

**Minutes of a meeting of the
HOUSING PANEL (PANEL OF THE SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE)
on Thursday 7 November 2019**



Committee members:

Councillor Bely-Summers (Chair)	Councillor Gotch
Councillor Howlett	Councillor Taylor
Councillor Wade	

Officers:

Richard Wood, Strategy and Service Development Manager
Polly McKinlay, Senior Commissioning Manager
Paul Wilding, Systems Change Manager
Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Officer

Also present:

Tony Buchanan, Housing Panel (tenant co-optee)
Councillor Linda Smith
Councillor Mike Rowley
Charlie Fisher, Transition by Design
Three representatives of the Lived Experience Advisory Forum (names not published)

207. Apologies

Councillor Wolf tendered apologies

208. Declarations of interest

None

209. Housing Panel Work Plan

The Scrutiny Officer informed the Panel that there had been no changes to the workplan.

It was agreed that the Scrutiny Officer would agree a scope on the topic of Hidden Homelessness, to be heard in March.

It was agreed that the Scrutiny Officer would schedule a pre-meeting briefing for Panel members on Housing Management and Council Housing Repairs and Investment immediately prior to the March meeting.

210. Notes of previous meeting

The Panel agreed the notes of the meetings of 27 June and 3 October.

211. Community Land Trusts

The Cabinet Member for Affordable Housing, Councillor Mike Rowley, introduced the report. It was explained to the Panel that the report sought to do two things: to provide an update on the progress made against the actions recommended in a previously commissioned report on how Community Led Housing could be delivered in Oxford, and to consider a land disposal by way of a long lease of a plot containing seven garages and a forecourt at Champion Way in Littlemore.

Regarding the actions recommended to support the delivery of Community Led Housing it was noted that the majority of major actions had already been taken forward. The one area which had not progressed was the suggestion that s.106 agreements be used to require provision of community led housing sites on larger developments. The rationale behind the decision not to progress this was due to the negative implications on scheme viability and therefore the overall number of social housing projects developed.

Charlie Fisher of Transition by Design, one of the authors of the previously commissioned report on how Community Led Housing could be delivered in Oxford, presented to the Panel regarding the definition of Community Led Housing, which covered multiple models but all had in common a shared and communal approach regarding finance, risk and management of a scheme. The progress made by the Council against the recommended actions of the previous report were commended, and four key issues were identified as particularly important in continuing to drive the delivery of Community Led Housing forward:

- a. Continued political support
- b. Continued officer support, particularly with regards to the upcoming application for funding from the Oxfordshire Growth Deal in March 2020, but also in the development and contribution to the work of the Community Led Housing regional hub and its work of ensuring a pipeline of land for projects, and matchmaking suitable stakeholders to projects.
- c. Developing a mechanism for shortlisting suitable prospective tenants from the housing register who actively wished to be involved in a housing environment with a cooperative element to it.
- d. Ensuring that land values included the social and environmental factors of potential developments. Bristol was held up as an exemplar in this regard.

The challenges of the proposed disposal site were explained to the Panel: its small size, proximity to the ring road, difficult access arrangements and protected trees. It was suggested that in the absence of any other developers wishing to work on the site, it would offer the opportunity to demonstrate proof of concept should it prove possible to develop through Community Led Housing.

The Panel sought reassurance on the degree of community involvement there had been to date in the design of the site. It was explained that the site was a very unusual site in that it was fairly isolated from other housing due to its position by the ring road and its proximity to the Oxford Academy. As such, no consultation had been undertaken to date. On other prospective garage sites, which were more squarely situated within an existing community there would be, backed by existing funding, far

greater consultation than simply that required by virtue of going through the planning process.

In response to questions by the Panel on what practical support was required from the Council, officer participation in planning and submitting a bid to the Oxfordshire Growth Deal in March was identified as the near-term need, but that further into the future officer support would be needed in engaging with the work of the community-led housing regional hub and its work of creating a pipeline of opportunities and matchmaking groups interested in bringing a community-led housing development forward. Further development sites, particularly former garage sites, would also be welcomed. The Panel welcomed the repurposing of garage sites.

The other major area of discussion by the Panel concerned how the Champion Way project and other community-led housing projects would be publicised, how they would attract those outside the traditional ‘co-operative demographic’ and the practicalities of choosing suitable people to participate whilst also fitting within the Council’s wider responsibilities and infrastructure as a housing authority. It was recognised that community-led housing projects did face a challenge in engaging wider demographics in the opportunities and benefits of community-led housing, but that Oxfordshire Community Land Trust had been awarded £15k of Cohesive Communities funding and were starting the process of recruiting a worker whose role would include greater publicity amongst target demographics. Whilst co-operative housing did tend to be popular amongst particular demographic types, experience from Oxfordshire Community Land Trust at Dean Court and other projects suggested that the benefits were equally viable for all, but that it was fundamental that whoever joined was of the mindset of wanting to live within a community setting. How the Council might identify people interested in living in such a way and involving them at an early stage was a key issue, with concern being raised that people may be steered towards such housing purely because it was ‘housing’. This was explained not to be the case - community led housing availability was to provide more options to those on the waiting list; it would not act as a replacement for other provision, those who did not want to live communally would not be pressured into doing so, nor would they be penalised for not doing so. In light of Oxfordshire Community Land Trust’s experience in identifying tenants suited to community led housing projects it was suggested that the Council should draw on their experience to identify tenants who would flourish in a community led housing scheme.

It was **AGREED** that the Panel would refer the following two recommendations to the Scrutiny Committee for consideration whether to refer to the December meeting of Cabinet:

Recommendation 1: That the Council will, when publicising and raising awareness of Community Led Housing, take steps to ensure that the barriers to demographic groups with less exposure to the concepts of communal living (particularly social housing tenants) are identified and addressed, and to ensure that these groups are equally equipped to understand the benefits of and to participate in the opportunities afforded by Community Led Housing.

Recommendation 2: That the Council will, in identifying tenants with the values, skills and motivations suited to community living, give the Oxfordshire Community Land Trust a formal role in the selection process.

212. Housing and Homelessness Strategy mid-point update

Councillor Mike Rowley, Cabinet Member for Affordable Housing, introduced the report, focusing on the delivery of affordable housing. At the mid-point of the strategy a large number of successes had been achieved, notably the commencement of the Oxford Housing Company on work to deliver over 500 affordable homes, with over 100 delivered in the previous year (including over 30 Council-owned homes in the Barton development) and with over 100 anticipated in the current year. The challenge of delivering housing within a context of near nation-topping house-prices was recognised, and with over 2000 people still on the Council waiting list further work was required. A significant amount of work had been undertaken with the County Council and neighbouring District Councils in developing the Oxfordshire Growth Deal, which would underpin a lot the necessary work to ensure the meeting of local housing need.

Richard Wood, Strategy and Service Development Manager, introduced the progress made in relation to homelessness reduction. Notable achievements were identified as a significant increase in places for rough sleepers commissioned by the Council, securing significant government funding, the establishment of Oxford Homelessness Movement, the implementation of the requirements of the Homelessness Reduction Act, the trial of the Oxfordshire Trailblazer programme. Housing demand, the need to consider the Climate Emergency and relations with registered social housing providers and transforming provision of rough sleeping services to a county-wide approach were recognised to be areas where further work was required. Suggested changes to the strategy put forward included the inclusion of a separate document detailing the Council's Rough Sleeping Strategy, greater cross-working throughout the County and building in the now-agreed Floyds Row and its associated services.

Questions to the Panel were addressed to members of the Lived Experience Advisory Forum on their experience of the Council and its duty to prevent homelessness. Feedback indicated that that within the last year there had been challenges with establishing a local connection, and that interaction with non-specialist homelessness Council staff had not proven valuable in terms of homelessness prevention, with advice being given to ensure that one individual was on the housing register. It was suggested that more signposting information should be available to officers, particularly those on the front desk at the Council, such as leaflets containing the details of local homelessness-related services.

In discussing the Council's plans for supported rent the Panel, following corroborative feedback from the Lived Experience representatives present, emphasised the vital role of supported housing for those on the journey from homelessness to stability, but it was also brought up that not all supported housing schemes were providing the level of support needed to realise the potential for positive outcomes. O'Hanlon House, particularly, was discussed in this regard with reports of access being problematic at times. The number of recovery houses for addiction was also mentioned, with support being given for increased capacity for such services. In response to the issues raised, it was explained to the Panel that the Council was in the process of seeking to transform

homelessness services, which would include supported housing. As part of that work needs analysis would be done in consultation with other district councils in the county, the County Council, Crisis, services users and service providers.

Further discussion was held in relation the progress made by the Council in the transition to having a county-wide approach to homelessness. Already, good progress was being made. In previous years each district had made independent bids to central government for funding, whereas this year the councils were working together on a joint bid. The value of Oxford being a hub, hosting a concentration of services was recognised by the other local authorities and a pooled funding arrangement was already in place. Floyds Row would form a particularly important part of this hub, and neighbouring districts had recognised the need to contribute to its funding.

Cabinet members, Panel members and officers all commented on the value of having people from the Lived Experience Advisory Forum at the meeting to share their perspectives and feedback. The Panel sought to ensure that the Lived Experience Advisory Forum would be given the opportunity to contribute towards the shaping of services and the drafting of the new strategy. It was confirmed that this would be the case from 2020.

It was **AGREED** that the Panel would refer the following three recommendations to the Scrutiny Committee for consideration whether to refer to the December meeting of Cabinet:

Recommendation 1: That the Council will develop an informed qualitative understanding of the support provided by supported housing providers particularly through additional consultation with recent and current service users, and that anonymised feedback will be provided to the Lived Experience Advisory Forum for the opportunity to make additional comment.

Recommendation 2: That the Council will discuss with the Lived Experience Advisory Forum to agree the most appropriate means of ensuring those with lived experience of homelessness are involved in the transformation programme of homelessness services at strategic and service design levels, as well as the development the new Housing and Homelessness Strategy.

Recommendation 3: That the Council should map its expectations of how the various arms of the Council contribute to the homelessness prevention agenda, also to include the expectations of those organisations which are under a duty to refer people under the Homelessness Reduction Act, and to run a mystery shopper process to check their current efficacy

213. No local connection review

Polly McKinlay, Senior Commissioning Officer, introduced the six month update report on the work of the No Local Connection Group.

Addressing the overall themes of the report, strong progress had been made regarding the key driver behind its recommendations – to become more person centred in its approach. The Council's view that after a period of six months living in Oxford, the

likelihood would be that a homeless individual would have developed a network and a connection to Oxford, and that reconnection to another area would not necessarily be in their interests, was now embedded into its service structure. Improved and increased services, such as 12 Somewhere Safe to Stay places in Simon House had been were not contingent on a local connection, meaning any rough sleeper would be able to access the service.

The changes made had had significant impacts on individuals, including helping a rough sleeper of 12 years who had been able to find a suitable tenancy.

A number of recommendations were highlighted as having not yet been implemented, namely around the extension of the Council's rules to the wider Common Operating Protocol used across the county. Significant amount of work had been done in preparing the ground for implementing the changes, other districts had begun implementing the changes, and agreement reached in principle across all districts. However, the finalised legal text was not agreed.

Questions from the Panel arose around the degree to which the changes would encourage homeless people to gravitate towards Oxford in order to access improved services, particularly around addiction. Whilst it was recognised as a risk, there was a need for to make a judgement call on whether reconnecting individuals to their original area would be in their best interests, or whether it was better for them to stay and receive services, and that this exercise should be understood in the context of the Council not wishing to participate in a race to the bottom for services. Further, the view of those with lived experience of homelessness indicated that this risk was not being realised, and that minimal numbers of individuals were being drawn to Oxford solely due to the quality of its services.

The Panel formally recognised the work done by the No Local Connection Group and commended it.

214. Outcome of the Homelessness Trailblazer and early intervention analysis

Paul Wilding, Systems Change Manager (Rough Sleeping) presented a report to the Panel on the Outcomes of the Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer programme.

The purpose of the Trailblazer programme was introduced as being an opportunity to learn what was needed and how homelessness prevention might be implemented across local authorities and other public sector organisations in the county, rather than the launch of a new set of services. Whilst some regret at the ending of the services was understandable, an encouraging element of the learning was that the Trailblazer indicated the need for improved communication – between individuals at risk of homelessness and service providers, and also between the service providers involved in homelessness prevention – and that improving such communication was relatively straightforward and did not require ongoing services, but simply maintaining the relationships created by the programme. The positive impact of the services, however, was recognised. There had been a great value in providing support to 1400 individuals, and funding had been received by Aspire from the Lottery to extend its element of the programme, the Community Navigators for another three years. Aspire had also raised

fund locally to support the extension of this service, which had been match funded by the Oxfordshire Community Foundation.

The Panel sought to identify what work would be undertaken to ensure that homelessness did not create a delayed transfer of care from hospital, and was informed that funding for the healthcare element of the programme had also been extended by Oxford University Hospitals NHS Trust, albeit presently only until March. Beyond that, discussions were being held between the Council and the Health Improvement Board.

Other questions were raised in regards to the opportunities for external funding. Government sources of funding were reported to be automatically flagged to the team, but funding had also been raised from elsewhere.

Clarification was also sought by the Panel on the impact of Universal Credit as a cause of homelessness. Whilst in the second half of the programme a significant number of people who were referred to the programme were on Universal Credit because their referrals come via the Job Centre, it was not felt that the experience from the programme indicated that Universal Credit was a cause of homelessness. Though over 50% of referees did have financial and debt issues, this was a consistent issue across both Universal Credit and non-Universal Credit referrals. Though not a cause of homelessness, the delay in payment of Universal Credit did at times mean that it could exacerbate existing issues and make homelessness more likely.

In response to questions as to how the lessons of the programme would be embedded rather than allowed to drift away the Panel was informed that the Homelessness Champions Network would be extended for a further year, providing a forum to provide wider stakeholders in homelessness prevention training and updates, as well as aiding communication and relationships. Also, an e-learning module had been made available on the back of the learning from the programme, which had been made available across the county and would help to safeguard the knowledge derived from the programme in the face of future staff turnover.

215. Date of next meeting

The Panel noted that the date of the next meeting as 5th March 2020.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 8.08 pm

Chair

Date: Thursday 5 March 2020

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