



To: Cabinet
Date: 09 December 2020
Report of: Housing and Homelessness Panel
Title of Report: Hidden Homelessness

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To present Housing and Homelessness Panel recommendations concerning the Scrutiny-commissioned Hidden Homelessness briefing
Key decision:	No
Scrutiny Lead Member:	Councillor Nadine Bely-Summers, Chair of the Housing and Homelessness Panel
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Mike Rowley, Cabinet Member for Affordable Housing
Corporate Priority:	More Affordable Housing
Policy Framework:	Housing and Homelessness Strategy
Recommendation: That the Cabinet states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations in the body of this report.	

Appendices
None

Introduction and overview

1. At its meeting on 05 November 2020, the Housing and Homelessness Panel considered a briefing on the Council's best estimates around the prevalence of hidden homelessness in Oxford.
2. The Panel would like to thank Councillor Mike Rowley, Cabinet Member for Affordable Housing, for attending the meeting and answering questions, Paul Wilding, Rough Sleeping and Single Homelessness Manager, for authoring and presenting the report and Paul Leo, Interim Director of Housing for supporting the meeting.

Summary and recommendation

3. Paul Wilding, Rough Sleeping and Single Homeless Manager, presented the report. By its nature, hidden homelessness is difficult to track with certainty. Since the publication of the most recent major study on hidden homelessness, the government had passed the Homelessness Reduction Act, which placed a duty on local authorities towards single homeless individuals. This single change was a solution for many of the causes of hidden homelessness.
4. Taking as a proxy for the number of people sofa-surfing the quantity of people approaching the Council Housing Options service for help under the Homelessness Reduction Act, numbers had increased by approximately 20% in comparison to the previous year. It was not possible to extrapolate from this the number of hidden homeless in Oxford, but it did indicate that services did exist to support individuals whose insecure tenancies had broken down.
5. In response to the report presented, the Panel focused its discussion on exploring the situations faced by those whose housing situations do not meet the threshold of homelessness, but are nevertheless sub-optimal. The Panel makes two recommendations around understanding and supporting those people who are sub-optimally housed.

Understanding and Supporting

6. The Panel welcomed news that, particularly in light of the passing of the Homelessness Reduction Act, mechanisms were in place to support those at risk of homelessness, including single-homeless individuals. However, there also remain a cohort of people who live in a situation which is sub-optimal, and has genuinely deleterious impacts on wellbeing, but which does not meet the threshold for support under the Homelessness Reduction Act or bandings on the Housing Register. Examples being young parents living apart from one another, being housed by their parents, or a middle aged person having to move back into their childhood bedroom. By living in spare bedrooms, such living situations do not qualify as homeless or overcrowded, leaving them with little support from the banding system of the Housing Register to reduce the waiting time for more appropriate accommodation.

The Panel fully recognises that there are challenges in knowing about such people. Whilst it can monitor issues such as sofa-surfing amongst those on the housing waiting list by virtue of the bandings on the Housing Register, it remains, overall, hard to detect and measure. Regardless of the challenges, the Panel considers this cohort of people to be in sufficiently serious a situation that the allocation of resources required to learn more about them is justified. With the current level of resources within Housing Services, it seems the most efficient means of achieving this would be through the use of external consultants to undertake research on the Council's behalf.

Recommendation 1: That the Council invests sufficient resources to gain an understanding of hidden-homelessness and sub-optimal housing,

possibly through the use of external consultants undertaking research, and begins to monitor it.

7. The experience of members of the Panel was that a high proportion of people they encountered in sub-optimal housing situations were largely resigned to their situations, thinking that the Council could not or would not be in a position to help them. Whilst it is clear that demand for social housing outstrips supply in Oxford particularly, and that – rightly – prioritisation towards those most in need occurs, the Panel does not consider this to mean that engaging with the Council is without value. Even in the event that the Council is unable to provide housing immediately, engagement with the Council can lead to support on issues such as debt and budgeting through the Council’s commissioned advice services, and unemployment support from Jobcentre Plus or the National Careers Service. As such, the Panel encourages the Council to increase understanding amongst sub-optimally housed individuals of the support the Council can provide them and generates ideas as to how those benefits might most meaningfully be communicated. It is the view of the Panel that as greater awareness of sub-optimal housing situations grow, this endeavour will be better informed so does not suggest that it must be done immediately.

Recommendation 2: That the Council, when it has sufficient understanding, undertakes a communications exercise to increase the engagement by sub-optimally housed individuals with the Council.

Further Consideration

8. The Housing and Homelessness Panel is not scheduled to hear further reports on this issue directly and is unlikely to do so helpfully without more evidence.

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Cabinet response to recommendations of the Housing and Homelessness Panel made on 05/11/2020 concerning the Scrutiny-commissioned Hidden Homelessness Update

Provided by the Cabinet Member for Affordable Housing, Councillor Mike Rowley

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<i>Recommendation</i>	<i>Agree?</i>	<i>Comment</i>
<p>1) That the Council invests sufficient resources to gain an understanding of hidden-homelessness and sub-optimal housing, possibly through the use of external consultants undertaking research, and begins to monitor it.</p>	Partially	<p>The Council already monitors the number and types of bandings on the Housing Register and will continue to do so. However, the work required to meet this recommendation is extensive. Because this group do not meet the thresholds of any statutory services, there is no data collected about their situation by either the council, or anyone else. As such the only way to gain insight into this situation would be by undertaking extensive fieldwork. This would need to be undertaken by a professional research company in order to minimise the required field work through the use of statistical sampling techniques. Under the present financial circumstances faced by the Council, this suggestion has not been put forward as a proposal for consideration within the Council's draft budget.</p>
<p>2) That the Council, when it has sufficient understanding, undertakes a communications exercise to increase the engagement by sub-optimally housed individuals with the Council.</p>	Partially	<p>As explained above, the specific work suggested would be very extensive and cannot be committed to. However, the Council endeavours to continue promoting the support it provides to those who need it in an effective way, we and will continue to examine how awareness of its services can be improved among those who are vulnerably housed, particularly those in marginalised communities.</p>