

Remote meeting

Minutes of a meeting of the Housing and Homelessness Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee) on Thursday 5 November 2020

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Committee members present:

Councillor Bely-Summers (Chair)

Councillor Taylor

Councillor Aziz

Councillor Wolff

Councillor Wade

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Officer

Paul Wilding, System Change Manager - Homelessness Prevention

Also present:

Councillor Mike Rowley, Cabinet Member for Affordable Housing

Tony Buchanan, Housing Panel (tenant co-optee)

27. Apologies

Councillor Mike Gotch tendered apologies.

28. Declarations of interest

None

29. Housing Panel Work Plan

The Panel considered the proposed workplan for the remainder of the civic year, which was **NOTED**.

30. Notes of previous meeting

The notes of the meeting held on 08 October 2020 were **AGREED** as an accurate record.

31. Rough Sleeping Update (including Hidden Homelessness)

Rough Sleeping Update

Paul Wilding, Rough Sleeping and Single Homeless Manager, presented the Rough Sleeping Update. Due to the fast-pace of developments in this area, a number of items in the report provided had significant updates. These included the announcement of a new national lockdown. The government had provided no new duties on Councils regarding rough sleeping, but following the efforts to provide interim accommodation during the first lockdown, numbers were low. Confirmation had been received from MHCLG that the planned November street count could proceed. An announcement had been made by MHCLG of almost £1m in funding from the Long Term Accommodation Fund to the Council which, alongside other provision, would mean 20 new units and 45 bed spaces would be available for long term rough sleepers for move-on accommodation. This comprised all the funding that the Council had applied for from the fund. Finally, the Council's Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) had been updated and a briefing would be provided to Councillors on it.

In its response to the report and presentation, the Panel raised a number of issues and questions. Firstly, the support available to those who had turned down interim accommodation during the pandemic. It was explained that St Mungo's as the commissioned outreach service would offer support to rough sleepers. If they were to refuse accommodation that would be respected, but St Mungo's would still continue to provide the same support afterwards.

The source of the additional units available for rough sleepers paid for through the Long Term Accommodation Fund grant was questioned. Five were to be purchased from the market, ten Council properties to be repurposed, and to five acquired from housing associations. The process for identifying which properties to repurpose would be largely based on which Council properties of one-bedroom became available. Further funding would be required, but it was the ambition to reach 50 such units in total owing to the success of such units in helping rough sleepers to find and maintain permanent accommodation. Whilst repurposing did diminish the availability of properties for other types of council tenants, avoiding the need to provide expensive and extensive ancillary services for rough sleepers represented a saving. Furthermore, the Council in providing 4.5% of social housing for temporary accommodation and move-on for rough sleepers was providing relatively little in comparison to some other Councils, with Hull providing 21% and Milton Keynes dedicating 16% to that purpose. The Council was 163rd out of 323 in the level of provision nationwide on that metric.

Clarity was sought regarding the status of provision of temporary accommodation for those with no recourse to public funds during the lockdown. It was confirmed that currently approximately 20 individuals without recourse to public funds were being provided temporary accommodation, though there was unclear advice from MHCLG on this. At some point, the Council's ability to provide such support would cease, making it all the more important to work to find solutions as quickly as possible. In the longer term, Paul Leo, Interim Director of Housing, explained the Council was working through Oxfordshire Homeless Movement to develop links with faith groups, foundations and individual benefactors to provide support to such individuals from the point at which the Council would be legally barred from doing so. It was suggested that it was important in ensuring uptake of the Council's offers of support to those without no recourse to public

funds that such individuals be assured doing so would not involve sharing of their immigration status.

At 48, the number of people giving up their temporary accommodation or being evicted was queried. The number at present was fairly low, but had originally been high when individuals had been placed in hotels and where there were difficulties with hotel staff, particularly around smoking in bedrooms. It was agreed that a gender breakdown would be provided outside the meeting. The fall in the number of EU citizens sleeping rough was put down to a combination of factors – the higher proportion of people being housed, and the success of the work of a government-funded worker for St Mungo's with a specialism in working with immigrants.

In response to questions about the relationships with the neighbouring districts the Interim Director of Housing provided an update. A number of important milestones were being reached by the county-wide steering group on rough sleeping. Two reports, by Crisis and the local Adult Safeguarding Board, were to be published on the efficacy of a rapid-rehousing approach, and the number of deaths of rough sleepers over the past two years. The steering group was setting up a group to respond to the issues raised. Amidst the high degree of joint working it was expected that a consultation would be launched on a county-wide strategy on rough sleeping which sought to jointly-commission services between agencies, and make use of each particular partner's strengths. For example, some of the other districts were felt to have more housing availability, whereas Oxford could offer a greater concentration of services to rough sleepers.

The challenges of providing SWEP provision in a socially-distanced manner were explored. In the absence of being able to use communal spaces, specific properties had been identified at Becket St for SWEP provision, extra space at the YHA and O'Hanlon House, making 22 places in total. This exceeded the number of rough sleepers in the City. Were numbers to increase, hotels had been contacted to identify suitable extra places.

It was **AGREED** that the following recommendation be made to Cabinet:

That the Council makes, as a matter of urgency, a public statement to clarify its position that it will provide emergency accommodation to all rough sleepers, including those without recourse to public funds, and that individuals receiving such support will not have their details passed to any immigration agency.

Hidden Homelessness

Paul Wilding, Rough Sleeping and Single Homeless Manager, presented the update. 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.

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, the typical hidden homeless profile.

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. For example, young families living with their respective parents, or older workers having to move back to their childhood bedrooms. The desire and differing capacity of the Council to help such people was recognised, but without having greater information about who and where such people were the exact needs and means of effectively publicising that support were difficult to understand. It was suggested that, given its impact on family life and children, this was an area of sufficient importance that the Council should be devoting resource to developing an understanding of the situation within the City.

It was **AGREED** that the following recommendations be made to Cabinet:

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.**
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.**

32. Reports for approval

The Panel considered a draft of the report to Cabinet written in response to the Housing Performance Q1 report. The draft report was **AGREED**.

33. Date of next meeting

The Panel **NOTED** the invitation to attend the Housing element of the Budget Review Group on 11 January 2021, and the date of the next Housing and Homelessness Panel meeting on 01 February 2021.

The meeting started at 6:00pm and ended at 7:20pm

Chair

Date: Thursday 4 March 2021