

To: Cabinet
Date: 16 June 2021
Report of: Scrutiny Committee
Title of Report: County-wide Transformation of Rough Sleeping and Single Homeless

Summary and recommendations	
Purpose of report:	To present Scrutiny Committee recommendations concerning the Cabinet report on the County-wide Transformation of Rough Sleeping and Single Homeless
Key decision:	Yes
Scrutiny Lead Member:	Councillor Liz Wade, Chair of the Scrutiny Committee
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Diko Blackings, Cabinet Member for Affordable Housing, Housing Security, and Housing the Homeless
Corporate Priority:	Supporting Flourishing Communities
Policy Framework:	Housing and Homelessness Strategy 2018 - 2021
Recommendation: That the Cabinet states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendation in the body of this report.	

Appendices
None

Introduction and overview

1. At its meeting on 08 June 2021, the Scrutiny Committee considered a report to Cabinet on the County-wide Transformation of Rough Sleeping and Single Homeless.
2. The Committee would like to thank Nerys Parry for presenting and authoring the report and for answering questions.

Summary and recommendation

3. Nerys Parry, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager, introduced the report which explained significant changes to the way in which services would be delivered. The pandemic had necessitated some change to service delivery already and, notably, increased the level of partnership working. A focus on a 'housing led' approach to work was proposed. There was recognition that there should be an objective of seeking permanent, stable, homes sooner rather than later for homeless people when trying to secure them accommodation; the model of hostels which had been in place for many years should be seen as a second best option.
4. Central to the proposals was the introduction of a new mechanism for commissioning services when the current 'pooled budget' arrangements come to an end. Under the new arrangements, services would be jointly commissioned between the County and City Councils using a revised pooled budget funded by Local Authority and Health partners with much more of a partnership approach than hitherto. The change was as much to do with how services were commissioned as to what was commissioned. The service is currently dependent to a significant degree on Government funding, the future of which was not guaranteed and so exposes the services to some risk. The new commissioning arrangements will be subject to value for money criteria among others. A continuing priority was on steps to prevent homelessness in the first place.
5. In response to the presentation the Committee explored issues around homelessness prevention in light of the challenge of the recent end to the eviction ban. The other key area of discussion was over issues pertaining to the new commissioning arrangements.
6. In total, the Committee makes four recommendations.

Homelessness Prevention

7. The Committee is in agreement with the advice it was given, that in order to balance the high level of input to support homeless individuals, preventing homelessness above and beyond the level of statutory duties in the first place is a vital component. Without it the system could become swamped.
8. The Committee also recognises that over the Covid period many people have seen reductions to their income – be it through furlough, reduced hours and job losses or an inability for small businesses to trade. For many in private rented accommodation this has caused difficulties in making rent payments, with an estimated 840,000 households in the private rented sector nationwide falling into arrears. In Oxford, with its high housing costs and high proportion of private renters this is likely to be a particularly acute issue, one which the end to the eviction ban could bring to a head. Putting to one side the huge personal costs that evictions would bring, this represents a clear challenge to the wider homelessness reduction strategy being embarked on.
9. Owing to this, the Committee hopes that the Council can learn from good practice elsewhere in terms of tenancy sustainment. Derby City Council's 'Call B4 You Serve' scheme is one such scheme which has been identified as an example of best practice by the Local Government Association. The service is a free,

specialist and impartial service for private rented sector landlords and is designed to help them avoid serving an eviction notice by dealing with tenancy issues early.

10. The Committee recognises that it is not always practical or effective to replicate exactly schemes from elsewhere, even where they are good practice. However, it hopes that the Council can take ideas from this scheme to strengthen tenancies locally and help to undergird the wider homelessness prevention strategy.

Recommendation 1: That the Council reviews Derby City Council's 'Call B4 You Serve' scheme to identify elements that might be enacted locally to maintain tenancies within the private rented sector

Commissioning Arrangements

11. The Cabinet report on this topic devotes a significant amount of time talking about commissioning and how services will be jointly-commissioned through an alliance model. The governance structure of this model is set out in Appendix 3 of the Cabinet report. One issue raised by the Committee was a lack of clarity over how directly political voices would be heard and reflected within the structure. A joint alliance will throw up a wide spectrum of issues and questions, some of which would be better suited to officer responsibility, and some better managed at a political level. In particular, the Committee is keen to see that the process of how services are procured one in which elected members have significant input.

12. The Committee recognises that this issue of procurement is particularly complex. Not only is the Council having to contend with the twin aims of maximising quality and ensuring value for money, but it seeks to do so in an innovative, cross-Council environment all whilst simultaneously also building much greater flexibility into the contracts it funds. So whilst it believes that those directly accountable to local tax payers should have a significant say in the ultimate outcome, the Committee is also keen that those decision makers should have access to the very best possible advice.

13. The Committee applauds the ambition shown in trying to address homelessness issues, but recognises that there are risks commensurate with the level of ambition. Poorly delivered procurement could prove slow, lacking in agility, expensive and or delivering poor quality, all issues which would put a stress on the cross-working and cooperation the county-wide approach relies on. Given that there is at present discussion within the public sector over the relative merits of tendering a service and choosing the partner at the end vs earlier identification of delivery partners and co-development of services with them the value of expert advice to match best practice with Oxfordshire's complex circumstances is clear.

Recommendation 2: That the Council ensures that the governance of the joint commissioning structure includes political and not just officer representation.

Recommendation 3: That the Council is assured that it and the other partner Councils are being provided the best professional advice regarding the most suitable approach to procurement of its services.

14. As noted above, a key attribute highlighted to the Committee for commissioned services under the new arrangements is flexibility and the ability to adapt throughout the course of a contract. The pandemic illustrated the importance of this particularly well, and the Committee recognises how well both partners have adapted their work in relation to the St Mungos contract.
15. Often, as with Floyds Row for example, change and adaptation to new circumstances will require physical work to make suitable existing infrastructure for new purposes or new ways of working. The Committee suggests that the naturally close relationship the Council has with Oxford Direct Services as its sole shareholder would place it well to undertake such work, particularly where the situation is complex and a number of unknowns exist at the start of the project, for instance where year-to-year government grant funding is involved. Given that the smoothness of project delivery has very significant real-world consequences on the stability of rough sleepers in need of services, the ability to manage uncertainty and challenges better is particularly valuable and is perhaps a less heralded aspect of the Council's Oxford Model.
16. Additionally, the Committee recognises that the Oxford Model approach has aspects which are not limited to its companies, pertinently here the recognition that outsourcing is not necessarily money-saving and that investment in staff can be seen in higher levels of service. The Committee is aware that there are parts of the Council, such as the Housing Advice Service, which have significant areas of natural cross-over with the proposed services being commissioned, most notably the Navigator service. It encourages the Council to be alive to the possibilities of in-housing suitable services.
17. As referenced above, the Committee recognises that in a joint-commissioning arrangement such as is proposed the Council is not solely responsible for making such decisions and must work within the wider alliance model. However, it hopes that the Council will consistently draw attention to the added value that the Council's own companies can provide and that it maximises the opportunities available for them to tender for work, and that it also does not overlook the benefits in-housed services might bring.

Recommendation 4: That the Council works with joint commissioning partners to promote the added value the Council's companies can bring, to maximise opportunities for them to demonstrate that value, and to be alive to the benefits of directly delivered services by Council staff.

Further Consideration

18. The Committee anticipates that the Housing and Homelessness Panel will address multiple aspects of this broad-ranging report throughout the course of the civic year.

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Cabinet response to recommendations of the Scrutiny Committee made on 08/06/2021 concerning the County-wide Transformation of Rough Sleeping and Single Homeless.

A verbal response will be provided by Cabinet Member for Affordable Housing, Housing Security, and Housing the Homeless, Diko Blackings

Recommendation	Agree?	Comment
1) That the Council reviews Derby City Council's 'Call B4 You Serve' scheme to identify elements that might be enacted locally to maintain tenancies within the private rented sector		
2) That the Council ensures that the governance of the joint commissioning structure includes political and not just officer representation.		
3) That the Council is assured that it and the other partner Councils are being provided the best professional advice regarding the most suitable approach to procurement of its services.		
4) That the Council works with joint commissioning partners to promote the added value the Council's companies can bring, to maximise opportunities for them to demonstrate that value, and to be alive to the benefits of directly delivered services by Council staff.		