

Minutes of a meeting of the Housing and Homelessness Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee) on Wednesday 6 October 2021



Committee members present:

Councillor Bely-Summers

Councillor Diggins

Councillor Fouweather

Councillor Jarvis

Councillor Linda Smith (Chair)

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Stephen Gabriel, Executive Director for Housing and Communities

Malcolm Peek, Property Services Manager

Bill Graves Landlord Services Manager

Simon Warde, Tenant Involvement Manager

Wendy Hind, Tenant Involvement Officer

John Mitchell, Committee Services Officer

Tom Hudson, Scrutiny Officer

Also present:

Tony Buchanan, Tenant Ambassador

Olga Siddon, Tenant Ambassador

Brenda Walton, Tenant Ambassador

8. Apologies

Councillor Wade tendered her apologies for the meeting, as did Head of Housing Stephen Clarke. There were no other apologies. This was **NOTED** by the Panel.

Newly appointed Executive Director of Housing and Communities, Stephen Gabriel, was introduced to and welcomed by the Panel.

9. Declarations of interest

None

10. Housing Panel Work Plan

The proposed work plan for the Panel's forthcoming meeting was **AGREED**.

11. Notes of previous meeting

The notes of the meeting held on 02 September 2021 were **AGREED** as an accurate record.

12. Landlord Services Performance Dashboard

Chair of the Panel, Councillor Linda Smith, updated Panel members regarding the housing performance dashboard. She was working with the Head of Housing to agree its measures, but owing to the issues relating to the implementation of the QL system the data to populate these measures was not currently available. This was **NOTED** by the Panel.

13. Housing and Carbon Reduction

Malcolm Peek, Property Services Manager, presented a Panel-requested report on Housing and the Low Carbon Agenda.

The Council had a target of ensuring 95% of its homes were rated no lower than a C on EPC ratings by 2030. Some government funding was being used to support this, with Local Authority Delivery and Social Housing Decarbonisation Funds being accessed as available. The bulk of the work was progressing, however, without government funding and a budget of £7m was available to 2030 to cover the work required to bring approximately 2500 Council-owned homes up to a C rating. Current focus was on procuring external expert advice on the works required, which would then be profiled into a programme. Surveys were anticipated to be completed by March 2022. Typical solutions would include lighting solutions, internal and external insulation, draft-proofing, solar and installation of heat pumps.

In response to the presentation the Panel raised a number of issues. One key issue discussed was that of engagement with residents, particularly for those who struggle with digital access. Given the potentially radical changes to some tenants' homes Housing Services were keen to run a full and accessible engagement programme, which had already been planned and budgeted. This would be in addition to the existing work of the Council's staff dedicated to advising tenants on possible measures to address fuel poverty. The issue of fuel poverty was an important consideration in the approach to housing retrofitting, with a focus on fabric first changes to raise energy efficiency without transferring from gas to electric heating, thereby avoiding the significant increases in fuel costs. Team members on the project were mindful of the complexity involved in ensuring different measures worked together and did not raise other issues such as damp. It was noted by the Panel that changes to properties could have a fundamental impact on the way that tenants live and enjoy their properties, as well as there being a wide variety of possible offerings around finishings, which it would want to see tenants involved with. Tenant involvement in the process would be critical, at both the level of individual homes and representative levels on wider issues. The level of consultation required and the complexity of the works meant it was very difficult to know at the current stage what proportion of the properties improved would be raised to EPC levels beyond a C grading.

The possibility of additional central government funding was explored by the Panel. It was hoped that there would indeed be further central government funding. However, such funding often came with tight criteria in terms of the works and timeframes involved. The Council would be proactive in looking for opportunities to access such funding but its specificity meant that external funding would not be the main determinant of

the Council's plans as it would be unlikely to meet the Council's own targets for energy efficiency.

Disruption for tenants during works was an issue of concern for the Panel. Much of the work, such as loft insulation and new windows could be done with residents in situ. Though before getting feedback on the works required it was difficult to say with certainty it was expected there would be very little decanting required to enable works to occur, and any such changes would be done in consultation with tenants.

It was **AGREED** to make the following recommendations to Cabinet:

- 1) That the Council works with the Tenant Involvement Team to ensure tenant engagement is sought and incorporated into the Council's work plans for improving the energy efficiency of its housing stock at the earliest stage. Areas of engagement to include both work with individual households and multi-household representatives for wider-ranging issues/
- 2) That the Council makes specific provision to support those with disabilities or mental health problems to engage in discussions about the most appropriate changes to their homes.

14. Social Housing White Paper

Bill Graves, Landlord Services Manager, introduced the Panel-requested update report on the implications of the central government's Social Housing White Paper.

The Grenfell tragedy had brought to the fore the importance of tenant safety in social housing. To that end, central government had put forward a white paper outlining seven rights of tenants in social housing. Although only a white paper, the clear advice of government was that social landlords should not wait before implementing the proposals. The rights identified were as detailed below:

- 1) To be safe in your home

The implementation of the changes required would have a number of consequences for the Council. Tenant engagement would need to be increased significantly, the provision of proscribed safety information would be necessary, a named person made personally accountable for health and safety would need to be selected. The additional requirements would have staffing implications, needing to be funded from the Housing Revenue Account. The process for making appointments to many of the necessary roles was already underway.

- 2) To know how your landlord is performing

The Council would be required to inform every tenant, at least once a year, on its performance.

Proscribed information would focus on compliance with multiple safety measures, the Decent Homes Standard, success in resolving complaints promptly and fairly, management and handling of anti-social behaviour and levels of tenant satisfaction over a number of key areas such as engagement, health and safety, overall condition, repairs handling, management of communal spaces, and the wider neighbourhood. Also included within performance reporting all social landlords

would be required to make available information on spending, and be subject to challenge by residents if spending was thought not to be in the right place.

The effects on the Council to comply with the requirements would include providing greater detail over spending, including more work with the tenant ambassadors to explain spending. The Council also wished to provide real-time data on its performance, meaning that costs would be incurred to support this. It was likely that the greater transparency over spending would lead to greater scrutiny over spending within and without the Housing Revenue Account.

3) To have complaints dealt with promptly and fairly

Changes to the Housing Ombudsman's code and other broader changes would have a number of impacts for the Council. These would include needing to adopt a two stage complaints process for housing complaints, with the Housing Ombudsman's definition of a complaint. Policies would need to be updated and made available online, including the vexatious complaints policy and reasonable adjustments policy. Two officers to investigate and manage housing complaints would need to be recruited and additional publicity amongst tenants on their right to complain and information on how to do this would be required.

4) To be treated with respect

Many of the changes in this aspect were external to the Council, with a more proactive regulator having greater freedom to make inspections and enforce significant fines and an expectation on providers in breach to self-refer to the regulator. A key foundation of the approach was that providers co-regulate with their tenants, stressing the ongoing importance of the Tenant Ambassadors.

5) To have your voice heard by your landlord

Under the proposals, social landlords would need to actively seek out best practice, including through training of staff and empowerment of tenants, of ways to improve engagement by tenants with their landlords. A key change for the Council would be the need to implement more individualised engagements, and more regular check-ups. It was possible for some residents to be living happily in their homes with no major life events or issues to prompt a visit. As such, it could be that the Council had not engaged with them for a long period. Regular face to face visits to check on the standard of the property and any unreported issues or concerns, and to gather information on protected characteristics and contact preferences would be a strong step in providing that deeper level of engagement. This would require greater resourcing than currently present.

6) To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in

A large focus of this area would be on the management of anti-social behaviour and making improvements to wider neighbourhoods. Another element would be on more health and wellbeing initiatives. For the Council, the main foci would be on engaging tenants in conversations about decarbonisation of homes, improving the quality of green space and estates generally.

7) To be supported to take your first step into ownership

Here, the Council would need to engage with a number of central government initiatives, such as a new shared ownership model, continued support for the Right to Buy, and providing support for leaseholders as well as tenants.

To date, Housing staff had undertaken a gap analysis of the work required and developed a high-level action plan with named officers for specific objectives. A lead officer for the delivery of this action plan was yet to be appointed, and the budget would need to be confirmed.

In response to the presentation the Panel raised questions around the Council's ability to influence other local social housing providers, and the importance of Selective Licensing to protect tenants in the private sector.

The Panel explored issues around the continuing duty to support Right to Buy. In particular, the question was raised whether there were ways to incentivise tenants to take on the Council's shared ownership properties instead of exercising the Right to Buy. The suggestion was thought to be potentially possible but required further investigation. Furthermore, it might not be necessary. The overall number of tenants exercising their Right to Buy was dropping anyway owing to the cost of housing in Oxford reaching such levels that even with the discount they were unaffordable for purchase. Shared ownership properties were proving exceedingly popular already and often provided a more financially sensible route into home ownership than Right to Buy. It was noted by officers that this should be marketed more extensively to current tenants.

Assurance was sought that Personal Evacuation Plans (PEEP) were in the process of being developed for all relevant tenants. All bar three households had a PEEP, with the three not doing so refusing to provide information. At present, PEEPS were reviewed every 18 months, but a resource request was being made in the Budget to bring that to once every 12.

The ability of the new QL system to deliver the information required for real-time updates was questioned. This was one of the strengths of the QL system, which when fully implemented would be able to provide exactly the sort of real time data needed across a variety of measures. Not all the performance reporting data would come via this system, but that which did would in no way be held back by it once fully implemented.

A suggestion was put forward by the Panel that potentially one area to focus on when increasing the frequency of visits by Tenancy Management Officers would be sheltered accommodation, with older people being more prone to loneliness and isolation. Some push back to the suggestion was put forward on the basis of the high proportion of council homes with an elderly person, approximately 40% having someone over 60, making a focus on sheltered schemes a partial solution to a bigger challenge. Targeting interventions using age as a guide to tackle loneliness would be something officers would seek to do.

The implications of greater transparency and scrutiny over HRA spending were discussed. Specifically, would existing monies from the HRA for items such as youth work need to be scaled back? Or conversely, would money to improve neighbourhoods mean more money could be spent from within the HRA? On balance there was a risk in this area, but if contributions were expected from the General Fund a number of projects of benefit to tenants and with tenant support might not be delivered.

More information was sought regarding the new requirement for allocations to take into consideration the impact on the local community. It was explained that mixed communities could be encouraged if there were negative impacts arising from having high numbers of one particular type of tenant, for instance high incidences of

exploitation of vulnerable people having their homes taken over by criminals for criminal activity.

15. Dates of next meetings

The Panel **NOTED** the dates of future meetings.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.35 pm

Chair

Date: Thursday 4 November 2021