

**To:** Cabinet  
**Date:** 15 December 2021  
**Report of:** Housing and Homelessness Panel  
**Title of Report:** Housing and Carbon Reduction

<b>Summary and recommendations</b>	
<b>Purpose of report:</b>	To present Housing and Homelessness Panel recommendations concerning the Scrutiny-commissioned report on Housing and Carbon Reduction
<b>Key decision:</b>	No
<b>Scrutiny Lead Member:</b>	Councillor Linda Smith, Chair of the Housing and Homelessness Panel
<b>Cabinet Member:</b>	Councillor Diko Blackings, Cabinet Member for Affordable Housing, Housing Security, and Housing the Homeless
<b>Corporate Priority:</b>	More Affordable Housing; Zero Carbon Oxford
<b>Policy Framework:</b>	Housing and Homelessness Strategy
<b>Recommendation: That the Cabinet states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations in the body of this report.</b>	

<b>Appendices</b>
None

### **Introduction and overview**

1. At its meeting on 06 October 2021, the Housing and Homelessness Panel considered a report it had commissioned concerning Housing and Carbon Reduction.
2. The Panel would like to thank Malcolm Peek, Property Services Manager, for authoring the report and attending the Panel meeting to present it and respond to questions.
3. This report was not submitted to Cabinet in November to allow the relevant Cabinet portfolio-holder to respond in person.

## **Summary and recommendation**

4. Malcolm Peek, Property Services Manager, presented a Panel-requested report on Housing and the Low Carbon Agenda.
5. The Council had a target of ensuring that 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 fabric-first solutions such as internal and external insulation, draft-proofing, but also possibly other solutions such as solar and installation of heat pumps.
6. The Panel's key area of discussion in response was over tenant engagement with the process, which is detailed further below. Beyond this, it also challenged the degree of disruption that the works would cause tenants, and welcomed reports that there would be very little need to decant tenants. Government funding was also discussed further, and the Panel agrees with the proposed approach and its rationale, to seek government funding wherever possible, but to recognise that government funding is often time or technology specific. As such, it is unlikely that the Council's plans and government funding will align closely enough to rely on, and the Council should therefore prioritise delivering the improvements, doing so to its own programme and willing to fund it, and take any cross-overs as serendipitous.
7. As alluded to above, the Panel wishes to make three recommendations regarding Council engagement with tenants over the improvements to the energy efficiency of their homes.

## **Tenant Engagement**

8. The retrofitting of around 2500 properties is large undertaking, which has the potential to change the way that a significant number of tenants use and enjoy their homes. The scale of the project and the importance to tenants of a pleasant home environment means that, to the Panel's view, strong tenant engagement throughout is particularly important. In the report that the Panel received there was an appendix detailing the Council's campaign plan, which consists of a letter-writing exercise with in-person follow-ups for non-responders over a course of three months with a view to securing details of those interested in having their homes upgraded. The Panel agrees with the need for this, but suggests there is opportunity for greater tenant empowerment and self-determination if more collaborative working is established at the outset.
9. The Panel was informed that it is the Council's policy to pursue a fabric first approach, seeking to make homes more efficient before changing the way

homes are heated. Switching from gas to electric would, unless other measures were also taken, such as solar, increase energy costs for heating. As such, it is likely that there will be a lot of replacements to doors and windows. Similarly, if internal wall insulation is required, this will require redecoration. Whilst for the Council the outcome of the retrofitting is the primary concern, for tenants the finishings might be of greater importance, and the Panel is keen that the ability to shape this is improved by involvement at an early stage.

10. Not all changes will be made to individual homes; blocks of flats are likely to have at least some work undertaken on a block level. The Panel would wish to see tenant representatives consulted to ensure these works also progress with tenant support. Establishing such consultee networks is not quickly done, which is a further reason for early involvement.
11. There is, however, a more fundamental point to be made, which is that spending from the HRA is spending of tenant's rent monies. Collaborating on finishings and what is to be delivered is worthwhile, but it remains fairly limited in terms of autonomy. The ability to choose *who* will undertake work is also an important function of self-determination and the Panel is keen this is promoted as far as possible. This is already work done by the Tenant Involvement Team, who get informed tenant input into responding to tenders, so it is felt that doing so in this instance would be fairly straightforward.

**Recommendation 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**

12. Related to the point above is another, more specific one. In its discussion the Panel noted that individuals with disabilities or who have mental health difficulties face greater risks when changes are made to the ways in which their homes are lived in. Specific consideration of their situation and particular needs is necessary in order to avoid disproportionate negative consequences arising from poor choices. For instance, someone who is at home almost all the time may benefit from a heating system designed to be always on, such as a heat pump and solar. Someone who also medically requires that their household is kept at a high temperature may find a heat pump not so useful a solution if it has insufficient heat generation during a cold snap. Loss of room space from internal insulation could be particularly problematic for people who are mobility-impaired. In each situation, what might be a standard (and reasonable) response for a person without disability or mental health problem could lead to significant detriment, be it financially, health-wise, or in terms of the functionality of their home. The Panel is concerned that without specific training or other provision to support these people they risk getting a substandard service in designing the upgrade of their new home, or they may choose not to engage at all. As such, the Panel wishes to underline the importance of providing dedicated provision for people in this situation to ensure they get informed advice on the best changes to make to their homes.

**Recommendation 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.**

13. As the ultimate ‘owner’ of the reports from its Panels, the Scrutiny Committee is responsible, where time permits, for signing off reports made from its Panel to Cabinet. The following recommendation was added at the request of the Scrutiny Committee in the sign-off process.
14. Specifically in relation to heat pumps, but potentially other technologies as well, the Committee expounded upon the theme of energy efficiency upgrades impacting the way in which tenants live in their own homes. The efficiencies of heat pumps, for example, are not to be found in finding a more efficient way to replicate the status quo; they approach heating differently, with lower, but typically more constant heat emissions. As a consequence, to feel the benefits it is necessary that the tenant modify their behaviour, and without that behavioural change the tenant may find themselves in a less pleasant environment than before the switch. It was suggested that this was an experience for at least some tenants in a heat pump pilot at Rose Hill. Similarly, growing accustomed to the working of new technology could prove flummoxing to some even if they understand and are willing to follow the best course of action, with similar negative consequences. The Committee is keen to see that this adaptation to the requirements of new technology is successfully navigated, and seeks therefore that ongoing support is made available for those who have technological solutions fitted to understand and implement these changes.

**Recommendation 3: That the Council provides ongoing support to those with new technology fitted to their homes to understand and implement the changes those technologies require to realise their full benefits.**

**Further Consideration**

15. The Housing and Homelessness Panel is unlikely to consider this item directly again during the civic year. Scrutiny, however, will continue to focus on issues of sustainability in the stock being developed through the Companies Scrutiny Panel.

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**Cabinet response to recommendations of the Housing and Homelessness Panel made on 06/10/2021 concerning the Scrutiny-commissioned report on Housing and Carbon Reduction**

**Provided by the Cabinet Member for Affordable Housing, Housing Security, and Housing the Homeless, Councillor Diko Blackings**

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<b><i>Recommendation</i></b>	<b><i>Agree?</i></b>	<b><i>Comment</i></b>
<b>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</b>	Yes	Housing Management have made a budget bid for two Customer Experience Officer roles in addition to the Energy Advice officer role currently in place. These Customer Experience roles will have a wide range of engagement activities which will include the carbon reduction projects
<b>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.</b>	Yes	Through the engagement activities, officers will speak to those with disabilities or mental health problems about their individual needs, including any adjustments that might be needed. This will include identifying any unmet support needs and actively working with relevant support agencies throughout the whole process.
<b>3) That the Council provides ongoing support to those with new technology fitted to their homes to understand and implement the changes those technologies require to realise their full benefits.</b>	Yes	We will continue to support residents with any changes to technology within their homes, including Contractor demonstrations on how to operate items such as Heating, hot water etc. on a one to one basis upon completion of any works.

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