

To: Cabinet
Date: 13 April 2022
Report of: Housing and Homelessness Panel
Title of Report: DSS Discrimination Motion Update

| Summary and recommendations | |
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| Purpose of report: | To present Housing and Homelessness Panel recommendations concerning the Council-requested update report on DSS Discrimination |
| Key decision: | No |
| Scrutiny Lead Member: | Councillor Linda Smith, Chair of the Housing and Homelessness Panel |
| Cabinet Member: | Councillor Diko Walcott, Cabinet Member for Affordable Housing, Housing Security, and Housing the Homeless |
| Corporate Priority: | More Affordable Housing |
| Policy Framework: | Housing and Homelessness Strategy, Council Strategy |
| Recommendation: That the Cabinet states whether it agrees or disagrees with the recommendations in the body of this report. | |

| Appendices |
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| None |

Introduction and overview

1. At its meeting on 22 March 2022, the Housing and Homelessness Panel considered an update report on the progress made against actions sought by Council in a motion passed in July 2021.
2. The Panel would like to thank Ian Wright, Head of Regulatory Services and Community Safety for authoring the report, presenting it at the meeting and responding to the Panel's questions.

Summary and recommendation

3. Ian Wright presented the report, outlining the progress taken against the actions required by the Council's motion. Of the five actions, four had been implemented in full: a revision of the OCLAS code to outlaw DSS discrimination, to raise the issue with the Welfare Reform team, to inform and train Housing Officers to recognise and refer cases of DSS discrimination to the Welfare Reform team, and to use multimedia communications to raise awareness of the issue. The latter had been particularly successful, with other Councils such as Bristol, landlord groups and national charities all enquiring for more information from the Council. The Council's website also had a specific page on recognising and responding to DSS discrimination, with links to Shelter's advice pages.
4. The one area which had not been fully completed, to establish a tenants' forum was significantly progressed, with invitations to get involved having gone out, and the first meeting expected to take place within the next month.
5. In its response the Panel raised questions over a number of areas including:
 - Landlord responses
 - Future resourcing of the forum and monitoring of the prevalence of DSS discrimination
 - The working relationship between the forum and the Housing and Homelessness Panel.
6. In addition to these, the Panel discussed and wishes to make two recommendations around broadening access to the Council's measures to prevent DSS discrimination, and potential issues around including both social and private rented sector tenants in the same forum.

Broadening Access

7. The original motion required that the Council 'Use official communication and media activities to improve awareness, as well as denouncing discrimination against benefits claimants clearly on the Council website, with a dedicated page detailing ways to recognise DSS discrimination and what actions to take in response.'¹ In this it has been very successful, with articles coming out on national rental websites like Landlordzone and The Negotiator. The work was also picked up on social media and praised by Shelter. The Panel welcomes this. It understands that the Council's mission is not solely directed towards improving the lives of its immediate residents but to lead on campaigning for broader change and is pleased to see the Council having a national-level impact.
8. Thankfully, national campaigning and local-level impact are far from mutually exclusive. Indeed, the more of a difference the Council can demonstrate locally,

¹The website page can be found at:

https://www.oxford.gov.uk/info/20267/private_housing_tenants/1515/discrimination_against_benefits_claimants

the more weight its model carries at a national level. In discussion, the Panel identified one area where the Council could improve the reach of its messaging.

9. Locally, the Council's messaging has been primarily targeted at individuals suffering DSS discrimination: how to recognise it, to make victims aware that it is illegal, and the support that is available to them. However, to date there have been no reports made to the Welfare Reform team of discrimination. This could be interpreted as a sign that DSS discrimination is not occurring, but the more likely explanation is that the direct messaging from the Council has not reached those who need it. The Panel's suggestion is that the Council need not try to communicate with these individuals directly. There are a lot of third party organisations – advice centres, tenant unions, charities and community groups – who come into contact with individuals likely to encounter DSS discrimination. The reach of the Council's messaging on this topic would be extended greatly by making those organisations aware of the support available.

Recommendation 1: That the Council contacts relevant third party agencies such as advice centres, unions and community groups, to make them aware of the support available to those who have faced DSS discrimination.

Composition of the Forum

10. The exact wording of the motion passed by Council in regarding the composition of the newly-established tenants' forum is as follows, that it: 'be composed of community groups and stakeholders representing tenants, both in private and council housing'. It is the Panel's view that a forum for both private rented sector and social tenants may not be optimal. The issues faced by and remedies available to tenants in social housing and the private rented sector are very different. If the aim of a tenants' forum is to give a platform for tenant voices to be heard putting two groups with very different interests could dilute the relevance to both. The Panel wishes to see tenants from both sectors given a voice, but it does query whether this setup fully enables this goal. Indeed, in the longer run, if there is too much which is not relevant to participants then ongoing involvement by members could actually reduce, which would undermine the forum's purpose.
11. Given that this has been endorsed by Council it would be overreach for Scrutiny to suggest that this should be changed. As a critical friend to the Council, however, the Panel does raise its concerns. Its recommendation is that this issue be raised with forum members, and that they be given ownership over how, what is ultimately their forum, not the Council's, is composed and what its focus should be.

Recommendation 2: That the Council asks forum members whether they believe the forum should seek to cover private rented sector and social tenants simultaneously.

Further Consideration

12. As part of its discussions over continued monitoring around the extent of DSS discrimination locally the Housing and Homelessness Panel has agreed to add this topic to its list of items for next years' work plan. It is anticipated that the report will be considered in a years' time.
13. A final issue that the Panel wishes to raise is in relation to the ongoing interaction between the forum and the Housing and Homelessness Panel. The Panel welcomes Council's suggestion to invite representatives on a bi-annual basis to discuss topics of relevance. Preparation for this is underway. However, the Panel does also feel it is necessary to underline that it, nor Scrutiny generally, is not a decision-making body. Its impact is indirect, pursuing enquiries and making recommendations. There is value to this, but the Panel considers that to ensure the full potential from the forum is realised that Council cannot rely on Scrutiny alone. Instead, it must also allow the forum to have direct influence on policy through joint-working between its representatives and relevant Cabinet members and senior officers.

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Cabinet response to recommendations of the Housing and Homelessness Panel made on 22/03/2022 concerning the DSS Discrimination Motion Update report

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

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| <i>Recommendation</i> | <i>Agree?</i> | <i>Comment</i> |
|---|----------------------|-----------------------|
| <p>1) That the Council contacts relevant third party agencies such as advice centres, unions and community groups, to make them aware of the support available to those who have faced DSS discrimination.</p> | | |
| <p>2) That the Council asks forum members whether they believe the forum should seek to cover private rented sector and social tenants simultaneously.</p> | | |

Date of Cabinet Meeting:

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