

Minutes of a meeting of the Housing and Homelessness Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee) on Wednesday 3 July 2024



Committee members present:

Councillor Diggins (Chair)

Councillor Jupp

Councillor Mundy

Councillor Qayyum

Councillor Rawle

Councillor Stares

Officers present for all or part of the meeting:

Nerys Parry, Head of Housing Services

Richard Wood, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager

Malcolm Peek, Property Services Manager

Kieran Edmunds, Rapid Rehousing Manager

Tom Porter, Senior Strategy and Service Development Officer

Alice Courtney, Scrutiny Officer

Apologies:

No apologies were received

1. Declarations of Interest

None.

2. Chair's Announcements

The Chair welcomed new and returning Members of the Housing and Homelessness Panel.

Cllr Rawle joined the meeting.

3. Notes of the previous meeting

The Panel agreed the notes of the meeting held on 07 March 2024 as a true and accurate record.

The Panel noted the following updates from the previous meeting:

- Minute 39 – the Landlord Services Transformation (Social Housing (Regulation) Act Compliance) item had been deferred to the October 2024 meeting.
- Minute 43 – the Scrutiny Officer had highlighted the changes required to the governance elements of the Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code Self-Assessment via the Landlord Services Manager, as requested.

- Minute 44 – the Landlord Services Manager had, via the Scrutiny Officer, circulated the additional information requested related to the Tenant Satisfaction (STAR) Survey.

The Panel agreed to consider items 7 (2024-25 Capital Programmes (HRA Delegations), 8 (Annual Review of the Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2023-28), 9 (Temporary Accommodation Demand and Mitigations) and 10 (Housing Performance Monitoring Q4 2023/24) next on the agenda, followed by items 5 (Housing and Homelessness Panel Work Plan), 6 (report back on recommendations) and 11 (dates of future meetings).

4. 2024/25 Capital Programmes (HRA) Delegations

Malcolm Peek, Property Services Manager introduced the report, which sought approval for the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Capital Programmes for 2024/25. The budget for the HRA Capital Programmes was agreed by Full Council in February 2024; the funds were for Capital works programmes for Council-owned housing stock. The works were divided into three programmes as set out in the report: internal, external and communal; the programmes would enable the Council to maintain the quality of property standards in its housing stock for 2024/25. A five-year Capital Programme was in development to commence from 2025/26; this was a one-year interim programme while the five-year programme was finalised. The intention was that the programmes in 2024/25 would be predominantly delivered by Oxford Direct Services (ODS).

In response to questions, the Panel was advised that:

- The Capital works would be prioritised from a stock condition basis, with housing stock in the worst condition being prioritised; a stock condition survey was currently being carried out which would inform the Capital works and prioritisation of them.
- Given the stock condition survey would not be completed until March 2025, prioritisation of works would take place on a rolling basis during 2024/25 as and when more was known about stock condition.
- Some Capital works to Council housing stock would be undertaken simultaneously with other more responsive repairs, where appropriate to do so.
- Planning of the delivery of Capital works was predominantly undertaken by the contractor, which was anticipated to be ODS.
- The Council held asset management information on Council housing stock which set out life expectancy data for various elements in any given property; this alerted the Council to when elements needed to be replaced/updated (e.g. kitchen or bathroom). Delivery of Capital works was informed by this asset management information.
- Damp and mould issues were generally considered under a separate workstream to the Capital works, however the Council took a holistic view when entering properties, so any damp or mould issues should be picked up and addressed if found during a visit for Capital works.
- Taking a holistic view of properties helped to ensure less inconvenience for tenants due to fewer visits being required to the property; it also allowed for more effective and efficient delivery for the Council/contractor.
- The report was very high-level; more detail in terms of specific programmes and stock condition management sat at the service level.

- The Council worked closely with ODS in terms of support and any lessons learned from delivery.
- The results of the stock condition survey would feed into the longer-term five-year programme which was being developed.
- Work on obtaining EPC Certificates for Council housing stock was a separate piece of work to this, but when Capital works were completed the Council re-assessed the EPC on the property.

The Panel noted the report; there were no recommendations.

Malcolm Peek, Property Services Manager left the meeting and did not return.

5. Annual Review of the Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2023-28

Richard Wood, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager introduced the report, which provided an update on the progress made in Year 1 of the Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2023-28 and sought Cabinet approval for implementation of the Year 2 action plan. The Panel was provided with a brief overview and background to the Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2023-28 and advised that the 'Emerging Risks and Challenges' section of the report was particularly key given current demand pressures on Housing Services. The Year 2 action plan sought to address those emergent risks and challenges.

In response to questions, the Panel was advised that:

- The action plan would be reviewed regularly in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities to monitor and report on progress against the commitments in the strategy and delegated authority would be sought to revise the action plan throughout the year in response to emerging priorities; the action plan would continue to be reported on annually to Cabinet and Scrutiny which would allow for oversight and scrutiny on an annual basis.
- The Head of Housing Services would seek clarification on the Council's intended approach, definitions and timescales in relation to First Homes and affordable homes and report back to the Panel.
- The Year 2 action plan would be RAG-rated throughout the course of the year in accordance with progress made in delivering the actions.
- Officers would include the previous year's action plan in future subsequent annual review reports to allow progress to be considered from year-to-year.
- The Council was responsible for discharging funding for the Home Upgrade Grant (HUG2) grant; the Head of Housing Services would seek clarification on current uptake/spend and report back to the Panel.
- The Council had seen a large increase in demand for Temporary Accommodation, however there had been a decrease in length of stay due to a concerted focus being placed on faster move-on from Temporary Accommodation.
- Housing First was primarily aimed at rough sleepers rather than those requiring Temporary Accommodation; rough sleepers were a separate client group to those requiring Temporary Accommodation.
- The Head of Housing Services would provide an update after the meeting on the implementation of the Panel's recommendation on the strategy from the previous year, which was accepted in part by Cabinet: *'That the Council works with OX*

Place to consider how it might move towards having a higher percentage of new homes let at social rent level than a simple majority.'

- Work was underway in relation to the asset management strategy referenced in the report; there would be the opportunity for Scrutiny and wider Member input into that document. The asset management strategy and the HRA Business Plan were interlinked and aligned to the budget-setting process; it was anticipated that both documents would be submitted to Cabinet in December 2024 and could be reviewed by Scrutiny beforehand in the usual way.
- Tenant engagement had already commenced in relation to the asset management strategy and HRA Business Plan.
- The Year 2 action plan would be updated where officers had left the organisation.
- A comparison of the Year 1 action plan versus the Year 2 action plan could be shared with the Panel in due course; officers would need to consider an appropriate format for this.

The Panel requested that:

- The Head of Housing Services provide a written update on the Council's intended approach, definitions and timescales in relation to First Homes and affordable homes.
- The Head of Housing Services provide a written update on current uptake/spend in relation to the HUG2 grant.
- The Head of Housing Services provide a written update on the implementation of the Panel's recommendation on the strategy from the previous year: *'That the Council works with OX Place to consider how it might move towards having a higher percentage of new homes let at social rent level than a simple majority.'*
- The Housing Strategy and Needs Manager provide a written comparison of the Year 1 and Year 2 action plans.

The Panel noted the report; there were no recommendations.

6. Temporary Accommodation Demand and Mitigations

Richard Wood, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager introduced the report, which provided an update on increasing levels of homelessness use of Temporary Accommodation and mitigations in Oxford. The rapidly rising demand for Temporary Accommodation presented a significant risk to Council finances and the mitigations sought to reduce Temporary Accommodation use in the months and year ahead and reduce the considerable financial risk to the Council. The trends in Oxford mirrored those in neighbouring local authorities and nationally.

Kieran Edmunds, Rapid Rehousing Manager, provided a summary of the mitigations which were proposed and those which had already been implemented.

In response to questions, the Panel was advised that:

- Housing Services worked closely with colleagues in the Anti-Social Behaviour teams to manage issues and conflicts at Temporary Accommodation sites, including those in residential areas.
- The Council was sympathetic to the concerns of residents in terms of the impact of Temporary Accommodation sites on the wider community, but it was a challenge given the significant demand for Temporary Accommodation.

- There were established procedures in place for instances where those in Temporary Accommodation breached their licence.
- Members could contact Richard Wood, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager to discuss any specific casework outside of the meeting.
- Demand for Temporary Accommodation related to those whom the Council had a statutory duty to provide Temporary Accommodation for, which was assessed on a case-by-case basis in accordance with relevant legislation; those who did not meet the threshold for the statutory duty may therefore end up rough sleeping longer-term, however there was other provision for rough sleepers – separate to Temporary Accommodation.
- Long-term rough sleepers often had very complex needs; it could take a long time to resolve issues and get those rough sleepers into suitable accommodation for the long-term.
- Consideration had been given to the impact on Council housing stock of redesignating existing stock as Temporary Accommodation.
- If the proposals set out in the report were agreed by Cabinet, Housing Services would get dedicated officer capacity to engage with residents to ensure that provision of Temporary Accommodation was done in the best way possible.
- The mitigations would cost the Council a significant amount of money, but when compared with the current significant cost of Temporary Accommodation (e.g. hotels) it was a much smaller amount of money.
- Officers monitored the balance of Council housing stock for different needs on a monthly basis; it was a fine balance that the Council wanted to get right.

The Panel noted the report; there were no recommendations.

Kieran Edmunds, Rapid Rehousing Manager left the meeting and did not return.

7. Housing Performance Monitoring Q4 2023/24

The Head of Housing Services had submitted a Housing Performance report for Q4 2023/24.

In response to questions, the Panel was advised that:

- Homelessness Prevention Duties and the rise in demand for Temporary Accommodation were linked; Prevention Duty outcomes had worsened as the Council was focusing more on the latter stages of homelessness as a result of reduced capacity due to the sheer demand for Temporary Accommodation.
- Homelessness prevention activity such as landlord mediation was less successful in the current climate, as landlords were required to increase rents due to rising inflation.
- Sourcing affordable accommodation for those who were evicted was extremely difficult.
- The Council was investing in its Prevention teams in 2024/25, which would help improve Prevention Duty outcomes as staff caseloads would reduce; improvements had already been seen in the first three months of 2024/25.

Cllr Stares left the meeting and did not return.

- The Home Office had sped up its decision-making process in relation to asylum claims, which meant that asylum seekers were evicted from Home Office hotels much quicker; asylum seekers then presented to the Council and the Council

had to undertake the usual statutory tests in relation to priority need and duty to house them.

- The Council continued to make representations to the Government in relation to funding for Temporary Accommodation.
- As part of the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund (SHDF) work, the Council had found that more Council housing stock than initially expected already had an EPC C; this was good news, but also made those properties ineligible for decarbonisation measures through SHDF.
- The mitigations which had been put in place around re-let times had only been implemented very recently; it was hoped that improvements would be visible when the Housing Performance report was next submitted to the Panel for consideration. The Head of Housing Services would attempt to separate out the historical data from the current position so that improvements could be more clearly identified.

The Panel requested that:

- The Head of Housing Services provide a written update on the total standard re-let time before the next meeting.

The Panel noted the report; there were no recommendations.

Nerys Parry, Head of Housing Services, Richard Wood, Housing Strategy and Needs Manager and Tom Porter, Senior Strategy and Service Development Officer left the meeting and did not return.

8. Housing and Homelessness Panel Work Plan

The Scrutiny Officer introduced the item; a provisional Work Plan and suggestions for the longlist of Scrutiny-commissioned reports for 2024/25 were included within the agenda pack. A number of items from the longlist had already been scheduled into the Work Plan.

Since the agenda had been published, two new suggestions had been made for Scrutiny-commissioned items, which the Panel requested the Scrutiny Officer schedule into the 2024/25 Work Plan:

- Housing First Update
- Regular performance information relating to Temporary Accommodation and Homelessness

In response to questions, the Panel was advised that:

- The Selective Licensing Implementation (Year 2) item could not be reported on in 2024/25 due to the reporting timeframe; the Year 2 reporting was required to be done after the end of the 2024/25 financial year.
- The item agreed in 2023/24: 'Housing Associations' Approach to Tenant Engagement' was unlikely to be feasible for consideration in 2024/25 due to capacity constraints within Housing Services; however the Scrutiny Officer would include the item on the list of suggestions for 2025/26 so that it could be kept under consideration.

The Panel agreed the Work Plan as set out in the agenda pack, noting that the Scrutiny Officer would seek to schedule in additional items as detailed above.

Cllr Jupp left the meeting and did not return.

9. Report back on recommendations

The Panel noted that, at its meetings on 13 March 2024 and 12 June 2024, Cabinet considered recommendations related to the following reports, responses to which were set out in the agenda pack:

- Allocation of Preventing Homelessness Budget 2024/25
- Housing Ombudsman Complaint Handling Code Self-Assessment
- Implementation of Selective Licensing

Cllr Mundy advised that he had a contact for a Tenants' Union (Acorn) which he could share in support of the Panel's recommendation: *'That the Council rolls out a Selective Licensing scheme communications campaign aimed at tenants to raise awareness of the scheme and tenants' rights; and actively engages with tenants unions as part of the campaign.'* Cllr Mundy confirmed that he would liaise with the Scrutiny Officer after the meeting.

In response to questions, the Panel requested that the Scrutiny Officer:

- Seek confirmation that the tenant communications campaign in relation to Selective Licensing would include accessible and inclusive communications, including forms of communication which were not digitally based.
- Seek confirmation in relation to what would happen if the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol budget was not sufficient to cover costs in any given year; and whether there was any contingency funding.

10. Dates of future meetings

The Panel noted the dates and times of future meetings.

The Panel noted that there was currently no business for the meeting scheduled for 07 August 2024 and agreed to cancel the meeting, subject to no urgent relevant items being added to the Forward Plan.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.39 pm

Chair

Date: Wednesday 7 August 2024

When decisions take effect:

Cabinet: after the call-in and review period has expired

Planning Committees: after the call-in and review period has expired and the formal decision notice is issued

All other committees: immediately.

Details are in the Council's Constitution.

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