

Housing and Homelessness Panel update

September 2020 Meeting

In the most recent meeting of the Housing and Homelessness Panel we again looked at issues centred around the private rented sector and the need for improvement. Two key areas were discussed. Selective Licencing for private landlords and H.M.O licensing.

Selective Licensing

Oxford City Council are launching a consultation on Selective Licensing for private landlords to improve and be regulated. The Oxford City Council will produce a report including the results of the public consultation and to consider and determine if the proposed scheme should be made and then submitted to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and local Government.

The proposal for a Selective Licensing Scheme will be examined in detail over the coming months but the overall decision on whether it would be given the go-ahead would ultimately lay with the relevant government department.

Selective Licensing is a contentious issue among private landlords and letting agents but with the increasing level of complaints from tenants and tenant groups a solution is needed to address the growing concerns about public safety. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted abuse, discrimination and neglect faced by private tenants have by landlords who have failed in their legal duty in maintaining the properties to a safe and satisfactory standard.

We heard from Michaela, from the Tenants Union, Acorn and Mark from Vale County Letting Agency, who both gave their option of Selective Licensing and an option was put forward that a public/private partnership should be setup to oversee any licensing scheme implemented.

Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, Cabinet member for Planning and Housing Delivery presented a report that provides findings from a review carried out for the HMO Licensing Scheme and seeks approval from members to conduct a statutory consultation to renew the scheme in 2021.

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HMO Licensing Renewal

HMO (Houses of Multiple Occupancy) licensing was introduced in July 2006 by the Housing Act 2004, at that time HMOs that were 3 storeys in height and occupied by 5 persons required a mandatory HMO licence.

In October 2018, the definition for HMOs requiring a mandatory licence was changed to include any HMO occupied by 5 persons forming more than 2 households.

Additional HMO licensing schemes, if introduced by Local Authorities, apply to those HMOs which are not required to have a mandatory HMO licence.

This scheme was renewed in 2016 and expires in January 2021. The scheme means that all HMOs including properties converted into self-contained flats without Building Regulation Approval, require a licence. In order for Oxford City Council to renew its HMO Licensing Scheme it must proceed through the statutory process as laid out in the guidance issued under the Housing Act 2004.

Homelessness Update

Paul Wilding – Rough Sleeping Manager at Oxford City Council gave an update on the issue of Homelessness in Oxford. Rough sleepers will not have to go back to the streets of Oxford over the next year, the council has paid for 124 rooms in different buildings across the city which it is using to house people who had previously been sleeping on the streets. Along with other councils, Oxford City Council was tasked with housing all the city's rough sleepers during the coronavirus lockdown as part of a government programme called 'Everyone In'.

The City Council has paid for rooms in an Oxford Brookes hall of residence at Canterbury House on the Cowley Road until July 2021. It has also extended an agreement with the Youth Hostel Association on Botley Road until March next year. Along with six rooms leased from University College, the council has a total of 124 self-contained rooms for rough sleepers. A total of 203 people have been housed in hotel and student rooms in Oxford over the past four months. Of these, 76 have been supported into more permanent housing. Canterbury Housing is a temporary move on from hostels for people with lower support needs but three major players in supporting homelessness. The Lived Experience Advisory Forum, Oxford Influence Group and

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Homeless Link Oxford will be supporting the City Council in addressing the needs of those faced with Homelessness for the next year.

The rooms where they have lived have been in a patchwork of different places, but the council's new arrangement means they will be in fewer locations. Oxford City Council is waiting to hear what its share of a £105m fund to end rough sleeping will be.

In addition, the Covid-19 Pandemic has highlighted a potential problem within the housing market from tenants who face the possibility of homelessness through difficulties of not being able to pay their rent. Whether this is through being furloughed or with being made unemployed the current no eviction policy will not last forever and we are yet to see the extent of the issues this brings when the scheme ends.

Panel's Recommendations

- ✓ Whilst the Panel recognises that Council has little direct influence over the choices taken by landlords when responding to situations arising from the pandemic, it also notes feedback from the Oxford Tenants Union on the overwhelming benefit to tenant mental health that good practice by landlords can have.
- ✓ It is the view of the Panel that steps taken to maintain tenancies, such as conversations about rent reductions or payment plans, are likely also to be in the interests of landlords in preventing voids which risk being unfillable in the event of retightened lockdown measures.
- ✓ Consequently, the Panel recommends that the Council take what action it can to increase good practice amongst landlords. In the Panel's view the only way it realistically can is through convening, influence and communication. The Panel recommends seeking information from landlords and tenants to understand the pressures on both sides, and promoting in communications with landlords good practice and highlighting the risks of not engaging in good practice for both tenant welfare and landlord returns. One avenue to explore being to use the contact the Council has with HMO landlords and its HMO landlord accreditation scheme.