

Housing and Homelessness Panel update

August 2020 Meeting

PRS (Private Rented Sector)

In August, the Panel welcomed two representatives from the Oxford Tenants Union to speak on the impact they had seen of Covid-19 on private rented sector tenants. The Panel were informed of the changing challenges faced by tenants during the Covid-19 pandemic. Initially, concerns were raised over failures by landlords and agents to maintain social distancing, attending properties for viewings unannounced or entering without tenant permission. Latterly, problems had arisen in shared properties where tenants had been held responsible for the full rent following the departure of a housemate. The pressure of paying rent during the pandemic had caused many people to be 'sick with worry' throughout, and those who had few alternative options were facing sofa-surfing or rough sleeping. Maintaining people in their homes was suggested to be the best means of preventing a significant rise in homelessness. As one of the places nationally with the most acute ratio between rents and earnings, Oxford would be particularly vulnerable to such an increase.

Panel members sought clarification from the Oxford Tenants Union on the scale of the problems within Oxford and the proportion of people the Council would have a duty to house. Knowing these figures precisely was acknowledged to be a challenge, with multiple advice providers in the city, and the unwillingness of people to seek help until being at the point of near-crisis.

In discussion it was recognised that the Council held little power over landlords. However, it was suggested that the experience of the Tenants Union was that communication over good practice and raising awareness of tenants' needs could be important ways of improving tenant-landlord relations during the pandemic. Raising awareness of tenants' rights was also an important undertaking. The difficulty in communicating with at-risk tenants, and landlords was recognised as challenging. A challenge faced by the Tenants Union was in communicating information on tenants' rights to non-English speaking communities, many of whom had an elevated housing risk profile.

Panel members discussed whether there existed a need for a social letting's agency. The concept was given support by Panel invitees on the basis that if it followed similar

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schemes elsewhere in the county would increase the availability of social housing in a city with a high unmet need.

The mutual threat to landlords and tenants caused by the pandemic was noted by the Panel, though it was recognised that the earlier and more acute damage would be felt by tenants. Being able to support and intervene early was identified as crucial in preventing homelessness but there was a potential blockage in knowing who was at risk until very late stages.

In a context of growing job losses and increased benefit claimants, the Panel discussed the high levels of non-compliance by landlords following the legal ruling that 'no DSS' clauses in adverts were discriminatory.

Panel's Recommendations

- ✓ That the Council uses its existing channels of communication to share information on tenants' rights and advice relevant to the pandemic, and that it will seek to use its existing links with local community groups to improve access to such information amongst non-English speaking groups.
- ✓ That the Council identifies tenants at risk of eviction and communicates with them proactively regarding the advice and support available to them.
- ✓ That the Council uses its convening and influencing power to hear, collect and share the experience of renters and landlords with a view to signposting to good practice and increasing awareness of the potential for lose-lose situations if such good practice is not followed by landlords.
- ✓ That the Council agrees to the Tenant Ambassador Review recommendation of increased communication between the Council's allocations team and its homelessness team.

Housing Delivery Plan

The Oxford Housing Delivery Test Action Plan seeks to explore what the key risks to housing delivery in the city are and looks to identify a range of actions that seek to reduce that risk and indeed seek to improve levels of housing delivery in Oxford. When the HDT was undertaken in November 2019, the Oxford Core Strategy was more than 5 years old, and so Oxford's test was affected by this.

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For the years following the adoption of the Local Plan the HDT results will be measured against the housing requirement in the plan of 475 homes per annum from 2020/21, increasing to 567 homes per annum from 2021/22 to 2035/36. Officers will be seeking clarification of this with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Regardless of the national requirements around the Housing Delivery Test the Council is committed to ensure we deliver our housing requirements and boost affordable housing in the city given the acute need. This is considered increasingly important given the wider factors now impacting relating to the coronavirus pandemic.

OCHL (Oxford City Housing Limited)

In June 2016 to help address the city's acute housing need, the Council set up the Oxford City Housing Company Ltd. The company, which is wholly owned by the Council, develops new build housing on Council owned land and buys affordable housing from developers on private land and undertakes estate regeneration schemes. By acquiring sites and building houses, the company seeks to influence the pace and type of house building in the city. The Council will also seek to purchase additional sites for housing that have stalled and sell it to the company to bring forward development more quickly.

Julian House & Lucy Faithful

Actions being taken to support the delivery of the Julian Housing and Lucy Faithfull sites. The Julian Housing site was reported to be on track, having only recently received planning permission. The Lucy Faithfull site had been subject to a hold up due to the presence of a 15th century friary beneath it, requiring archaeological investigation, but it was otherwise moving forward.

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