

HOUSING PANEL (PANEL OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE)

Thursday 27 July 2017

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillors Goff, Henwood, Pegg, Sanders, Thomas, Wade and Humphrey.

OFFICERS PRESENT: Andrew Brown (Scrutiny Officer) and Stephen Clarke (Head of Housing Services)

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor Mike Rowley (Housing)

GUESTS PRESENT: Priscilla Reynolds

102. APOLOGIES

Apologies were noted from officers Caroline Green and Martin Shaw (item 4).

103. ELECTION OF CHAIR FOR 2017/18 COUNCIL YEAR

Councillor Henwood and Councillor Thomas were both nominated to chair the Panel but the Panel was unable to elect a chair because the votes were tied.

The decision to elect a chair for the council year was therefore referred to the next meeting of the Council's Scrutiny Committee, on 7 September.

Councillor Henwood was selected to chair this meeting in a random selection process.

104. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations.

105. FIRE SAFETY IN TOWER BLOCKS

The chair invited a member of the public to address the Panel. The speaker expressed a number of concerns including about:

- Public safety in tower blocks and the cladding on some Oxford towers.
- The adequacy of the national testing regime.
- The marketisation of housing leading to corners being cut to enhance profits and developer interests being placed above community interests.
- Affordable housing stock being reduced as a result of Right to Buy.
- Affordable housing policy in the city and the level of new affordable housing being delivered at the redeveloped Templar's Square.

The Head of Housing Services updated the Panel on the Council's response to the Grenfell Tower disaster, the safety of Oxford's tower blocks, the cladding systems used and the status of the government tests.

He said that resident safety is the utmost priority for the Council. The Council had learnt lessons and implemented recommendations following previous disasters at Lakanall House and Shirley Towers. For example the Council had taken a decision to retrofit sprinkler systems in all 5 tower blocks following a recommendation in the Lakanall House Coroner Inquest, which was published in 2013. Only 18 blocks in the country had been retrofitted with sprinkler systems and 5 of those were in Oxford. Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service had recently inspected all Oxford tower blocks twice and concluded that they were safe.

Following the Grenfell Tower disaster the Council had moved quickly to reassure residents about the safety measures in place in their tower blocks, including by issuing letters and hosting drop in sessions.

The cladding systems on Oxford's tower blocks were not the same as those on Grenfell Tower. The insulation used in Oxford was rockwool (approximately 150mm thick) which was non-combustable and had the highest Euroclass fire safety rating of A1, whereas it is understood that the insulation used at Grenfell had been combustible. The other element of the cladding system was the rain screen which was typically about 3mm thick. The rain screens installed on parts of Windrush Tower and Evenlode Tower were made from aluminium composite material (ACM) and were similar to those used on Grenfell, comprising of two very thin aluminium sheets with another material in between.

The Government response to the Grenfell Tower disaster had been difficult to follow. Initially the Council had been required to submit samples of ACM from its tower blocks for testing and these samples had failed. However, all ACM had some combustibility and building regulations did not require it to meet that standard. A number of experts had questioned the testing regime and the government had since appointed fire safety experts to advise them on whole system testing, including both the insulation and the rain screen elements of various cladding systems. The first result had just been published and the system used on Grenfell was found to have failed. The Council's system would be tested soon.

The Council had taken an 'in principle' decision to remove the rain screen installed on Windrush and Evenlode towers (this applied to only some elevations of the blocks) and would need to take an informed decision based on the test results about what to replace it with, with a view to ensuring that the replacement would have a 30-40 year service life. The refurbishment project was still underway, contractors were on site and one mast climber was still in place which could facilitate these works taking place relatively quickly. It was thought likely that the cladding could be replaced within 6 months. Residents understandably had major concerns and wanted to know what was happening. The Council would continue to reassure residents and would communicate next steps soon. A reference group had also been established.

The chair invited a tower block tenant to address the panel. She said that she lived at the top of Evenlode Tower with her partner and two children and found it quite frightening. She wanted more information about what to do and how to get out in the event of a fire and questioned why tower blocks had been built to a height at which the fire service would be unable to tackle a blaze from the outside.

The Head of Housing Services confirmed that the fire service did not have the equipment to fight fires towards the top of tower blocks from the outside but the approach has always been to fight fires from the inside using dry risers installed on each floor.

The stay put policy remained in place but that many residents were very concerned about it. If a fire was detected in a resident's flat the advice was to leave the flat and close the door. Sprinklers should put out or suppress the spread of the fire until the fire service arrived on the scene (their response time has been confirmed as being 8 minutes). If smoke or heat was detected in a communal area then the 3 closest floors would be evacuated and people on the other floors were advised to stay put. The Council needed to work with residents to ensure they understood the advice, information cabinets containing details of the fire safety system in each block are being provided for use by the Fire and Rescue Service. The Council was also working to identify vulnerable residents so the fire and rescue service could be advised which flats they may need to evacuate in the event of a fire.

The Board Member for Housing said that the Fire Brigades Union had been campaigning for improvements to building regulations and the retrofitting of additional fire safety measures in tower blocks over a number of years. He also said that a fire at Plowman Tower in 2013 had been successfully contained within one flat and that he hoped the reference group would remain in place in future.

The Panel welcomed the quick action taken to communicate with residents and noted the following points in response to questions:

- The Council was reviewing over block evacuation procedures.
- The Council had taken advice from the fire service throughout the refurbishment project.
- Hockmore, Plowman and Foresters towers will not have the same ACM rain screen.
- The Council would take soundings from the reference group about the fire safety arrangements in tower blocks and what more the Council could be doing to reassure residents.
- The Council had made its views clear to government about the inadequacy of the building regulations and the testing regime, given that ACM complied with the regulations but failed the test.
- The Secretary of State had committed to reviewing building regulations but the timing and outcomes were unknown at this stage. Building regulations were not normally applied retrospectively.
- The storage of items such as bicycles, mobility scooters and sofas in communal areas was a concern because such items were combustible or could cause an obstruction. The Council had provided additional resources to tackle this issue and had changed operational procedures for bulky waste collections.
- Alarms were tested weekly. Practice evacuations were not common practice but residents had asked the Council to consider these.
- Leaseholders were required to have sprinklers and fire doors as front doors. Two leaseholders had refused sprinklers but the Council was seeking to force their installation through the courts.

106. TENANT SCRUTINY PANEL TOWER PROJECT UPDATE

The Tenant Co-optee introduced the Tenant Scrutiny Panel's (TSP) interim report on the tower block refurbishment programme. He said that the TSP had visited all 5 tower blocks, spoken to project managers, requested documents and conducted a resident satisfaction survey about this big project.

The Panel commented that the report was very useful and interesting. In response to questions the Panel noted that:

- There had been limited opportunity to engage with leaseholders.
- It would be useful for TSP members to be named in future reports.
- Replacing inefficient, unserviceable storage heaters and improving energy efficiency had been a priority and the Council would evaluate these impacts at the end of the project.
- It was unusual for satisfaction to be measured midway through a project but this had enabled a number of issues to be identified and addressed.
- A tribunal case about the costs to leaseholders was ongoing.
- Sinking funds could not be implemented retrospectively but would be considered for new developments e.g. at Barton Park.
- The refurbishment involved complicated and disruptive works and there had been tensions at times.
- The new Resident Liaison Coordinator had been a go to person and would remain in post until the end of the project. This role was seen as vital for major works and budget proposals would be brought forward to make this post permanent.

107. HOUSING PERFORMANCE - QUARTER 4

The Panel requested a written response from the Head of Business Improvement about the pressures affecting measure CS002: Time to process changes in circumstances.

The Panel noted that a written response (previously circulated now appended) had been provided in respect of the numbers in measures HC016: Number of affordable homes for rent delivered and HC006: Total number of affordable homes completed in year.

In response to a question, the Head of Housing Services advised that the reduction in the number of children in temporary accommodation was an excellent result given the circumstances and he did not know what more the Council could do in seeking to reduce this figure, given that a range of initiatives were already in place. He added that the impacts of the Homelessness Reduction Bill would need to be planned for and would hit the Council financially. The Council's response would be built into the forthcoming budget round.

The Panel heard that successful interventions with rough sleepers were defined as those where a person to whom the Council had a duty to house had been taken off the streets into accommodation or prevented from sleeping on the street.

The Head of Housing Services also confirmed that the tower block refurbishment project was an intense and complicated project that had impacted his department and used a lot of resource.

108. RECOMMENDATIONS UPDATE - UNIVERSITY HOUSING NEEDS

The Panel noted the report and made the following comments:

- Members were not impressed with the approach of Oxford University representatives at the meeting.
- The response to recommendation C was a concern because amount of student accommodation concentrated in certain locations was becoming overwhelming and it may be appropriate to put student accommodation in areas outside of the city centre and Headington, e.g. Barns Road or Blackbird Leys.
- In the response to recommendation E, post-graduates on research-based courses may need to be better defined to capture those whose research is of most benefit to the city.

109. HOUSING PANEL WORK PROGRAMME

The Panel noted the work plan and agreed to:

- Receive regular updates on the tower block refurbishment project, including any developments with building regulations and the Council's representations to Government on issues of fire safety.
- Broaden the item on Tenant Involvement to include engagement with resident groups and housing associations.
- Receive a further update on the Council's work on void garages and underused garage sites.
- Visit a tower block with housing staff and meet residents.
- Visit a homelessness facility in the city.
- Seek the views of the public and interested parties (e.g. tenants who live on estates, homeless people etc.) when considering future items.
- Include a message on the front of future agendas encouraging members of the public to address the Panel.

110. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The Panel approved the notes with one change which was to say on item 96 that the list of garage sites was not complete and that the Panel supported a full census of garage sites in the city.

111. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Noted.

The meeting started at 5.00 pm and ended at 7.15 pm

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