

HOUSING PANEL (PANEL OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE)

Wednesday 26 April 2017

PANEL MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillors Henwood (Chair), Pegg, Sanders, Thomas and Wade; Geno Humphrey (tenant co-optee).

OFFICERS PRESENT: Andrew Brown (Scrutiny Officer), Melanie Mutch (Empty Property Officer (Private Sector)), Martin Shaw (Property Services Manager) and Ann Phillips (Tenancy Management Manager)

92. APOLOGIES

The Panel noted apologies from Councillor Angie Goff, Stephen Clarke, Bill Graves and Frances Evans

93. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations.

94. EMPTY PROPERTIES

The Empty Property Officer introduced the report. She said that she had been in post since 2005 and that the Council had had an empty property strategy in place since 2009. Since then the number of empty properties in the city had reduced from around 900 to about 300 currently, with 75 of these empty for more than 2 years and 25 for over 10 years. This decrease couldn't be solely accredited to Council interventions, which involved officers from a number of different services. The strategy was due for a refresh and a consultation would take place over the summer.

The Empty Property Officer advised that an empty property was defined as any dwelling that had been continuously unoccupied for over 6 months. Second homes were covered by different legislation and owners of second homes had to demonstrate that they lived there at least once a year, for example by producing utility bills showing energy usage.

In response to a question about targeting empty commercial premises, the Empty Property Officer said that she is made aware of 3-4 sites per year. Legislation restricted enforcement opportunities for non-dwelling properties but Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO) could be an option in some cases.

The Panel asked questions about the circumstances around some specific empty properties in the city and heard that all cases were different and the Council used a range of approaches to encourage owners to bring them back into use. Owners of empty properties often had a defence so in many cases achieving successful outcomes required a lot of support and effort.

The Panel asked what resources would be required to support a substantial CPO programme. The Empty Property Officer advised that the CPO process

was immensely time consuming and while the Council was gaining more experience in this area, enhanced in-house legal expertise would be needed. The Council could also potentially facilitate CPOs on behalf of external financiers. One issue with the CPO process was a requirement to demonstrate that empty dwellings were causing harm. Officers found that neighbours often retracted complaints if they thought a property would be brought back into use as social housing.

The Panel queried the timing of the consultation and received assurances that avenues such as Tenants in Touch were used to encourage residents to report empty properties, which they could do anonymously online.

The Empty Property Officer explained that the figures in Appendix 2 for the numbers of properties brought back into use were affected by the numbers of new builds coming onto the market hence a minus figure was shown in year 6.

The Panel agreed to scrutinise the new empty property strategy and voiced support for the additional use of CPO powers.

95. GREAT ESTATES UPDATE

The Property Services Manager said that the Great Estates programme comprised of 2-3 major improvement schemes per year plus a number of smaller schemes. Wherever possible these schemes were aligned with cyclical maintenance and off-street parking improvements to achieve better overall outcomes. Tenants and leaseholders were routinely consulted as they knew their estates best. This involved door knocking, exhibitions, and surveys. Officers wanted to know where anti-social behaviour (ASB) was taking place so that opportunities for ASB it could be designed-out. Officers wanted people to be proud of their estates and feel the investments had been worthwhile.

The Property Services Manager said that officers had found that the lead in process had been quite considerable, often involving 6-9 months of preparation before improvement works could start. This had resulted in £400k of slippage but it was expected that future spending targets would be met. Some blocks needed external treatment works and officers were surveying and cataloguing blocks in order to understand solutions and costs. These could inform a future rolling programme of further improvements, subject to funding.

The Panel voiced support for the programme and suggested that the types of schemes taking place provided an ideal opportunity for local young people to get involved in their delivery, for example as apprentices. The Panel also suggested that may be an idea to involve children in redesigning communal areas where these were being vandalised. The Property Services Manager said that he would take these suggestions away.

The Panel questioned how schemes were selected and heard that they were prioritised from suggestions by local members, residents and officers. It was suggested that members representing unparished wards might wish to direct some of their allocated CIL funding to environmental improvements in estates.

The Panel encouraged the planting of trees, particularly where trees were being removed as part of an improvement scheme.

The Panel raised concerns about cars were parked on grass and questioned whether additional off-street parking could be delivered in these areas. The Property Services Manager advised that the biggest limitation was obtaining planning consents.

The Panel welcomed the report and asked for a further update in 12 months to include:

- More details about off-street parking improvements.
- Feedback from residents.
- Any metrics that can be provided to illustrate how improvements had made a difference (e.g. numbers of additional parking spaces provided).

96. EMPTY GARAGES AND FORMER GARAGE SITES

The Tenancy Management Manager introduced the report. She said that responsibility for the management of the Council's garage assets had transferred to her team in December 2015. They had seen that there were a lot of empty units and set up a project to address this, with a focus on Blackbird Leys, where many empty garages were located.

The Panel questioned why some particular blocks did not appear to be listed in Appendix 1 and suggested that they should be listed by ward, based on current ward names and circulated to ward members.

The Panel resolved to go into private session to discuss information contained in the confidential appendices.

97. TOWER BLOCK REFURBISHMENT

The Chair of the Tenant Scrutiny Panel (TSP) advised that the TSP report had now been submitted to senior officers and would be presented at the next Housing Panel meeting.

98. HOUSING PANEL WORK PROGRAMME

The Scrutiny Officer advised panel members to email him any suggestions.

99. NOTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Noted.

100. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Scrutiny Officer advised that due to the impacts of the General Election, the next Housing Panel meeting was now provisionally scheduled for 10 July 2017, not 14 June 2017 as listed in the paperwork.

101. EXEMPT APPENDICES - GARAGE ASSET MANAGEMENT

The meeting started at 5.00 pm and ended at 6.45 pm