

Review of Oxford City Council's Tower Block Refurbishment Programme

Undertaken by the Tenant Scrutiny Panel (TSP)

June 2016 - February 2017.

Background

The panel was originally made up of six members but due to the ill-health of one member and the resignation of another, the remaining members felt they should produce an interim report at this stage. We recommend that at the end of the project, another review be carried out to look at the overall outcome of the project by a larger panel. We wish to convey our thanks to the Oxford City Council (OCC) officers for their co-operation in producing documents and providing explanations when requested. A comprehensive list can be found at the end of this document.

Introduction

This review has been written whilst work is still being carried out at Evenlode, Windrush and Hockmore towers. None are yet complete, therefore we are unable to finalise our findings on parts of our initial objectives. We do however feel that we have been given sufficient information on some aspects enabling us to identify areas of good practice and concerns and so we have based our report on those facts.

The decision to carry out this review took into consideration that it is the biggest project, both in value and structure that OCC has undertaken. This also goes with its policy, objectives and commitments towards its residents. Therefore, in our opinion, the review is beneficial for both the OCC and the TSP. It is also (in nature) different from previous reviews carried out.

We started by defining the scale of the works in accordance with this great project and scope of review. Since the contract for the five Tower Blocks had been signed and the selected contractor (WDES) had already started work, we decided to start the review forthwith in order to catch up. We decided to concentrate on the first three blocks, determined by their start and completion dates, followed by the other two blocks. All blocks have similarities in the refurbishment and improvements being undertaken. We could then

evaluate both good practice and shortcomings in our review. We would hope that our findings could be utilised in future projects.

Methodology

To catch up, the TSP made a number of site visits. These included meeting with the contractor and tenants as well as submitting our request for information. We have attended presentations and consultation meetings with the relevant staff involved with the project.

The TSP members were allowed to have a look at the contract and tender documents in situ. During the desktop reviews, we had the chance to get an idea of the running of the contract and performance of OCC in executing the contract, along with the performance of the contractor's management team and any follow up with them. We have also seen some progress reports which give a view of the practice, achievements and problems met and how they could be resolved.

Our objectives

1. To determine that the Tower Block Refurbishment Programme produced an end product worthy of the major financial cost involved.

1.1 The panel would like to note that the initial financial cost of refurbishment started at £12 million, through £15m, to £18m and finishing at the final contract value of £20.1 million was confusing, also the first justification for the project lifetime being 30 years after refurbishment could not be cost effective.

1.2 Although we did not see the feasibility study we were still under the impression for some time, until it was clarified to us and corrected later, that the increase was due to additions and alterations. Also, the lifetime of the Tower Blocks will be 60 years or more (possibly 80). This figure was also confirmed by WDES. These facts made it evident and logical to decide on refurbishment versus demolition. Finance were able to confirm the money to pay the increased figure was available and indeed that this figure did include monies for unforeseen extra expenses.

1.3 We have been following the programme and smooth running of the works by consultation with the residents, reports of co-operation between OCC management and WDES staff and viewing what has been accomplished so far.

1.4 The need for employing various consultants and each of their roles has been fully explored and we find nothing of concern. As we cannot yet see the end product we feel this is the only comment we can make at this stage.

2. To recognise good practices and communication during the partnership of WDES, OCC and residents and recommend that they be included in any future projects.

2.1 We want to commend the appointment of a Resident Liaison Co-ordinator (who was attached to the Tenant Involvement Team) by OCC to help alleviate the communication problems that were sure to occur in a project of this magnitude. She was the point of contact for both residents and the contractor when situations arose because of missed appointments and other problems. She was also responsible for contacting the various departments within OCC when their input was required. Delays were alleviated by her knowledge of the project which meant access to quick solutions. We must commend how this role has been undertaken. By creating a single point of contact other members of staff have been free to fulfil their normal responsibilities whilst providing support when necessary (helping with door to door surveys for instance). This position should be regarded as a must for any future projects – even small ones. We recommend that it remains as part of the Tenant Involvement Team.

2.2 Access to the works has faced some problems and inconvenience for both the contractor and tenants. In order to avoid similar problems (which can cause delays and inconvenience to the contractual arrangements), comprehensive arrangements should be undertaken by consultation and meetings, these would help establish ground rules between contractors, OCC and residents so that work could be completed on schedule.

2.3 The panel identified from a resident's survey carried out in Evenlode and Windrush that

some areas required a change of practice. WDES made alterations in their procedures around making appointments for access to properties, produced newsletters and displayed work schedules in the blocks. The practice of making face to face contact with residents at the start of these projects is much better than just pushing letters through doors. Whilst this is time consuming we feel it should be considered as best practice as it develops good relationships between all parties.

2.4 Special consideration should be given to elderly and disabled residents and if they feel the need for a chaperone they should be given the chance to reschedule visits. Similar consideration should be afforded to residents who have a poor understanding of the English language. We are fully aware that this is an OCC policy but would like to see the same policy being adopted by any contractor.

3. Make sure residents are all fully informed on how to use new heating and updated water system efficiently.

3.1 Tenants we have spoken to have confirmed that information has been provided on the change of systems. It might be advisable if a follow up visit by an Energy Advice Officer is made after the main heating bills are received to ensure that the instructions have been fully understood. The panel have requested three questions to be included on the final satisfaction reports to be completed by residents. This will help us to formulate our final conclusions on how residents feel about the new systems.

4. To monitor the experience for residents throughout the refurbishment cycle and determine how unexpected problems were rectified to a satisfactory conclusion.

4.1 Whilst most aspects appear to have been solved on an ad hoc basis, two issues came to light in the satisfaction surveys and we must commend WDES for how they dealt with them. Residents complained of offensive language being used by sub-contractors, especially whilst they were working on the cradles, also the attitude and lack of care being taken whilst working in people's flats. Both of these issues were taken up by WDES with their sub-contractors and the level of complaints dropped dramatically. Problems also occurred when lifts were out of commission but again, we heard that in many cases the contractors offered help to people.

4.2 The Anti-Social Behaviour team (ASB) could be asked to intervene and give advice and maybe take action if need be.

5. To establish at all stages of the project, transparency is maintained to ensure that WDES produce the final expected product.

5.1 At one time, one of the TSP members thought that OCC could have taken over this project, but it was explained to him that it is not within the capacity of OCC to do so. It required a professional body and specialist staff and workforce.

5.2 The review body fully accepts this need and therefore endorses the appointment of these bodies. After establishing the value of the work being done by the consultants E.C.Harris, we are happy that all stages are being monitored carefully.

5.3 We would recommend that the new OCC housing company follows an equally exacting process when dealing with any construction developments it may undertake.

6. To make sure that all on-going maintenance costs have been fully recognised and that they have had procedures put in place to cover the financial costs involved.

6.1 The panel have recognised the costs involved in maintaining and cleaning of the cladding and windows but to date have no evidence that these are covered by any budget.

6.2 Although we were advised that the exterior of the windows could be cleaned from inside the flats safely we have doubts that some residents will feel confident to undertake this task. We strongly recommend that OCC take responsibility for cleaning all windows as well as the cladding. We recognise that this could increase the service charge but in the interests of Health and Safety we think this is a price worth paying.

6.3 One of the contractual conditions is cleaning the cladding every two years otherwise it will lose its function by accumulating fungus, according to the contractor.

Therefore the confirmation that OCC will take this responsibility and that there is a budget for it, is essential.

7. To identify any areas which could improve community cohesion for future high rise housing developments.

7.1 It is imperative that the community cohesion issues have to be looked into with focus, high priority and care.

7.2 This is an area which needs to be considered not only for high rise flats but all future housing. The nature of today's living means that people's lifestyles have altered. Much social housing is for (a) single people who need assistance (because of health problems, both physical or mental) or older people who have little or no family contact or (b) families (single parent included) with children where parents have to/want to work. Parents have to enlist childcare and often have no family support having had to move away from the area they grew up in.

7.3 For many, sites such as 'Facebook' are the means they use to keep social contact with others. Maybe this is an area that could be explored. Could a site provide the means for tenants in an area to 'talk' to each other and perhaps develop community ideas?

7.4 OCC could perhaps provide free Wi Fi and information be supplied in new tenants packs. When community events are held in the area they could be published on the site. Inter area teams of tenants could compete at quizzes, sports activities, baking skills etc. if the initial contacts are successful.

7.5 Past experience has shown that tenant's associations can be equally very good and very bad. They are reliant upon there being a group both willing and able to run these groups. It maybe with the use of 'social media' some of the past headaches might be avoided.

7.6 One recommendation we would make is that any future developments include community buildings which can be used by residents groups. They need to have rooms for groups, both large and small, so consideration should be given to more flexible designs

where rooms can be combined together when needed.

7.7 Sports facilities seem to suffer from a lack of accommodation where space is available for permanent storage of equipment. It has been encouraging to see the facilities the OCC have helped to provide for sports in Oxford, such as pavilions for football teams and we commend them for this. Future developments must provide these facilities, especially when they mean children have to live in flats and have no gardens to play in. Safe playing areas, such as we have seen at Denny Gardens, are a must when future developments are envisaged.

7.8 We hope the commitments of WDES as given in their agreed contract with regard to all elements relating to community cohesion will be fully met. This is another area we cannot give our views on until the completion of the project. OCC can play a major role in achieving this through strengthening communication and partnership with all the stakeholders, as well as monitoring the contractor's commitment and mutual interests in this respect.

8. Review respite requirements and how provision can be met for current and future projects.

8.1 Please refer to comments in the following section on respite facilities. We were unhappy that respite space which was spoken about in the main WDES office, when the TSP met the site manager at the start of the project, did not materialise.

9. Assess the environmental impact including pollution (noise, airborne and waste) as a result of the works.

9.1 Without doubt the noise pollution caused by the roofing works in the blocks is the one issue that has registered with everyone. It was necessary work and could not be avoided. In these instances the council and contractors must ensure that residents are aware of the level of noise involved. Good communication is vital. Respite facilities within the blocks is not acceptable, provision must be off site. However few residents took up the offer of respite in Evenlode or Windrush but as it was only available on site this may be the reason.

9.2 We have received no reports of other pollution causing problems. We do believe however that on occasion, the caretakers have had to clear mess left by contractors. This issue needs to be resolved in any future developments as to who is responsible for this work. We refer to this point in items of concern.

10. Items of concern

10.1 We have had certain items brought to our attention from reading the Clerk of Works report. We would like to highlight:

10.2 At Evenlode Tower, it was soon identified that many contractors arrived to start work and were unable to because the mast climbers were not in place. Sufficient time had not been allowed for their installation. This led to delays for some contractors which could have been avoided had the schedule been correct. It has however been pleasing to see this did not reoccur at Windrush or Hockmore so obviously lessons were learnt.

10.3 Contractors working on the cladding had to be stopped because of temperature issues. The prompt action of OCC reporting the issue to WDES meant the work was halted before too much damage was done by the sub-contractor. This action should not have been necessary as the contractors should have been aware of the criteria for the process of attaching the cladding.

10.4 The public right of way issue should have been dealt with prior to the work on Evenlode. The delay in achieving a S278 caused by the section247 going to the County Council and the Department of Transport could take 4-5 months according to the letter from Richard Crook (Construction Manager of WDES) to David Tatman (Senior Consultant representing OCC). This will surely lead to extra costs. We can only hope that Oxfordshire County Council and the Department of Transport grant permission without any further delay. An investigation as to why this happened should be undertaken to establish how this omission occurred and to ensure that this is not an issue in future developments.

10.5 At Hockmore Tower there is an on-going safety problem regarding the scaffold loading bay. New River Retail did not grant permission to use the South Elevation roof for

storage so all materials are lifted by a large fork lift to the storage area above the front entrance and exit to the site. Permission has been granted for WDES to store skips, materials etc. at the nearby car park of the closed Nelson public house. Hockmore Tower was always going to be a difficult site to manage but why were these problems not foreseen?

10.6 The other issue that appears to be outstanding is that of fire doors/front doors not being fire compliant. This again is causing delays and doubtless extra cost. At the time of this report we do not know what action has been taken/ has been agreed.

10.7 We think it should have been raised earlier when the safety issue was first discovered.

10.8 Health and Safety: It is fair to say that the issue of security, safety and protection has been well covered contractually. We look forward to seeing proof of actual implementations so that we can review it.

10.9 We have seen no official Health and Safety records, such as accident books, for the sites. There were references to Health and Safety made in the sample Clerk of the Work's reports we viewed but nothing further.

10.10 We have not seen any manuals, documents and instructions to show that residents are fully aware of how to use the new facilities and what the procedures are in case of emergencies.

10.11 The responsibilities for cleaning inside and outside of the buildings both during and after works, along with the repair of any damages needs to be clarified so that disputes can be avoided. The contractor should ensure that all sub-contractors are aware of their responsibilities. OCC staff should not be expected to shoulder extra duties when they are probably dealing with extra work caused by the disruptions during this project.

11. The Manual of Repairs

11.1 We suggest that it contains a separate attachment of a route map showing all the

water lines inside the building, electricity, sprinklers, hydrants etc. related to the system in the blocks and the surrounding area and the mains.

12. Solar Energy

12.1 We were pleased with the possibility of installing solar cells for the electricity and heating in the roof of Hockmore Tower. We were informed of the difficulties of installing them on the other towers due to the nature of the structures; we would suggest in view of its numerous benefits and being the policy of OCC to go solar we propose that OCC approaches the consultants to see if there are any smart alternatives that could be utilised in future OCC works and projects where solar energy is not feasible.

13. At this stage the Panel do not feel able to move to the Indicators of success –To be meaningful this should be considered at the end of the project. We have tried to highlight where good practice has been established and also the concerns we have identified.

Oxford City Council Tenant Scrutiny Panel

The panel would like to thank the following officers for their time and co-operation in helping us conduct this review with added thanks to their supporting teams who helped collate facts and figures.

Stephen Clarke	Head of Housing and Property
Jack Bradley	Senior Building Surveyor (Project Lead)
Simon Warde	Tenant Involvement Manager
Amy Weller	Resident Liaison Coordinator
Cat Arnold	Senior Management Accountant
David Watt	Finance Business Partner
John Ryan	Tenant Liaison Surveyor (Clerk of Works)
Adnan Chaudhry	Leasehold Management Officer

We have referred to the contractor throughout as WDES but are aware of their change of title to Fortem

We do not wish the following to be regarded as part of the review, but would like the officers to be made aware of our feelings

One area we would like to add our comments is the issue of the leaseholders and their charges.

When 'Right to Buy' was established, we do not think that the problem of having leaseholders in these types of buildings was considered. In the panel's opinion the OCC have treated the leaseholders fairly regarding the costs levied. Like OCC, we await the outcome of the tribunal. We consider the publicity generated by some individuals and local press totally unjustified and unwarranted and would like the OCC to know they have our backing on their handling of this issue.

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