

Minutes of a meeting of the HOUSING PANEL (PANEL OF THE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE) on Tuesday 16 January 2018

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Committee members:

Councillor Henwood (Chair)

Councillor Sanders

Councillor Thomas

Councillor Wade

Geno Humphrey

Officers:

Stephen Clarke, Head of Housing Services

Andrew Brown, Committee Services Manager

Mike Newman, Corporate Secretariat Manager

Frances Evans, Strategy & Service Development Manager

John Mitchell, Committee and Member Services Officer

Also present:

Councillor Mike Rowley, Board Member for Housing, Housing

140. Apologies

Apologies had been received from Councillors Goff and Paule.

141. Declarations of interest

None.

142. Housing Panel Work Plan

The Panel noted the forward work programme.

143. Review of Oxford City Council's tower block refurbishment project relating to fire safety

Following the Grenfell Tower fire in London, the Corporate Management Team commissioned a review into fire safety aspects of the Council's tower block refurbishment project, specifically the use of aluminium composite material (ACM) rain screen cladding on parts of two tower blocks in Blackbird Leys. The Executive Director of Organisational Development and Corporate Services had submitted the report which was introduced by the Corporate Affairs Lead who gave a brief introduction to the report, the conclusion of which was that the Council had followed a robust process and taken proper account of the guidance and regulations in force at the time; advice

flowing from pre-Grenfell incidents (eg Lakanal House); and advice from Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue (which had been consulted throughout). The Council had taken steps to keep residents fully informed, to reassure them about safety matters and had taken account of their concerns.

The Committee and Member Services Manager confirmed that the high turnover in the Clerk of Works role identified in the report had not given any cause for concern as far as safety was concerned. The Clerk of Works was employed by the Council to provide an additional layer of quality assurance.

In response to questions about the capacity of Building Control referred to in the report (and attributable in part to pressures caused by the Westgate project) the Head of Housing Services said that he had appointed a full time Building Control Officer for the task and who would remain in post until the end of March.

In response to a question about the reference to a fire test on 02 August involving “some” residents, the Head of Housing Services explained the process for the evacuation of the Evenlode and Windrush tower blocks which, in normal circumstances, would involve residents of the floor on which the fire had been identified and the ones immediately above and below. Officers had worked with a self-selected reference group of residents about this issue and all residents had been informed about the procedure to be followed in the event of fire.

Members were grateful to officers for the report and were interested to understand how residents felt now that the project was coming to an end and that reassurances had been given about safety of the tower blocks. The Head of Housing Services said that residents were now generally more secure, officers would continue to reassure and there would be a final survey of residents once the project was complete.

Vulnerable residents were made known to the Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service which would prioritise their evacuation in the event of fire. There was no reason not to continue housing vulnerable people in tower blocks when it was, by all other counts, an appropriate offer.

The Building Control’s assessment referred to in the report had been based on Building Regulations rather than the Building Control Alliance guidance simply because the latter had not been published at the time of the assessment. The approach taken would have met at least one of the routes to compliance set out in the BCA guidance.

The towers were fitted with effective sprinkler and alarm systems and the cladding material was non-combustible. While it was not possible to guarantee that the towers would meet future regulatory requirements or guidance the Head of Housing Services thought it unlikely that they would impact too heavily on the Council’s provision, if at all.

The Panel had been pleased to note the outcome of the report and thanked the officers for it.

The Chair reminded the Panel that the principle of a visit to the Tower Blocks had been agreed at a previous meeting. The Head of Housing Services suggested that a good time to do this would be once the project had been completed in a few weeks’ time.

144. Draft Housing & Homelessness Strategy 2018-21

The City Executive Board, at its meeting on 23 January, would consider the amendments made to the draft Housing and Homelessness Strategy 2018-21 following 6 weeks of public consultation, with a view to approving the amended Strategy 2018 (and its associated appendices).

The Housing Panel had commented on the pre-consultation version of the Strategy and asked for the post-consultation version to be included on the agenda for pre-decision scrutiny.

The Chair reminded the Panel of its recommendations to the City Executive Board in relation to the pre-consultation draft, all of which had been accepted.

Cllr Rowley, Board Member for Housing, introduced the report and Strategy which was returning to the Panel as a penultimate draft before submission to the CEB the following week. The revised strategy took account, among other things and to the extent that it could, of the Homelessness Reduction Act.

The Strategy and Service Development Manager drew the Panel's attention to Appendix 4 of the report which noted responses given to representations made during the consultation.

In relation to "local connection" as a criterion for provision of, and access to services, the Strategy and Service Development Manager said it had been the subject of particularly detailed consultation with many stakeholders, including service users. This was a matter which did not lend itself to any easy or obvious answers. The Strategy had, however, identified a workstream to consider the matter further.

The Chair noted that Government guidance in relation to the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 made frequent reference to the Local Authority's ability to operate discretion in its application. The Strategy and Service Development Manager confirmed that there would be training on the requirements and implications of the Homelessness Reduction Act for those involved in decisions about provision, including when discretion should be applied..

There was a tangential connection between the Strategy and the use of Community Protection Notices (CPNs) but the Strategy was not an appropriate place for a detailed account of their use and operation. There would be a separate report on the CPNs to CEB in February (and prior consideration by Scrutiny Committee).

The Chair suggested that the "City Conversation" was an important means of gaining intelligence which could usefully be fed into future iterations of the Strategy. The Strategy and Service development Manager explained that the City Conversation in November came after the consultation had closed but agreed with the Chair's suggestion that a reference to it should be made in the executive summary. The Strategy sets out the importance of collaborative working with other agencies to

address issues of homelessness and rough sleeping. The City Conversation started this and going forward, work will continue to develop partnership arrangements.

It was agreed that the Panel should receive a report on progress with the Homelessness Partnership in 6 months' time.

In a discussion about the availability of housing generally there was recognition of the pressures caused by high student numbers and the loss of family housing as a result of Right to Buy and subsequent sale of the properties to private landlords. The Council was working with the County Council and also consulting, through the Local Plan 2036 review, with a number of employers in the City to look at the housing needs of staff. The Council is also working with the County Council to consider housing requirements of young care leavers. The welcome reversal of the Government's supported housing benefit cap meant that accommodation could continue to be provided for some vulnerable people for whom it would otherwise be difficult without subsidy.

The Chair suggested that the first sentence of the Council's vision, as set out at the beginning of the Strategy should be expanded so as to refer to the City as a place in which to "... live, work *and learn* ..."

The causes of homelessness were many and varied and, generally, outside the Council's control. The causes of homelessness and early prevention were being explored further as part of the Trailblazer project. Responsibility for dealing with the consequences of homelessness did not lie solely with the Council. Many homeless people have additional needs and require wrap around support services. Homelessness was something that had to be addressed on a collaborative partnership basis, and this was reflected in the Strategy. Partners across Oxfordshire would need to work together to meet duties and responsibilities and to address issues of homelessness and rough sleeping.

Panel members expressed concern that when the Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP) had last been invoked, not all those entitled to access support had done so. The Head of Housing Services explained that some work would be done to find out why this had been the case as services were made available to those who needed it.

The work being done to support the housing needs of key workers was welcome.

The Chair noted a Panel member's concern and it was agreed that the two elements of section 5.44 of the Strategy should be separated out to avoid the juxtaposition of a reference to loss of life alongside the perception of tourists. Also that paragraph 5.9 of the Strategy should be amended to show that vulnerable homeless people may be tempted into crime. A cross-check of the document should also be undertaken to eliminate any typographical errors and to ensure that when referring to average house prices within the Strategy document, there is consistency of how this is presented.

145. Notes of previous meeting

The Panel approved the notes of the meeting held on 13 November.

146. Jennifer Pegg

The Chair concluded the meeting by reflecting on the absence of Councillor Pegg whose bubbling personality and ability to ask the difficult questions would be sorely missed. He thought, however, that questions from the Panel at this meeting had done justice to her memory.

147. Date of next meeting

Meetings are scheduled as follows:

- 08 March 2018
- 09 April 2018

All meetings begin at 5.00pm

The meeting started at 5.00 pm and ended at 6.30 pm

Chair

Date: Thursday 8 March 2018

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