

Cabinet Housing Panel
26 June 2017

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL

* Reporting to Cabinet

Minutes of a meeting of the WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL CABINET HOUSING PANEL held on Monday 26 June 2017 at 7.30pm in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, The Campus, Welwyn Garden City, Herts, AL8 6AE.

PRESENT: Councillors J.Boulton (Chairman)
M.Perkins (Vice-Chairman)

M.Birleson, H.Bower (substituting for K.Holman),
M.Cook, J.Cragg, M.Holloway, S.Johnston, H.Quenet,
F.Thomson

CO-OPTED MEMBERS: Co-opted Members:-
Tenants' Panel Representatives

R.Read and B.Robbins

Independent Representatives

R.Paris

OFFICIALS PRESENT: Executive Director (Housing and Communities) (S.Russell)
Head of Community and Housing Strategy (S.Chambers)
Head of Housing Operations (S.Pearson)
Head of Property Services (Housing) (P.Gray)
Private Sector Housing Manager (A.Luck)
Governance Services Officer (M.Lowe)

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN AND VICE CHAIRMAN:

It was noted that the Cabinet had appointed Councillors J.Boulton and M.Perkins as Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Panel respectively for the 2017/18 Municipal Year.

2. SUBSTITUTION:

The following substitution of a Panel Member had been made in accordance with Council Procedure Rules 19-22:

Councillor H.Bower for K.Holman.

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3. APOLOGIES:

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor K.Holman and S.Smith, Independent Representative.

4. MINUTES:

The Minutes of the meeting of the Cabinet Housing and Planning Panel, held on 19 April 2017, were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

5. ACTIONS UPDATE:

An updated version of the report of the Executive Director (Public Protection, Planning and Governance) had been circulated. The report identified actions agreed at the last meeting of the Cabinet Housing and Planning Panel and their current status.

RESOLVED:

That the status of actions identified at the meeting of the Cabinet Housing and Planning Panel on 19 April 2017 be noted.

6. FIRE SAFETY IN FLATS:

Executive Director (Housing and Communities) reassured the Panel that, following devastating events at Grenfell Tower, the Council had implemented a number of initiatives to ensure that the residents of the two Council-owned tower blocks in the Borough, Queensway House and Goldings House, were as safe as possible.

The Head of Property Services (Housing) read the following statement.

“Queensway House

Cladding samples

The contractor who installed the cladding in 2012 has given an assurance that the materials and the system are not the same as that used in Grenfell Tower.

However, as an extra precaution the Council today took samples and they are currently being tested at the Building Research Establishment (BRE) - this is the organisation which is testing cladding for other local authorities and is approved by the government to do this. We have been advised by the BRE that we will have the results in the next couple of days.

We have published a statement on the Council's website, carried out a letter drop to all Queensway House residents this afternoon and circulated the statement to all Members.

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Working with the Fire Service

Nick Long and Simone Russell attended a Local Resilience Forum (LRF) meeting this afternoon at Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue HQ - this was a county-wide meeting to look at fire safety issues.

Simone Russell and Peter Gray will also be meeting with Andrew Butler, Head of Protection (Fire Protection Team) to discuss how we can work with the Fire Service in managing fire risk. This will include other measures we can take to maximise fire safety in Queensway House, in light of the terrible tragedy which occurred at Grenfell Tower. This will include looking at options for installing a sprinkler system to all communal areas of Queensway.

Contingency planning

We had received reassurance from the contractor who fitted the cladding at Queensway House that it is safe - however we want to be prepared for any eventuality. As such we are carrying out the following actions:

- Identifying a contractor to be on stand-by in the event that part or all of the cladding has to be removed. This includes the provision of scaffolding which will be required.
- Identifying suitable alternative short term accommodation for residents of Queensway House, should the need arise to decant them whilst works are being arranged/carried out. Seeking a contractor to deliver around the clock warden patrols within Queensway House, should the need arise.

Identifying vulnerable tenants in Queensway House

We are clarifying which residents would need special assistance in the event of an emergency evacuation and/or decanting, should the need arise. This includes residents with a disability/older people.

Goldings House

This block is owned by Paradigm Housing Association. We have received assurances from them about fire safety and will continue to liaise with them so that we can satisfy ourselves that they building is being well managed.”

Head of Community and Housing Strategy further stated that Paradigm confirmed they carried out regular Fire Risk Assessments, the most recent being carried out in November 2016. Because of the nature of the services provided at Goldings House, including a Foyer project, there was 24 hours staff cover and an evacuation procedure is in place in the event of a fire. There is no sprinkler system”.

Members of the Panel raised a number of questions and concerns to which Officers provided the responses detailed below.

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- Queensway House had a stay-put policy for evacuation in the event of a fire in the block. Currently the Fire and Rescue Service supports this approach. However depending upon the response from the Government, this approach will be reviewed by the Council.
- Following the two letter drops to the residents of Queensway House no queries or concerns had been received by the Council by its residents.
- Following the resilience meeting attended by the Executive Directors referred to in the first statement there were no plans to change the current policy at the present time.
- There were 66 separate flats, mostly one bedroom. The Council is looking at options for sprinkler systems will install an appropriate system for the building if this is required. The Council will also follow the Government's/Fire Service recommendations.
- The installation of a sprinkler system does not necessarily have to be only on the Government's recommendation. However it will be considered as part of a complete package of measures for improving and developing the safety of the blocks of flats.

Councillor Perkins, as Cabinet Member, stated categorically that the Cabinet was actively looking at and giving serious consideration to the installation of a sprinkler system at Queensway House at policy level. The Cabinet was currently obtaining advice from experts in the field. However, there was no government requirement at this stage to install a sprinkler system.

Officers continued to respond to concerns raised by the Panel.

- Due to the layout of Goldings Houses, which was split into the 'Foyer' and general housing it was difficult to maintain a fire register. There was no practical mechanism to monitor who was in the block at any given time.
- The majority of the Panel concurred with the view that a sprinkler system in Queensway House would be welcomed and that it should not be necessary to wait for a Government recommendation before it was considered and implemented.
- Fire Risk Assessments of other accommodation, including sheltered housing schemes are carried out regularly. Works to these properties are scheduled as a complete package of improvement works. The Housing Team is also carrying out an audit to verify the information it already holds on vulnerable and elderly residents in Queensway House.
- The wider piece of work regarding the doors to leasehold flats and their fire safety rating was on-going. The Panel would receive an update in due course.

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- The Panel noted that before the fire at Grenfell Tower a number of leaseholders had queried why it was necessary to install fire doors to their properties. These queries had stopped since the fire. Work continued to engage leaseholders.
- Queensway House had a single means of escape. Frequent inspections of the block are undertaken by the caretaker to ensure that no debris was left in the communal areas and stairways. This was at least weekly. The last inspection was carried out one week ago and the areas were found to be spotlessly clean.
- A caretaker was dedicated to Queensway House.
- Officers in the Housing Department were working closely with the Corporate Property with regard to the access and use of the outside staircase/fire escape from the CAB area.
- Queensway House had 12 floors.

The Panel, whilst recognising the need to have a holistic approach to any safety system or package in Queensway, reiterated the view that the Cabinet consider carefully the installation of a sprinkler system at Queensway House as expeditiously as possible.

Officers advised that a sprinkler system was one of many items currently being considered by the Council. However, it was imperative that a measured approach was taken to ensure that the optimum safety system was installed and implemented. Officers were committed to progressing the information and finding a resolution as soon as was reasonably possible to ensure that the residents of the blocks and all Council properties were as safe as possible. The results of the testing of the cladding was awaited and would be collated with other information received. The decision taken would depend on the information which was received; other aspects and elements would also need to be considered. There was a number of different options regarding sprinkler systems appropriate for communal areas and flats. There were a number of factors to be considered before any system was installed and advice and any recommendation from the Fire Service would be awaited and taken forward as soon as possible. Officers recognised that the safety of residents was paramount.

Councillor Perkins, as Cabinet Member commented that the Council must follow the most appropriate advice and that the Cabinet was very much minded to agree for a sprinkler system to be installed. However the Panel must be aware that the Cabinet needed to make a considered decision based on the advice received from the Fire Service. The Council had to follow the appropriate advice recommended and to take into account the materials at Queensway House and the building layout. It was imperative that, should a sprinkler system be installed,

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that it was the right one for the property as should it not be it may create an even more difficult situation.

Some Members again expressed the view that the Cabinet should not wait for a Government recommendation on Queensway House to be received but to actively go out to seek a solution.

Members also expressed the view that an ongoing communications plan must be prepared and shared with the appropriate organisations. This would ensure that residents and the wider public would be kept fully informed of all information and decisions taken by the Cabinet. It was imperative that there was communication with residents; residents received information from the Panel and that the Panel had expressed concerns regarding the sprinkler system.

Officers reassured Members that there had already been two letter drops to the residents of the blocks and that there would be continued communication.

A Tenant Panel Member commented that all the implications of the installation of a sprinkler system needed to be considered, including the disadvantages. One such example being insurance premiums, should the sprinkler be activated on the top floor when the lower floors were not affected would result in extensive insurance claims due to water damage.

Officers advised that whilst there was legislation for non-smoking policies in the communal areas it would not be possible to put a blanket ban on a whole block. It would not be enforceable and would be impossible to police. Leases did not stipulate that a property was no smoking. Nor would it be possible to regularly check electrical appliances in properties where the appliance had not been purchased by the Council.

Officers reassured Members that should the investigation into the fire at Grenfell Tower identify an electrical appliance as being the cause then all Council residents would be advised to have any appliances of that make and model tested (Periodical Electrical Testing). Information about the product would be circulated and advice and guidance given to residents. This information would also be disseminated to all residents across the Borough.

Officers confirmed that the cladding insulation layer was being tested by the Building Research Establishment.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the statements made by the (Officers) on the current situation regarding fire safety in flats be noted.
- (2) That the Cabinet consider the concerns raised by the Cabinet Housing Panel regarding the installation of a sprinkler system at Queensway House.

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- (3) That the Cabinet be urged to install a sprinkler system at Queensway House as soon as practically possible.
- (4) That an ongoing communications plan be prepared, in order that residents and the wider public be fully informed of any decisions taken by the Cabinet.
- (5) That the recommendations and advice received from the Government and other appropriate experts be considered and acted upon as appropriate.

7. PROPOSED SCOPE OF WORK FOR THE NEW CABINET HOUSING PANEL:

The Panel received a presentation from the Executive Director (Housing and Communities) on the proposed scope of work for the new Cabinet Housing Panel. The Panel was asked to express their views on the areas of work.

Executive Director (Housing and Communities) introduced the areas of work as follows.

- Housing Revenue Account Business Plan – discussion and updates
- Discussing and updating key service developments
- Future initiatives for the Service, including housing development
- Performance monitoring – key performance indicators
- Tenant Scrutiny – updates, findings and recommending service improvements
- New strategy/policy and protocols – discussion and recommending approval
- Receiving updates on government policy changes, their impacts and our response
- Affordable Housing Programme – progress updates

Following a request, the Executive Director (Housing and Communities) assured Members that training would be provided on the Housing Revenue Account and that a separate section be included on the housing provision for vulnerable groups and that this group be highlighted.

RESOLVED:

That the proposed scope of work as set out below be agreed.

- a. Housing Revenue Account Business Plan – discussion and updates
- b. Discussing and updating key service developments
- c. Future initiatives for the Service, including housing development
- d. Performance monitoring – key performance indicators
- e. Tenant Scrutiny – updates, findings and recommending service improvements
- f. New strategy/policy and protocols – discussion and recommending approval

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- g. Receiving updates on government policy changes, their impacts and our response
- h. Affordable Housing Programme – progress updates
- i. Housing provision for vulnerable group.

8. OVERVIEW OF THE HOUSING SERVICE:

Presentations were received from the Executive Director (Housing and Communities) and the Heads of Housing Services which provided an overview of the Housing Service at Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council.

Responding to questions the following answers were given:-

Head of Housing Operations

There had been a total of 14 evictions during the previous year, which were not all as a result of rent arrears. A very low number of evictions were due to Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) as there were many enforcement tools which were used before the Council went down this route, which was seen as a last resort. It was very difficult to evict for ASB because of the amount of evidence required by Judges and it was often difficult where witnesses did not want to give evidence. Officers experienced difficulty managing the expectations of neighbours or residents around the Borough who were experiencing ASB.

Following the reintegration of the Housing Trust, the Council would continue to promote events in the community. However a review of the current services and programmes would be undertaken to ascertain which would continue and/or be improved and which activities will be carried out in conjunction with the Community and Housing Strategy Team which is in the same directorate. Services, such as those provided at the Jimmy MacDonald in Hatfield and others in the community, would be enhanced across the Borough to provide better life chances for residents.

Head of Property Services (Housing)

- Comparisons were made against the services provided to private homes in respect of time, cost and efficiency.
- Economies of scale resulted in slightly reduced costs.
- Gas servicing reached 100% in past few months (a legislative requirement), with strategies in place to identify those residents who repeatedly did not allow access to their properties to allow for servicing and maintenance.
- There were indicative timescales for the life cycle for the replacement of materials and works for the sector which were used for guidance only as they did not have to be adhered to legally. Should an item, such as window

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frames when inspected they would not necessarily be replaced. Detailed records were kept of all replacements.

RESOLVED:

That the presentations received from the on the Executive Director (Housing and Communities) and the Heads of Housing Services be noted.

9. INTRODUCTION OF NEW STATUTORY ENFORCEMENT POWERS FOR PRIVATE SECTOR HOUSING:

Report of the Executive Director (Housing and Communities) setting out the introduction of new statutory enforcement powers for the Council under the Housing and Planning Act 2016 together with the current enforcement powers.

In response to questions from Members, Officers confirmed that the Building Research Establishment commissioned to carry out a stock survey had estimated that there were 2,341 Houses in Multiple Occupation in the Welwyn Hatfield area. Currently only those which were over three stories with five or more living individually required a licence. This may change depend if Government changes legislation for mandatory licencing for two storey with five or more people.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Committee note the content of the report.
- (2) That a further report would be brought back later in the year which would set out the proposals for a policy which would include the use of the new powers and the mechanism for calculating the appropriate level of civil penalty where applicable.

10. HOMELESSNESS REDUCTION ACT 2017 UPDATE:

Report of the Executive Director (Housing And Communities) provided an update on the Homeless Reduction Act 2017 which would expand the duties of Councils to prevent homelessness for all homeless households.

There a many new measures in this new legislation and this will have a resource implication for the team. However Members were reassured that the Council was already proactive in preventing homelessness and this goes some way in preparing for the new legislation.

RESOLVED:

That the content of the report be noted.

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11. GOVERNMENT FUNDING PREVENTION OF HOMELESSNESS:

Report of the Executive Director (Housing and Communities) related to the funding the Government had allocated to Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council. The new grant gives Councils more control and flexibility over homelessness budgets at the local level, taking into account local circumstances. It forms part of the Government's approach to tackling homelessness, helping both those at risk of homelessness and those experiencing a crisis.

The report set out the detailed work which had been carried out on a series of proposed work streams/projects identified as a priority for funding from this newly available sum.

Officers, in response to questions from Members advised that:-

- The funding would be utilised by initiating partner mobilisation rather than investing in the internal establishment – this would make it easier to withdraw in the event that the funding ceases after two years. There was the intention that the initiatives could potentially be continued by partners even if funding ended in two years' time. In order to do this there would need to be effective measures in place to assess the outcomes achieved.
- There would be a planned approach as to how the extended duty under the Homelessness Reduction Act would be coordinated and implemented, which included holding regular meetings with the relevant organisations on a county wide basis to identify the best way forward.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the content of the report be noted.
- (2) That the proposals set out in the report be recommended to Cabinet for approval.

(The Chairman accepted this report as an urgent late item on the grounds that it needed to be referred to the Cabinet at its next meeting).

Meeting ended at 9.30pm
ML