

MINUTES OF THE HOUSING SELECT COMMITTEE

Wednesday 5 July 2017, 7.30pm

Present: Councillors Carl Handley (Chair), Peter Bernards (Vice Chair), Olurotimi Ogunbadewa, Jonathan Slater, Bill Brown and Pat Raven and ex-officio member Councillor Alan Hall.

Also present: Genevieve Macklin (Head of Strategic Housing), Jeff Endean (Housing Strategy and Programmes Manager), Emma Talbot (Head of Planning), Kevin Sheehan (Executive Director for Customer Services), Thiru Moolan (Building Control), Steve Kilden (Fire Safety Manager, Lewisham Homes), Andrew Potter (Chief Executive, Lewisham Homes), and John Bardens (Scrutiny Manager).

1. Minutes of the meeting held on 26 June 2017

The scrutiny manager outlined two changes that will be made to the minutes of the last meeting:

- 1.1 The attendance will be amended to reflect that no apologies were received.
- 1.2 Paragraph 5.4 will also be amended to say that “the committee agreed that in all future reports officers should define and explain the different types of affordable housing being referred to”.

Resolved: the Committee agreed the minutes of the last meeting as a true record.

2. Declarations of interest

2.1 The following non-prejudicial interests were declared:

- Councillor Slater is a member of the board of Phoenix Community Housing.
- Councillor Hall is a governor of the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust.

3. Responses from Mayor and Cabinet

There were no M&C responses for this meeting.

4. Fire safety in tall buildings

Kevin Sheehan (Executive Director for Customer Services) introduced the report. The following key points were noted:

- 4.1 Following the Grenfell Tower tragedy, council officers have been working to establish the number of tall buildings in Lewisham that need to be tested. Officers have been looking at the buildings owned by the council, registered social landlords (RSLs), and private developers, and what powers the council has to influence each sector.

- 4.2 Government guidance was to test all buildings with cladding made of Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) and, if a sample fails, to put in place interim fire safety measures to reduce the risk.
- 4.3 In Lewisham six blocks managed by Lewisham Homes were identified as needing testing. Three of these blocks have since failed ACM fire safety tests and the council has ordered the removal of cladding from these buildings and put interim fire safety measures in place. Lewisham Homes will be prioritising an intrusive inspection programme across their buildings. Cladding will not be the only risk being looked into.
- 4.4 RSLs in the borough are following a broadly similar process to the council and a small number of tower blocks have needed to have their cladding tested. One private sector building has had its cladding submitted for testing.
- 4.5 The council's relationship with its private sector partners is complex. The council does not regulate the private sector, but it does have some powers (as set out in the report) which it deploys on the basis of risk. the Grenfell fire public inquiry may look into relationships like this and who has the authority to regulate.
- 4.6 The Lewisham Mayor has asked officers to consider introducing sprinklers in tower blocks where it would be possible and appropriate. Only 1% of tall buildings in the social sector in the UK have sprinklers.
- 4.7 It is not yet clear if the Government are going to meet the costs of any necessary work. The council intends to ask the Government to contribute, as it sees this as a national issue.
- 4.8 Where fire risks are identified and there are things that could be done to improve safety – sprinklers and fire doors for example – the Council will be forceful, using relevant legislation where necessary, including with leaseholders.
- 4.9 Officers will talk to Barry Quirk (Chief Executive) about writing to the DCLG permanent secretary to express the Council's concerns about the cost of the necessary work.

Steve Kilden (Fire Safety Manager, Lewisham Homes), Andrew Potter (Chief Executive, Lewisham Homes) and Thiru Moolan (Building Control) also spoke on this item. The following key points were noted:

- 4.10 Lewisham Homes has a very experienced fire-safety team, with the right experience and qualifications, which cares about making their buildings as safe as possible for their residents.
- 4.11 It has long been accepted that the best advice in the event of a fire in a tower block of flats is to stay in your flat. Each flat is intended to act as a fire-resistant compartment to prevent the spread of fire beyond that flat. There has been no change to this advice since the Grenfell fire.

- 4.12 Communal fire alarms are not recommended in tall buildings for a number of reasons, including the fact that residents are likely to start ignoring them after a few false alarms.
- 4.13 Lewisham Homes' tall buildings have "dry risers" in place for the Fire Brigade to pump water through in the event of a fire. Buildings over a certain height have "wet risers", which are kept permanently charged with water.
- 4.14 All Lewisham Homes blocks that needed to be tested have been. This has identified three blocks with ACM cladding which needs to be removed. Three blocks tested were found to have non-ACM cladding. The priority has been to put in place interim measures on the three blocks with ACM cladding. This has included 24hr fire wardens and communicating widely with residents.
- 4.15 Lewisham Homes is aiming to have the name of a contractor to remove the cladding by the end of this month (July 2017). Once the cladding has been removed there will be another longer-term phase of work on fire safety and it is important that Lewisham Homes takes the time to choose the right contractors for this.
- 4.16 The Fire Brigade were the first people to inspect Lewisham Homes' blocks, which is important for residents as they are seen as independent. So far two Lewisham Homes blocks with ACM cladding have received intrusive surveys from the Fire Brigade. Over time Lewisham Homes will introduce a programme of intrusive surveys of all buildings of six stories or more regardless of the cladding system in use. However the buildings with ACM will be prioritised.
- 4.17 Prior to Grenfell, Lewisham Homes was already taking a number of fire safety measures in certain types of building. This included a programme of installing sprinklers in sheltered housing and installing automatic fire detection equipment in large houses that have been converted into flats. This programme should be fully completed by the end of the year. Lewisham Homes is also voluntarily installing sprinklers in all new-build properties.
- 4.18 Lewisham Homes' fire door installation programme, which has been running for five years, is nearing completion.
- 4.19 Lewisham Homes' fire-risk assessment process includes a fire-safety checklist that caretaker staff use daily to monitor and report any maintenance issues that might be a fire risk. Caretakers are trained by fire safety advisers to help them identify fire safety issues. This is an ongoing process with fire safety advisers always available to answer queries. Any fire related maintenance issues identified are inspected after the repairs are made and signed off by a repairs supervisor. All fire-safety-related maintenance must be completed in 48hrs.
- 4.20 Lewisham Homes will be engaging widely with residents, not just about cladding, but fire safety more generally. Lewisham Homes will be putting more robust fire safety checking systems in place, including looking more closely at those occupiers presenting a fire risk to others and taking formal action against

repeat offenders. Court action will be the last resort, but will be taken if necessary.

- 4.21 Where fire risks are identified and there are things that could be done to improve safety – sprinklers and fire doors for example – the Council will be forceful, using relevant legislation where necessary, including with leaseholders. The Council is also looking into carrying out intrusive surveys to identify any breaches in compartmentalisation from holes cut in walls from installing technology.
- 4.22 Some Lewisham Homes Tenants and Residents Associations have objected to having sprinklers installed due to concerns about the potential for water penetration.
- 4.23 The approach since the 1950s has been to design flats to contain a fire for one hour. The Fire Brigade will usually arrive long before then. Over time it is possible for holes to be cut in walls – for instance, to install technology – and that these have the potential to affect the ability of flats to contain fire. Retrofitting sprinklers can be destructive work which also involves cutting holes through fire compartmentalisation. Technical experts will need to weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of retrofitting sprinklers.
- 4.24 Officers noted that fire safety issues are not dealt with through planning – this is done through Building Control. The Government have said that planning shouldn't try to replicate or duplicate other controls. Officers also noted that developers have a choice about the Building Control they work with. The Grenfell public inquiry is likely to look into the deregulation of Building Control.

The Committee made a number of comments. The following were noted:

- 4.25 The Chair of Overview and Scrutiny noted that he had written to the Council's Chief Executive, Barry Quirk, asking questions about the fire safety in regeneration schemes across the borough. He explained that the intention of writing formally to the Chief Executive was to provide reassurance between council meetings.
- 4.26 The Chair of Overview and Scrutiny noted that Scrutiny will take a longer-term look at the council's response following Grenfell and that the request for this report was intended to provide an opportunity for officers to report early on and reassure residents.
- 4.27 The Chair of Overview and Scrutiny noted that Scrutiny will develop a programme of work to take forward any findings or recommendations relating to the Grenfell response.
- 4.28 The Chair of Overview and Scrutiny commented that the council needs to be open, transparent, effective and timely, with proper community engagement throughout this process.

- 4.29 The Chair of Overview and Scrutiny noted that following the Housing Select Committee this issue will be considered again by the full Overview & Scrutiny Committee, and then again at the Sustainable Development Select Committee.
- 4.30 The Chair of the Housing Select Committee noted that at the last meeting the committee discussed scrutinising the health and safety checks of some buildings.
- 4.31 The committee noted that the advice to stay in your flat in the event of a fire, based on the compartmentalisation of blocks of flats, assumes that all the safety measures are still in place as intended.
- 4.32 Given that there were a number of internal fire-safety issues with Grenfell, as well as the external cladding, the Committee queried what is being done to improve tenancy checks.
- 4.33 The Committee noted that hoarding can sometimes present a fire risk to other residents and that the recommendations from the committee's report last year on mental health and housing should help with this.
- 4.34 Given that we have now seen that the strategy of fire compartmentalisation can go catastrophically wrong, the Committee suggested that we need to consider what else we can do to cover the remote possibility that it fails again.
- 4.35 In order to warn and stop people walking into a building if there is a fire, the Committee queried whether buildings could be fitted with an alarm that can only be operated by the fire brigade.
- 4.36 With the number of councils needing contractors to remove cladding, the committee expressed concern about companies trying to profiteer and asked to be kept informed.
- 4.37 The Committee thanked Steve Kilden, Andrew Potter, Thiru Moolan and Council officers for the information they provided.

Resolved: the Committee noted the report.

5. Lewisham Housing Strategy

Jeff Endean (Housing Strategy and Programmes Manager) introduced the report. The following was noted:

- 5.1 This report is intended to set out the council's progress against its housing strategy 2015-2020. The strategy's priority areas are: Helping residents at times of severe and urgent housing need; Building the homes our residents need; Greater security and quality for private renters; and Promoting health and wellbeing by improving our residents' homes.
- 5.2 The Government is yet to publish any further detail on the implementation of recent changes to housing legislation. Officers do not therefore propose to carry out a wider review of the Housing Strategy at this stage.

- 5.3 Instead, officers have drawn a series of service priorities for the coming year from the existing strategy. This includes: Maximising the benefit of the Trailblazer programme on preventing homelessness; Implementing new approaches to housing development, both in-house and through wider partnerships; Continuing work to improve conditions in the private rented sector; and Restructuring the Housing Needs service to incorporate Refugee and No Recourse to Public Funds services.
- 5.4 The £985,000 of funding from DCLG for the Homelessness Prevention Trailblazer programme is one-off money. The £340,000 of funding from the GLA for the No First Night Out (NFNO) Shared Accommodation Scheme is to fund a shared programme across the boroughs of Bexley, Bromley, Greenwich and Lewisham.

Resolved: the Committee noted the update.

6. Select Committee work programme

John Bardens (Scrutiny Manager) introduced the report. The following was noted:

- 6.1 The first evidence session for the Committee's in-depth review of models for delivering new housing will be held on 6 September.
- 6.2 The annual report and business plans for Lewisham Homes and the Brockley PFI will also be presented at the meeting on 6 September.

Resolved: the Committee noted the work programme.

7. Referrals

7.1 There were no referrals at this meeting

The meeting ended at 21.30pm

Chair:

Date:
