

CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING AND PREVENTING HOMELESSNESS

RECORD OF DECISIONS of the meeting of the Cabinet Member for Housing and Preventing Homelessness held remotely on Monday, 7 December 2020 at 4.30 pm

Present

Councillor Darren Sanders (in the Chair)

Councillors Cal Corkery

14. Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Scott Payter-Harris.

15. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of members' interests.

16. Building Safety Regulatory Reform

Steve Groves, Head of Building Maintenance, presented the report, highlighting the main points of the Building Safety Bill and the Fire Safety Bill, and next steps being undertaken by the Directorate. The planned maintenance programme, due to come to a Cabinet meeting in March 2021, will demonstrate a continuous focus on fire safety, for example, installation of sprinklers and fire doors. Officers will review structure and roles in Housing as the bills proceed through Parliament.

Councillor Sanders had requested the report to show how upcoming laws on making buildings safe will impact on the council and tenants; as a landlord, tenants' safety is paramount for the council.

Councillor Corkery, Labour Spokesperson for Housing and Preventing Homelessness, knew of residents who were anxious about blocks with unsafe cladding. However, it was important to be aware of the potential conflict between residents' safety and their privacy. Although landlords need access to inspect residents' homes as part of the proposals of both bills, their right to privacy needs to be kept in mind. Therefore, community engagement needs to explain to residents why the changes are important so that they comply. It is also important to promote the tenant voice; Grenfell Tower residents' concerns had been ignored and this must not happen again. Residents' Associations are a good way for residents to engage in management and control of their homes, although membership of associations has declined recently; meetings could perhaps be held virtually. Councillor Sanders noted that attendance at the residents' associations in Horatia and Leamington Houses had declined though attendance in blocks in Landport and Buckland was good.

Mr Groves said the the scope of resident engagement was not very clearly defined in the Building Safety Bill. One of the aims of the Advisory Residents' Panel is to set out best practice. Officers will link with local authorities who are "early adopters" so that the council can be at the forefront of best practice. Officers always try to engage with residents over their concerns.

Councillor Sanders acknowledged the concerns over residents' privacy but pointed out some residents of Horatia and Leamington Houses had had gas canisters in their flats, despite being told not to because of the fire risk. With regard to the reference in paragraph 3.15 in the report to residents keeping their properties in good repair, the level of repair required is not specified. However, Mr Groves advised that as landlords the council has a responsibility to maintain properties but residents have a responsibility to let the council know when repairs are needed, to check smoke alarms work and to report problems.

Councillor Sanders noted that some blocks have staff on site and asked what would happen in other blocks as there may be some unnecessary fear amongst residents, involving residents has been long overdue and if Grenfell Tower residents had been listened to the tragedy might not have happened. It is unclear if the proposals in the bills would be extended to low-rise blocks but making plans now is very sensible. The current administration had been very keen on installing sprinklers but progress had been delayed due to Covid-19. The first priority of a landlord is to keep residents safe.

The Cabinet Member noted the report and requested that a progress report be brought back to a Cabinet portfolio meeting when more information is available, perhaps once or twice a year.

The Cabinet Member noted the report. The report is for information only and is not subject to call-in.

17. Disposal of Council Housing and Replacement of Council Housing

Councillor Sanders explained the report had been written in response to queries from Councillors Corkery and Payter-Harris and discussions with the City Solicitor. The disposal and replacement of council housing forms part of the powers delegated to the Director of Housing, Neighbourhood & Building Services but there was a balance to be struck between commercial sensitivity and openness.

James Hill, Director of Housing, Neighbourhood & Building Services, presented the report. The figures given for the number of replacement properties in the pipeline are current but are likely to have changed since the report was written as the situation is very dynamic.

Councillor Corkery said there had previously been no public awareness that the council was selling council homes and there had been some concern and surprise at the practice when there is a shortage of social housing. There needs to be increased awareness and transparency of which properties are

sold and why. Commercial confidentiality is not acceptable as a reason when the public can find out this information on the internet.

Mr Hill explained that the report puts the disposal of council homes in context; the case study mentions eight of ten homes that were sold out of a total stock of 14,900 council properties.

Councillor Sanders acknowledged Councillor Corkery's views; however, the proceeds from the sold properties will go towards buying replacements, with a net gain of a couple of homes, which is a quicker way of finding new homes than building them. The council is investing £100 million in new homes over the next five years (about 100 homes each year) and this year it is buying 190 new homes, despite Covid-19. Part of the decision to invest is due to work done by Councillors Corkery and Payter-Harris and shows a significant commitment to reducing the waiting list and improving people's lives. In addition, the removal of the borrowing cap from the Housing Revenue Account will help reduce the housing waiting list and continue the excellent work with rough sleepers. Properties are only disposed of as a last resort but he agreed it was important that the process was transparent. He will liaise with the City Solicitor in the next few days over how much information on disposals and acquisitions can be made public.

The Cabinet Member noted the report and requested that:

- discussions are opened up with the Governance & Audit & Standards Committee on how much information can be made available;
- discussions are held with the City Solicitor to the extent to which disposals and acquisitions, which both fall within the same delegations, can be made more open.

The Cabinet Member noted the report. The report is for information only and is not subject to call-in.

The meeting concluded at 5.16 pm.

Councillor Darren Sanders
Chair