

## HOUSING & SOCIAL CARE SCRUTINY PANEL

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing & Social Care Scrutiny Panel held on Friday, 20 September 2019 at 10am at the Civic Offices, Portsmouth

### Present

Councillor Luke Stubbs (in the Chair)  
Cal Corkery  
Leo Madden  
Claire Udy

#### 13. Apologies (AI 1)

Apologies were received from Councillor Chris Attwell.

#### 14. Declarations of Members' Interests. (AI 2)

No interests were declared.

#### 15. Minutes of the previous meeting held on 30 July 2019. (AI 3)

**RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 30 July 2019 be agreed as a correct record.**

#### 16. Review of the experiences gathered after the decant of residents from tower blocks. (AI 4)

Paul Fielding, Assistant Director, Housing, Housing, Neighbourhood & Building Services presented the slides that had been circulated at the meeting and would be published shortly afterwards.

The first slides showed the impact of the decant of the two blocks on the housing waiting list which had been requested at the previous meeting. Councillor Madden noted that the impact had not been as significant as he had thought.

The project team of officers had met recently and the conclusions were included in the presentation.

Housing Officers were briefed the day before the tenants were informed but picked it up quickly and had their target of ensuring that all the tenants were offered a property by the Spring.

#### **Paul Fielding and the following officers then responded to questions from the panel:**

Jonathan Coulson, Housing Officer  
John Wright, Estate Manager  
Mark Fitch, Head of Local Authority Housing

#### Preparation

The preparation for the decant had started weeks in advance.

The timeline for the decision-making process was not known.

An officer group led by James Hill, Director of Housing, Neighbourhood & Building Services met regularly and involved the communications team.

### Staffing.

No staff had been made redundant nor new staff recruited as a result of these decants. It would not have been appropriate to recruit new officers to support the project because experienced officers were required. Some had been transferred from other areas; as a result some other work may have slowed down, but nothing was stopped.

### Leaseholders.

The council holds very little information about leaseholders in council blocks. If they let out their flat, the council does not know the tenants' details. There are relatively few leaseholders in tower blocks, often because the service charge is fairly prohibitive. The council did buy back the single leaseholder's flat at a market value but was not responsible for rehousing any sub-tenants, although as a responsible landlord we did investigate if we would have a duty to the tenants. However the tenants actual moved out of the area meaning that the flat was purchased with no occupants.

Normally the bill for works on Local Authority (LA) blocks would be charged to (shared between) the leaseholders with a cap of £15,000. However, the cap does not apply if they are not living in the flat as their principal home.

Following a decant of residents from a council housing block of flats in Eastern Road, the tenant of a leaseholder was offered alternative accommodation due to their personal circumstances.

### Safety in other buildings.

All the other council-owned blocks had been checked for security and passed.

This is not a significant issue in terms of numbers. The council is aware of only one building that has similar cladding; it is privately owned. The council is monitoring the situation.

### Security.

Security was already on site at Horatia and Leamington Houses and was continued during the decant. The building was also patrolled every two hours. Access to the buildings was controlled with tenants and visitors signing in. If the council was to carry out a decant of another building, having on site security would be considered.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) guidance is clear as to the policy for enforcement. Property owners follow this.

### Communication.

First told the majority of the tenants were naturally concerned about the situation and asked questions. The fact that they received prompt and consistent responses helped build their confidence in officers.

Interpreters were on hand during the first week and available for meetings.

Officers worked in the evenings and weekends to ensure that all tenants had been reached. The council generally does not collect information from tenants just in case it might be useful in the future.

The sole eviction that had taken place during the decant had been due to rent arrears. The tenant had been made aware of the financial compensation available but had not engaged with housing staff.

#### Rehousing.

The housing team took into account of the tenants' requests in terms of areas and types of houses. The vast majority of offers met their needs. A high number wanted to stay in Somerstown but understood that that there was a limited number of properties in that area. Some families were in properties that were not suitable for their needs and more appropriate accommodation was found.

The tenants who moved out of the city (Paulsgrove and Leigh Park) received council support contacting schools.

The majority of tenants were happy with their new accommodation. Support from their new area offices is continuing with those who are not satisfied.

#### Financial Impact.

Councillor Stubbs noted that £1.35m of rent had been lost. Paul Fielding confirmed that any lost rent would be handled within the housing revenue account.

#### The future of the buildings.

This has yet to be determined.

#### Justin Turner, Watch Manager, Fire Safety Policies, Hampshire Fire & Rescue Service explained the following points to the panel:

The National Fire Chiefs Council had written to the owners of buildings about cladding. The owners are responsible for removing any cladding but if they did not do so, the MHCLG would arrange for it to be done and bill the owners.

He had been informed of the situation by his line manager at the end of the first week of June. He did not know how many officers knew earlier. He prepared his team for the briefing which took place on the following Monday.

He was in regular contact with Steve Groves at the council who was very insightful.

He ensured that the operational procedure was in place in case of any incidents.

The fire service had teams in both buildings on 5 June. They left telephone numbers available for any queries and were only 30 seconds away if needed. They did not receive as much contact as expected. Most people were concerned with moving rather than safety.

The fact that there was no piped gas in these blocks meant that the likelihood of an explosion was slim. People visiting the blocks had their shopping bags routinely checked and camping gas stoves were removed two or three times and stored off site until the tenants needed them.

He was involved until the end of March this year and a colleague took over that role.

He would have preferred the floors to be emptied systematically but this was not possible. However, he was satisfied that if there was an incident, it would not have been different from a normal one. There were a number of small incidents business as usual.

In response to questions, he clarified the following points:

There was no particular concern that the anti-social behaviour happening in other LA blocks would spread. Having security on site was a deterrent. There were no squatters in the blocks. As soon as the flats were vacated, the locks had been changed and the electricity disconnected.

Personally and professionally he stated that all council blocks of flats should have sprinklers installed. There is an element of over engineering in some buildings which can cause problems. Their location is very important: in flats rather than in the stairways as these are already sterile areas. The student blocks in the city have sprinklers in the flats.

His role is to keep an eye on those sorts of aspects of high rises. He regularly walks around council buildings with housing officers carrying out a range of checks. The team understands the issues and repairs are carried out promptly. Council blocks are very safe even without sprinklers installed because of the way they were designed and monitored by the team.

During the discussion that followed, the panel agreed that former tenants of the two blocks would be asked to complete a survey and whether they would be interested in talking to the panel about their experience of being rehoused.

The meeting concluded at 11:20am

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Councillor Luke Stubbs  
Chair