

Housing and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Housing and Community Engagement Scrutiny Commission held on Wednesday 10 February 2021 at 6.30 pm (Online virtual meeting).

PRESENT: Councillor Gavin Edwards (Chair)
Councillor Damian O'Brien (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Dora Dixon-Fyle MBE
Councillor Jon Hartley
Councillor Hamish McCallum

**OTHERS
PRESENT:** Councillor Leo Pollak, Cabinet Member for Housing
Cris Claridge (former co-opted member)
Ina Negoita (former co-opted member)

**OFFICER
SUPPORT:** Everton Roberts, Head of Overview and Scrutiny (Acting)

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for lateness were received from Councillor Hamish McCallum.

2. NOTIFICATION OF ANY ITEMS OF BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR DEEMS URGENT

There were no additional late items.

Supplemental agenda No.1 contains the officer report on:

- Building Safety and Cladding

Supplemental agenda No.2 contains:

- Minutes – 1 December 2020

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS

There were no disclosures of interests or dispensations.

4. MINUTES

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meetings held on 1 December 2020 and 28 January 2021 be approved as correct records.

5. BUILDING SAFETY AND CLADDING

Councillor Leo Pollak, Cabinet Member for Housing provided the commission with a brief overview of the current position in respect of building safety and cladding in the borough. Councillor Pollak highlighted the following:

The council has responsibility for 55,000 homes, across 260 council estates (over 2500 blocks). Health and safety of residents was of paramount importance in respect of building safety and fire safety. Since the Grenfell fire, the council has undertaken fire risk assessments (FRA) of all the council blocks, and had adapted the requirements of the FRAs to the different circumstances of the blocks.

Since the passing of the Government Safety Bill and Fire Safety Bill, the council has appointed a person to take on the responsibilities of the council's corporate liabilities in relation to building and fire safety for the council stock. There was also a plan in place to start recruiting a set of building safety managers who have operational responsibility for a set of blocks.

In respect of EWS1 inspections, the council had made the choice to bring in a qualified engineers who have already started doing detailed inspections on a handful of blocks as part of an initial pilot. Full inspections were also being undertaken of all high rise blocks, starting with a desktop analysis which was then to be followed up with a detailed inspection where necessary. It was hoped that the inspections would be completed by the end of March and at that point the council would have a much fuller picture.

The council had set up a Building Safety Board, with a building safety programme which will form the basis for inspecting, monitoring and enforcing on private sector stock as well. The monitoring of housing association stock fell to the Department of MHCLG.

The asset management strategy refresh was to be considered by cabinet in June 2021 and there would be a much stronger risk based analysis about which estates and blocks get sequenced for the purpose of major work cycles in the borough.

The council was close to approving a budget for buybacks of former right to buy homes along with parameters of what the council would pay to bring a home back into use for homeless families or general needs council housing.

The commission also heard from Dave Hodgson, Director of Asset Management.

Dave explained that once a FRA had been undertaken, that would drive next actions. The council had a very clear understanding of the council's high rise blocks, there were none with ACM cladding, but there were blocks with other types of cladding. Whilst the general focus was on ACM cladding, the council was focussing on all types of cladding. The council was aware of what was on the different blocks and no immediate problems had been identified.

Correspondence from the Ledbury Action Group in respect of fire risk assessment ratings of Southwark housing blocks was raised at the meeting. The correspondence made a comparison between FRAs undertaken 18 months ago compared to current date. The correspondence suggested that overall there had been no improvement in ratings and in some cases ratings had gone down.

Dave Hodgson explained that fire risk assessors take into account lifestyle factors, not just the building fabric of a block when carrying out a risk assessment. Rubbish on balconies, blocked bin chutes or a live repair case may have impacted on the outcome at the point of inspection. The risk assessment only reflected a snapshot in time, and reflected the position at the time of the inspection.

Desmond Vincent further explained that where a fire risk assessment identified physical changes needing to be carried out to a building because of a highlighted fire risk then required actions would be followed up, but there were also management issues such as residents leaving rubbish, this would be communicated to the estate services to ensure that monitoring is undertaken and issue addressed, similarly communication with housing management would be communicated with, if there is a particular risk around a resident and anti-social behaviour rendering the building at risk.

Officers explained that they were unable to comment on the detail of the correspondence circulated by Ledbury, as the information had only just been brought to their attention, but agreed to go away and look at the information presented.

Dave highlighted some of the challenges that existed in respect of the completion and signing off of the EWS1 forms. It was explained that fire safety engineers who can sign off EWS1 forms can command high fees due to the limited number that exist that are qualified to sign off the forms. It was not practical to train fire safety engineers in house as it would be difficult to retain them due to the level of demand and the council was not in a position to compete with private sector in terms of wages. It also took several years to become a qualified fire safety engineers.

The EWS1 form had two parts to it and only part two of the form that required a fire safety engineer sign off. Part 1 could be signed off by a number of council officers. The council's approach was therefore to support leaseholders by identifying those properties that did not require an EWS1 form, those which only required Part 1 to be completed and those which required both parts and to advise leaseholders accordingly. If Part 2 was not required then leaseholders could approach, any chartered building company for completion of Part 1. A complicating factor was that mortgage lenders were requiring the completion of the whole form even where Part 2 was not required by legislative guidance.

The council was restricted in what it could help leaseholders with as survey costs when required were at present exceptionally high with bills of up to £20,000. If a leaseholder arranged to have one done, other leaseholders could benefit without contributing, it was therefore not reasonable to expect a single leaseholder to foot the bill. It was therefore a quite complex situation which officers were trying to work through.

A question was asked by a member of the public in respect of where tenants can go to get information on progress in connection with action arising from Fire Risk Assessments.

It was explained that the council had been considering how it could better communicate with residents on this issue, currently, Fire Risk Assessments for council owned buildings over 18 meters was published on the council website. Information relating to buildings below that level were available on request via a generic email address.

It was noted that the EWS1 form was only valid for 5 years.

It was requested that the commission receive a progress update on the buyback of Right to Buy properties.

It was suggested that the commission receive update/ written response from the Building Safety Programme Delivery Board. It was recommended up that this be picked up as part of next year's work programme. Councillor Pollak agreed to take away the issue of transparency of the Board, he also informed the meeting that he was due to agree an individual decision making report in respect of buy backs of right to buy properties.

RESOLVED

That the Building Safety Programme Delivery Board be requested to periodically report back to the commission on its work.

6. WORK PROGRAMME 2020-21

The chair reported that he would be bringing forward some recommendations to the next meeting on the areas the commission have been looking at as part of their scrutiny reviews.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme as at 10 February 2021 be noted.

The meeting ended at 7.40pm

CHAIR:

DATED: