

Minutes of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee
held at Riverside, Lowestoft on **Thursday, 3 January 2019 at 6.00pm**

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Overview & Scrutiny Committee Members Present:

Councillors A Cackett (Chairman), D Beavan, L Coulam, T Gandy, L Gooch, P Light, J Murray, K Robinson, C Topping and M Vigo di Gallidoro

Cabinet Members in attendance:

Councillor B Provan – Cabinet Member for Resources
Councillor C Punt - Cabinet Member for Housing

Officers present:

K Blair (Head of Operations), J Brown (Housing Maintenance Manager), A Jarvis (Strategic Director) and S Davis (Democratic Services Officer)

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE / SUBSTITUTES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors K Springall and J Smith.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor J Murray declared a local non-pecuniary interest in item 10 – Jubilee Beach Chalets, South Beach, Lowestoft – Redevelopment Proposal, as a Trustee of the Sentinel Leisure Trust.

3 MINUTES

RESOLVED

- (a) That the Minutes of the Meeting held on 4 October 2018 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.
- (b) That the Minutes of the Simultaneous Meeting of Suffolk Coastal's Scrutiny and Waveney's Overview & Scrutiny Committee be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.
- (c) That the Minutes of the Meeting held on 1 November 2018 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

4 ANNOUNCEMENTS FROM THE CHAIRMAN, RESPONSES OF THE CABINET TO ANY REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE OR REPORTS OF ANY DISCUSSIONS WITH THE CABINET

There were no announcements on this occasion.

5 ST PETERS COURT – FIRE SAFETY UPDATE

The Cabinet Member for Housing presented the report giving an update in relation to fire safety at St Peter's Court following the tragic events at Grenfell Tower.

In addition, Members received a tabled copy of the Fire Risk Assessment (FRA) carried out in November 2018 and it was noted that, originally, it had been thought that the FRA was a confidential document, however, having taken further advice it could now be made public.

The Housing Maintenance Manager reported on the fire safety works completed, underway or planned at St Peter's Court since the original Fire Risk Assessment undertaken on 27 July 2017 and these included:

- The installation of a full category L4 fire detection system throughout the building
- Replacement of automatic bin chute shutter plate and mechanism
- Replacement of all flat entrance door sets with new FD 60 Fire Doors
- Replacement of two communal doors to each floor with new fire doors
- Replacement of window reveals throughout the building with a fire retardant board
- Installation of a full fire safety sprinkler system to each unit of accommodation
- On site management control
- A further Fire Risk Assessment carried out in November 2018
- Fire Service Exercises

In addition, further works planned included external cladding investigations and further compartmentation surveys.

The Committee was informed that one of the flats had been left vacant and stripped out in order to see where the issues were and Officers had found this very useful.

With regard to the new Fire Doors, the Housing Maintenance Manager reported that these were a planned improvement to not only improve fire safety but modernise the building. External letter boxes were not fitted adjacent to the flats and no letter opening was present in the new door.

In relation to the fire sprinklers, it was noted that these were not intrusive and work had commenced at the top of the building in November 2018. Residents had been invited to a vacant flat to view a completed sprinkler installation and were generally very happy. Tenants had commented on the friendliness of the workforce and how they had cleaned up after themselves. It was noted that two water tanks still needed to be installed towards the end of March and workers were on floor 14/15 at the moment so the system would be operational once the tanks were in.

Reference was made to the Fire Risk Assessment (FRA) carried out in November 2018 and it was noted that the overall risk level had reduced from "significant" classification to "tolerable" recognising all works that had been or were being undertaken. Members were informed that the FRA report had highlighted a few other issues as detailed in the report including timescales. It was noted that 4 of the 13 actions identified had already been completed namely:

- 1 – Do not place items on the electric cooker and hob – tea towel was removed
- 5 – Replace Georgian wired glass vision panels and re-bed in intumescent glass sealant - complete
- 10 – Test and service fire alarms regularly with records kept - ongoing
- 11 – Reinstate access door at the foot of the escape stairs - temporary door in place

The Cabinet Member reported that the external cladding still had to be tested but as far as the Building Control records indicated at the time of installation in 2001, the material and installation were completely different from the system installed at Grenfell Tower, and there were no voids behind as it was affixed directly to exterior of the building. He added that, as and when flats became empty, further compartmentation surveys would be undertaken to ensure consistency throughout the building. He concluded by suggesting that Members might wish to review the situation again in a year's time.

Questions from Members

A Member raised the point that some non Council owned sheltered schemes she was aware of had letter boxes fitted in the doors. The Housing Maintenance Manager commented that there was a duty on any landlord to undertake risk assessments of their properties. Letter boxes mentioned may very well be fitted with intumescent fire seals, however, those at St Peters Court were not, and would have needed either changing or improving. As such it was decided to accelerate the contract to replace the doors and install new external letter boxes to maintain the integrity of the fire door barrier.

A query was raised as to how the privately owned flats within St Peter's Court were being dealt with. The Housing Maintenance Manager reported that the Council had responsibility for the structure of the building so it had been decided to replace their doors too in order to protect the whole building and ensure that Council tenants were not put at risk. It was explained that currently there were only 5 privately owned leasehold flats within the building and if any became vacant the Council would consider buy back. It was also clarified that it was within the lease agreements that leaseholders could not just replace doors with what they wanted. Additionally the Council would be organising inspections to the private flats within the building.

Reference was made to the comment that 6 doors remained outstanding and it was noted that, of the 90 purchased, 6 doors had been damaged and the Council was waiting for replacements to be delivered but unfortunately there was currently a national shortage of fire doors due to Grenfell. Members were assured that they would be fitted as soon as they were received.

In relation to 1.8 of the report, it was explained that audits were carried out by Housing staff such as the caretakers and Senior Housing Officers at least monthly.

With regard to consultations about the works, clarification was sought on how many tenants had not visited the empty flat to view the sprinkler installation. The Housing Maintenance Manager reported that about 20 had visited the flat so approximately 70 had not turned up. The point was made that the viewing had been during the day and some tenants might have been working during this time. The Housing Maintenance Manager stated that it was not intended to offer another invitation to view the flat as it needed to be rented out. The Cabinet Member pointed out that education for tenants was ongoing and feedback suggested that tenants chatted between themselves and with contractors so the messages were getting rolled out and a lot of work was going on in the building so tenants were aware. He added that, in addition, the caretaker was now doing more hours at the building and the Senior Housing Officer went round more often.

Clarification was sought on when the checks would be made into the external cladding and it was noted that it would be March time. The Housing Maintenance Manager reported that Building Control colleagues had overseen the works at the time and it was expected from initial investigations that the fire barriers in place would accord with what their records say is there. The Strategic Director clarified that the Council had ordered and commissioned a product which was fitted but what had come out of Grenfell was, how could we be certain this was what got installed, so representative samples needed to be taken and tested. He added that it was a very different material to the ones used on Grenfell and the building was rendered on the outside with no air gaps but it still needed to be checked just to make sure.

Reference was made to the FRA which stated that the building's fire action policy was to "stay put" and it was noted that fire action notices were stuck on the back of flat entrance doors which advised tenants that if there was a fire in their individual flat then they should leave but if it was elsewhere in the building then they should "stay put" as they would be protected in their flats for an hour although if the Fire and Rescue Service wanted them to evacuate then they would be told to leave.

Reference was made to the fact that the Grenfell fire possibly started when a fridge caught fire and, therefore, clarification was sought on whether appliances were checked to ensure they were safe and not prone to catching fire. The Housing Maintenance Manager reported that tenants had been offered PAT testing of their appliances a year ago but take up had been very low given that if a fault was found with an appliance the plug would be cut off immediately. The Member clarified that he had meant were tenants warned about having specific goods that had an inherent fault. The Strategic Director responded that manufacturers tended to recall those products and it was difficult for the Council to know what goods were in private residences which was why the sprinkler systems had been put in the flats

Clarification was sought on whether the Suffolk Fire and Rescue Service had said that they would need 5 tenders on site before they would deploy staff into the building. The Housing Maintenance Manager reported that he was not quite sure where this had come from as the Fire Service regularly attended the building with one tender. He added that the Fire Service had recently carried out two exercises where they went in the building and had not had 5 appliances at the time. The Chairman read out a minute extract from the minutes of the Extraordinary Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 27 November 2017 and it was clarified that the reference to 5 appliances had been when the Fire Service had attended a large tower block in Ipswich and they had stated that firefighters would enter a building immediately if they knew there was a sprinkler system.

A query was raised as to who was responsible for checks on the building and it was responded that the on-site caretaker would undertake the checks. It was added that the previous caretaker had been fully trained and similarly the new caretaker would receive training.

Clarification was sought on whether the Council had received any Government funding for the new sprinkler systems and the Housing Maintenance Manager responded that no funding had been received and the systems were being paid for out of the Council's Housing Revenue Account.

A query was raised on how long it would take to evacuate the building and how many firefighters were on each appliance. The point was made that the building would only be evacuated in a worse case scenario as the policy was to “stay put”. The Cabinet Member stated that he thought smaller appliances only had 2 or 3 firefighters on board but the bigger ones would have more people and they were likely to be the appliances that were sent to St Peter’s Court if there was a fire rather than small appliances.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted and a further review be carried out in a year’s time.

6 CURRENT POSITION OF THE COMMITTEE’S WORK PROGRAMME

The Chairman presented the updated report setting out the Committee’s current Work Programme and it was noted that, following agreement of changes at the last meeting, the Waveney financial outturn reports were now being considered elsewhere. As such, it was confirmed that the scheduled joint meeting with the Audit & Governance Committee on 17 January 2019 would now be an Audit & Governance Committee only.

In addition, Members were reminded that, as also agreed at the last meeting, the joint meeting with the Audit & Governance Committee scheduled for 7 February 2019 was changed to just an Overview & Scrutiny Committee meeting and there were currently no reports scheduled to be considered at that meeting. The Chairman stated, however, that two Scoping Forms had now been submitted for consideration so, if Members approved their inclusion on the Work Programme, it was possible that they could be scheduled for the February meeting.

The Committee considered the first Scoping Form submitted by Councillor Topping in relation to Suffolk County Highways’ process for issuing permits to close roads and carry out repairs to roads. It was noted that, if Members were minded to resolve that this item be included on the Work Programme, the Highways Officer could not make the 7 February meeting and it was possible he would not be able to attend on the 14 March 2019 either. The Chairman reported that Councillor Mary Evans, Suffolk County Cabinet Member with responsibility for Highways was currently chairing a Highways Improvement and Innovation Board who at some point would be looking at Network Assurance, the Team that issued permits for road closures etc. Councillor Topping referred to a Suffolk County Council Audit Committee minute from 31 January 2018 and she stated that they clearly knew what the problems were but they did not seem to take an holistic approach as it appeared that just one person made the decisions that could “shut” down a town by closing several major roads at one time. It was suggested that, if the Member had concerns relating to specific incidences, then she could contact Suffolk County Council direct. Concern was expressed that this was a problem nationally because, under the current system, County Councils had no real control as they could not refuse a request if it was classed as “essential” work. It was explained that if works ran over they could fine the company but that led to companies asking for longer in the first place just in case they were delayed. The Chairman suggested that Officers be asked to contact Suffolk County Council to see if they could attend the March meeting but if they could not attend then it could be something Members of the East Suffolk Scrutiny Committee might wish to raise in future.

With regard to the Scoping Form submitted by Councillor Beavan relating to Southwold Harbour, the Chairman stated that she had made Councillor Beavan aware that, if the Committee agreed to accept the item on the Work Programme, it could only look at the process that had been used rather than being able to actually resolve any of the issues he had raised. She continued that, in addition she had asked Councillor Beavan, who had made specific allegations within the Scoping Form, to meet with Officers in order to clarify the issues he wanted scrutinised and he had agreed to do this. The Committee was informed that, unfortunately, no-one who had dealt with the 2010 accounts was still employed at Waveney. The Head of Operations indicated that, although Officers had already met with Councillor Beavan on this matter several times, he felt it would be useful to meet again to clarify the specific issues. He added that, if Members did decide to scrutinise the item, there were several existing reports that could be made available to them.

RESOLVED

1. That the current Work Programme of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as set out in Appendix A, be noted.
2. That the Scoping Form relating to Suffolk County Highways be accepted onto the Work Programme for the March meeting if Highways were able to attend.
3. That the Scoping Form relating to Southwold Harbour be accepted onto the Committee's Work Programme for discussion at the 7 February 2019 meeting and that Councillor Beavan liaise with Officers to clarify the issues to be scrutinised.

7 INFORMATION BULLETIN – LITTERING

The Chairman presented the Information Bulletin relating to Littering and it was suggested that, as there were a number of questions from Members, a full report be made to the February meeting.

RESOLVED

That the Information Bulletin relating to Littering be noted, however, a full report be made to the February meeting and Members with any specific questions in relation to this item be asked to email them to the Democratic Services Officer for collation prior to them being emailed to the Head of Operations.

8 INFORMATION BULLETIN – ASSET MANAGEMENT

The Chairman presented the Information Bulletin relating to Asset Management. The Head of Operations confirmed that work to complete the Asset Register was on schedule and it was anticipated that all the inspections would be carried out by the end of January 2019 with the Register completed by 31 March 2019.

RESOLVED

That the Information Bulletin relating to Asset Management be noted.

9 EXEMPT/CONFIDENTIAL ITEMS

RESOLVED

That under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended), the public were excluded from the meeting for the following agenda items of business on the grounds that they involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

10 JUBILEE BEACH CHALETS, SOUTH BEACH, LOWESTOFT – REDEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS

The Committee considered the Cabinet Member for Resources' report in relation to redevelopment proposals for the above site. Members were reminded that Cabinet had previously granted approval to demolish the existing Jubilee Parade concrete beach chalets and undertake structural work to the retaining sea wall. A redevelopment proposal had been made, however, following investigations, it was felt that it should not be progressed on the grounds of viability and alternative options for the site should now be explored.

RESOLVED

1. That Cabinet does not approve the original project on viability grounds.
2. That Cabinet awaits a full appraisal of the alternative options as detailed in the confidential report.

11 MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the Exempt Minutes of the Meeting held on 4 October 2018 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

The meeting concluded at 7.45pm

Chairman