

Report to the Council

Committee: Cabinet

Date: 27 July 2017

Subject: Housing

Portfolio Holder: Councillor S Stavrou

Recommending:

That the report of the Housing Portfolio Holder be noted.

The Council's approach to Fire Safety for its housing stock following the Grenfell Tower fire

1. We were all devastated to hear about the tragic loss of life as a result on the horrendous fire at Grenfell Tower in the London Borough of Kensington and Chelsea in June. Understandably, both members and officers have received a number of enquiries from tenants, leaseholders and others about the Council's approach to fire safety.

2. Shortly after the fire occurred, our Director of Communities provided comprehensive information for members in the Council Bulletin summarising the Council's approach to fire safety. An Information Note for the public was also produced and published on the Council's website along similar lines, with associated publicity.

3. Fundamentally, the Council has always taken fire safety and the safety of residents very seriously, and our officers have worked very hard over many years to continue to improve fire safety in our housing stock. I hope that the information we have been providing recently gives both members and the public some reassurance on the Council's approach.

4. However, I thought it would be helpful to summarise some of the key points of the Council's approach to fire safety in this Portfolio Holder report to Council which are as follows:

- The Council has no high rise blocks of flats - the highest blocks of flats we have are just 5-storey, at Limes Avenue and Copperfield in Chigwell. They comprise flats on the ground floor (owned and managed by London and Quadrant Housing Trust) with two levels of Council-owned 2-storey maisonettes above. However, they are not enclosed blocks – all of the residents' front doors are accessed from open deck-access walkways.
- We have a number of blocks of flats that are four stories high - in most cases accessed by internal communal stairways. In the event of a fire, they are of a sufficient height that can be accessed by the Fire Service to rescue people if required.
- In accordance with the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 and the Housing Act 2004, officers and consultants undertake Fire Safety Risk Assessments of all the communal areas in our blocks of flats. They are categorised into "low" and "high risk" buildings. A specialist fire safety company undertakes the more complex Fire Safety

Risk Assessments of our “high risk” buildings. Coincidentally, and somewhat reassuringly, the Fire Safety Risk Assessments for all of our “high risk” buildings were completed in the month immediately before the Grenfell Tower - we are just awaiting the written reports.

- Fire Safety Risk Assessments for “low risk” buildings are undertaken by our Housing Assets Team on a rolling programme – and all “low risk” blocks have had a Fire Safety Risk Assessment within the last 2 years.
- Fire Safety Risk Assessments cover a number of aspects. They consider both the physical environment of communal areas (e.g. gas pipes, fire extinguishers, condition of fire doors) and any hazards (e.g. obstructions, unauthorised carpets and other floor coverings). Reports are produced for each inspection and any required actions are identified and recorded.
- In the past, asking tenants and leaseholders to take identified actions following Fire Safety Risk Assessment inspections is often problematical - since they invariably involve asking tenants to remove things like flower pots, children’s equipment, buggies, carpets, rugs etc. from communal areas. Indeed, many Members will recall the lengthy debates about this issue, following complaints and opposition from tenants and leaseholders about the Council’s approach to fire safety at the time, which my predecessor persistently adhered to – our housing officers therefore work very hard to pursue these issues, often in the continuing face of strong opposition from tenants.
- Following Fire Safety Risk Assessments that were undertaken in the past, in 2016, officers undertook a comprehensive review of the number and location of fire extinguishers in communal areas - which resulted in a number of additional fire extinguishers being provided and others being re-located. This was in addition to the ongoing programme of planned individual fire extinguisher checks.
- Co-incidentally, a pre-planned Internal Audit Study of Fire Safety Risk Assessments is included as part of the Council’s Audit Plan for 2017/18, which has already commenced and is currently in progress. The Audit Report will be processed and reported in the usual way, with any recommendations listed and monitored through Internal Audit’s “Audit Recommendation Tracker”, which is overseen by the Audit and Governance Committee.
- We have just completed a programme of installing hard-wired linked smoke and heat detectors in all of our Council properties. These detectors are connected to the property’s electrical wiring, which means that they are not reliant on the tenants changing batteries – although they do have a battery back-up as well. In two-storied buildings (e.g. houses), if one smoke detector is activated from smoke or heat, the other detector sounds as well. They are checked annually by the Council.
- We have also recently completed a programme of installing 30-minute fire resistant front doors to Council flats in blocks. Since it is the responsibility of leaseholders to install doors to their own properties, in order to encourage and assist leaseholders (and to improve the overall fire safety in blocks of flats), members agreed an initiative a number of years ago to offer leaseholders a discount of 75% from the cost of installing these

doors, at the same time as we are installing them to the Council's properties in their block.

- At the June meeting of the Communities Select Committee, held shortly after the Grenfell Tower fire, the Select Committee agreed to a recommendation from the Director of Communities that it receives a detailed report in September on the Council's approach to fire safety and associated issues – and any further improvements that could be made. This will also give an opportunity for members to ask officers any questions on the approach.
- The Council is not required to provide, and has not provided, sprinkler systems in any of our properties. This may be an issue that the Communities Select Committee will possibly want to consider, together with the associated issues and costs.
- Fire alarms are installed in all of the Council's sheltered housing schemes, Norway House Homeless Persons Hostel, North Weald and Hemnall House, Epping – which are regularly tested and serviced. Fire alarms at sheltered housing schemes and Norway House are also linked to the Council's Careline Service. They will continue to be linked in this way to the new provider's centre when the Careline Alarm Monitoring Service is outsourced.
- Fire drills are held every six months at all of the Council's sheltered housing schemes, and more regularly (every three months) at Norway House. The approach that has always been taken to our sheltered housing schemes and Norway House, based on the advice of the Essex Fire and Rescue Service, is to adopt an "Evacuate Policy" and not a "Stay Put Policy".
- A few blocks of flats across the District have external cladding – but none have the same cladding as used at Grenfell Tower, which is Aluminium Composite Material (ACM). However, as a precaution, the Director of Communities has asked the Housing Assets Team to check on the type of cladding used on all the Council's blocks of flats in the district - to assess whether or not, in the light of the Grenfell Tower, there are any issues or concerns that the Council needs to be aware of, and any action required. I will, of course, advise Members if any concerns do come to light
- I have reported below on a visit and tour of Norway House Homeless Persons Hostel for Members of the Communities Select Committee and the Cabinet which, co-incidentally, was held just before the Grenfell Tower fire. Members asked a number of questions about fire safety at Norway House and saw for themselves the physical environment and safeguards taken. Both the Leader and I, together with (I believe) the other Members in attendance, were very satisfied and re-assured with what we saw and heard with regard to fire safety at Norway House.
- Since the Grenfell Tower fire, I have been visiting the larger blocks of Council flats in the District, accompanied by the Ward Councillors, to see for myself the approach taken to fire safety on the Council's estates. At the time of writing, I have already visited the Limes Farm Estate, Chigwell and am next scheduled to visit the Springfields Estate in Waltham Abbey.

5. In conclusion, neither Members nor officers are ever complacent about fire safety, but I hope that the information provided to Members and the public to date gives some reassurance of our approach to fire safety, and the measures that we have put in place over a number of years to mitigate the effect of any fires occurring in our properties, particularly blocks of flats. However, we will continue to identify and consider any additional measures that we feel are necessary in the light of experience and guidance.

Members visit to Norway House Homeless Persons Hostel, North Weald

6. The Communities Directorate arranged a visit to Norway House Homeless Persons Hostel for all Members of the Cabinet and the Communities Select Committee on 16th June 2017.

7. Norway House was purchased by the Council in 1974 from the Ministry of Defence as the Council's primary temporary accommodation for homeless households, which continues to be the case to this day.

8. Following a brief introduction by the Director of Communities, the Hostel Manager, Sarah Smith gave a very interesting and informative tour of the building and grounds, including the chalets and the location of the 3 proposed pods to accommodate 6 single homeless people. Members saw the benefit of recent improvement works to the building, including the provision of communal kitchens and individual bathrooms for all households.

9. All the members that I spoke to were, like me, extremely impressed with how well the Hostel is being managed; how clean and well-maintained the building is kept; and how caring and understanding the staff are towards their residents, often under difficult circumstances, to make the residents' stay comfortable whilst they are coming to terms with the effects and implications of their homelessness.

Flexible Homelessness support Grant – update

10. At its meeting on 15 June 2017, the Cabinet agreed that the Government's Flexible Homelessness Support Grant (required to be ring fenced to be used on homelessness services), already received by the Council in the sum of £277,000 in 2017/2018 and £313,000 to be received in 2018/2019 be initially used by the Council to continue working with Genesis Housing Association in order to provide private rented accommodation to homeless applicants in order to prevent homelessness, with a budget of £60,000 in both 2017/2018 and 2018/19 to fund the cost of the Association's Management Fees.

11. It was further agreed that following the cut in housing related support funding by Essex County Council, the Council meets its own housing related support costs at the young parents scheme Railway Meadow, Ongar with a budget of £29,000 in both 2017/2018 and 2018/2019.

12. A number of homelessness initiatives already agreed by the Cabinet at its meeting on 2 February 2017 (Minute 130 refers) in the sum of £43,500 in both 2017/2018 and 2018/2019 will also be met from the grant resulting in a saving to the General Fund.

13. A further report will be submitted to the Cabinet later in the year for consideration to be given for the use of the balance of the Flexible Homelessness Support Grant of around £131,000 in 2017/2018 & £167,000 in 2018/2019.

14. I will be meeting with officers in the near future to consider other homelessness initiatives to be funded from the grant, and also options for the use of any additional grant the Council may receive from Government in order to provide financial support to help us meet with new duties under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017.

Review of the Housing Allocations Scheme

15. On 5 September 2017, the Communities Select Committee will be considering a report on the Review of the Housing Allocations Scheme. Following the meeting, officers will be drafting a revised Scheme which will be considered by an external Legal Advisor. When advice has been received the draft Scheme will be amended in accordance with the advice. The Council will then enter into a 12 week consultation with every private Registered Social Landlord of social housing with which it has nomination arrangements, Town and Parish Councils, the Tenants and Leaseholders Federation and partner agencies with an interest in the Scheme. The Scheme will then be considered by the Cabinet around February/March 2017. The new Scheme will come into force as soon as time allows for re-registrations and verifications of all home seekers currently registered.

Out sourcing of the Careline Alarm Monitoring Service

16. At its meeting on 2 February 2017 (Minute 121 refers), the Cabinet agreed that the Careline Alarm Monitoring Service be outsourced to an external provider. The procurement process is being managed by the procurement arm of the North Housing Consortium (NHC), of which the Council is a member, using a Framework Agreement procured in accordance with EU rules which the Council is able to use. In accordance with the timetable set out by the NHC it is planned to complete the process and outsource the service by mid-November 2017.

Update on the Council House-building Programme

Phase One – Waltham Abbey

17. In April 2017, we took possession of the first houses to be built by the Council in over 30-years. Two new three bedroom houses were completed on the Red Cross site at Roundhills and handed over by the Contractor P A Finlay & Co Ltd. These were let on the same day to two families from the Council's Housing Register. Four further three bedroom houses on the same site were handed over and let in May 2017. The next handovers will be six two bedroom houses.

18. This will be followed by nine; one and two bedroom flats at Harveyfields in August 2017 which will be named "John Scott Court". The Council will be holding a formal opening ceremony to celebrate the opening of the new block. This will take place early in October 2017. Further details will be published nearer the time in the Council Bulletin.

19. The final two duplex homes on the Red Cross site will complete the Phase when the expected handover takes place around September 2017.

Phases Two and Three – North Weald, Epping and Coopersale

20. The Contractors on each of the sites making up Phases Two and Three continue to make progress with works on site, with the exception of the Queens Road development in North Weald, where delays have been experienced due to on-going negotiations with UK-Power

Network over a lease for the new electrical sub-station and cable diversions that are required for the development.

Phases Four to Six – Various Locations in the District

21. Twenty-two sites making up Phases Four to Six have already obtained Planning Permission, which will deliver fifty-eight new Council homes. However, there are twelve sites that are to be referred back to the Council House-building Cabinet Committee where permission has been refused. These sites, if approved would have delivered thirty-three new homes in the form of one, two and three-bedroom houses and bungalows. The total cost of abortive fees associated with these sites stands at around £200,000. There are just four sites at Vere Road, Loughton; Pentlow Way, Buckhurst Hill; Woolard Street, Waltham Abbey; and St Peters Avenue, Ongar left to determine at the Planning stages. These four sites will deliver a total of thirty-four new homes if approved.

Review of the Housing Repairs Service

22. The contract with Mears, the Repairs Management Contractor will expire on 31 March 2020. Therefore, the Council is currently inviting Tenders from specialist Consultants to undertake an Options Appraisal for the future delivery of the Service which allows sufficient time to consider the way forward and procure the most suitable option. The core options appear to be an out-sourced single contract; in-house provision, using the Council's existing management, staff and operatives; insourced contract, using a Repairs Management Contractor to continue to deliver the service with the existing directly-employed staff; joint venture organisation; and a shared service with another organisation.

Housing Repairs - Relocation to Oakwood Hill, Loughton Depot - update

23. A Project Team of Officers has been set up, who have identified a number of options for how the Housing Repairs Service can relocate to the Oakwood Hill Depot in Loughton. Each of these options is being explored in more detail. Cost Consultants have been appointed and have been asked to provide an estimate for each option. These will be discussed with Cabinet Members once the cost estimates have been received.

Petition Received

24. In line with Council procedure, I would like to inform Members that a petition has been received, containing 56 signatories from residents at Parkfields and Hansells Mead, Roydon. The petition states that:

“Our Estate is a mess; the lorries have ruined the grass islands, curb stones are missing! People are having to park everywhere, even on the grass! We need parking spaces not messy grass verges”

25. In consultation with the Ward Councillor and myself, the following response was sent to the lead Petitioner:

“In terms of the damage to the kerbs and verges, the Council is aware that much of this damage is being caused by Lorries following satellite navigation devices directing them to the various farms and nurseries in the local area. The Council has been discussing this with land owners

and the County Council to try and educate drivers. I am aware signs have been erected by Essex County Council warning lorry drivers not to enter Parkfields as it is not suitable.

The Council is also already aware of the demand for parking in Parkfields, Roydon since it features on the Council's list of sites for Off Street Parking, and I can confirm the area has been surveyed and ranked alongside other sites in the district.

The Off Street Parking Programme is monitored very closely by the Cabinet, with the ranked list of streets being the subject of an annual review. Each year the Cabinet agrees the next set of sites to progress to the design, consultation, planning and then the build stages. However, with a need to make savings or generate additional income across the Council, at its meeting in October 2016 this Programme was identified as one that should be self-financed in the future. This could be either through pay and display, Residents Parking Scheme or controlled allocated parking.

Again, at its meeting in October 2016, the Cabinet agreed that for the time being, it is only the schemes that they have already committed would be constructed, and that any new schemes, of which Parkfields, Roydon is already on the list of possible future schemes, would only be added when the Cabinet undertakes its annual review of off street parking in February 2018.

In the meantime, the Housing Management Team and Housing Assets are looking into the damaged kerbs and grassed verges and will be looking to undertake repairs. Where the damage is to adopted land, then these will be referred to Essex County Council Highways."