

Economic Regeneration, Housing and the Arts Policy and Accountability Committee Minutes

Tuesday 13 December 2016

PRESENT

Committee members: Councillors Daryl Brown, Adam Connell, Alan De'Ath (Chair), Lucy Ivimy and Harry Phibbs

Other Councillors: Lisa Homan, Cabinet Member for Housing,

Council Officers: Paul Monforte – Head of Operations, Housing Property Services, Kathleen Corbett – Director of Finance and Resources, Housing Services and Ernest Gray, Manager of Planned and Capital Works.

Mitie Staff: Laura Mitcham - Performance Information Manager, Ian Webb - Senior Partnerships Manager, Kevin Griffiths – Commercial Manager, Ruth Tyson – Resident Liaison Officer and Mahmood Abedi – Technical Supervisor.

27. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Councillor Daryl Brown had sent her apologies for late arrival. Councillor Ben Coleman, Cabinet Member for Commercial Revenue and Residents Satisfaction, had sent his apologies for absence.

28. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

29. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 November 2016 were agreed to be accurate.

Anthony Wood explained that at the meeting held on 6 September 2016 officers had committed to supporting the lighting sub-group. Unfortunately since that meeting the sub-group had not been able to hold an effective meeting as the required officers could not all attend at the same time. Councillor Homan agreed to raise this issue with officers.

30. WORKING AT HEIGHT AND SCAFFOLDING ON COUNCIL PROPERTIES

Councillor Homan, Cabinet Member for Housing, explained that scaffolding had been a cause for complaints by residents for many years. She said that officers had been working on ways to reduce the inconvenience to residents, although there was still much to do.

Paul Monforte, Head of Operations for Housing Property Services, explained that the council had to do a large amount of work at height to maintain its housing stock. This work needed to be carried out safely and in many cases this meant that scaffolding was essential, however, a thorough evaluation of alternative ways of doing the work would be completed before scaffolding was selected.

Paul Monforte acknowledged that scaffolding was disruptive to residents, blocking light, preventing the use of gardens and causing security fears; indeed 105 complaints had been made about scaffolding over the last year, which made up 12% of complaints about the repairs service. Scaffolding was also expensive, for example, making up 22% of the external capital repairs programme.

Officers were making attempts to limit the use of scaffolding, for example, by making the process to evaluate which method for working at height to use more robust, keeping a scaffold register to track where scaffolding was being left up for too long. New technology was also being brought in to use, particularly for inspections. Where scaffolding was necessary, officers were working to improve communications with residents so that they knew why scaffolding was there and how long it would be up.

Laura Mitcham, Service Improvement Manager - Mitie, explained that the company had recently started to use drones to carry out survey and inspection work. This approach was not possible in all cases but where a drone could be used it had a number of advantages. The principal advantage was that scaffolding would not be needed until work was begun, which would benefit residents and save the council significant amounts of money. The use of drones would also provide better photographic evidence which could be used to show residents what was being done and support the Section 20 process; the view which could be obtained from drone footage was in some ways better than the view which could be got from a scaffold, particularly for roofs. Footage from a drone flight and stills taken from surveys around the borough were shown to the committee, which was impressed with its clarity.

In response to questions Laura Mitcham explained that the drones were owned and operated by a specialist contractor; the drones were piloted by

operators licenced by the Civil Aviation Authority. A 25m Safety Zone was needed when the drone was in flight, although this in many cases preferable to disruption caused by the erection and dismantling of scaffolding.

Councillor Phibbs asked whether drone surveys were sufficiently good to allow surveyors to accurately assess works. Ernest Gray, Manager of Planned and Capital Works, said that in most cases the drone footage was far better than what a surveyor could see from scaffolding. There would still occasionally need to be physical inspections, for example, where materials needed to be tested.

Councillor Brown asked what the cost saving could be. Laura Mitcham explained that a drone flight could cost as little as 10% of what the scaffolding would have cost.

Councillor Ivimy asked whether the council was achieving good value when hiring scaffolding. Kevin Griffiths, Commercial Manager – Mitie, explained that each scaffolding job was tendered individually, with 6 scaffolding firms being used regularly. These companies provided a safe and good quality service at a fair price, and where a company failed to deliver the required service they would be removed from the list of contractors that Mitie used. Ernest Gray explained that all scaffolding prices also had to be approved by an external cost consultant appointed by the council to ensure that good value was being achieved. Councillor Ivimy asked whether more than £1 million had been spent with one contractor over the past year. Kevin Griffiths said that this had happened as some projects had been very large in the past year. Councillor Phibbs asked whether Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) were able to get scaffolding work on council housing projects. Kevin Griffiths explained that SMEs tended to be used for reactive repairs and for lower level jobs; he explained that most did not have the capacity to do larger scaffolds.

A resident asked whether using drones would lead to surveyors being made redundant. Paul Monforte said that as qualified people were needed to review the footage there would be no redundancies.

Councillor Connell asked whether there were enough qualified drone operators working in the borough to meet the council's demand. Ian Webb, Senior Partnerships Manager - Mitie, said that there were enough operators, noting that a survey was a relatively short process. Councillor Connell asked if weather conditions prevented drone flights. Paul Monforte said that poor weather could mean that drones couldn't fly, however, this was also true of surveys using scaffolding which could be badly affected by high winds.

A resident asked whether there had been any injuries whilst working at height in Hammersmith and Fulham in the last year. Laura Mitcham confirmed that there hadn't been.

Councillor Connell asked whether access to the footage would be controlled. Laura Mitcham explained that footage was stored on a Mitie system called mihousing. This required a username and password to log onto and so access could only be given by Mitie. It was hoped however that footage could

be shared with residents so that they could see what work was needed; to enable this recording would only take place once drones had passed residents windows.

Anthony Wood, a resident, asked whether residents would be informed prior to a drone being used in their block. Laura Mitcham said that they would be; she agreed that the letters would be passed through the residents communications group for its consideration.

Councillor Phibbs asked whether there were any targets for how much the use of drones would save or for how many days less scaffolding residents would have to endure. Paul Monforte said that there were not any targets at this stage as the project was still evolving; he agreed however to look at Mitie's key performance indicators to see where a target might be introduced. He noted that as each site was different, and safe working arrangements had to be maintained, it might be difficult to set a realistic target.

Councillor Phibbs asked whether cherry pickers or mobile scaffold towers were used to carry out works and inspections. Kevin Griffiths said that cherry pickers were occasionally used for surveying work, but that they were not suitable for repairs. Mobile scaffold towers were used for both inspection and repairs where evaluations showed them to be safe and appropriate.

Councillor Phibbs noted that the high cost of scaffolding used to repair tall buildings and asked whether the council should consider this in its planning policies. Paul Monforte explained that by using high quality, low maintenance, materials the cost of scaffolding could be managed.

A resident asked whether the council controlled private sector scaffolding. Councillor Homan explained that the council issued scaffold licences and ensured that scaffolds were safe, but that it did not have any greater control over the market.

31. FINANCIAL PLAN FOR COUNCIL HOMES 2017/18

Councillor Homan noted that this annual report was usually an opportunity for the PAC and residents to discuss the proposed Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget for the next year. She explained that as the Government had forced councils to cut rents by 1% each year there was less for the committee to consider.

Kathleen Corbett, Director for Finance and Resources (Housing), explained that the rent reduction had placed considerable pressure on the HRA budget. The planned works programme had been reprioritised to delay spending on kitchens and bathrooms whilst leaving windows to be replaced more quickly, in accordance with residents wishes. The impact of the Government's proposed high value voids policy had not been included as no payment would now have to be made until after the 2017/18 financial year.

Anthony Wood asked how else the council had been trying to offset costs. Kathleen Corbett explained that the council was trying to increase other

income, for example through the rental of garages and commercial properties; it was hoped that this would bring in an additional £200,000 in the next financial year.

32. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING AND WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair explained the proposed work programme for the next few meetings and asked for any suggested additions to it.

Councillor Phibbs noted the item on Greening our Estates and asked that either Gavin Simmons or Mark Waters be invited to the meeting to address concerns he had about trees on housing estates.

Councillor Phibbs asked that the PAC receive a regular report on key performance indicators for the housing department. The Chair agreed that this would be a helpful report.

Councillor Phibbs asked that an item on the use of tenants' halls be brought to the PAC as he remained concerned that they were sitting empty. Councillor Homan said that residents had been working with officers on this issue and that a report could be brought to highlight the improvements made to the PAC.

The Chair asked that if possible the item on Worklessness be brought to the April 2017 meeting.

A resident asked that a further item on the Arts be considered early in the new municipal year.

The Clerk told members that the report of the Poverty and Worklessness Commission, which had looked at issues within the PAC's remit, was expected to be considered by the Health, Adult Social Care and Social Inclusion PAC on 31 January 2017 at 7pm and that ERHA PAC members were invited to attend and take part in the discussion.

Meeting started: 7.05 pm
Meeting ended: 8.20 pm

Chair

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