

Place Select Committee

A meeting of Place Select Committee was held on Monday, 10th July, 2017.

Present: Cllr Derrick Brown (Chairman), Cllr Sonia Bailey (Vice-Chairman), Cllr Evaline Cunningham, Cllr Paul Rowling, Cllr Phil Dennis (sub for Cllr Bill Woodhead), Cllr Chris Barlow, Cllr Ken Dixon

Officers: Steven Hume (CHS); Raymond Sullivan (EG&D); Gary Woods, Annette Sotheby (DCE))

Also in attendance: Juliet Halstead, Sharon Holmes (G4S); Aime Claude Ndongozi (Migrant Help), Cllr Steve Nelson, Cllr Nigel Cooke, Cllr Barry Woodhouse

Apologies: Cllr Maurice Perry, Cllr Bill Woodhead, Cllr Mrs Sylvia Walmsley

**PLA
18/17** **Evacuation procedure**

The evacuation procedure was noted.

**PLA
19/17** **Declarations of Interest**

Cllr Sonia Bailey declared a personal non-prejudicial interest in agenda item 5 as she was a member of the United Voices Women's Choir who worked with asylum seekers.

Cllr Paul Rowling declared a personal non-prejudicial interest in agenda item 5 as he had been a member of the Board of Tristar Homes.

Cllr Phil Dennis declared a personal non-prejudicial interest in agenda item 5 as he had previously rented a garage from Tristar.

AGREED that the declarations of interest be noted.

**PLA
20/17** **Draft Minutes 10th April 2017**

Consideration was given to the draft minutes of 10th April 2017.

AGREED that the minutes be approved.

**PLA
21/17** **Scrutiny Review of Asylum Seeker Services**

G4S

Members were presented with an overview from nationally commissioned service providers G4S in relation to asylum seekers. The key points were as follows:-

- G4S became service providers (transporting and housing asylum seekers) in 2012, initially for 5 years, with a 2-year contract extension until 2019, with Jomast the sub-contractor across the North East.
- On arrival into the country, asylum seekers are temporarily accommodated (primarily at Wakefield for those asylum seekers who are

dispersed to Stockton-on-Tees) for around 3 weeks with dedicated health provision on-site. G4S then provide them with transport and appropriate housing in one of the agreed Local Authority cluster areas, of which Stockton is one.

- Safeguarding of vulnerable people and supporting those with additional special needs to access services they require.
- An accommodation induction is carried out, which includes accessing local services and registering with a GP – an initial health screening is important so that any issues people may have such as pregnancy, disability or mental health can be identified.
- Local Authority's School Admissions Team advised of any school age children.
- Service users are provided with a briefing pack, local area map and information including location of halal shops, places of worship, voluntary sector organisations and details of the complaints process. A booklet giving details of how to contact G4S, the emergency services, interpreting service, links to Victim Support, etc are also provided.
- Service users are given a tour by Jomast to familiarise themselves with the area.
- Single unrelated people may have to share a bedroom and a Consent to Share form is completed for this. Consideration is given to nationality, language and religion, however incompatibility is managed if this occurs.
- Service users are provided with basic supplies such as bedding, kitchen and bathroom items, and are shown how to operate the heating, oven, etc.
- Service users have to sign an occupancy agreement giving details of what is expected of them.
- A card recently introduced by the Home Office allows service users to use a cash machine or buy necessary items they may need. Financial advice and support is available from Migrant Help.
- Sharing of information and liaising with Local Authorities and strategic partners.
- 90% occupancy level is operated.
- Support is given if refugee status is granted, working closely with support agencies, housing team and charitable organisations such as Action Foundation who can provide single people with support for a period of time.
- Support and advice is given to assist people to move on if not granted leave to remain.
- Home Office looking at the structure of the new 2019 contract.

Members asked why there was a difference in the way nationalities were treated, as this had been reported by service users and advocates in the voluntary services. In response, it was stated that whilst Jomast had bi-lingual staff, interpretation could be a cause of this, although this should not occur. Members asked if this could be followed up.

Members reflected concerns that the School Admissions Team were not always notified when children were in a catchment area or when families had moved on and children were no longer in school. It was noted that guidance on such communication was taken from the Local Authority, and the agreed protocol was that the housing provider would email/fax the Council's School Admissions Team (direct contact with a school does not occur) – G4S asked to be notified of any specific issues.

Members asked if an effective complaints procedure was in operation for

service users who should feel confident to report any concerns. It was also felt that the booklet in the asylum seeker information pack was not easy to understand. In response, G4S said they deal with all the issues they are made aware of, however Stockton service users often contact Jomast with concerns rather than directly to them as specified in the complaints leaflet which is now under review.

Members asked about Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and noted that KPIs include:

- Response times – 24 hours for a boiler breakdown, for example.
- Moving or finding accommodation – 4 hours for a person at a police station needing transport and accommodation, for example.
- Medical provision on arrival, particularly those needing immediate medical attention - robust procedures in place for this.

All information is logged onto a central database, of which the Home Office have access and can observe activity. It is important that issues reported to sub-contractors are logged centrally, therefore more efficient process if all information is fed through G4S.

Members were interested to know how Stockton performed against other areas. It was noted that G4S information is contract-wide, however a breakdown could be provided if required.

Members were concerned about identifying exploited and vulnerable individuals in Stockton and the wider area, and were advised that potential victims of trafficking would be recorded on a national referral system run by the Salvation Army. Information sharing is important and work is carried out with two organisations in Sheffield and Leeds regarding trafficking victims. It was recognised that not all victims disclose, but some do when they feel safe and settled.

Members expressed concern that service users were not given enough training with gas and electrical appliances, and highlighted the subsequent fire risk associated with this. It was reported that induction was the first point of training with pre-checks and monthly checks carried out on properties where a Housing Officer has access to rooms. Regular meetings held with visual pictures to repeatedly stress the risks to service users. Certain items are not allowed in bedrooms, for example kettles and toasters. Candles and incense sticks are confiscated.

A breakdown of complaints was requested by Members and it was agreed that this would be provided.

Members asked how Service Centre calls (around 4,000 each month) were broken down. In response it was noted that all calls are categorised:

- Property management
- Safeguarding
- Domestic violence
- Anti-social behaviour – the Home Office now require a breakdown of victims and perpetrators.

- Assaults on service users or staff.
- Payments – problems with card not working for cash withdrawals etc.

A breakdown of calls could be provided, the majority of which are payment queries, property defects and anti-social behaviour.

Discussion took place around the visit to the Arrival Medical Practice to meet asylum seekers whose main concerns were shared occupancy and anti-social behaviour, particularly when a person is sent back to the same accommodation after an incident, creating further tension. Members asked if this problem could be addressed, and were advised that emergency relocation was sometimes requested from the Home Office, and occasionally the Police. Specific examples could be investigated and more information provided.

MIGRANT HELP

A presentation was given by the Regional Operations Manager of Migrant Help; key points as follows:

- Service delivery model
- Telephone contact centre for support and help
- Regional services
- Service delivery partnerships
- Access to services in Stockton
- Key issues in Stockton
- Co-ordination with other agencies in Stockton
- Contacts and additional information

Members asked about working with partners and if asylum seekers are aware that pro-bono legal advice was available. It was noted that a service was available in Newcastle, but that solicitors usually want to ensure that a case they take on is likely to proceed.

Members asked where Migrant Help received their funding and were advised that this was provided by the Home Office (a contract and a grant).

Members asked about performance indicators and were advised that the contact centre has a response time of 5 minutes to answer calls. Members were keen to know how many people worked in the contact centre and how many enquiries were received. In response it was noted that national data could be provided.

Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council's Lead Member for the North East Migration Partnership (NEMP) provided information on the work and effectiveness of the partnership, including its role in representing the views of the Local Authority. In summary:

- NEMP is a very useful partnership, though could be more focused on Members.
- It has met with senior Civil Servants and government Ministers, and allows Local Authorities to speak as a region.
- NEMP must ensure it remains independent from the Home Office (which

funds it).

- Details of the post-2019 contract (once confirmed) may be something which the Local Authority wants to look at in terms of service provision.

AGREED :-

- a) to note the information provided
- b) for further information requested to be forwarded

PLA 22/17 Scrutiny Review of Fire Safety of High Rise Residential Buildings (Task & Finish)

Although the high rise issue is not directly within their remit, the Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) had requested that an update on the work undertaken by Local Authorities across the TVCA area was provided to their Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January 2018 – this would enable findings and learning to be shared where appropriate.

It was noted that Thirteen Group had previously reported they were carrying out high priority investigations following confirmation of the presence of Class 3 combustible cladding (partial) at Kennedy Gardens, Billingham, and Members agreed it was important that findings were shared with key local partner agencies.

Concern was expressed that when an application had been tabled in 2013 to carry out work to Kennedy Gardens, including the cladding, the materials specified at the time should have been scrutinised by the Local Authority to ensure suitability. Discussion took place around the difference between Planning and Building Control legislation, and although running parallel, these were separate processes. The material details within the Planning application would be in relation to the appearance, not the functional ability to protect the building from fire, as Building Control would be involved with that aspect. Following a change in legislation in the 1984 Building Act, this allowed for private approved inspectors. Local Authority Building Control would not intervene if there was a problem as any issues would be dealt with by the National Body of Building Control Alliance. It was suggested that a meeting with the Chairman of the Planning Committee be held to explore the role of Planning in more detail, though it was acknowledged that issues around Building Control will inevitably be driven by the Government's public inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire.

It was noted that the cladding material used on Kennedy Gardens was 4mm thick aluminium panel, non-combustible at low temperatures, and the higher specification was chosen for its sound and environmental insulation.

Cleveland Fire Brigade had reported that Kennedy Gardens, apart from a misting system, was an example of good practice in high rise buildings, with the fire-fighting stairwell giving 120 minutes of fire-fighting capability. The presence of dry risers, secure rooms with bin chutes which are double fire-proofed, and flats that are compartmentalised so that if a fire started it would be contained were also positive fire safety measures.

Members asked about Fire Authority recommendations for sprinkler or misting systems to be installed in high rise buildings as no deaths had occurred in buildings with these in place. Thirteen Group were currently looking at this. It was noted that misting systems had the benefit of not causing as much water damage as sprinklers.

Concern was expressed about the polyester/UPVC materials used on the bay windows possibly causing a fire hazard, not just the cladding materials. A mineral fibre type of insulation was used on Kennedy Gardens which was a different type to that used at Grenfell Tower. Although cladding was a major issue, fire risk assessments were also extremely important.

The DCLG would be looking at the type of insulation material used, and recommendations from the national public inquiry would be forthcoming.

Members agreed that following the Grenfell Tower fire, Local Authority priority was to reassure local residents of their safety.

The cause of the Grenfell Tower fire was thought to be a Hotpoint fridge-freezer which had been discontinued in 2009, about which a recall notice had been sent out. Members considered whether the final report of this task and finish review should include more detail around this faulty appliance, however, it was noted that the Grenfell Tower Resident Group had reported power surges repeatedly to the management company several months before the fire. It was felt that until the investigation was completed, doubt would remain around the exact cause.

The Chairman reported that Kennedy Gardens residents had said they felt happy that their concerns had been listened to on a recent visit by Building Control and Committee members.

Members suggested minor amendments to the draft Task & Finish report:-

Front page Omit the photograph
1.3 & 3.2 Omit there have been 87 discoveries of human remains thus far
1.2 & 3.1 Insert the probable cause of the fire was a faulty fridge-freezer
4.13 Insert additional reference to what Planning is not (to reinforce the difference to Building Control)
4.38 Include reference to Kennedy Gardens having two sets of stairs – one for evacuation and one for the Fire Brigade (Grenfell Tower only had one set of stairs).

AGREED:-

- a) To approve all the suggested recommendations, plus
- b) An additional recommendation regarding the installation of sprinkler/misting systems in all high rise residential buildings across Stockton-On-Tees

PLA **Work Programme 2017-2018**
23/17

AGREED - that the Work Programme be noted.

