



**Report to:** Cabinet 5 July 2021

**Lead Members:** Councillors Neil Gough, Dr. Tumi Hawkins and Brian Milnes

**From:** Councillor Grenville Chamberlain, Chair, Scrutiny and Overview Committee  
Councillor Judith Rippeth, Vice Chair, Scrutiny and Overview Committee

---

## **Update from Scrutiny and Overview Committee**

### **Purpose**

1. This report is to inform Cabinet about the discussion among members of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee at its meetings on 20 April 2021 and 22 June 2021.

### **Extensions of Time (Planning) update**

2. At its meeting on 20 April 2021, the Committee considered a report on the outcome of an Internal Audit review of the Extension of Time process followed by the Greater Cambridge Planning Service.
3. Committee members made the following comments:
  - Continued performance improvement might be easier to demonstrate by adopting a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system
  - The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) should be urged to clarify against which standard performance should be measured to ensure consistency and comparison of like with like
  - Extensions of Time should be agreed as soon as possible
  - The Internal Audit report should be considered in the context of the circumstances (Covid-19 pandemic) in which the review period fell – circumstances that were very challenging and with which officers coped well
  - The use of Extensions of Time to ensure quality of applications should be taken as evidence of officers being as thorough as possible
  - Extensions of time were sometimes beneficial to the overall process, allowing for a thorough and worked through outcome

- It should be recognised that sometimes Extensions of Time were needed to make applications submitted by developers or their agents acceptable to the Local Planning Authority
- Collaboration between those involved in the planning process invariably led to a more satisfactory outcome
- Officers had continued to process applications effectively despite the severe challenges and restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 Pandemic.

4. Members also considered two rhetorical questions

- Should Extensions of Time agreed before the statutory deadline for the determination of planning applications and those agreed after it be considered differently or as a single matter?
- Are Extensions of Time agreed by applicants and agents as a means of securing planning permission?

## **Private Sector Housing Policy**

5. At its meeting on 22 June 2021, the Committee considered a report on a Private Sector Housing Policy. Members observed as follows:

- Care was needed to ensure a reasonable balance given that tenants could sometimes be the cause of a property's poor state of repair.
- Given the potential workload, it would be important for staffing levels and expertise, though sufficient now, to be reviewed from time to time.
- An effective dialogue with landlords would be essential to emphasise the escalation measures that could be taken in the event of persistent breaches of the policy.
- The policy needs to be proofread to ensure consistency throughout, and compliance with the Council's style guide.
- Enforcement of the policy should be proportionate, properly prioritised and, above all, reasonable.
- The policy, and language used, must be clear and precise.
- The policy should cover those properties managed by Ermine Street Housing because Ermine Street was an arms-length Company of the Council but not part of it.
- There might be merit in exploring an award scheme for good landlords.
- It would be useful to seek integration between this policy and the Empty Homes Strategy.
- Information about landlords had to be kept up to date so that they could be contacted as soon as possible after a problem was identified.
- Whenever possible, the term 'rogue landlord' should be avoided.

## **Quarter 4 Performance**

6. At its meeting on 22 June 2021, the Committee considered a report on Quarter 4 Performance. Members observed as follows:

- The Contact Centre remained a concern, but it was encouraging to hear that new telephony equipment would allow a 'call back' option to be introduced. Other innovations were also of interest, such as the potential of Artificial Intelligence and possible use of online chat agents.
- Less intimidating ways of collecting feedback from tenants would result in more meaningful feedback and assessment of tenant satisfaction.
- Although the backlog of complaints about the Greater Cambridge Planning Service was being addressed successfully, progress must be monitored. Where appropriate, statistics must be placed in context. For example, the proportion of planning applications determined within target should include details of when Extensions of Time had been agreed.

**Report Author:**

Ian Senior – Democratic Services Officer