

Housing Scrutiny Board

8 September, 2015

Summary of Matters Considered at the Board

Report of the Chair, Councillor P Hughes

The Scrutiny Board met on 8 September, 2015 and the following item was considered. I have selected the main points of the discussion which I feel members of the Council will be particularly interested to know more about. For more detail, a copy of the minutes is available on the Committee Management Information System (CMIS) via the Council's website at <http://cmis.sandwell.gov.uk/cmis5/>

1. Housing Allocations Policy Review

The Board received a presentation on the Housing Allocations Policy, including elements that have been revised in the previous update in 2013, statistics on the local context and some of the potential areas for consideration during this current review of the Policy.

It was reported that the 5-year residency test, introduced in 2013, resulted in a reduction in the number of households registered for housing in the borough. There are a number of specific exemptions to the residency test; however these are only for relatively small numbers of cases with particular circumstances. The majority of households on the register come under the category of non-statutory reasonable preference. Members feel that additional data is needed on this category to help guide the allocations policy and approaches to future social housing provision in the borough.

The Board received statistics relating to the supply of housing stock across the six towns of Sandwell, together with numbers of bids received for each type of stock. It was agreed that more detailed information on the supply and demand for different property types on a geographical basis is required to further inform the review of the Policy.

The Board discussed some of the reasons for low demand for certain property types. It is recognised that there are a wide range of factors that influence the demand for particular property types and for particular blocks. These factors include the impact of the welfare reform being implemented by the Government, changes in people's general preferences for accommodation type and age restrictions on some blocks based on historic situations. Reclassification of certain properties/blocks could be a way of addressing demand issues which would help get households off the register and into tenancies, while reducing the Council's costs associated with void properties. It is acknowledged that this will need to be flexible as a single solution will not be suitable borough-wide.

Members were informed that with a small proportion of blocks of Council flatted accommodation there has been a drop in demand. Further investigation as to the causes of this is required and the Board feels that it will be helpful to discuss this matter, along with general housing allocations, with local ward members at the quarterly councillor meetings held in each of Sandwell's six towns. It was also suggested that this matter be referred to the Tenant Review Panel to seek the views of that tenant organisation.

Members also asked to visit to the Allocations Team to speak to front line staff about their experiences and to see their processes in action.

The Board considered that the information on the supply and demand of Council housing could be used to inform any potential building of new properties by the authority. Members were aware of sites that had been previously identified for social housing developments and asked that the Director – Regeneration and the Economy provides an update on the current status and future plans for such sites.

Councillor P Hughes
Chair