

Housing Scrutiny Board

3 November and 15 December, 2015

Summary of Matters Considered at the Board

Report of the Chair, Councillor P Hughes

The Scrutiny Board met on 3 November and 15 December, 2015 and the following items were 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/cm5/>

3 November, 2015

1. Selective Licensing of Privately Rented Housing

The Board received a briefing on recent changes to the Housing Act 2004 relating to selective licensing of privately rented housing. It was reported that previously, local authorities had powers to introduce selective licensing as a means of addressing issues caused by proven low demand and/or significant anti-social behaviour. In April 2015 these licensing powers were widened to allow their use to tackle issues connected with poor property condition, high levels of crime, deprivation or migration.

Evidence was being gathered and analysed to determine potential areas of Sandwell that could benefit from a selective licensing scheme and the Board requested a further report once this analysis is complete.

2. Recent Developments on Extending Right to Buy to Housing Association Tenants and the Sale of High Value Council Housing

The Board received a briefing on recent developments on the Government's commitment to extend the Right to Buy to Housing Association tenants as well as the Government's proposals to require local authorities to sell high value council housing.

It was reported that, following a nationwide ballot on 2 October, the housing association sector had voted in favour of entering into a voluntary Right to Buy arrangement with their tenants. The details of this, as agreed with the Government, include a commitment by the sector to deliver one-for-one replacement of units that are sold within two years of their sale. It was noted that the replacements could be of any property type or tenure.

It is difficult to predict a likely take up of the right to buy of housing association properties, although if demand is similar to the percentages of tenants that exercised the right to buy their council homes in the first five years following the introduction of that Right to Buy, it could mean the loss of 220 housing association social rented homes in Sandwell over a five year period.

The Government has previously announced plans to require local authorities which have retained ownership of their stock to sell 'high value' homes as they become vacant. The Housing and Planning Bill includes provision for the Government to determine a formula which will include an assessment of the probable turnover of 'high value' properties in a year. This formula would determine the level of a financial payment for each authority that would be payable to central government.

The financial payment to central government does not need to be paid by funds generated by the sale of such 'high value' properties. It might be possible to sell other properties, for example hard to let properties, to cover the payment instead.

3. Tenant Involvement and Engagement

The Board received a presentation and briefing on the changes being made to the ways in which tenant engagement and involvement will be carried out in Sandwell. There has been a multi-party working group which includes representatives of the Scrutiny Board, Council officers, tenants and the third sector. This group has discussed the future of tenant engagement and involvement.

A menu of involvement has been developed by the Neighbourhoods directorate. This sets out a wide range of engagement and involvement opportunities with various levels of time commitment. This is designed to allow tenants to engage in a way that suited their lifestyles and circumstances. The types of involvement available include mystery customers, Tenant Review Panel, the Armchair Club (a way to be involved without leaving home) and focus groups.

A key proposal is the commissioning of services from the voluntary sector to provide tenants and residents with support to form groups and be strong advocates for their local areas. This will be delivered through a Service Level Agreement with a specialist voluntary sector organisation. The Board asked to receive the draft Service Level Agreement once it was available.

The allocation of community chest funds for the 2015/16 financial year has been delayed due to significant changes in the staffing structure within the directorate. There are a number of options for how to handle the funds including combining with the Local Area Budget, handing over to a commissioned partner to administer, or carrying forward the funds to the next financial year. The Chair advised the Board that at a working group meeting he had asked those present (including the tenant representatives) to advise organisations which might be reliant on the community chest funding to approach the Council.

4. Local Letting Plans

The Board received a report on Local Letting Plans including their legal basis, how they work alongside the Housing Allocations Policy and the background and history of such Plans within the borough. It was reported that as age restricting Local Letting Plans had been introduced over the last 20 years or more, currently over 10,000 units of flatted accommodation were subject to some kind of age restriction.

From time to time other types of Local Letting Plans had been used to achieve specific objectives, for example restricting ground floor flats to applicants with a medical priority.

5. Housing Support for Care Leavers

Representatives of the Neighbourhoods and Children's Services Directorates attended the meeting to report on ways in which they work to support care leavers with their housing needs.

Neighbourhood Services provide 14 Council-owned flats, with one additional flat due to be allocated, for use as 'training flats' to provide care leavers with practical experience in living independently while receiving appropriate support. Neighbourhood Services and Children's Services are discussing ways in which the support offered to care leavers can be strengthened through increased partnership working.

The limitations on available properties of a suitable type (for example single bedroom flatted accommodation) are exacerbated by the significant proportion of the Council's stock having age restrictions.

It was reported that a new post is being created to help improve the Council's housing support to care leavers. The post holder will be required to have knowledge of both children's services and housing related legislation. The job description and personnel specification are currently being developed.

Neighbourhood Services also facilitates the 'Motiv8' programme which is aimed at various young people who may be vulnerable, including care leavers. The programme aims to equip the participants with life skills which include a range of educational, employment, interview and practical skills. The programme also includes coaching and mentoring and can continue, where necessary, once individuals have completed the programme. The programme is run by one officer within Neighbourhoods, with additional staff support drawn from volunteers from the directorate. The Board suggested that former Council staff, for example retirees, could be offered an opportunity to volunteer too.

15 December, 2015

Housing Allocations Policy

The Housing Scrutiny Board has carried out a review of the Housing Allocations Policy to help inform the Cabinet's consideration of a refreshed Policy in early 2016.

In carrying out this review, the Board has:-

- received the Housing Allocations Policy 2013;
- considered statistical and demographic data relating to:
 - the Housing Register;
 - lettings;
 - the Council's housing stock and demand across the six towns.
- considered data on properties that were deemed 'difficult to let' due to low demand and/or restrictions due to Local Letting Plans;
- received information on the use of Local Letting Plans in Sandwell;
- visited the Housing Choice service, including speaking to front line officers who are involved with housing allocations.

Taking account of the evidence they have received, members discussed the need to minimise losses arising from housing voids. It was felt that additional flexibilities needed to be available in situations where the housing list had been exhausted. This would allow vacant properties to be re-let more quickly, which would reduce costs to the Council. Members felt that this was particularly important as the Housing Revenue Account faced increasing pressures from current and forthcoming Government policy changes.

The Board also suggested that quarterly councillor meetings should receive and discuss information on void times in their towns to allow members to provide an insight through their local knowledge on causes and consequences. This could provide a mechanism to review issues like Local Letting Plans to ensure they remain suitable and of benefit in each town as circumstances change.

The Board had already agreed that the subject of housing allocations, voids and Local Letting Plans should be considered, from a local point of view, at the first available Quarterly Town meetings in the New Year. It was suggested that the quarterly Town meetings should also regularly receive and discuss information on void times in their towns to allow members to provide an insight through their local knowledge on causes and consequences. This could then provide a mechanism to review issues like Local Letting Plans to ensure that they remain fit for purpose and of benefit in each town, as circumstances change.

Members agreed the following recommendation for submission to the Cabinet for consideration at the same time as the refreshed Housing Allocations Policy in early 2016:-

That the section of the Housing Allocations Policy relating to Local Letting Plans (section D/10) be amended to include the following paragraphs:-

- (a) All Local Letting Plans should be written in accordance with the above and be reviewed on a regular basis.
- (b) That where an age restriction forms all or part of the Local Letting Plan, only the tenant needs to meet the age restriction in order for the household to qualify for the property, so long as all other members of that household are aged 18 or over.
- (c) That where an age restriction forms all or part of the Local Letting Plan, priority will be given to applicants who meet that age criteria. The Council will also have the option to draw up a reserve list for those applicants who are no more than five years younger than the

age restriction as set out in the Local Letting Plan. This latter list can be used to allocate the property in the event that the former list is exhausted.

- (d) That where an age restriction forms all or part of the Local Letting Plan and where a property has been through three bidding cycles and is subsequently unlet, the manager shall use discretion on how to let the property to households that would previously not have qualified (either due to age restrictions or household composition).

Councillor P Hughes
Chair