

Housing Scrutiny Board

16 November and 13 December, 2016

Summary of Matters Considered at the Board

Report of the Chair, Councillor P Hughes

The Scrutiny Board met on 16 November and 13 December, 2016 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/cmis5/>

16 November

The Implications of the Housing and Planning Act 2016 and Welfare Reform on the Housing Allocations Policy

The Board received an update on the implementation of the Housing and Planning Act 2016 and discussed the implications of its various provisions, for which government guidance and regulation is still awaited. Plans to require local authorities to sell their higher value council properties have now been delayed by the Government, as has the introduction of mandatory higher rents (commonly known as "pay to stay").

The Board also discussed the implications of ongoing welfare reform and the implications on allocating Council properties and the Council's rental income. Around 400 properties in Sandwell are going to be affected by the cap on household benefit. The cap on housing benefit at local housing allowance rates means that for a single person under 35 their housing benefit will not cover the rental charge on any of the Council's one bedroom properties. The Council currently generates around 450 single person tenancies per year where the applicant is under 35. Approximately 60% of the Council's flatted stock has an age restriction, meaning that nearly 60% (3,200 units) of one bedroom flats and 45% of two bedroom flats (2,000 units) are currently unavailable to persons below the age of 40.

It is currently unclear as to how other local authorities are responding to the social and financial challenges presented by welfare reform, and the Housing and Planning Act and this is in part due to the lack of regulation and guidance to date. The Board noted that workshops have been held with staff from Housing Services and will be receiving feedback on this. The Board also feels that a joint workshop with Housing Services staff would be useful to gather and explore a range of ideas and this will be arranged in the new year.

13 December

Sandwell Community Information and Participation Service – Overview of Service Level Agreement and Achievements

The Board noted the performance against the service level agreement that the Council has with Sandwell Community Information and Participation Service. Examples of specific activities and their impact were noted. As part of the monitoring requirements two reports are provided to the Director – Neighbourhoods per quarter specifying in detail the achievements and outcomes delivered through the Grant Agreement.

SCIPS has assisted in providing IT training and support to residents on completing forms to build confidence and equip them better to apply for benefits. The Board notes that similar services are also being provided by the Libraries Service and has asked that officers from Welfare Rights and Income Management liaise with SCIPS to benchmark what is being provided and provide a co-ordinated approach.

Following the restructure of Neighbourhood Services and the loss of a dedicated officer support SCIPS was also commissioned in January 2016 to deliver direct services to tenants and residents groups across Sandwell. A survey has identified that coverage of tenant and resident groups is not equitable across all towns and a gap analysis is currently being undertaken to establish how these gaps can be filled. The Board has requested a further report following the completion of the gap analysis in relation to the tenant representation across the borough.

Revenue and Benefits Service – Discussion on the Impact of Welfare Reform

The Board noted a presentation from the Revenue and Benefits team on its activities to support residents in relation to challenges created by the ongoing welfare reform.

The Board was informed of the numbers of Sandwell residents affected by each of the reforms and the activities being undertaken to support people to sustain their tenancies:-

- Under occupancy Penalty (“Bedroom Tax”) – 4,048
- Household Benefit Cap – 130 currently and a further 750 from January 2017
- Universal Credit -2,393

The Board agrees that the most effective way to deal with the changes is to ensure that effective teams are in place. The Interim Director – Neighbourhoods will therefore be reviewing structures and roles accordingly.

Councillor P Hughes
Chair