

Minutes of the Housing Scrutiny Board

26th April, 2017 at 5.00 pm
at Jack Judge House, Oldbury

Present: Councillor P Hughes (Chair);
Councillor Edis (Vice-Chair);
Councillors Preece, Shaeen and Tranter.
Mr M Babb (Co-opted Member).

Apology: Councillor B Price.

13/17 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 13th December 2016 be confirmed as a correct record.

14/17 Update on Town Workshops

Further to Minute No. 7/16 (29th September, 2016) the Board noted that workshops had taken place in Smethwick, Tipton and Wednesbury so far. The purpose of the workshops was to discuss a range of housing issues in the towns.

The workshops had been attended by both members and officers and had been well received. The Board noted the specific issues raised within each town and the following key themes, which had been raised in all three of the towns: -

- Age restrictions were causing delays in letting properties, and consequently rental losses.
- The requirement to prove that a person had lived in Sandwell for at least five years or had a close connection to be eligible for a Council property was having a negative impact on demand, causing higher void losses.

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- There was a lack of large family houses and also a lack of two bedroom houses across the borough.
- The number of houses of multiple occupation was on the increase.

Members expressed particular concern at the impact that age restrictions on flats was having on letting vacant properties and the detrimental effect on the Council's rental income. It was reported that the City of Wolverhampton Council had discontinued the use of age restrictions and had not seen any increase in anti-social behaviour levels as a result.

The Board also discussed the idea of the introduction of a sixth priority band for the Council's housing register, which would be open to people who were unable to provide proof that they had lived in or had a connection to the borough for five years. This would assist in addressing demand issues for flatted accommodation and reduce financial losses from void properties.

A member of the public present at the meeting asked what the Council was doing to address issues of under-occupation. The General Manager-Housing Services reported that the Council was currently focussing on under-occupied four bedroom houses. Whilst the Council was unable to force people to move, there were options available to incentivise and support people to. He added that properties in the Council's high rise blocks were of an excellent standard, with 24 hour security, and needed to be promoted better.

The Board noted that those tenants under-occupying properties who were in receipt of benefits could accrue arrears as a result of the under-occupancy penalty. The Board was informed that all tenants subject to the under-occupancy penalty were offered the opportunity to move before the penalty was introduced. Those who had declined to move and accrued arrears as a result were dealt with in accordance with the Council's usual arrears procedure. The Board endorsed this approach and recommended that the Interim Director – Neighbourhoods actively pursue such cases and the Cabinet Member make a policy statement to support this stance.

Workshops in Oldbury, Rowley Regis and West Bromwich would be held in due course and a summary of the key issues from all six towns would be used as a basis for consultation with the public and the Tenant Review Panel.

Resolved:-

- (1) that the Interim Director – Neighbourhoods be requested to take action to actively pursue and take appropriate action against tenants who have continued to under-occupy Council properties, despite being offered opportunities to move, and are in rent arrears as a consequence of the under-occupancy penalty;
- (2) that in connection with recommendation (1) above the Cabinet Member for Housing be requested to make a policy statement to endorse the action of the Interim Director – Neighbourhoods in relation to rent arrears connected to the under-occupancy penalty.

15/17

Impact of Welfare Reform in Sandwell

The Board received a presentation on the implementation of the welfare reform measures that the Government planned to introduce and the Council's efforts to prepare residents to minimise the impact of the changes. The progress of each of the welfare reform measures was noted.

The Board discussed the implementation of Universal Credit in Sandwell, which had been phased in for new claimants from 2015 but would be fully implemented for all claimants from July, 2018. 68% of tenants would be affected and in some cases the amount of Universal Credit they could claim would not be equal to what they claimed under the previous benefits regime. In addition, there was an eight-week delay in processing claims, and no payment for the first seven days, therefore many tenants could immediately find themselves in arrears. It was noted that pilot authorities had seen an increase in rent arrears by 40%. For those claimants deemed to be vulnerable the arrears team could arrange for the rental element of Universal Credit to be paid directly to their landlord. The Board noted that the Department for Work and Pensions had not defined "vulnerable" in this context. Job Centre Plus had referred around 33 residents to the Sandwell Financial Services Hub, however, there was no follow up information on what support they had been able to access. The Chair reported that funding for the Hub was due to come to an end and requested that the future sustainability of the Hub be looked at to ensure that it remained as a provision to support residents.

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The Board noted a working example of how a family with three children would lose around £60 a week as a consequence of the freeze on working age benefits. The Board also noted that grandparents taking care of their grandchildren would be negatively affected, despite the fact that they would be saving the public sector money on foster care fees. Those people who chose to pursue a Special Guardianship Order could claim some benefits which minimised the impact, however not all relative carers chose to do this. Members felt that the Council should take a pro-active approach in identifying relative carers that would be affected and provide appropriate advice on Special Guardianship.

An Officer Working Group had been established in 2011 to co-ordinate the Council's response by planning and delivering support to those affected. All directorates were represented on the Group and information was shared across services to ensure best use of resources. The Council's response had been pro-active and, using data provided by the Department for Work and Pensions, all affected private tenants and Council tenants had been contacted to advise them of the changes and their impact. Neighbourhoods staff had received training to provide appropriate advice and support, including signposting to other agencies. The Group had also briefed to members. In many cases advice and support was all that the Council could provide, given the stringent nature of the changes.

Future priorities for the Working Group included expanding its work with external partners, understanding repeat users of local welfare provision and discretionary housing payments to plan support in response to need. A web based support portal – “BetterOff Sandwell” – was due to be launched to complement face to face advice services. It was hoped that directing people to web based support services would ensure that resources for face to face support could be directed to those in the most need.

Members welcomed the informative presentation and thanked officers for their enthusiasm and commitment in helping those in need.

Resolved:-

- (1) that the Executive Director-Resources be requested to investigate and clarify the financial sustainability of the Sandwell Financial Services Hub to ensure that it

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remains available as a source of advice and support for residents;

- (2) that the Director-Children and Families and the Executive Director-Resources be requested to identify relative carers who do not have Special Guardianship Orders and provide appropriate advice to ensure that they are not adversely affected by welfare reform.

16/17

Thanks

The Chair thanked members and officers for their support in conducting the business of the Board in 2016/2017.

(Meeting ended at 7.41 pm.)

Contact Officer: Stephnie Hancock Democratic Services Unit 0121 569 3189
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