

Minutes of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

**22nd March, 2018 at 5.00pm
at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

Present: Councillor Edis (Chair);
Councillors Goult and Hevican (Vice-Chairs);
Councillors Ashman, Phillips and White.

Apologies: Councillors Allcock, Hadley, R Price and Underhill.

In attendance: Tammy Stokes (Planning Regeneration Manager);
Alan Martin (Housing Partnerships and Programme
Manager).

3/18 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 25th January, 2018 be approved as a correct record.

4/18 Housing Update

The Council's Planning Regeneration Manager and Housing Partnerships and Programme Manager attended the meeting to provide the Board with an update on housing developments across the borough.

It was reported that the Cabinet had approved a three-year strategic plan for the development of Council housing in Sandwell. This had identified sites for the first 636 new Council homes, with full financial appraisals to be undertaken at individual site implementation stages and included as part of each site-specific Cabinet report. If any of the site schemes were not able to progress due to financial viability issues, there were a number of reserve schemes that had been developed to ensure unallocated resources were utilised. The updated development programme for new Council homes was presented to the Board.

Over 100 properties would have been completed and occupied by the end of the 2017/18 financial year. Combined with the site schemes that were programmed to be reported to Cabinet, the three-year target of building approximately 600 new homes should be achieved.

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The resources for the build were predominantly through the Housing Revenue Account, alongside other funding sources such as Section 106 commuted sums for affordable housing and Right to Buy receipts. There were bids with Homes England for resources from the Shared Ownership and Affordable Homes Programme grant fund.

On private development sites, there were tools and measures available to the Council to encourage private owners to bring forward their sites for development. Each site was treated on a case by case basis to determine the most suitable method, for example powers under section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act were used to tidy up vacant sites that were impacting on the amenity of the surrounding areas. Such enforcement action could encourage landowners to identify a more long-term solution to a site.

Council officers, as part of Development Ready, provided support to private landowners to market their sites to house-builders, obtain planning permission and, where appropriate, apply for grant funding.

The ultimate sanction for private sites not being developed would be a Compulsory Purchase Order. There were clear risks and costs associated with such an Order so they were only used where there was a clear case in the public interest.

The Board was advised that there were significant opportunities through the West Midlands Combined Authority and the Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership for private land-owners and house-builders to apply for funding to cover abnormal costs in relation to land remediation or infrastructure requirements.

From the comments and questions by members of the Scrutiny Board the following responses were made and issues highlighted:-

- The Right to Buy had an impact on the Council's social housing stock. Any income the Council received from Right to Buy sales was paid back into the Housing Revenue Account.
- Smaller sites across Sandwell might lend themselves to a modular build approach to development.
- Through the West Midlands Combined Authority £52million was available across the Black Country for land remediation.

The Board thanked officers for attending the meeting.

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Report from Scrutiny Work Groups

The Board received an update on the activities of the two Scrutiny Work Groups. Each Work Group had been led by one of the Board's Vice-Chairs. The Groups had been aligned around two key areas of the Board's terms of reference: housing and crime/anti-social behaviour (ASB).

The Housing Scrutiny Work Group had originally intended to carry out a review of the Council and partners' response to problem/unsafe Houses in Multiple Occupation however due to an ongoing independent review of a case in West Bromwich it was not timely to undertake that review.

The Housing Scrutiny Work Group met on 14th February, 2018 to carry out a pre-decision scrutiny review of the draft Prevention of Homelessness Strategy.

The Council's Service Manager – Housing Management and Housing Strategy and Research Manager attended the meeting and explained the work undertaken in developing the draft Strategy and the consultation undertaken so far which included housing associations, the third sector, as well as with Crisis, a national homelessness specialist charity.

Following the discussion, the Housing Scrutiny Work Group endorsed the draft Strategy as it was considered to meet the requirements placed upon the Council by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017. The draft Strategy would be submitted for consideration by the Cabinet in April.

In addition, the Housing Scrutiny Work Group had concerns about the future sustainability of the regional Landlords Forum. This Forum had been a successful vehicle for engaging landlords and it was felt that this should be considered on a regional basis.

The ASB Scrutiny Work Group met on 14th March, 2018 to hold an evidence gathering workshop with Police and Council officers on what was being done in Sandwell to tackle ASB caused by off-road motorbikes.

The Council's CCTV and ASB Operations Manager attended the meeting and representatives from policing teams across Sandwell also attended.

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The officers in attendance explained the efforts being taken to address ASB caused by off-road motorbikes. This fell into several broad categories:-

- Building intelligence – on trends (such as areas and times where such ASB took place) and individual cases (models and colours of bikes, identities of riders and addresses);
- Enforcement – including seizing and crushing vehicles, prosecutions and civil measures (e.g. for breach of tenancy agreements);
- Education – such as leaflets, school talks and a forthcoming off-road motorbike accident VR video that would be the first of its kind nationally.

The ASB Scrutiny Work Group felt that while it was clear that there was lots of good partnership working between the Police, the Council and others in Sandwell, this wasn't always well communicated to councillors or the public.

Resolved:-

- (1) that the draft Prevention of Homelessness Strategy be endorsed;
- (2) that the Council and Partners' response to problem/unsafe Houses in Multiple Occupation be referred to the Scrutiny Work Programme for 2018/19;
- (3) that the future sustainability of the regional Landlords Forum be referred to the West Midlands Combined Authority Overview and Scrutiny Committee for further consideration;
- (4) that the Cabinet Member for Public Health and Protection be requested to support the continuation of partnership working between the Council and West Midlands Police to tackle off-road motorbike anti-social behaviour;
- (5) that the Director – Housing and Communities work with West Midlands Police to carry out a promotion campaign before the summer to raise awareness of the issues surrounding off-road motorbikes including safety and legal aspects;

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- (6) that the Director – Housing and Communities, Executive Director – Resources and West Midlands Police ensure that councillors are kept informed of campaigns relating to community safety, crime and anti-social behaviour so that they can help communicate the campaigns locally.

(Meeting ended at 5.55pm)

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