

**Minutes of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities  
Scrutiny Board**

**4<sup>th</sup> October, 2018 at 5.30pm  
at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

**Present:** Councillor Ahmed (Chair);  
Councillors Crompton and Hevican (Vice-Chairs);  
Councillors Allcock, Chidley, Hadley, M Y Hussain, M  
Hussain and White.

**Apologies:** Councillor Phillips.

**In attendance:** Stephen Gabriel (Service Manager, Housing  
Management);  
Wendy Peniket (Neighbourhood Manager Housing  
Choice).  
Neville Rowe (Housing Strategy and Research  
Manager).

10/18 **Minutes**

**Resolved** that the minutes of the meeting held on 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 2018  
be approved as a correct record.

11/18 **Housing Allocations and Temporary Accommodation for the  
Homeless**

Officers from the Neighbourhoods directorate attended the meeting and presented to the Scrutiny Board information on housing allocations and temporary accommodation for the homeless in Sandwell.

The current Housing Allocations Policy came into effect in April 2013. Key amendments at that time included the introduction of a five-year residency test and several changes to ensure better use of the Council's housing stock including extending Band One priority to all households that were under-occupying a house and giving greater priority to overcrowded households and households with children in flats.

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Since 2013 numbers of applicants on the housing register had fallen by almost two-thirds to 3280, and numbers of existing tenants requesting a transfer had fallen by a third to 2990. Currently, the majority of households on the register had children.

Two-thirds of lettings of Council-owned properties in 2017/18 had been to households in Bands 1-4; the remaining third were to households in Band 5, which was for households in general need.

A number of challenges impacting upon housing allocations were discussed including:-

- Affordability within the Private Rented Sector was becoming a significant issue as there was a weekly affordability gap of between £16-18 for properties of all sizes.
- The five-year residency test could also cause some households to be excluded from the housing register because the test itself, or their inability to provide proof even when they had been resident within Sandwell for the required length of time.
- There was a mismatch between the customer base for Council housing and the levels of age restrictions on certain types of accommodation.

It was reported that nationally there had been an increase in the use of Temporary Accommodation between 2011 and 2017 and this was reflected within Sandwell. The main contributory factor was thought to be the rise in the loss of Assured Short-hold Tenancies. This was compounded by the impact of welfare reforms introduced by the Government including the Housing Benefit cap for large families and the freezing of the Local Housing Allowance rate during a time of increasing private rent levels.

The top five reasons for placing in Temporary Accommodation were:-

1. Loss of an assured short-hold tenancy;
2. Loss of National Asylum Support Service accommodation;
3. Family exclusion;
4. Relationship breakdown (with violence);
5. Relationship breakdown (without violence).

The Council used a range of units to provide Temporary Accommodation:-

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- 25 self-contained units in the Private Rented Sector;
- 48 units at Bed and Breakfasts/Hotels;
- 6 private sector Houses in Multiple Occupation;
- 11 of the Council's own-stock (with an additional 9 in the pipeline).

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

- The Council had a target of processing applications to join the housing register within 10 days of receiving all the required information, including proof to satisfy the five-year residency test.
- Members noted that some people found it difficult to provide adequate evidence to satisfy the five-year residency test, despite having lived in the borough for many years.
- The Council had put in place measures to help Council tenants affected by the underoccupancy penalty when it was first introduced. These measures included offering higher priority banding for moving to a small Council property. It was acknowledged that some people did not wish to move and were willing to accept the penalty.
- Two bedroom properties and larger family homes were areas of identified need within the Council-owned stock.
- More tenants paid their Council Tax by Direct Debit than their rent. Members felt that there was a need to encourage tenants to pay by Direct Debit, especially at the time of first taking up their tenancies.
- The Council considered converting lofts to help alleviate overcrowding in its housing stock on a case by case basis. The Board felt that this approach could be utilised to help meet the need for larger family homes in a cost-effective way.
- In order to help improve support offered to Care Leavers it was felt that earlier registration for housing could be carried out, which would facilitate a smoother transition to an independent, sustainable tenancy.
- Joint assessments by both housing professionals and social workers could create efficiencies and improve processes.

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- Local Lettings Plans for age-restrictions on properties needed to be reviewed in more detail to ensure they remained appropriate and necessary in order for Council-owned housing stock to be utilised in the most effective way.
- While the Council made use of some of its own properties to provide Temporary Accommodation, members felt this could be increased to help alleviate costs associated with securing externally provided properties and also help make positive, effective use of properties that may otherwise be difficult to let.
- The Housing Allocations Policy was to be reviewed and the Board asked for it to be brought to a future meeting for discussion.

The Scrutiny Board thanked officers for attending the meeting and providing detailed information and points for discussion.

**Resolved:-**

- (1) that the Director – Housing and Communities provide the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board with the following:-
  - (a) details of the housing priority banding arrangements;
  - (b) detailed information the Council's housing stock by type;
  - (c) details of numbers of households given priority for having children in flatted accommodation;
  - (d) overview of other key Council housing related statistics.
- (2) that Cabinet be requested to consider the following recommendations:-
  - (a) That, to help minimise instances of arrears and to assist people on Universal Credit to manage their finances effectively:
    - (i) consideration be given to introducing appropriate incentivisation for new tenants to set up Direct Debits to pay their rent at the time of taking up a Council tenancy;

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- (ii) Council tenants who pay their Council Tax by Direct Debit be encouraged to also pay their rent by the same method;
  - (b) That Sandwell Children's Trust be requested to:-
    - (i) work with the Council's Housing and Communities Directorate to register looked after young people for Council housing at the age of 16 in order to facilitate a smoother transition to becoming care leavers and to secure independent, sustainable tenancies;
    - (ii) consider co-locating a social worker within the Housing Solutions Team to allow for joint assessments with housing professionals to take place;
  - (c) That a review of all Local Lettings Plans for age-restrictions be carried out to ensure they remain appropriate and necessary in order for Council-owned housing stock to be utilised in the most effective way;
  - (d) That the use of some of the Council-owned housing stock as Temporary Accommodation be increased to make effective use of properties and to reduce costs related to securing externally-provided Temporary Accommodation.
- (3) that the Director – Prevention and Protection provides councillors with lists of accredited landlords in Sandwell to assist them in their local ward representative role;
- (4) that the Housing Allocations Policy review be brought to a future meeting of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board, including an overview of options relating to the existing residency test such as the application of the test to only certain stock types and the introduction of a sixth housing priority band;
- (5) that a report on Council housing-related anti-social behaviour be submitted to a future meeting of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board.

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(Meeting ended at 7.29pm)

Contact Officer: Alex Goddard  
Democratic Services Unit  
0121 569 3178