

Minutes of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

21th February, 2019 at 5.39pm
at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

Present: Councillor Ahmed (Chair);
Councillors Crompton and Hevican (Vice-Chairs);
Councillors Allcock, Chidley, M Hussain, Phillips and
White;
Mr J Cash (co-opted member).

Apology: Councillor M Y Hussain.

In attendance: Nigel Collumbell (Service Manager – Housing
Management);
Mark Satchwell (Service Manager – Registration);
Wendy Peniket (Neighbourhood Manager Housing
Choice).
Neville Rowe (Housing Strategy and Research
Manager).

1/19 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 4th October, 2018
be approved as a correct record.

2/19 **Provision for New Burials in Sandwell**

The Service Manager – Registration attended the meeting and presented a report on the provision of new burials in Sandwell. This matter had been referred by Council at its meeting on 16th October, 2018 for further consideration by the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board.

At the October meeting of Council, a proposal to depart from the Site Local Development Plan at Powke Lane, Rowley Regis was considered. This was for approval for a cemetery and associated works at a site near to the existing cemetery in Powke Lane. This would help meet the continued need and demand for burial spaces in Rowley Regis.

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The Board noted that there were eight operational cemeteries in Sandwell which were managed by Registration Services. These were:

- Fallings Heath Cemetery, Wednesbury
- Heath Lane Cemetery, West Bromwich
- Oldbury Cemetery, Smethwick
- Powke Lane Cemetery, Rowley Regis
- Tipton Cemetery, Tipton
- Thimblemill Cemetery, Smethwick
- Uplands Cemetery, Smethwick
- Wood Green Cemetery, Wednesbury.

The only sites currently able to accommodate new burials were Heath Lane, Tipton, Thimblemill, Fallings Heath and Powke Lane. Using historic burial data and numbers of graves available at each site, it was possible to anticipate when each site would no longer be able to accommodate new burials. These indicated particular pressures at the cemeteries serving both Rowley Regis and West Bromwich. Due to these pressures, the pre-purchase of graves at Powke Lane and Heath Lane Cemeteries was no longer being made available.

A number of options for the provision of burial spaces in Sandwell were reported. These included identifying new sites locally across and out of the borough, identifying a more central site meet the needs of several of the six towns, doing nothing (which would result in families needing to bury their deceased in other boroughs) or lobbying government to seek the power to re-use existing graves.

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

- Nationally 80% of bereaved families chose cremation, the remaining 20% chose burial. Whilst each year there was a decline in the number of families choosing burial, due to a variety of cultural or religious factors the demand for burial was unlikely to ever subside completely.
- A Water Cremation Working Group was now established to look at the possibilities of that method. However, as with traditional cremation, this would not remove the demand for burial spaces.

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- Currently only London boroughs were able to re-use graves, and even then, only one out of 32 London boroughs had chosen to do this.
- The Council did not have responsibility for any churchyard cemeteries that were operated by the Church of England or the Roman Catholic Church.
- The planning application for the new cemetery at Powke Lane had been approved by Planning Committee. The site had undergone relevant investigations and was suitable for such a development. All required consultation in relation to the application had been complied with.
- Only 30% of the open space at Powke Lane was proposed to be used for the cemetery. The remainder would be subject to improvement works and increased security such as CCTV would be installed.
- Additional sites were being investigated in West Bromwich. The possibility of using out of use sports pitches at the former Churchfield School was suggested by the Scrutiny Board.
- The Board noted that costs of burials and cremations in Sandwell were amongst the lowest nationally, which encouraged families from across the Black Country and Birmingham to use Sandwell's bereavement related services. The Board felt that it was important to understand the impact of any fee changes for out-of-borough burials and asked for a further report on this matter.

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

Resolved:-

- (1) that the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board agrees that the option of providing a cemetery at Powke Lane, Rowley Regis is the appropriate one to help meet the need for burial spaces in the part of the borough;
- (2) That the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Growth be recommended to resubmit to Council the proposal to depart from the Local Development Plan in relation to the proposed cemetery at Powke Lane, Rowley Regis;

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- (3) That, further to (2) above, the Director – Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer ensures that the local community in the vicinity of Powke Lane, Rowley Regis are informed of the proposed improvements to the remaining open space to help address any concerns;
- (4) That the Director – Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer continues to investigate suitable sites that either meet individual towns' burial needs, or provide a central facility for the borough;
- (5) That the Director – Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer provides a further report to the relevant Scrutiny Board in 2019/20 on out-of-borough burials in Sandwell cemeteries, including an impact analysis of any changes to the fees.

3/19

Review of the Housing Allocations Policy

Officers from the Housing and Communities Directorate attended the meeting and presented a report on the ongoing review of the Housing Allocations Policy. This review was focussed on four key areas:-

- The increasing affordability gap for residents seeking rented accommodation;
- The current stock/customer base mismatch;
- The Homelessness Reduction Act;
- Looked After Children and other vulnerable persons.

It was reported that the current Housing Allocations Policy came into force in April 2013. The key amendments made at that time included the introduction of a five-year residency test to gain access to the housing register, together with a series of amendments that enabled the best use of the existing housing stock. These included giving greater priority to households living in a flat with children under 16 years of age and to households living in accommodation that was either overcrowded or under-occupied. In addition, 3- and 4-bedroom houses were restricted to households with children under 16 years of age.

It was anticipated that the Cabinet would consider a revised Housing Allocations Policy in June 2019. Discussions and consultation around the Policy review were already underway, including this Scrutiny Board, the

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Tenant Review Panel, Tenant Management Organisations, the Housing Management Partner for the Sandwell PFI and Sandwell Community Information and Participation Service (known as SCIPS).

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

- Over half of the housing register was made up of households with children under the age of 16.
- In 2017/18 two-thirds of lettings were to new applicants; the remainder were to existing tenants who were transferring to another property.
- There was strong evidence of a weekly affordability gap between the Local Housing Allowance and lower quartile rental rates in the private rented sector.
- The 5-year residency test was felt to act as a growth stimulant for the private rented sector as it caused households to be excluded from the housing register either because of the 5-year requirement, or their ability to provide adequate proof. Furthermore, the test itself was a source of delays due to the administrative burden on the Council and the applicant.
- National guidance suggested a 2-year residency test and this was used by most Councils.
- The under-occupancy penalty (better known as the bedroom tax) imposed by the government was still in effect. The Council took a flexible approach to assist household who were seeking to downsize to prevent being subject to the penalty. One of the ways the Council helped such households was through assistance with moving costs.
- The priority granted to households in overcrowding situations was extended to all individuals aged 18 or over within that household.
- There was the potential for legal challenge to the high proportion of age-restricted blocks that were in Sandwell.

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- The Council was engaging in a significant programme of building housing. The Board felt that local people, for example those looking to downsize but stay in the local area, should get priority for new build properties.
- A recent study by an independent organisation had shown that 26% of homes in Sandwell were in the private rented sector. It was known that nationally around 40% of all Council properties bought under the Right to Buy scheme ended up in the private rented sector.
- If existing Council tenants (of five years or more) moved into new build properties they would be able to exercise their Right to Buy on that new property. In these instances, the Council was able to apply a cost floor calculation to mitigate the financial impact however.
- The need to encourage owners of long-term empty properties was raised and would be included in the work programme for Scrutiny.
- The Tenancy Agreement, as a legal document, had to contain certain wording. The Tenant Handbook could help explain key responsibilities of tenants in plain English.

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:-
 - (a) promote the review of the Housing Allocations Policy by various means, including suitable advertising in facilities used by the local community, for example libraries, community centres, doctors' surgeries and places of worship;
 - (b) consider the inclusion of a local lettings plan for new build giving priority to local people looking to downsize within their local area to enable them to remain in their neighbourhoods;

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- (c) provide a report to a future meeting of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board on the outcomes of the consultation on the Housing Allocations Policy review to provide an opportunity for the Board to identify any recommendations it wishes to make to Cabinet on the revised Policy;
 - (d) provide all councillors with information relating to the support available to Council tenants who are seeking to downsize;
- (2) that the Council's approach to Long Term Empty Properties be included on the work programme for the relevant Scrutiny Board in 2019/20.

(Meeting ended at 8.10pm)

<p>Contact Officer: Alex Goddard Democratic Services Unit 0121 569 3178</p>
