

Minutes of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

**6th February, 2020 at 5.45 pm
at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

Present: Councillor Moore (Chair);
Councillors Bostan, M Y Hussain, S Jones and
Padda;
Mr J Cash (Co-opted member).

Apologies: Councillors Edwards, M Gill, P M Hughes and
Sandars.

In attendance: Karl Robinson (Business Manager, Housing
Solutions);
Neville Rowe (Housing Strategy and Research
Manager).

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Adoption of Revised Housing Allocations Policy

Further to Minute No. 3/19 (21st February, 2020) the Scrutiny Board considered a number of proposed policy amendments to the Council's Housing Allocations Policy.

Officers had carried out an extensive review of the Policy, with the proposed amendments centred on:-

- enhancing the Council's ability to prevent homelessness;
- aligning policy with current legislation;
- enhancing the Council's ability to support vulnerable persons;
- making the policy more efficient and fit for purpose;
- continuing to make the best use of existing stock.

A web-based survey had been carried out, with text messages invites to complete the survey sent to approximately 5200 out of 6500 households on the housing register. Overall an 8% response rate from the register had been achieved, with responses to the proposed amendments being between 56% and 80% in favour.

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The survey also included an option for respondents to provide comments. These had been reviewed and key themes relating to frustration at lack of housing supply and perceived excessive length of time on the housing register had emerged. It was noted that these issues of stock supply were due to national policies such as Right to Buy, welfare reform and the overall national decline in social housing lettings rather than local policy.

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

- the Council operated a range of locally determined schemes (local lettings plans) that placed age restrictions on flatted accommodation. Whilst some were clearly aimed to meet the needs of older tenants, others were restricted to people aged 45+ or 40+. It was acknowledged that age restrictions could be used to help reassure tenants and prevent issues, but that a review of arrangements was required as 70% of housing applicants were under the age of 40 and 50% of the Council's one and two bedroomed flatted stock had an age restriction of 40+ or more;
- it was suggested that a solution to age restrictions could be lowering them by 5 years, which could retain the overall aims of such schemes, but make them accessible to more households on the housing register;
- where a neighbourhood was the location of new build council housing, members felt it was important to ensure that a proportion of units were let to local households so that the local community could feel the benefit;
- members suggested that the survey could have been carried out using a range of methods to encourage responses from people who had no access to mobile telephones/computers or faced other barriers (for example language or cultural);
- there was a lack of clarity around financial incentives available for households downsizing to smaller council properties, especially from 3-bed to 2-bed homes;

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- households could seek support through the Locals if they had difficulty in understanding or accessing the bidding process;
- the proposal to introduce periodic assessments of individual bidding activity would allow the Council to amend levels of priority and also provide additional support where it was determined a household was experiencing difficulties in accessing the bidding process;
- whilst previous committees had suggested that households taking up tenancies with the Council must register to vote, legal advice had indicated that the Council could only encourage households to register. It was suggested that levels of encouragement were not consistent by officers across the borough;
- the proposal to reduce the five year residency test to two years would bring it in line with the requirements placed on the Council by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 in relation to providing support to households;
- the Choice Based Lettings arrangements were last reviewed four years ago;
- members reported instances where households had bid for a property and were, to the best of their knowledge, top of the bidding list at the close of the bidding window, but had ended up not being granted the tenancy for the property. Further details on what might cause this were requested by the Scrutiny Board.

The Scrutiny Board referred its comments on the revised Housing Allocations Policy to the Cabinet Member for Homes.

The Chair thanked officers for their work in reviewing the Policy.

Resolved:-

- (1) that the Cabinet Member for Homes be requested to consider the comments of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board in relation to the revised Housing Allocations Policy;

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- (2) that the Cabinet Member for Homes be requested to consider including in the Housing Allocations Policy specific reference to the use of Local Lettings Plans for new build housing and areas experiencing anti-social behaviour;
- (3) that the Cabinet Member for Homes and Director – Homes and Communities be requested to review the support offered to households on the housing register who may have difficulty accessing information or bidding processes due to technological or language barriers;
- (4) that the Director – Homes and Communities be requested to provide the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board with briefing notes on the following topics:-
 - (a) incentive offers for households downsizing to a small Council-owned property;
 - (b) reasons why a household might not be granted a property when to the best of their knowledge they were top of the bidding list;
 - (c) the policy in relation to Council housing exchanges.

(Meeting ended at 7.05 pm)

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