

# Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

Thursday 1 October 2020 at 5.45pm

**Present:** Councillor Moore (Chair)  
Councillors Akhter, Bawa, Bostan, Edwards, M Gill and S Jones.

**Officers:** Alison Knight (Executive Director – Neighbourhoods);  
Alan Caddick (Director – Housing and Communities);  
Nigel Columbell (Service Manager – Housing Management Services);  
Karl Robinson (Business Manager – Housing Solutions).

## 14/20 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors P M Hughes, M Y Hussain and Sandars and Mr J Cash.

## 15/20 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interests declared at the meeting.

## 16/20 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 9 July 2020 were agreed as a correct record.



## Reset and Recovery – Phase 1 Findings

The Executive Director – Neighbourhoods presented to the Board the findings of the Communities working group which formed part of the Council's Reset and Recovery Framework.

The working group had considered a range of evidence and the experience in Sandwell was similar to the national situation. A number of key areas had been considered including:-

- mental health;
- food insecurity, digital exclusion and financial hardship;
- social stress;
- Black Asian and Minority Ethnic Groups (BAME);
- young people;
- volunteering and the Voluntary/Community Sector.

A series of town member workshops had been held, with the views of councillors sought. These had reflected the findings from other evidence sources.

When considering areas with a prevalence of factors that increased risk such as population age, overcrowding, multiple deprivation and people from BAME backgrounds, it was possible to identify areas of Sandwell with potentially increased risk to COVID-19 including West Bromwich, Smethwick, central Wednesbury and parts of Tipton.

The working group had concluded that COVID-19 had exacerbated existing weaknesses in Sandwell's community relating to underlying poverty and deprivation. It was recognised that the Council needed to do something different to address these underlying vulnerabilities and to do this effectively it was important to ensure:-

- engagement was done in the right way and was culturally sensitive;
- changes in the Council's organisation to do things more corporately;
- resources were more focused in areas of most need;
- clear measures of success.

Following comments and questions from members of the Board, the following responses were made, and issues highlighted:-

- A range of methods had been used throughout the COVID-19 situation to communicate important information and guidance to the public. This had included social media, websites, partners in the third sector and use of channels such as community radio stations. It was important to continue to improve the way in which the Council communicated with the borough's communities.
- A key area of work was to revisit the Corporate Plan whilst reflecting the impact of, and the need to recover from, the COVID-19 pandemic. It was suggested that this could be brought to a future scrutiny meeting in due course.
- It was important to recognise that it was not just a Council response to COVID-19, but a whole system response involving partners and the voluntary sector. Members agreed, but noted that many organisations looked to local authorities to provide the leadership and co-ordination role.
- Volunteering had seen an increase during the pandemic and the vital role of volunteers was acknowledged, but members were of the view that this shouldn't be a reason for the Council or the Government to reduce other support.
- The Food Hub, that had been required as part of the initial lockdown response to COVID-19, had functioned well. Whilst this area of activity was ending, the Council was able to bring the service back quickly in the event that circumstances require it to return.
- A number of meetings had been held with community leaders and faith leaders across Sandwell but it was acknowledged that this may not have covered all places of worship.
- Guidance had been made available in a number of community languages and people who could speak community languages had supported the Council's Track and Trace activity to help better communicate with residents.

- The Council had sought to engage with people who had entered rent arrears as a result of COVID-19 in different ways and had not looked at enforcement. The Board was advised that whilst rates of arrears had increased, it was not significantly so.

18/20

## **COVID-19 Reset and Recovery – Neighbourhoods**

Further to Minute No. 13/20, the Board received a presentation from the Director – Housing and Communities updating members on the reset and recovery work by the Neighbourhoods directorate in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Within the Neighbourhoods directorate a range of services had already restarted or increased their activities. These included:-

- Grounds Maintenance – all services back to normal working;
- Housing Repairs – service has returned to essential repairs due to local restrictions being in place;
- CCTV and Concierge Services – all services back to normal working;
- Sandwell Valley Phases 1 and 2 – recommencement of services and increase in activities;
- Parks – play areas reopened with signage to explain to users what is expected of them;
- Estate Services and Caretaking – all services back to normal;
- Urban Forestry – all services back to normal;
- Lightwoods House – services reopened, including the restaurant;
- Leisure Centres – both Sandwell Leisure Trust and Places Leisure had restarted services in a restricted way;
- Libraries and Museums – West Bromwich Central Library had reopened on a limited basis. Main libraries in other towns would follow over the coming weeks and months. Consideration was being given to how smaller libraries would operate.

The Board was informed that remaining events this year had been cancelled. This included the annual Bonfire at Dartmouth Park, Christmas at the Valley and Christmas Lights switch-on events.

Officers were looking at how events could be held virtually as an alternative.

Following comments and questions from members of the Board, the following responses were made, and issues highlighted:-

- Whilst the Council was not seeking enforcement on housing arrears during COVID-19, it still retained enforcement for cases where it was required.
- There was expected to be an increase in demand for services as a result of private landlords evicting tenants following the end of the previous ban on evictions.
- Whilst there would not be any Christmas light switch-on events this year, the lights would still be installed and operate during the festive period as they were well liked by local traders and communities.
- Members requested clarity on arrangements for operating their advice surgeries for their constituents.
- The Council had used the closure of offices to renovate the One Stop Shop.
- Opening of other offices, such as Locals, had to be done whilst mitigating risk to both the public and officers. It was highlighted that people could still pay bills in person at Post Offices and other pay points locally.
- Before the pandemic services were already in the process of being redesigned to encourage digital contact, whilst being mindful of some people's need for face to face services.

**Resolved** that the Director – Homes and Communities circulate the restart programme for libraries to councillors.

## Homelessness Update

Further to Minute No. 13/20 the Board received an update on the Council's activities around homelessness.

An outline of the challenges pre-COVID-19 was presented, which included national drivers such as welfare reform and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 as well as local challenges including high levels of temporary accommodation use and a high homelessness demand in comparison to the size of the Council.

In order to meet the additional challenges posed by the pandemic, the homelessness-related response to COVID-19 was focussed on six key areas of activity:-

- Planning;
- Rough Sleepers;
- Hospital discharge;
- Asylum and immigration;
- Domestic Abuse;
- Temporary accommodation.

Whilst COVID-19 had presented many challenges, the service had been able to achieve a number of positive outcomes including reduction in the case backlog increases in engagements from rough sleepers and housing more rough sleepers during the period. Use of temporary accommodation was down and use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation was at its lowest level in two years.

The Board was informed that relationship building with private landlords was ongoing and included pre-emptive work with all parties in cases of arrears due to COVID-19. The service was also working with private landlords to develop an incentive model – 'Secure and Sustain'.

It was noted that there would be a continued drive to prevention through early intervention to stop people becoming homeless in the first place.

Members noted the progress made to date on addressing homelessness and rough sleeping. The Board placed on record its thanks to the team for their hard work.

20/20

### **Work Programme**

The Board noted its schedule of meetings until the annual meeting in 2021. Topics for the next meeting had been programmed and included the findings of the consultant's report into Leisure in Sandwell and an update on the Commonwealth Games Aquatic Centre. It was suggested that the relevant Cabinet Member could be invited to the meeting also, to give a general update on matters in their portfolio.

The Board also requested that other Cabinet Members with portfolios relevant to the terms of reference of the Board be invited to give similar updates at other meetings.

The Chair also informed members that it was intended to arrange an additional meeting in late February or early March 2021.

Meeting ended at 7.36pm