

# Minutes of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Board

28<sup>th</sup> January 2021 at 5:45pm  
Online Virtual Meeting

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

**Officers:** Alan Caddick (Director of Housing and Communities)  
Nicky Denston (Service Manager)  
Steve Greenhouse (Service Manager)

## 01/21 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor P M Hughes and Mr J Cash (Co-opted Member)

## 02/21 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interests made at the meeting.

## 03/21 **Additional Item of Business**

There were no additional items of business to be considered at the meeting.

## 04/21 **Enquiries to the Council (relating to Board's Terms of Reference)**



The Scrutiny Board received a presentation on enquires received by the Council from members of the public, councillors and members of parliament, concerning the Board's terms of reference. Background on all enquiries was provided including the number of calls received per year (500,000), a breakdown on the topics of each call and the varied IT systems used to log and chase enquiries. The report outlined that the Council aimed to deal with enquiries at the first point of contact, only complex enquiries were passed on to the necessary service area.

A breakdown of the Council's response rates was presented to the Board. It was explained that both councillor and MP enquiries increased in 2020 by 13.7% and 16.8%, respectively. With the highest increase seen in enquiries on housing allocations, repairs and rent. Customer access points being closed and changes to services as a result of COVID-19 were cited as potential reasons for the increase.

The Board was informed that a Service Redesign Project Group had been set up to consider tenancy management enquiries, with a view to digitise the service. The group consisted of both Neighbourhoods and Contact Centre Officers. It was also explained that a working group on 'avoidable contacts' had been set up to tackle repeat enquiries or enquiries that could be dealt with online. The Board also heard that a review of enquiry handling would be taking place over the next 6-12 months as part of the Housing Ombudsman Code of Practice.

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

- Provision for residents without online access or those who required assistance would remain in place.
- Working from home arrangements had been risk assessed to ensure that data remained GDPR compliant. It was confirmed that contact centres were expected to retain some element of remote working post-COVID.



- Performance of enquiries after the first point of contact were tracked. The information on complex enquiries and the customer journey could be provided to the Board at a future meeting.
- Information presented to the Board would be used to inform the aforementioned reviews and performance reviews. Contact centre information was also shared with Council service areas to ensure staff could be trained on the handling of topical issues.
- The MySandwell portal system was currently in testing stages for logging housing repair enquiries. There had been delays due to COVID-19. By spring 2021 additional housing services were expected to be available to residents on the MySandwell portal.
- End to end responses were not reflected in the presentation. All council enquiries were logged, further information on the tracking and closure of all enquiries could be shared at a future meeting.
- Neighbourhood offices would not operate in the same way as pre-COVID19, as more services moved online. The role of offices was in review and would consider the views of elected members and residents.

**Agreed** that the Director – Housing and Communities provide a report to a future meeting of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board on the digitisation of enquiries and the customer journey.

05/21

## Housing Repairs Update

The Scrutiny Board received a presentation on the impact of COVID-19 on the Council's housing repairs service. It was confirmed that thorough health and safety risk assessments were undertaken and regularly reviewed, taking into consideration guidance from the trade unions. 132,000 repairs were delivered since the first government lockdown in March 2020 (Usual average repair numbers in that timeframe were 170,000). The presentation explained that internal essential jobs and void repairs continued



through the first lockdown and external works had since been delivered. It was outlined that there were 1000 orders on hold, of which 850 were deemed non-urgent. The Board was informed that void repair let times had increased by 5 days during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It was also explained that housing repair enquiries were dealt with within 6 days on average, with customer satisfaction rates at 94.4%.

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

- Given the increased transmission rate of the new COVID variant, all staff were able to access LFTs. The service was working with PHE and NHS England and had categorised staff according to age and/or any pre-existing conditions. Employees who fell into these categories would be given priority vaccinations.
- All health and safety measures had been considered to fulfil emergency repairs – emergency works had continued to support most vulnerable tenants as well as tenants who had tested positive for COVID-19
- Use of temporary accommodation was at its lowest for several years – costs reduced by £800,000 in the past 10 months by making use of the Council's empty properties to provide interim housing for rough sleepers. Officers referred to the newly refurbished Applewood Grove property which had facilities to accommodate families and a 25-room capacity.
- The Housing Repair service would make contact with tenants after the government lockdown to discuss whether non-essential works remained outstanding or had been completed by tenants.

**Agreed** that a report on Applewood Grove be added to the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board's



future work programme and, if restrictions allowed, a visit to the facility also be conducted.

Meeting ended at 7:09pm

Click [here](#) to watch a recording of the meeting

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