

Minutes of the Select Committee for Policy Review

**4th September, 2018 at 5.30 pm
at the Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

Present: Councillor Worsey (Chair);
Councillors Ali, Cherrington, Edwards and Rollins.

Apology: Councillors Dr Jaron and Sandars.

5/18 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 20th February, 2018 be confirmed as a correct record.

6/18 **Sandwell's Housing Strategy Statement**

The Select Committee received a presentation on Sandwell's Housing Strategy Statement which had been approved in 2012. It was noted that there was no longer a statutory requirement for the Council to have a Housing Strategy.

Since 2012 the Government had introduced a variety of requirements in statute for policies and strategies relating to housing matters including:

- Prevention of Homelessness Strategy;
- Tenancy Strategy;
- Policy to discharge a Homeless Duty into a Private Rented Sector Tenancy;
- Housing Allocations Policy;
- Council Tenancy Conditions;
- Increased Planning Regulation.

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The Housing Strategy Statement had been developed to avoid a lengthy document that was of limited use – the Statement was intended to outline the Council’s overall strategic aims in relation to housing matters, which were broken down into three key objective areas:-

- Making the best use of existing housing stock;
- Increasing the supply of new homes;
- Protecting and promoting health, safety and wellbeing.

To meet these key objectives the Council carried out a range of services and work and the following achievements since 2012 were reported:-

- 916 privately owned empty properties helped to be brought back into use;
- Over 2,600 households re-housed in the social housing sector into accommodation that better met their needs;
- Enabled the completion of over 3,500 new homes – of which just under 1,300 were affordable rented homes (as at March 2017);
- Completion of 174 extra care units, with approximately 300 further extra care and supported housing units planned;
- Over 2,200 ‘Category One Hazards’ removed from privately rented homes;
- 9,000 households helped and supported to prevent homelessness either through remaining in their own home or obtaining alternative accommodation.

From the comments and questions by members of the Select Committee, the following responses were made and issues highlighted:-

- The steps taken by the authority to support households that were under-occupying their properties to take up other accommodation had helped to free up properties that could meet the needs of households that were in an overcrowded property.
- There were some people who did not wish to downsize and instead chose to accept the under-occupancy penalty (more commonly known as the ‘bedroom tax’). Commonly this was due to the property having been the family home for a considerable length of time and the strength of feeling wanting to remain close to the memories made there.

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- Some empty private properties were a result of someone being left a property by a family member following their death and not being sure what to do with it. With advice from the Council these could be encouraged to either sell or rent the property, helping bring housing supply into use in the borough that would otherwise lie empty.
- The Council could and did apply a Council Tax charge on empty properties to encourage owners to bring a property back into use.
- Housing Zone status had been granted to two areas of Sandwell – Friar Park and North Smethwick. If successful these two Zones had the potential for providing significant numbers of new homes.
- The Council had adopted a proactive approach to the prevention of homelessness, including through working with St Basil's family mediation service which could help prevent young people becoming homeless.
- The key funding stream available for Private Rented Sector properties was related to adaptations.
- It was known that the Private Rented Sector made up a significant proportion of privately owned properties in Sandwell. Many private landlords in Sandwell were responsible and provided a good quality service; these people were supported by the Council through initiatives like the Landlords Forum.
- Any possible selective licensing of private landlords in Sandwell would require significant resourcing to allow for the necessary inspections to be carried out.
- The Allocations Policy had been last reviewed in 2013 and the tenancy conditions for Council-owned properties were last reviewed in 2009. Both were currently being reviewed.
- Off-site construction methods were being considered within Sandwell. It was reported that the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board had looked at this topic, including visiting a factory in the region.

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- Land reclamation was an important issue within Sandwell due to the industrial heritage of the area. There were opportunities arising from the West Midlands Combined Authority in relation to this.
- It was important to link up the Council's strategic approach to housing matters with that of the West Midlands Combined Authority.
- The Housing Strategy Statement had been produced before Vision 2030 had been developed. A refreshed Housing Strategy Statement should clearly demonstrate which of the ambitions of Vision 2030 it supported.

Resolved:-

- (1) that the Director – Housing and Communities review Sandwell's Housing Strategy Statement to include the following elements:-
 - (a) the relationship with the West Midlands Combined Authority and its Housing Strategy;
 - (b) the ambitions of Vision 2030 that are supported by the Housing Strategy Statement.
- (2) that when it is reviewed, Sandwell's Housing Strategy Statement be reported to the Select Committee for Policy Review prior to consideration by the Cabinet.

(Meeting ended at 6.28 pm)

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