

## **Minutes of the Select Committee for Policy Review**

**16<sup>th</sup> April, 2019 at 6.30 pm  
at the Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

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

**Apologies:** Councillors Cherrington and Sandars.

### 3/19 **Minutes**

**Resolved** that the minutes of the meeting held on 26<sup>th</sup> February, 2019 be confirmed as a correct record.

### 4/19 **The Council's Approach to Addressing Homelessness**

The Select Committee received a presentation from the Council's Housing Strategy and Research Manager on homelessness in Sandwell and what the Council's strategy and policies were in relation to addressing it.

Sandwell's Homelessness Prevention Strategy had been refreshed and took effect from April 2018. It contained five strategic priorities:-

- universal prevention;
- targeted prevention;
- crisis prevention and relief;
- recovery; and
- sustainable housing options.

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In August 2018, the Government published its Rough Sleeper Strategy that advocated the possibility of Government working with local authorities to update their homelessness strategies into Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategies which would be monitored by central government. Government may also opt to introduce local authority level Homeless Boards.

The Select Committee was advised that the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 took effect from April 2018 and introduced three major new duties:-

- Prevention Duty;
- Relief Duty;
- Duty to Refer.

The Act had introduced Personal Housing Plans. These Plans were prepared on a case by case basis and set out the expectations on individuals as well as what the Council would do to support them either to prevent them becoming homeless or to secure a new home. These Plans were quite time-intensive to complete, which placed additional demands on officers.

The Council was looking to develop a 'whole borough approach' to homelessness, working with the third sector, registered providers and the Children's Trust.

The Select Committee was informed that temporary accommodation had to be provided in certain circumstances. The main causes of people needing to be provided with temporary accommodation included:-

- increases in private rent rates but no increase in Local Housing Allowance rates, which led to an increase in lack of affordability in that sector;
- reducing turnover of council housing properties;
- increase in the number of larger families presenting as homeless and a corresponding lack of suitably sized accommodation;
- clients presenting at crisis stage leaving little time for officers to work to prevent the homelessness occurring.

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It was reported that each year, the Council was required to carry out a count of rough sleepers. This last happened in November 2018 and had indicated an increase of rough sleepers in Sandwell since 2017. To help address this, a number of initiatives and measures were in place:-

- Severe Weather Emergency Provision;
- a strong partnership with Langar Seva, a local charitable organisation, which targeted rough sleeper hotspots in Smethwick and West Bromwich;
- an improved outreach service due to commence in the summer as part of the Housing First pilot scheme.

Housing First was an established model for tackling homelessness amongst the most vulnerable and entrenched individuals. The model offered permanent mainstream affordable housing as quickly as possible, coupled with intensive support within the community to ensure that the tenancy was sustained. The West Midlands Combined Authority area had received funding from central government to implement the pilot; in Sandwell, this was due to commence in July 2019.

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

- Langar Seva operated a bus that provided food to rough sleepers and others in need. The Council had begun to work in partnership with Langar Seva, with officers attending the sessions to help people with a range of issues. In its first six weeks, this partnership working had resulted in around a dozen people coming off the streets, with two having since accessed employment. The Select Committee welcomed the good work of Langar Seva and felt that the positive partnership working should be communicated to the public more widely to raise awareness;
- The West Midlands Combined Authority had received £9.6million from Government to deliver the Housing First pilot scheme across the region. Sandwell would be receiving £935k for its pilot scheme;

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- the Council could make referrals for homeless individuals and households to other boroughs where there was a local connect there, for example, a close family relative;
- the Select Committee sought clarification on the process that was followed for supporting people fleeing domestic abuse or other safety-related issues;
- some funding opportunities from the Government only provided for a short period between notification to the Council and the deadline for bids. It was reported that the Council's procurement processes were not designed to facilitate such tight timescales, which could result in the authority being unable to submit bids for funding that could help realise the Council's ambitions. Members asked that this be further investigated to ensure that the Council could maximise its opportunities for bidding for funding.

Members thanked the Housing Strategy and Research Manager for attending the meeting.

**Resolved:-**

- (1) that the Director – Housing and Communities provide the Select Committee for Policy Review with further information relating to:-
  - (a) homelessness statistics for each of the six towns of Sandwell;
  - (b) the use of temporary accommodation (including numbers and locations);
  - (c) the Council's processes and procedures for supporting people who were fleeing domestic abuse or other safety issues;

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- (2) that the Executive Director – Resources, when reviewing the Council’s procurement processes, consider ways in which they can allow for flexibility in responding to opportunities to bid for funding.

(Meeting ended at 7.26 pm)

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