

Minutes of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

**Thursday, 25 November 2021 at 5.45 pm
at Council Chamber - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

Present: Councillor Mabena (Chair)
Councillors Ashman, Fisher, G Gill, Randhawa and V Smith

Also present: (Nicholas Austin (Director of Borough Economy); Nigel Collumbell (Service Manager for Housing Management); Maryrose Lappin (Domestic Abuse Team Manager); Manny Sehmbi (Business Manager for Community Partnerships); Jason Flannagan (CCTV Control Room Manager); Alexander Goddard (Democratic Services Officer); Gabrielle Evans (Democratic Services Officer).

23/21 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies were received from Councillors Kausar and K Singh.

24/21 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest made.

25/21 **Minutes and Notes of Previous Meetings**

Resolved:-

- (1) that the minutes of the meeting held on 01 April 2021 were received.
- (2) that the notes of the meeting held on 02 September 2021 were noted.



26/21 **Additional Items of Business**

There were no additional items of business to consider.

27/21 **Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy**

The Domestic Abuse Team Manager presented the item to the Board, explaining that the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 had been passed and meant that Local Authorities now had a new statutory duty to provide specialist support for victims of domestic abuse in safe accommodation. The Council was required to:

- assess the need for victims of domestic abuse and their children in safe accommodation services in their areas;
- produce a strategy to detail how it would respond to the duty;
- commission support to victims and children in safe accommodation
- appoint a domestic abuse local partnership board for the purposes of providing advice to the authority about the exercise of the authority's functions;
- report back annually to central government that it had met these obligations.

Councillor Randhawa arrived at 5:52pm during consideration of this item.

The Domestic Abuse Strategic Partnership (DASP) board, Sandwell's statutory board, had now established a Task and Finish Group and the draft Safe Accommodation Needs Assessment had been completed.

The Safe Accommodation Strategy had been widely consulted on across the Council and DASP partners and was published on 25 October 2021 to comply with the statutory requirement. The final Safe Accommodation Strategy was required for publication by 5 January 2022. An implementation plan was being developed and would be regularly monitored by DASP. The Council had also been allocated New Burdens Funding to support the delivery of the new safe accommodation duty and proposals being developed.

The Domestic Abuse Team Manager provided a definition of safe accommodation as defined in the statutory guidance as:

- domestic abuse refuge accommodation;

- specialist safe accommodation (i.e. dedicated specialist support to victims with relevant protected characteristics and/or complex needs);
- dispersed accommodation (safe self-contained and semi-independent accommodation);
- sanctuary schemes providing target hardening of properties along with specialist support and move-on and / or second stage accommodation.

A definition of specialist support for victims of domestic abuse as defined in the statutory guidance was also provided. This included:

- Advocacy support
- Domestic abuse prevention advice
- Specialist support for victims designed specifically for victims with relevant protected characteristics or with additional and / or complex needs
- Children's support
- Housing-related support
- Advice service
- Counselling and therapy

It was explained that the above list was not exhaustive and other relevant support services could be put in place based on victims' needs.

The needs assessment had been undertaken by Linxs Consultancy Limited and included data collection and analysis, analysis of current services and wide-ranging consultation programme which included survivor testimonies and stakeholder feedback. The need assessment found that the safe accommodation system in Sandwell was highly effective. A range of accommodation types and levels of support provided by Black Country Women's Aid (BCWA) meant that survivors were routinely accepted regardless of the level of risk or complexity of presenting needs. There was also good outcome tracking for those who were declined a space in accommodation.

The needs assessment also identified a number of gaps, as outlined in Appendix 1 of the report, which the strategy aimed to address. Following analysis of these gaps, the strategy would be based around the below themes:-

1. Improving the survivors' recovery journey;
2. Enhancing the ability for survivors to stay in their own home;
3. Developing a more responsive and cohesive system

The Domestic Abuse Team Manager outlined the specific commitments to address the above 3 themes, this included: children's support; psychologically informed interventions for adults and children in safe accommodation; dedicated sanctuary provision for adults and children; and the need for resettlement and floating support for victims and children leaving refuge. It was proposed to address the additional needs identified by the needs assessment using the New Burdens funding and work was underway on proposals for this.

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

- The council had a list of registered housing and service providers who would be commissioned to provide the support. The Council already had contracts with these providers.
- Further training would be required by the commissioned providers to address victims' additional needs
- There were currently 38 Safe Accommodation properties which were provided by Black Country Women's Aid (BCWA). The Council had commissioned those spaces and BCWA had a further 3 additional spaces in the borough.
- Part of the Council's commitment to the strategy was to promote the support available to male victims of domestic abuse. The service "Ask Marc" had also recently been launched across the Black Country.
- Single sex accommodation was the norm and the Council had both 24 hour accommodation and dispersed accommodation provision. Males were more likely to be housed in the dispersed accommodation.
- There had been over 10,000 cases of domestic abuse in Sandwell in the last year. It was highlighted that West Midlands Police had recently undertaken a review of the number of domestic abuse cases. COVID had shone a light on domestic abuse but it was anticipated that it was unlikely that the figures would go down and reported cases were likely to increase.
- Financial support and more general welfare advice were provided by BCWA.
- Since COVID, there had been an increase in demand for mental health support and support for victims of mental and financial abuse.

- The 38 refuge spaces were full; there was constant demand and the spaces were almost always full. Sandwell residents were given priority for these spaces.
- People from all backgrounds were represented in refuges (ethnicity, disability, gender etc.) there were no barriers to access identified. The number of LGBTQ+ and Male victims was small. The Police and Crime Commissioner had recently launched a service for these victims.
- Victims who decided to go back home could be referred back to community-based services or could refer themselves. BCWA offered sustainable support but it was an informed choice for victims when leaving a refuge. The Director for Borough Economy explained that it could take a number of times for victims to get out of the cycle of abuse. From victims' testimonies, it took time to build up contacts and support to get separation. Contact could not be forced onto people but BCWA kept their services readily available. It was highlighted that wraparound support was key to breaking the cycle of abuse.
- Anonymised data on the demographics of victims could be circulated to members of the board.
- For those victims who had no recourse to public funds, support was not always possible but BCWA did try to maximise their support where they were able to do so.
- It was highlighted that if a crime had been committed then it should be the perpetrator who was punished rather than the victim. It was important to use the full force of the law and other agencies to ensure that victims could stay in their home.
- Where victims were located was dependent on the makeup of the household; these conversations were initiated early on in the process. For those victims in temporary accommodation outside the borough, moving locations was not as simple. It was an improving picture for those victims, but an exact number could not be given.
- Initially during COVID, victims couldn't come forward to seek support, but reporting increased again after the first few weeks. Of those reports, psychological and financial abuse had become more prevalent.
- The Service Manager for Housing Management highlighted that it was reassuring that there wasn't a shortage of accommodation or bed space during COVID, however opportunities needed to be maximised across the private rented sector.

- It was explained that hidden abuse such as child-parent abuse and male abuse was an increasing concern and reports had been growing.

28/21

Tenant Engagement and Participation

The Business Manager for Community Partnerships provided an overview of the Social Housing White Paper, and explained that it had been introduced by the Government to improve regulation around consumer standards. This White Paper was part of the government's ongoing response to the Grenfell Tower tragedy and the Hackett review. The white paper set out seven key promises to tenants in Social Housing:-

- To be safe in your home
- To know how your landlord is performing and hold it to account
- To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly
- To be treated with respect
- To have your voice heard by your landlord
- To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in
- To be supported to take a first step to ownership

The Business Manager for Community Partnerships outlined the current structures and commissioned services to support tenants' voice, including the Tenants Complaints Panel, Sandwell Community Information & Participation Services (SCIPS) and the Tenant Review Panel (TRP). The TRP was made up of 9 tenants and 1 leaseholder but currently had 4 vacancies; this had been the case for some considerable time.

A summary of the activity that had taken place to date was provided, following the initial review which was brought to this Scrutiny Board on 30 January 2020. The following was outlined:

- Initial discussions took place with the Cabinet Member for Homes, the Scrutiny Board and the TRP
- Established a working group to explore and codesign different models and structures
- Consultation with existing engagement & participation structures
- The Tpas, a national organisation specialising in tenant engagement, had been engaged as a Critical Friend

- Feedback to Working Group on Consultation and presentation from Tpas on good practice models
- Following above discussions draft Terms of Reference and Engagement Model were presented to the Working Group
- Update provided to Cabinet Member for Homes and TRP
- A Cabinet workshop took place on 10 March 2021
- Cabinet considered and approved the proposals on 24 May 2021

Following approval by Cabinet, the TRP was disbanded and the new Tenant & Leaseholder Scrutiny Group had been established. A new Tenant Involvement model had been created and the Councillor Representative of the Group had been confirmed as the Chair of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board. The Tenant Engagement and Participation Working Group had set up an Implementation Group. This group has undertaken the recruitment and selection process to recruit to the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group.

The recruitment process had been codesigned with tenants and leaseholders. The recruitment and selection panel was made up of the Housing Service Manager, Nigel Collumbell, the Chair of SCIPs and a representative from Tpas. A key aim of the process has been to recruit a broad range of representation, a varied approach to the communications on the application process was undertaken to attract the right applicants.

The deadline for applications was 29 October 2021 with interviews scheduled for 1 December 2021. 53 applications had been received in total from across all six towns in the borough.

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

- The Tenant & Leaseholder Scrutiny Group was to be an outside body of the Council. At present, it was unclear how the Group and this Scrutiny board would work together, and it was down to the Chairs to establish how both bodies could work together. The Housing team had worked with Democratic Services to ensure that duplication of work would be avoided. It was envisioned that both bodies could work together and provide members with the opportunity to hear tenants' views directly.

- The Tenant & Leaseholder Scrutiny Group would be public and whatever was to be discussed in meeting would be made available to other residents. The publishing and availability of documents and minutes of each meeting had not yet been covered in the terms of reference for the Group but it was hoped that new technologies could be used to get the communications strategy right from the offset. An annual report would also be reintroduced to provide an overview of the work of the Group in the previous year.
- Officers had tried to ensure that the panel was as diverse as possible by working with faith partners and other voluntary organisations during the advertising stages of recruitment.
- Regarding the recent media coverage on the Council's new Tenancy Agreement, it was confirmed that the item would be brought to the next meeting of this Scrutiny Board. The Service Manager for Housing Management stated that what had been represented did not reflect the Council's intention and hoped that what had been outlined in the meeting had demonstrated that complaints and comments were welcomed by the Council.

Resolved: that the Chair of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board represent the Board on the Tenant & Leaseholder Scrutiny Group.

29/21

Upgrade and Expansion of the CCTV & Concierge Service

The CCTV Control Room Manager presented the report to the Scrutiny Board, outlining that the Cabinet had approved the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) – Housing Investment Programme report on 18 October 2017, which set out a refreshed 10-year HRA investment plan to enable the delivery of new build projects, continued investment into existing stock and communal spaces. The report contained an allocation of £1.2 million to help prevent crime and anti-social behaviour by extending our coverage of CCTV.

A resident consultation on the planned proposals relating to the Upgrade and Expansion of the Council's CCTV & Concierge Service was scheduled to be completed by the end of November 2021 and the phased planning to implement these proposals was now underway.

The current service provided a 24-hour 365-days a year CCTV and

Concierge service to approximately 50% of the Council's high-rise blocks. Residents without access to these services had regularly requested provision which would bring parity of service delivery across all high-rise blocks and would enable all tenants to benefit from the following:-

- Intercoms and door entry systems linked directly to our Control Room.
- Remote controlled access to all high-rise blocks, monitoring of visitors and restricting access to unwanted callers.
- A 24-hour service that linked tenants properties to the Council's control room operators via intercom handsets in their flat which could be used to report repair's, anti-social behaviour and crime, building safety concerns or any other general enquiries relating to their block of flats.
- CCTV monitoring for flatted estates including internal cameras covering ground floor communal spaces, lifts, entrances and surrounding areas.

It was explained that these services made a significant contribution to ensuring community safety and perceptions of safety for residents, not least some of the most vulnerable residents. Over the past year the team had dealt with 101,647 intercom calls via the concierge service, providing additional support and advice to tenants and issuing immediate warnings to those identified as acting in an anti-social manner both within communal areas and outside blocks. CCTV footage had also enabled other sanctions to be taken against identified individuals where this had been necessary.

Currently tenants paid a service charge of £8.57 a week, which consisted of:

- £3.69 for CCTV
- £3.18 for Concierge service
- £1.70 for secure door entry provision

Should all high-rise blocks receive the service the increase in number of tenant's paying a service charge would reduce individual payments to approximately £6.87 per week or £357 per year. These charges were covered by Housing Benefit and the Housing Costs element of Universal Credit for those in receipt of it.

The procurement process was set to take place in the new year and the CCTV Control Room Manager hoped that the scheme would be welcomed by residents.

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

- For those eligible to receive Universal Credit the service charge would come out of their housing costs element.
- Officers had been petitioned several times by residents to receive this service. Approximately 90% of responses to the resident consultation were positive, further detail was outlined in the report. The Service Manager for Housing Management stated that he had never received any negative feedback on the CCTV and Concierge service since he had joined the Council.
- It was felt by members that the cost quoted was fair and that the service was something residents appreciated in Sandwell.
- The Service had begun a benchmarking process to receive an accreditation.
- Councillor Fisher advised the Board that he had arranged a visit to the Control Room. The CCTV Control Room Manager explained that additional measures were now in place due to COVID but that members could book an appointment to visit the Service.

30/21 **Cabinet Forward Plan**

The Cabinet Forward Plan was noted by the board

31/21 **Work Programme**

The Democratic Services Officer explained that an additional meeting on the 9 December 2021, had been added to consider the Tenancy Conditions Consultation Feedback. At the Board's next meeting there would also be a detailed discussion to identify additional items for the boards work programme in the new year.

Councillor Fisher stated that the Police and Crime Commissioner had announced they were closing a number of police stations in the borough; Tipton; Wednesbury and Oldbury. He questioned whether the topic could be raised by the Chair or the relevant Cabinet Member as he felt it was important that the station remained open for use by Police Community Support Officers and the community. The Chair noted this requested and stated that it would be taken on board.

Councillor Fisher asked that a petition on a highways crossing and pedestrian crossings more generally be considered on the Work Programme or raised with the relevant Cabinet Member. It was explained that this topic would come under the Terms of Reference of the Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board and should be referred to that Board for consideration.

Meeting ended at 7.11 pm

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