

Minutes of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

Thursday, 26 January 2023 at 6pm
at Council Chamber - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

Present: Councillor Fenton (Chair)
Councillors Ashman, Fisher, Lewis, Shaeen and Brown

Also present:

8/21 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Akhtar (Vice-Chair), Bhullar, Jalil, Kaur and Webb.

9/21 Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

Councillors Ashman and Fenton declared another interest in the matter referred to at Minute No. 12/23; Launch-Plan of the Sandwell Aquatic Centre, in that they were members of Sandwell Leisure Trust.

10/21 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meetings held on 24 November 2022 and 10 January 2023 be confirmed as correct records.

11/21 Additional Items of Business



There were no urgent additional items of business to consider.

12/21

Launch- plan of the Sandwell Aquatic Centre

The Board received an overview detailing the outline plan to prepare for the opening of the Sandwell Aquatic Centre.

The site was due to be opened to the public from the Summer of 2023, with the first regional event due to be held in September 2023, following draft programmes having been developed in consultation with partners. The draft programme had been informed by key values including overcoming barriers to participation and the use of exercise to promote physical fitness and mental wellbeing.

The Assistant Director of Borough Economy outlined that the Sandwell Aquatic Centre had to appeal to both residents of the Borough, and regional users to ensure it was a commercially viable site.

Work had also been undertaken to draft operating procedures, with health and safety principles having been used to ensure a safe and high-quality environment for users of the facilities.

Recruitment was progressing well, an offer of employment had been made to the Head Diving Coach and the Chief Operating Officer of the Local Authority Trading Company had been in post for a two week period. Recruitment for other positions was ongoing, with staff being transferred from the Langley and Smethwick sites ensuring no redundancies would take place.

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

- That a precise opening date for Sandwell Aquatic Centre had yet to be clarified, but the Local Authority Trading Company was on target and schedule.
- The Assistant Director of Borough Economy agreed to provide further information on what action was being taken to open Langley swimming facilities to the public.
- A Working Group would be set up to provide support and guide both Operational and Business Planning areas.

- Further input from Ward Members and local communities would be utilised to develop plans for community groups and schools to access facilities.
- It was identified that plans remained an outline at present, with financial matters to be finalised.

Resolved that a Working Group comprised of the members of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board be established to support and guide both Operational and Business Planning areas related to the Launch-Plan of the Sandwell Aquatics Centre.

13/21

Playing Pitch Strategy

The Board received an overview of the Playing Pitch Strategy, which had been commissioned in accordance with Sport England Guidance. The Strategy was being developed and aimed to address the facility needs of identified sports across the Borough.

Playing pitches and outdoor sports facilities played a fundamental role in achieving physical activity outcomes, and improved quality of life for residents via access to local green spaces.

The Assistant Director of Borough Economy outlined that playing pitches, particularly those with natural grass, were expensive to maintain with significant resources required to ensure they were of a high standard. It was proposed that a supply and demand analysis should be used to ensure resources were being utilised effectively, with prioritisation tools including area-by-area and site-by-site action plans, to ensure best value for money.

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

- Upon completion, the Strategy would have considered predicted population growth and existing regeneration areas.
- For facilities that were at-risk the Strategy would guide subsequent developments and protect critical assets.
- A Working Group would be set up to support the completion, adoption and implementation of the Playing Pitch Strategy.

Resolved that a Working Group comprised of the members of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board be established to support the completion, adoption and implementation of the Playing Pitch Strategy.

Council House New Builds Programme Update

Further to Minute No. 20/22 (30 August 2022), the Board received an Update on the Council House New Builds Programme.

The Board was informed that the Home England Grant partnership had reduced Sandwell's allocation from 195 to 123 units, as these were unable to be delivered within timescales. Challenges had been encountered by the Council and housing associations, however three selected sites have been awarded grant funding of £53,000 with increased timescales for construction.

The Housing Partnerships and Programmes Manager also outlined the recent changes to the Right-to-Buy Receipts Scheme which enabled the Council to re-invest in building replacement Council homes. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, receipts could be used by the Council to make-up 40% of the new build cost and could be used within 5 years.

The programme was funded by multiple funding sources, however higher land remediation costs and land availability in Sandwell had generated challenges.

The Board was advised of the following issues that were impacting upon scheme delivery:-

- Increased energy efficiency measures via changes to building regulations having resulted in cost per unit increasing by £10,000 – 15,000.
- Constructed tender price returns having been above scheme estimated costs due to construction cost inflation.
- Current economic conditions, having resulted in increased, field, transportation, and energy costs.
- Contractors having sought to negotiate after tender submission, which is against Council procurement policy.

It was accepted that current conditions were contributing to a challenging period for the Council when building new houses and the Board thanked Officers for their continued efforts.

Update of Working with the Voluntary and Community Sector to Tackle the Cost of Living Crisis

Further to Minute No. 38/22 (1 November 2022), the Board received an Update on Working with the Voluntary and Community Sector to Tackle the Cost of Living Crisis.

The Board received any overview of the Council's response to the Cost of Living Crisis, including the response of third sector organisations. Feedback had overwhelmingly been positive with friends groups and support networks having been developed by residents and community groups to support people throughout the winter.

The Board heard that efforts had also been made to reduce the stigma associated with accessing warm spaces, with events including a Christmas Grotto, live music and family creative events having happened. The purpose of this was to encourage and incentivise these spaces to residents, particularly with sectors of the community less likely to access support available.

Training had been provided to warm space providers to equip staff to provide support and facilitate specialist referrals to organisations including Citizens Advice, where needed. Warm spaces grants had also been available via Sandwell Council of Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) to small organisations to support the Warm Spaces charter, with 34 groups being awarded £118,849 over the Winter period.

The Public Health Consultant outlined that libraries had been particularly instrumental with 83,495 visits since October 2022, uses included to access warm drinks and charge devices. Libraries had remained open throughout the festive period including on Christmas Day to support with referrals to water companies and financial advice.

The Board further heard that cascading information to residents about available support and remained a key focus. The Cost of Living Booklet had been sent to all households, including care homes and was available in multiple languages. In addition, the Council website had been used to map support services collate information both by type and by area to make in accessible to residents.

The Council's Cost of Living Champions programme had enabled Sandwell citizens to educate members of the public on what channels of support was available. Further sessions had been planned across the NHS and local partners, with 153 attendees to date.

Winter Warm packs have also been distributed across Sandwell for those who needed them. £10,000 was awarded to Black Country Foodbanks to use across their Sandwell sites to provide support when required to vulnerable residents.

The Board received a presentation from the Senior Manager at Sandwell Community Information and Participation Service (SCIPS) who outlined the value of Community Centres helping people during challenging times. She noted the particular success of the sessions her organisation had held informing people of the routes to access support.

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

- Not all foodbanks within Sandwell were part of Black Country Foodbanks network, meaning they had missed out on financial support.
- New methods of providing financial support to foodbanks may be required.
- A dedicated officer to answer queries, share information and support Councillors in relation to foodbank coordination would be advantageous.
- Foodbanks had largely been reliant upon volunteers to run and were low on non-food items, in particular period products.
- Poverty proofing and financial support provision for schools to be explored, particularly in relation to school trips.
- That warm packs may not have been evenly distributed across the borough, however more had been ordered to be distributed across the borough.
- The distribution of warm parks should be monitored centrally and these should be distributed direct to organisations where possible.
- There have been multiple reports of residents not receiving the Sandwell Herald, this was to be looked into as part of the corporate contract.

- The mapping of support services and foodbanks has continued to be communicated to both residents and this Board.
- Warm bank usage had been a success story across the borough; it was agreed that a statistical breakdown of warm bank usage by town be provided to the Board.
- Agreed that a letter of thanks be sent to library staff operating warm spaces in recognition for their hard work, particularly over the Christmas period.

Resolved that:-

- (1) that Director of Public Health provide a dedicated contact officer to answer queries, share information and support councillors in relation to foodbank coordination as part of the Cost of Living Crisis;
- (2) that the Director of Public Health explores providing financial support to foodbanks;
- (3) that the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board refer poverty proofing and financial support provision for schools to the Children's Services and education Scrutiny Board;
- (4) that the Director of Borough Economy arrange for letter's to be sent to library staff operating warm banks in recognition for their hard work.
- (5) Resolved that an Update of Working with the Voluntary and Community Sector to Tackle the Cost of Living Crisis is provided to the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board on a quarterly basis.

16/21

Update from the Chair of the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group

The Board received an update from the Chair of the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group. The Board heard that the Group was progressing well and had utilised its January meeting to reflect on the progress of the last calendar year.

The Group was focused on partnership working with Housing Management and holding meetings with senior staff members to discuss moving forward.

The Chair of the Board thanked members of the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group for their hard work and endeavours.

17/21

Work Programme and Cabinet Forward Plan

The Board noted its Work Programme for 2022/23 and received the Cabinet Forward Plan.

Meeting ended at 8.06pm

Contact: democratic_services@sandwell.gov.uk