

Minutes of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

Thursday, 23 March 2023 at 6pm
at Council Chamber - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

Present: Councillor Fenton (Chair);
Councillors Bhullar, Fisher and Lewis;
Phillippe Brown (Co-opted Member and Chair - Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group).

Also present: Chief Superintendent Maria Fox (West Midlands Police).

Officers: Gillian Douglas (Director of Housing), Nigel Collumbell (Service Manager – Housing Maintenance), Tom Hogan (Operations Manager – Tenancy Services), Karl Robinson (Business Manager – Housing Solutions), Tessa Mitchell (Business Manager – Community Safety and Resilience), Manny Sehmbi (Business Manager – Community Partnerships), Stuart Hall (Home Improvement Manager), Alexander Goddard (Scrutiny Lead Officer) and John Swann (Democratic Services Officer).

26/23 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ashman, Jalil, Kaur and Shaen.

27/23 Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

There were no declarations of interest made at the meeting.



28/23 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meetings held on 20 January and 23 February 2023 be confirmed as a correct record.

29/23 Additional Items of Business

There were no urgent additional items of business to consider.

30/23 Implementation of the Sandwell Community Safety Strategy 2022- 2026

The Board was informed that the Safer Sandwell Partnership was a collaborative initiative between the Council, West Midlands Police and other key agencies to enhance community safety across the Borough.

The Chief Superintendent for Local Policing in Sandwell Maria Fox outlined that incidents of serious violence were rising, both in Sandwell and nationally. This had increased from 4,000 recorded incidents in the Borough 10 years ago, to over 20,000 per annum in 2022.

It was reported that serious youth violence had decreased in recent years, targeted interventions, multi-agency partnerships and a Police presence in schools were believed to have contributed to this decline.

Domestic Abuse remained a significant issue with a third of violent crimes being domestic in nature. A new sexual abuse and assault strategy was being introduced across the Borough as part of the work to address this. In addition, West Midlands Police had worked closely with the office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) via the Violence Reduction Partnership. Members noted that Black Country Women's Aid had recently been awarded a contract to deliver a training and awareness programme to tackle domestic violence and abuse.

Whilst sexual abuse was underreported, recorded levels had been rising, particularly crimes that had been committed online and against children. Early intervention methods were key in combatting sexual abuse and workshops in schools around healthy relationships and training for partner agencies on the topics of

female genital mutilation and sexual assault had received positive feedback.

Modern Slavery remained an issue locally and nationally. It was a difficult and hidden crime but a good partnership approach was in place in Sandwell and a range of strategies were in place to help address this type of crime. Raising awareness of Modern Slavery was considered an important strand in helping to identify cases earlier and for the public to be aware of the signs.

Reducing offending and re-offending rates was a priority, providing prisoners with the skills and training so they could successfully integrate back into society. Programmes which aimed to break the cycle of criminality at a young age included mentoring and restorative justice schemes and treatment programmes for those with substance misuse issues.

Serious and Organised Crime was a constantly evolving issue. The Board was informed that people engaged in these types of crime moved from commodity to commodity depending on what was most lucrative – this could include drug trafficking, money laundering, people trafficking or arms dealing. Holistic plans were utilised to dismantle organised crime groups and to disrupt their activities as much as possible.

Local crime and anti-social behaviour issues were tackled through Sandwell's Tasking processes, both at a local town and strategic borough-wide level. The Board heard priorities at a local level included the Nuisance Bike Plan, CCTV mapping in strategic locations and ASB walkabouts to ensure Police had a visible presence on the street scene.

The Board received an overview of changes to policing structures, with four Chief Inspectors joining in early April to support this.

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

- There was sometimes a disparity between the expectations of someone reporting anti-social behaviour and what the Police and Council could do about it. The Anti-Social Behaviour Policy had been revised to highlight this and sought to

provide clarity on which organisation was responsible for various matters.

- Additional support and mentoring wrapped around schools had been tried and tested in Smethwick and this was suggested as good practice that the Police could look at.
- High turnover of Police, such as local sergeants, was a frustration as it necessitated building relationships repeatedly. It was confirmed that changes were typically due to officers choosing to take up roles in other parts of the force or be promoted in rank.
- Data around domestic abuse and sexual abuse should be broken down by gender, age and location that could help determine any patterns that needed to be addressed.
- Issues were raised with the 101 reporting number, with calls dropping or taking too long to be answered. The Chief Superintendent was committed to improving this and resources had been allocated to increase capability.
- The recently published Casey Report needed to be fully understood with appropriate action taken to root out any institutional racism, sexism or other unacceptable behaviours.

31/23 Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy

The Board received an overview of the Council's Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy.

Under the Homelessness Act 2002, local authorities were required to produce a homelessness strategy that detailed the strategic direction of the Council to tackle homelessness.

The Council was performing well at preventing homelessness and had prevented 70% of cases in the Borough compared to the national average of 53%. Accommodation and support had been provided to 150 rough sleepers, with 84 permanently accommodated.

Whilst the prevalence of rough sleepers in Sandwell had reduced by 85% since 2019, it was estimated that 5,000 people, both homeless and at risk of homelessness, would receive support from the Council during the 2023/ 24 Municipal Year.

The Business Manager – Housing Solutions outlined the success of the Council's 'Call Before You Serve' scheme, through which

landlords and tenants had received support prior to eviction notices being issued. The scheme had prevented 60% of over 200 cases from resulting in an eviction.

Collaborative work with private rented sector landlords had also taken place, to incentivise landlords to accommodate former rough sleepers as tenants. This scheme had secured 150 tenancies from 2021- 2023, with an additional 20 flats in the Cradley Heath area expected to be ready to let imminently.

During 2022, £250,000 of additional grant funding had been acquired by the Council, this money had been ringfenced to provide support for those without recourse to public funds. The Holly Grange site had capacity to accommodate 5 individuals without recourse to public funds and was the preferred option when compared to Bed and Breakfast facilities.

It was anticipated that the rising prevalence of rough sleeping nationally increased pressure on housing via resettlement schemes and cost of living pressures would increase demand on the Homelessness services provided by the Council.

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

- Individuals at risk of, or experiencing homelessness, may prefer speaking to staff face- to face. The basing of homelessness staff at Community Hubs would therefore be advantageous.
- The presence of Homelessness staff at libraries at suitable times would be considered.
- Reducing the number of households in temporary accommodation remained a key ambition for the Council.
- Applications for grants were submitted to central government regularly.
- Walk in services were available at Sandwell Council House, and homelessness staff could be reached both online and via the telephone.
- Caseworkers were assigned to those in need of homelessness assistance and were triaged by need and risk factors.
- The Council had recently hired more staff to increase service capacity which was consistently monitored.

- The Private Sector Enforcement team had supported private landlords to uphold high standards for tenants in private rented accommodation.

Resolved that:-

- (1) the Cabinet Member for Housing consider basing homelessness staff at Community Hubs and provide a presence at Sandwell libraries at suitable points throughout the week;
- (2) an update on Homelessness be brought to the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board in 6 months' time.

32/23 Report of the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group - Home Checks Review

The Board received the second report of the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group; the Home Checks Review.

This piece of work focussed on Home Checks, which was a proactive tenancy management service. This involved officers visiting tenants and having conversations. It was proposed that all 27,000 tenants in Council accommodation would receive home checks, with 3,000 such checks having been carried out so far.

The Scrutiny Group had undertaken a survey and Group members had home checks themselves to obtain first-hand experience. The Group had identified practical suggestions on how to make the Home Check service better for tenants.

Recommendations made by the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group which Housing Management had agreed to implement include the following:-

- ensuring Home checks were accessible to all, including tenants who were at work during the day;
- the review of the main referral pathways to ensure these were most relevant;
- providing copies of completed home checks forms to tenants who had received a visit;

- the review of access to interpreter services.

The Chair of the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group confirmed that information required to undertake the review had been made available and when Group members had interviewed staff, feedback had been positive around honesty and transparency.

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

- There was a three-year programme for the Home Checks to visit all Council tenants.
- Triggers had been developed to direct the visits to where they were most needed. This could include where there hadn't been contact for a long period of time, overcrowding, underoccupancy and high-rise blocks. Damp and mould reports automatically triggered follow up visits.
- A set of service standards were being developed.
- Home checks were offered 9am-5pm but this would be kept under review.
- The Council used a text message service to send reminders to tenants, this helped to avoid missed appointments.
- The Dynamic Scheduling System would, in the future, allow the Council to pick up instances where officers had not kept to appointments with tenants.

The Chair of the Scrutiny Board thanked the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group for its hard work on this review.

Resolved that the Budget and Corporate Scrutiny Management Board be requested to consider looking at performance management around Home Checks.

(Councillor Bhullar left the meeting following consideration of this item).

33/23 Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy on Adaptations for Disabled Tenants in Council Housing

The Board was informed that the current Housing Assistance Policy was formed in June 2012. It was intended that a revised policy would reinforce a person-centred approach and a focus on prevention, helping to create home environments enabling disabled people to live full lives.

Since 2003, the Council had the discretion to develop and maintain its own housing financial assistance policy in compliance with relevant legislation. To do this, the Council had to publish and maintain a policy.

It was reported that Government funding for Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) had changed significantly in 2015/16 when it became part of the Better Care Fund, which was a single pooled budget to support health and social care services to work more closely. There was now an opportunity to better align the Council's policy with the aims of the Better Care Fund which were to provide more joined-up and customer-focussed services to reduce hospital and care admissions and enable people to return home more quickly.

A revised Policy on Adaptations for Disabled Tenants in Council Housing would bring greater parity between the way housing adaptations were managed through the housing revenue account and the DFG regime which applied to other social housing and the private sector.

Engagement sessions and workshops had taken place with staff groups including Adult Social Care and Housing. Foundations, the national body for Home Improvement Agencies, had also helped provide a 'critical friend' role in the formation of policy.

Consultation had also taken place with the voluntary sector and their service users, particularly those that provided a service to people with disabilities or mobility issues. Initial feedback was that residents and service users agreed with what was proposed and were supportive of the changes to policy.

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

- Where one member of a household was assessed as needing an adaptation but another household member's circumstances also changed and required an adaptation, this should be assessed by Adult Social Care and any equipment provided should be safe for all members of the household.
- It was proposed that members of the household with the same accessibility needs could have applications transferred to themselves. For example, in the event of a death to

prevent a new application needing to be completed and to retain the adaptations in the property.

- For alterations made by tenants themselves, there would be certain circumstances where consent would be withheld; for example, removing a load bearing wall, or inappropriately-built extensions.
- Smart technologies had become a useful tool to aid those with access requirements and support individuals to maintain independent living.
- The Council was currently in the process of appointing new contractors. There would be two; one for the North of the borough and one for the South. A new Contract Management Team coming onstream would monitor this going forward.
- The first £15k of any means tested contribution would be disregarded; this amount covered the commonly required works for adapting bathrooms, so this would enable these kinds of adaptations to be carried out more quickly.
- A separate policy for adaptations to Council housing was required so Council tenants would no longer be required to apply for a grant.

Resolved that:-

- (1) that the Director of Housing explore the use of assistive smart technology to support disabled tenants;
- (2) that the Director of Housing investigate the feasibility of transferring applications to other individuals in the property with the same accessibility needs;
- (3) that a working group be held in early June to further consider the Private Sector Housing Assistance Policy on Adaptations for Disabled Tenants in Council Housing prior to its consideration by Cabinet.

34/23 Update from the Chair of the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group

The Chair of the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group advised the Board that a workshop had been held recently to work

collaboratively to build and move forward with tenant scrutiny. This workshop was felt to have been insightful and open and honest questions and discussion had taken place.

35/23 Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Action Tracker

The Board noted the status of actions and recommendations it had made. Further updates would be reported to future meetings of the Board.

36/23 Work Programme and Cabinet Forward Plan

The Board noted its Work Programme for 2022/23 and received the Cabinet Forward Plan. The Chair advised the Board that collaborative discussions would take place around work programming for the 2023/24 municipal year.

Meeting ended at 9pm

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