

# Minutes of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

**Thursday, 23 February 2023 at 10.00 am  
at Sandwell Valley - Sandwell Valley Visitor Centre**

**Present:** Councillors Fenton (Chair), Akhtar, Dunn and Lewis.  
Phillippe Brown (Co-opted Member and Chair - Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group).

**In Attendance:** Councillor Rollins (Cabinet Member for Leisure and Tourism); Alice Davey (Director of Borough Economy), Gillian Douglas (Director of Housing), Jim Brennan (Business Manager Tenancy and Estate Management), Nigel Collumbell (Assistant Director – Housing Management), Matthew Huggins (Assistant Director – Green Spaces, Green Services and Events), Marianne Monro (Community Partnerships Officer) and Dawn Winter (Assistant Director – Libraries, Archives, Information Services, Tourism and Community Hubs).

**Also present:** Alexander Goddard (Democratic Services Officer).

## 18/23 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ashman, Fisher, Kaur and Shaheen.

## 19/23 Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

No declarations of interest were made at the meeting.



## **20/23 Urgent Additional Items of Business**

There were no urgent additional items of business to consider.

## **21/23 Tackling Anti-Social Behaviour in Council Tenancies**

The Board received a presentation on how the Council addressed anti-social behaviour (ASB) in Council tenancies. This included joint working between Sandwell Locals and the ASB Team. A protocol was in place that informed how different types of incident were managed – with different teams responsible for taking a lead on different issues. In general this broke down as:-

- Tenancy management aspects – Sandwell Local Teams;
- Higher risk aspects (that could include violence, drugs or domestic abuse – ASB Team.

The Protocol included measures such as a Victim Vulnerability Risk Assessment and determination of a risk rating.

The Board noted that regular meetings were held between ASB officers and Housing officers in Locals. This had multiple benefits; as well as helping with escalation of issues where required, it also helped to build the knowledge base of Housing officers on ASB issues.

An escalation process was in place which included a range of teams from across the Council with different enforcement powers. It was also possible to involve external agencies such as the Police, where appropriate.

The latest enforcement figures were presented to the Board and covered the period from January 2021 to September 2022. The figures indicated a rise in civil injunctions and fixed penalty notices, as well as the first Closure Order to prevent access to a property. It was noted that the numbers of enforcement measures were low compared to the number of warnings issued; this indicated that most people responded to the warnings and changed their behaviour.

Officers outlined the preventative work that took place to support tenants and help them change their behaviour where necessary. This included Acceptable Behaviour Contracts, Good Neighbour

Agreements and referrals to other support services where appropriate (e.g. substance abuse issues).

The Board noted the annual 'Safer 6' initiative and the activity that had taken place around ASB in Council tenancies, including drop-in coffee mornings and walkabouts in areas with known issues. The main objective was to raise awareness of what the Council could offer to support tenants.

A case study was shared with the Board which demonstrated the often-complex nature of ASB cases and the partnership working that was needed to ensure positive outcomes.

The Board was also informed about 'Cuckooing' which was where isolated and vulnerable people were taken advantage of by criminals and gangs who used their home as a base for criminal activities such as drug dealing or benefit scams.

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

- Noise complaints were difficult to handle, but the Council's ASB policy made it clear that one-off/occasional parties (or similar) were not ASB. For longer-term noise issues, the Council encouraged residents to speak to their neighbours as they might not be aware of the noise. The Council did have electronic equipment it could install to monitor noise and had access to an App that could be deployed to residents to measure noise. These technological options provided an objective measure of what was happening in a case.
- Misuse of common areas in blocks of flatted accommodation was an issue. The specific issues varied, but included drug-use and unauthorised access (including sleeping in common spaces). Environmental Protection Officers helped to build an information and evidence base of the issue and provide effective interventions.
- Some misuse of common areas was due to boredom experienced by young people. Where this happened it was discussed with the Council's Youth Service, at tasking meetings and with third sector partners where appropriate.

- There were no set specific levels for property condition. A shared process with tenants including a home check and discussion was utilised. Where there was a lack of awareness or ability by the tenant to care for their home the Council looked to offer support, either through advice or bringing in other agencies. The Council wanted tenancies to be successful and did not seek to take punitive approaches except as a last resort.
- A review of the Council's Voids was currently underway and would include looking at how to help tenancies get started on the right footing. The review would also look at standards of Voids, including gardens as this could impact re-let times.
- A Community Safety newsletter was available, and residents could sign up to receive it through the Council's Communications Team. Members highlighted that information could also be shared through the Sandwell Herald as well as at community spaces including the Warm Spaces initiative.

Members acknowledged that the presentation had only covered ASB in Council tenancies and asked for a further report on ASB involving private tenants and owner-occupiers to be included on the work programme for the Scrutiny Board.

**Resolved** that the following topics be included on the work programme for the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board:-

- (a) Anti-social Behaviour by private tenants and owner-occupiers;
- (b) Tenant Satisfaction Survey outcomes.

## **22/23 Towards a Heritage Strategy**

The Board considered a report prepared by specialist consultants 'Towards a Heritage Strategy' which had been originally commissioned in 2021.

The Council had recognised the need to look beyond museums and arts towards a wider heritage and culture offer and strategy. The Strategy would go beyond museums and even beyond buildings themselves.

Although museum accreditation was not compulsory, it could assist the Council in attracting funding, so Wednesbury Art Gallery and Haden Hill House had been progressed for accreditation with the outcome currently awaited.

The Cabinet Member for Leisure and Tourism acknowledged that the current focus on buildings as the heritage of the borough didn't work and did not resonate with the people of Sandwell. Instead the Council needed to re-consider how it engaged with residents in their heritage. Buildings could be a vehicle for telling the heritage story of Sandwell and the many communities that form it.

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

- Income generation was important to consider as it would safeguard buildings of heritage importance. One potential source of such income was weddings (and other events). Haden Hill House currently offered weddings and other venues were being considered.
- A Visitor Services Operations Manager had recently been appointed, which included venue hire, retail and catering.
- A new electronic venue hire system was being introduced in April.
- When any services were operating in a financial surplus a decision would be required as to how that surplus should be used.
- There were a wide range of community associations across the borough that would be willing to talk and discuss the heritage and history of the people they represented.
- There would be public engagement and consultation, as well as further councillor involvement. This had not yet been designed.

- It was recognised that due to limitations on storage the current Archives service did not reflect the full history of the borough or its people as it had not been possible to actively collect archival materials. The Heritage Strategy was an opportunity to rectify this.
- The Cabinet Member for Leisure and Tourism highlighted the opportunity presented by the approaching 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sandwell as a way to engage with, and hear the stories of, the people of the borough.
- The option to share heritage and archive material online would help to reach wider audiences and enhance the heritage offer through physical buildings and spaces.
- There was potential for heritage to help strengthen community cohesion through sharing of stories and histories.
- It was important to ensure that all communities were involved, not just those which had existing working relationships or avenues to express their views to the Council.
- Marketing and communication was identified as an important aspect to get right.

The Chair of the Scrutiny Board and Cabinet Member for Leisure and Tourism undertook to discuss timelines for further reports on the Heritage Strategy journey for inclusion on the work programme for the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board.

## **23/23 Green Spaces Strategy and Implementation Plan**

The Board considered a report and presentation on the Green Spaces Strategy and Implementation Plan.

It was reported that there were 543 green spaces in Sandwell. Of these there were 32 parks and gardens and the remainder were mostly green spaces such as amenity spaces, corridors and allotments.

The Board acknowledged the important role that green spaces had in Sandwell, providing places for our residents and visitors to exercise and socialise as well as provide valuable habitat for wildlife.

Members noted that there was a period of transition over the last 12 months from a reactive service to a planned and proactive programme of improvement directed at the lowest quality green spaces. This required a change in culture and approach.

The Board received an overview of the Green Spaces Audit that had been last carried out in 2018. The Audit confirmed that overall Sandwell's green spaces were low quality (with the notable exception of destination sites such as Sandwell Valley and the parks that had been awarded Green Flag status). It was reported that in terms of unrestricted access to green space, Sandwell was in the middle of its comparator group, with 3.63 hectares of such space per 1000 residents.

The Audit had set frameworks for scoring Quality and Value. For Value this included social value and value to nature; for Quality is included the green space being welcoming and clean, with adequate signage. The 2018 Audit determined the average score for Sandwell green spaces to be 34/100 – which was classed as 'poor'. It was acknowledged that this needed to be improved and would require more investment of resources in the lowest scoring sites. The targets that had been set were considered reasonable and there were some stretch targets also. It was highlighted that the initial targets were not the end goal in themselves, but would provide a basis for further improvements.

Members noted that in the last year 158 sites had been cleared, with an identified need to strengthen cross-service work to build on this work.

The Board was advised that there were 202 Green Space Improvements Plans to be completed that would help determine the levels of resources required and the type of interventions needed to improve these spaces.

It was acknowledged that whilst parks and green spaces needed to be free at the point of access, there was demand for additional services or experiences at an additional cost. For example

catering facilities; the Council had opened seven new such facilities in the last year. A pop-up coffee shop was also being trialled to see if it could work in different sites. Any surplus from these kinds of offers could be reinvested to further develop and improve the sites.

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

- The Service had been realigned within existing resources with an increased education offer bringing income and the interim Volunteer Management post bringing in person-hours.
- It was acknowledged that there was a need to improve communication with local residents, Friends groups and ward members around improvements and planned works.
- It was planned to have a new Green Space Strategy in 2025, with a mini Green Space Audit planned for the end of 2024.
- Members felt that utilising local connectivity and a multi-partner approach could allow for more effective consultation with residents. The Cabinet Member for Leisure and Tourism highlighted that rather than a big consultation exercise, continual engagement was the aim.
- It was suggested that a separate report on Hot Spot Solutions could be brought to a future meeting of the Board.
- There was a £4.5m programme of works set out as of November 2022. This was the first time that the Council had been able to specify where it would spend those funds, and also be held account on it.
- The Council was on target to have reviewed and repaired all play areas and outdoor gyms by the end of March 2023.
- Other strategies would underpin the wider Green Spaces Strategy such as the Allotment Strategy and the Safer Green Spaces Strategy.
- The Council was working with Sandwell College to provide an avenue for students to enter green careers. This was



made possible through repurposing a previously difficult to solve problematic site into a training site.

- External funding was also actively sought including from national sports governing bodies such as the English Cricket Board and the Lawn Tennis Association.
- The maintenance of the existing Green Flag parks had been factored in to business plans.
- Events were working towards covering their costs and trials of approaches had been taken to determine commercial viability which could be scaled up in future years.

Officers felt that there had been a misunderstanding around the Friends Framework. It had been introduced to put structure in place and to provide better support for Friends groups (both of spaces as well as parks). Members felt that the language used in the new agreements as part of the Framework was potentially too strong.

The Cabinet Member for Leisure and Tourism addressed the Board and confirmed that the Council was not seeking to control Friends Groups, but to set out clear expectations. It was acknowledged that the Council greatly valued Friends groups which had vast knowledge and experience.

In relation to the Friends Framework and agreements the following points and responses were made:-

- Previously more vocal groups had received a disproportionate amount of officer time. The intention of the Framework was to be clear around what the Council offered Friends groups and to ensure equality of access to officers.
- Two Friends networks had been established for the North and South of the borough to help bring Friends group members together to help share their experiences and knowledge.
- The Council had already extended the deadline for Friends groups to sign up to the new agreement and the majority of groups had already signed up.

- It might be possible to produce a simplified language overview of the agreement, but as it was a partnership agreement it was, by necessity, worded in a certain way.
- Friends groups had been consulted throughout the production of the Framework and changes had been made taking on board their feedback.
- Legal responsibilities around parks and green spaces remained with the Council – it wasn't appropriate for Friends groups to undertake works without permission for example.
- A target had been set for Friends groups to attract £10k of funding each, but this was more for Council officers to work to support and to set aspirations for Friends groups.
- The Council was putting in a range of resources to help support Friends groups – officer time, training opportunities etc. In return there was an expectation that they would put back into the park/space.

## **24/23 Tree Strategy and Implementation Plan 2023-2028**

The Board considered the Tree Strategy and Implementation Plan 2023-2028 that was due to be considered by the Cabinet in March 2023.

The Strategy sought to refresh the Council's approach to the protection, enhancement and management of its tree stock in Sandwell, aligning with practice in other areas and national guidance.

For context, it was reported that there were approximately 265,000 trees in Sandwell, which covered 18.1% of the borough. As well as providing an important natural habitat for wildlife, health and wellbeing benefits to residents and reducing noise, trees provided almost £6bn in annual benefit based on carbon storage, air pollution removal and rainwater interception.

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

- Trees on Council housing land were the responsibility of the Council in its role as landlord, therefore costs associated with them were funded by the Housing Revenue Account.
- The Council would not know the extent of remedial works required until inspections were completed.
- The Council had a team of three officers trained to Level 3 in Arboriculture as well as other officers trained to a lower level that could undertake some kinds of works.
- It was planned to plant 15,000 trees by 2030; these would be in addition to those the Council plants to replace any trees that were felled. The figure would include private residents and businesses that planted trees and the Council would encourage them to register their tree.
- There had been some concerns that the introduction of technology would lead to over-monitoring of staff, but it was confirmed that the intention was to allow the Council to move to a data-led approach.
- The Council's policy in relation to healthy trees had not been amended although it was acknowledged that the application had historically not been completely consistent. This meant the Council would not fell or prune trees due to loss of light or television/satellite signal disruption.
- It was intended to survey urban street trees as 'red risk' trees and resources would be available to remediate where the need was identified.

**Resolved** that the following matters be included on the work programme of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board:-

- (1) Update on Grounds Maintenance (including use of technology);
- (2) Checkpoint reports throughout the first 18 months of the Tree Strategy and Implementation Plan;

(3) Feedback from the survey of trees, to include impact on light to habitable rooms where possible.

## **25/23 Sandwell Valley Masterplan**

Consideration of this item was deferred to a future meeting of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board.

Meeting ended at 4.24pm following adjournments between 11.08am-11.17am, 12.14pm-12.28pm and 1.40pm-2.16pm.

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