

Minutes of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

**30 August 2022 at 5.45pm
In Committee Room 1 - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

Present: Councillors Fenton (Chair), Akhtar (Vice Chair), Ashman, Fisher, Kaur and Lewis.

Also present: Gillian Douglas (Director – Housing), Tony McGovern (Director – Regeneration and Growth), Marianne Munro (Community Partnerships Officer), Matt Powis (Senior Democratic Services Officer), John Swann (Democratic Services Officer)

17/22 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Bhullar, Jalil, Webb and Phillippe Brown (Co-opted Member and Chair Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group).

18/22 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made at the meeting.

19/22 Urgent Additional Items of Business

There were no urgent additional items of business to consider.

20/22 Council House New Builds Programme

The Board received overview of the **Council House New Builds Programme** and a progress update upon the efforts to create affordable housing in Sandwell.

The Director for Regeneration and Growth advised the Board of the progress of building 195 homes via the Homes England Grant Programme, with building to be commenced by 2023. Funding of over £6 million had been obtained via this pathway and was secured by a legal agreement.

The presentation received by the Board set out risk mitigation measures in place, including intentions to build 206 homes, to ensure that the target of 195 would still be met if planning issues were encountered. The update also incorporated details of current challenges with inflation, workforce shortages within the construction sector, and the availability of materials. It was noted that Homes England recognised the challenges within the sector and were working with Local Authorities to mitigate timescale slippages.

The Council had utilised grant funding for specific land remediation in the Borough from the Local Enterprise Partnerships Land Remediation totalling £1.45m and West Midlands Combined Authority Land Remediation totalling £450k.

The Board was advised that the waiting list for housing within Sandwell was in excess of 10,000, with over 6,500 being new applicants.

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

- There had been delays to the Council New Builds Programme largely attributed to Covid-19 safety measures and the impact of construction cost inflation which had led to challenging tendering processes.
- A Member sought clarification on the date when the 195 homes were agreed with Homes England. In response, the Director for Regeneration and Growth confirmed a response would be provided in writing.
- The Council works with developers to accurately obtain all necessary information about upcoming development sites. This method reduces the risk of unforeseen remedial works during development.
- That the council currently builds an average of 77 houses per year, with approximately 250- 280

properties being purchased via the Right to Buy scheme.

- A tenant was eligible to purchase their home under the Right to Buy scheme if they have been a secure tenant for three years. However, for new build properties the Council had the power to apply a 'Cost Floor' which deducts the amount of money spent on the property in the previous 15 years from the discount to safeguard the investment of the Local Authority.
- The Council was able retain up to 40% of the cost of the home sold under the right to buy scheme (1-4-1 income) which was partially funding ongoing developments.
- The Council had 27,000 properties within it's housing stock. This had reduced from 57,000 in the 1980's following the introduction of the right to buy scheme.

21/22

Cabinet Forward Plan

The Board received the Cabinet Forward Plan.

Resolved that the following items be added to the Boards work programme 2022/23:-

- 2023-24 Asset Management, and Housing December 2022 Maintenance Investment Programme.

22/22

Work Programme

The Board noted its Work Programme for 2022/23.

23/22

Exclusion of the Public and Press

That the public and press be excluded from the rest of the meeting. This was to avoid the possible disclosure of exempt information under Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act, 1972, as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006, relating to the financial and business affairs of any person, including the authority holding that information.

The Appropriation of Various Disused Former Garages in the Borough

The Board received a report on **the appropriation of various disused former garages in the Borough**. The Director for Housing outlined that there were proposals for four garage sites to be appropriated from the General Fund to the Housing Revenue Account for demolition.

It was confirmed that the Council had determined that the proposed sites were not viable to continue to maintain the garages and that there was a business case for them to be re-purposed for best value.

The Council recognise the viability challenges for sites once demolished, including securing the sites and concerns relating to anti- social behaviour.

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

- There was no applicable data relating to how tenants utilise their garages.
- The Council had 2,700 garages across the Borough. There was a consensus that the availability of vacant garages needed to be better advertised to residents.
- There was a discussion on the reasons for specific demolition of garage sites. In this respect, it was requested that the relevant options appraisals for specific garage sites that were earmarked for demolition be circulated to the Board.
- It was accepted that garage usage for car owners was slowly declining due to the increase in electric vehicles and the lack of charging facilities within the garage stock.
- A number of garage tenants had decided not to renew garage leases upon receipt of the Council's rental increases. However, rental numbers had stabilised over a number of months.
- Housing options for small and larger developments were usually considered when investigating surplus sites. If unsuitable, alternative options include marketing the land to buyers and private sale would be explored.

Meeting ended at 6.55pm

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