

Minutes of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

1 November 2022 at 5.15pm
In the Council Chamber - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

Present: Councillors Fenton (Chair), Ashman, Bhullar, Fisher, Jalil, Lewis, Shaeen and Webb.
Phillippe Brown (Co-opted Member and Chair - Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group).

Also present: Delroy Thomas (Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group)
Mark Davis (Chief Executive Officer – Sandwell Council of Voluntary Organisations (SCVC))
Jan Macmillian (Senior Manager – Sandwell Community Information and Participation Service (SCIPS))
Gillian Douglas (Director – Housing), Nigel Collumbell (Service Manager – Housing), Ian Dunn (Revenues and Benefits Service Manager), Neale Cooper (Finance Business Partner – HRA, Housing and Assets), Richard Hawkins (Manager – Citizen and Community Protection), Alexander Goddard (Democratic Services Officer), John Swann (Democratic Services Officer), Chantelle Simms (Democratic Support Officer).

34/22 Apologies for Absence

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

35/22 Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

There were no declarations of interest made at the meeting.

36/22

Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 30 September 2022 be confirmed as a correct record.

37/22

Urgent Additional Items of Business

There were no urgent additional items of business to consider.

38/22

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

The Board received a report and presentation on **Working with the Voluntary and Community Sector to Tackle the Cost of Living Crisis.**

The board heard that the population of Sandwell had the greatest percentage of households experiencing food insecurity in the west Midlands and the second highest ranking by 'Cost of Living Vulnerability Index' out of all 333 Local Authorities nationwide.

Due to the challenges facing the residents of Sandwell, targeted help was being prioritised to support vulnerable individuals and households. This was intended mitigate risk factors such as adverse mental wellness which were exacerbated by knock-on impacts of the cost of living crisis such as lack of foodstuffs and the ability to heat one's home.

The presentation set out the wide-ranging approach of the Council. A key element was the Cost of Living 'Champions', including faith leaders, internal staff and employees of the voluntary and community sector to provide practical advice and signpost residents to support. This was modelled on the success of the Covid Champions scheme that had run during the pandemic.

It was report that there was a focus on providing warm banks in libraries and other community settings, as well as extra funding for food banks being made available, the locations of which were being advertised on the Council's website.

Proposals for targeted support at present included 'Winter Warmth packs' to be distributed to selected groups and life skills sessions aimed at enabling young people to develop practical skills including budgeting and cooking on a low income.

The Board received a presentation from the Chief Executive Officer of SCVO who outlined the concern from members of the community at the inflationary cost measures taken by the Government and the Bank of England. He further detailed how organisations were adapting due to the changing pressures with two thirds of the 1,000 groups and charities SCVO represented delivering new services in Sandwell in relation to the cost of living crisis.

Members further heard that the Small Grants Scheme, administered by SCVO on behalf of the Council, had invited community organisations to apply and had received over 40 applications in a two-week period. SCVO was working jointly with the Council to provide warm banks and emphasised the predicted strain on families and relationships due to the cost of living crisis.

The Board received a presentation from the Senior Manager at SCIPS who outlined the importance of a two tiered approach; providing support and equipping residents prior to requiring targeted intervention, and linking up with services and facilities so those presenting in a crisis could access rapid support. She also outlined the importance of ensuring services were judgement-free, explaining that fear of stigma could prevent those accessing the support they needed.

Equipping those in the community with knowledge was felt to be vital, ensuring that those in crisis knew where to turn to access support. Creative approaches in cascading this information to residents needed to be explored so that it was presented in multiple formats.

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

- Information to residents detailing support services in multiple formats may have a wider reach, including those who were not routinely online.
- Members reached a consensus that the Sandwell Herald, print communications in libraries, screens in Council buildings, communications to parents via schools and billboards should all be utilised to communicate with residents.
- A roadshow method of communicating support to communities was discussed and this was felt to be positive.
- That when communicating locations of support services (warm spaces and digital dens etc) to residents, presenting these on a map might prove advantageous, both in print communications and via digital tools.
- That staff in warm spaces should be able to advise on basic queries, so that residents could receive face-to-face support.
- That a coordinated approach between the Council, third sector and voluntary organisations, together with the 'champions', would be beneficial.
- Youth Services that provided specialist support might come under strain due to the cost of living crisis. Members felt that a Council review of Youth Services would be advantageous in assessing the demand and funding pressures upon services.
- The Six Town's Credit Union was a positive support to communities in Sandwell, in particular the offer of low-cost loans supported residents. Members felt that empty retail units in West Bromwich Town Centre could serve as a location for a new branch that was more accessible and that this should be explored.
- Existing resources could be utilised, there was an existing food bank network in Sandwell. Some were oversubscribed whilst others had surplus food. Members felt a coordination exercise of existing food bank resources in Sandwell would be positive.
- That checks were in place to ensure funding was utilised as granted for voluntary and third sector organisations with a charter and a minimum service offer agreement in place to ensure compliance.
- That period poverty issues would be exacerbated by the cost of living crisis and a piece of work between the

Scrutiny Board and the Directorate of Public Health may add value to the discussion.

- That £20m in Council Tax rebate payments had been issued to 130,000 households, with a further £6.8m paid via household support schemes and £200,000 paid via the Local Welfare Provision Scheme.

Resolved that:-

- (1) that Directors ensure that the marketing of support services is strengthened; including making use of multi-media, billboards, communications to parents via schools and a roadshow event.
- (2) that Directors produce a map of support services via location and geographical coverage and share this through a range of media including print and online.
- (3) that the Cabinet Member for Children and Education be asked to conduct a review of demand and funding pressures on Youth Services across the borough.
- (4) that the Directors of Borough Economy and Regeneration and Growth investigate the options for working with the Six Towns Credit Union to relocate into an empty property in West Bromwich, more central to the town centre and transport links.
- (5) that Directors investigate ways to better coordinate the existing foodbank network in Sandwell to ensure best use of available food resources.
- (6) that the Chair of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board hold discussions with representatives from the Directorate of Public Health to discuss period poverty and access to sanitary products.

Voids Property Review

The Board received a report and update of the **Voids Property Review**, which was due to be completed by April 2023.

The purpose of the review was to address an increase in turnaround times for properties, and to ensure properties that were re-let were at the appropriate standard. It was reported that as at the end of September 2022 the average turnaround time had increased from 24 days (2019/2020 average) to 37 days, representing an average rent loss of £451 per property.

The findings of the review would be captured in a Voids Policy to support in developing a new empty homes standard that met the expectations of tenants whilst representing value for money. It was hoped that this would ensure efficient management of Council assets.

The Service Manager for Housing set out the main challenges in reducing void timescales which included inflationary costs and availability of both materials and labour.

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

- That all Council properties are compliant with the Decent Homes Standard, which was higher than the standard required by law.
- That the majority of complaints received were related to the condition of gardens.
- The Council had recently undergone a procurement process and had new contractors in place. An exercise was being undertaken to embed high standards across contractors.
- Contracts were renewed periodically to ensure value for money.
- That tenants frequently wanted to 'personalise' their properties, it was agreed that flexibility to individual needs should be considered as part of the review.

Councillor Jalil left the meeting during consideration of this item and did not return.

40/22

Housing Revenue Account 30 Year Business Plan

The Board received the **Housing Revenue Account 30 Year Business Plan**, a draft document which was due to be adopted by Cabinet in February 2023.

The Business Plan quantified the income received into the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), currently £120m from rent and £10m from charges per annum; and planned expenditure as part of a long-term 30-year plan.

Members were advised that a specialist consultant, Savills, had assisted the Council in the preparation of the business plan which has been predicated on a 5% rent increase; however, the percentage increase would be finalised following the Government's consultation on the capping of rent increases.

The Director of Housing outlined that the position of the Council was to increase rent, citing the 1% per annum reductions in rent charges during the period 2017- 2020. The Board noted that this had a long- term impact upon the availability of finances to invest in the housing stock, in an environment with a current need to retrofit properties, achieve EPC C status by 2030, as well as ongoing repairs and maintenance to maintain housing stock at an acceptable standard.

Consultation with stakeholders including SCIPS and the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group was to take place in the months ahead.

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

- That a Sandwell Plan for new build homes was to be devised following the departure of Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council from the Black Country Plan.

- Funding from Homes England and the West Midlands Combined Authority was being sought to resource identification of new sites on which to build housing.
- That borrowing would increase moving forward to support the needs of the HRA, in line with the state of the financial markets.
- The Council did want to incentivise downsizing to tenants, however it was acknowledged that a good offer of a smaller property must be made to encourage this.

Members agreed that the Strategy would be brought back to Scrutiny in due course, so the rent increase could be finalised, and members would have further information to better inform decision making.

That the Housing Revenue Account 30 Year Business Plan be brought back to a future meeting of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board.

41/22

Empty Property Strategy 2023-2028

The Board received the **Empty Property Strategy 2023-2028**, which set out how properties were prioritised to ensure residential houses were not left vacant for extended periods of time.

Empty properties wasted resources and contributed to urban decline. The Board heard that they reduced the value of neighbouring residential properties and became hotspots for vandalism and anti-social behaviour. The Service Manager for Housing explained that at present, 3,300 residential properties across the borough were vacant, with a dedicated officer being appointed to bring empty properties back into use.

Proposals included a dual approach, with incentives including loans of up to £20,000 to empty home-owners, to improve the condition of the property and bring it back into use as well as enforcement. Enforcement powers included Section 215 orders to tackle unsightly properties. Current targets were to bring 200 empty private sector properties back into use over a five-year period.

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

- The proposals for issuing loans for bringing properties back into use did not intend to charge interest.
- The budget for loans was currently £750,000.
- Properties would be prioritised by needs, with family homes to be targeted first as they were in most demand in Sandwell.
- Nomination rights were to be utilised when issuing loans to property owners so that the Council could nominate tenants from those on the housing waiting lists. Also if the house was sold on the open market the Council was able to recoup its costs.
- Compulsory Purchases Orders (CPOs) were an available power the Council could use, however due to the high costs and prolonged timescales associated with this option it was to be used sparingly.
- Empty properties were most commonly identified via Council Tax, as empty properties paid a premium charge.
- The 200 homes empty homes in a five-year period was a target the Council was hoping to exceed.
- Tracing the owner's of the empty properties was expected to be the biggest challenge for the Council.
- Members suggested that the draft document include information on Council Tax increased charges for vacant properties.

42/22

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 Housing Hub Review was being finalised and was due to appear before the Scrutiny Board on 24 November 2022.

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

43/22

Work Programme and Cabinet Forward Plan

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

Further to Minute No. 40/22, it was noted that an update on the **Housing Revenue Account 30 Year Business Plan** would be provided before it is considered by Cabinet on 8 February 2023.

Meeting ended at 7.41pm

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