

Minutes of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

**1 April 2021 at 5:45pm
Online Virtual Meeting**

Present: Councillor Moore (Chair)
Councillors Bostan, Bawa;
Mr Cash (Co-opted member).

Also present: Councillor Allcock (Cabinet Member for Homes).

Officers: Manny Sehmbi (Business Manager – Community Partnerships); Nigel Collumbell (Service Manager – Housing Management); Chris Jones (Project Director) and Suky Suthi-Nagra (Democratic Services Manager).

12/21 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Edwards, P Hughes and Sandars.

13/21 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 25 February 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

The Chair requested that information in relation to Oldbury library be circulated to members of the Board.



14/21 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interests made at the meeting.

14/21 **Additional Item of Business**

There were no additional items of business to be considered at the meeting.

15/21 **Tenant Engagement and Participation**

The Service Manager for Housing Management reported that Government had recently introduced the Charter for Social Housing White Paper to improve regulation around consumer standards. This White Paper was part of the government's ongoing response to the Grenfell Tower tragedy and the Hackett review. The white paper sets out seven key promises to tenants in Social Housing:

- To be safe in your home
- To know how your landlord is performing and hold it to account
- To have your complaints dealt with promptly and fairly
- To be treated with respect
- To have your voice heard by your landlord
- To have a good quality home and neighbourhood to live in
- To be supported to take a first step to ownership

The Council had been engaging with Tpas as critical friend to provide guidance on best practice for tenant engagement.

The Business Manager for Community Partnerships outlined the current structures to support tenants' voice, including the Tenants Complaints Panel, Sandwell Community Information & Participation Services (SCIPS) and the Tenant Review Panel (TRP). It was explained that the TRP scrutinised housing services to support services improvement and a member of the TRP, Mr Cash, sat as a member of this scrutiny board.



Further to Minute Number 2/20, a working group which consisted of council officers, residents' associations, SCIPS and member from the TRP, had been established to codesign different engagement models. The officer had worked with Tpas and the working group to draft a circular model on Resident and Leaseholder Proposed Involvement. Consideration was now given to the proposed model which was still subject to further consultation. The model included a new Resident and Leaseholder Scrutiny Panel under the Director of Housing. This panel would include a Councillor Representative to provide political advocacy and collaboration between the Cabinet and Scrutiny.

Consideration was given to the draft terms of reference for the Scrutiny Panel. It outlined the role, purpose and potential membership of the group, a possible recruitment process to encourage diversity and broader representation, as well as a learning and development programme and priority areas for the work plan which would be agreed by members of the group.

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

- Tenant recruitment processes were set to be codesigned with partners and tenants to ensure that tenants were empowered and the panel had broad representation. The engagement work for the process was underway and would continue.
- The Tenant Audit programme on the proposed engagement model acknowledged the Tenant Inspectors Programme, Mr Cash and other tenants had expressed support for Tenant Inspectors.
- The directorate had an ambition to create a welcoming environment for tenants to be engaged for a 3-year tenure on the Panel as well as opportunities for tenants to engage with single issues.



- The role of the co-opted member from the TRP from the Board was valuable and would be continued. The proposed change would include councillor representation on the panel but would not remove the co-opted member from this scrutiny board.

Agreed that the dissolution of the current Tenant and Resident Panel and the proposed new model be supported and considered by the Cabinet.

16/21

Question and Answer Session with the Cabinet Member for Homes

The Scrutiny Board received a presentation from the Cabinet Member for Homes, Cllr Allcock, on his portfolio and the work he would be focussing on in the future.

On the topic of Tenant Engagement and Participation, the Cabinet Member referred to previous item noting that the importance of the work was underpinned by regulatory changes, but it was also crucial to put residents at the heart of council and ensure that the tenants voice was heard.

The Cabinet Member for Homes explained that the pandemic had accelerated work that was already in progress to improve the council's digital offer, including increased options for service users on when and how they access council services. Project work had been across all teams in Housing Management: Home Ownership; Housing Solutions; Income Management; Locals; ASB; Rent Accounting. Face to face Safe checks would be maintained to ensure residents were safe and secure in their properties.

On preventing and reducing homelessness, the Cabinet Member stated that the council was a leading authority in the region. Temporary accommodation numbers were down to approximately 40, 18 months prior they were at a high of 120+.



The average time spent in temporary accommodation was also down from 53 days the start of 2020 to 39 in December 2020.

The Council had taken part in the WMCA Housing First scheme, at the start of the pilot the Council were deemed to be failing in their support for rough sleepers. Through this scheme, 44 rough sleepers had been housed in secure accommodation for a period of 6 months or longer. The council had improved partnerships with private landlords via the Secure and Sustain programme to enable private renters to take on rough sleepers, the programme provided assurances such legal fees to private renters, electric checks and gas safety checks to ensure that the properties were fit for purpose. Council had also been working with St. Basils on the accommodation near Sandwell General Hospital. The Council were also involved in WMCA Change Into Action Programme where residents can donate via the website to local charities that support rough sleepers.

Due to the pandemic, building operations had suspended, the Council had refocused on acquiring properties. 68 properties had been purchased to use as Housing Revenue Account (HRA) stock, which was an investment of £9.3M investment. The Council had a further 145 potential properties to purchase and were interested in pursuing properties that addressed residents acute and specific needs.

The Council had an annual gas servicing rate of 99.56%, 132,000 repairs had been delivered since March 2020, with the average time taken to respond to complaints at 6 days, this was maintained throughout the pandemic. A building safety board had been established to implement the recommendations of the Hackett Review and ensure compliance with building safety Regulations.

The Board noted an update on the Council's asset management and maintenance throughout the pandemic. Where required, the works carried out included: roofs, windows, front and rear doors, new fascia and rainwater goods, external decorations and environmental works.



Work had continued on the Council House New Build Programme – over 354 new units completed, with another 235 units approved and in progress, as well as a new programme being developed to achieve in excess of 600 units in the coming 4/5 years. Information had been pulled together on small sites across the borough that could be developed into new housing sites.

On Private Sector Housing, the Cabinet Member for Homes reported that he had had minimal involvement with the works, however explained that the Council operated a Triage system to ensure a duty officer was available every working day during office hours to deal with requests that are received. The requests came from the contact centre, inhouse or online referrals. The Council received 800 enquiries annually. Inspections were carried out using the Housing Health & Safety Rating System (HHSRS) where properties were risk assessed against the 29 hazards criteria. A large number of enquires and requests for assistance related to inadequate heating, damp and mould growth. Licensing was mandatory for all Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) which were occupied by 5 or more people in 2 or more households. 160 licenses had been issued. Where the local authority received disrepair notifications which could result in legal proceedings regarding the council's housing stock, the housing team carried out inspections, prepared finding reports and would defend the local authority at court if required. There were 120 cases dealt with annually.

The Cabinet Member for Homes also explained the future planned works for the Council, which included:

- Face to face home checks to sustain tenancies and support building safety requirements.
- Improved security and CCTV to High Rise Blocks. Consultations were set to commence in the summer of 2021.
- A review of New Tenancy Conditions had been completed, with a roll out planned for 2022 next year due to the pandemic
- In commitment to the Housing Allocation Review Cabinet Report (26/2/20) The Housing team were considering Age Designations to improve access to affordable housing for younger people, including care leavers. Consultations were set to commence in the summer of 2021.



- Amendments to the Tenancy Sustainment Programme. This was on hold due to the statutory notice that has to be served to change the conditions, which was not considered appropriate during the pandemic.
- Remodelled services to ensure resources match demand in a post COVID world.
- Asset management and maintenance including High Rise External Improvements, External Improvements and Cyclical Maintenance.
- Neighbourhood Improvements including External refurbishment (including 2-year programme to replace all wooden doors with composite doors).
- External Adaptations to Low Rise Flats.
- Disabled Adaptations.
- Installing carbon neutral heat pumps, thermal insulations etc. to meeting the Councils aim of zero carbon homes.
- Modular Housing and modern methods of construction were being considered.
- Considering delivery options for major council sites – currently in master planning process.
- New housing delivery vehicle options were being developed – this would allow the Council to have the flexibility to build other forms of tenure.
- Negotiating options to purchase new build property off plan directly from developers.
- Bidding for the Homes England Affordable Housing Programme 2021/26.
- Undertaking partnership working with the Housing Solutions team to deliver the Secure and Sustain and Call Before You Serve projects.
- Inspection of all licenced HMOs.
- Implementation of Selective /Additional Licensing (Following Consultation analysis).
- Expanding enforcement of Civil Penalties where landlords fail to comply with statutory notices served.
- New initiatives to assist tackling empty properties.



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

- Further information on the allocated affordable homes within the Council's property portfolio would be brought to a future meeting.
- Sandwell was a leading authority in the WMCA for supporting rough sleepers and the Council were considering further collaborative working with WMCA and funding from the Government to provide further support after the pandemic. As a Council there was funding available to continue supporting rough sleepers in the short-term.
- A Council owned property development company was being scoped with Savills, the Cabinet Member for Homes referenced the Bird report and noted that social housing could be socially engineered and would allow the Council to control the market, creating affordable homes. This scheme would be brought back to Cabinet in late summer/early autumn 2021.
- There were 1300 empty properties across the borough, at present Council policy dictates that those purchasing empty properties must pay council tax increases dependent on the length of the time the property has been vacant e.g.
 - o Any property which has been empty and unfurnished for **two years or more** will be charged an additional 100% on its Council Tax bill. This will mean that you will be liable for **double** the normal Council Tax amount.
 - o Any property empty and unfurnished for **five years or more** will be charged an additional 200% on its Council Tax bill. This means that you will be liable for **three times** the normal Council Tax amount.
 - o From April 2021, any property empty and unfurnished for **ten years or more** will be charged an additional 300% on its Council Tax bill.



This means that you will be liable for **four times** the normal Council Tax amount.

The current policy also meant that leaseholds could allow for properties to get into a state of disrepair, with the Council having to pay for works to ensure that the property was liveable. The Cabinet Member for Homes noted that a review of this policy needed and must be tackled in a more affirmative way.

- Rogue Landlords were being tackled by selective licensing and enforcements. When COVID restrictions were lifted the Council aimed to work with Landlords to educate and promote improvement. The Cabinet Member for Homes was in support of enforcement against Rogue Landlords and need to be considered further in the future
- The Age Destination policy was under review and would be brought back to this scrutiny board in the future.
- The council had encountered problems with developers, the plan to build 600 homes was ambitious and the team hadn't been able to fulfil all properties. The scale of production and costs associated with more modern methods of constructions such as modular housing were an issue. Build time could be as little as 72 hours, however due to the high costs associated there had been resistance. Other authorities had noted a reduction of snagging costs at £8million, however this saving would not go back into the pockets of residents but the housing developers. The Council were in discussion with Hadley Industries for a pilot scheme and development project which would allow for the Council further understand modular construction methods including how to maintain and develop the properties. The Cabinet Member for Homes also noted that residents would have to learn how to maintain and internally update homes due to the methods and materials used.



Update on Sandwell Aquatics Centre

The Project Director for the Sandwell aquatics centre introduced the item and shared drone footage as well as images to show the progress on the project. This Scrutiny Board last received an update on the Aquatics Centre in November 2020 (Minute No. 28/20). Although there had been inclement weather (high winds and freezing temperatures) in the period since the last report, work had continued positively on the Aquatics Centre project and it remained on target to be handed over to the Birmingham 2022 Organising Committee on time.

The Project Director explained that since the last update, the following had been started/completed:

- All pool tanks had been measured and pressure tested to ensure that the dimensions were correct and that there were no leaks – all three pools had passed these tests;
- The dive tower and associated springboard plinths had been installed;
- The primary steel frame for the building had been completed;
- The cladding to the front section of the building and the eastern elevation was complete and had also progressed well on the western elevation;
- Work had commenced on the roof for the building and the roof liner sheets are 75% complete;
- Curtain walling was complete on the front section of the building, with some glazing in place, and was progressing well on the western elevation;
- Masonry work had commenced and was progressing well internal to the building; and
- First fix M&E works had commenced and were progressing well.

Work had also been completed on phase one of the highways works required to support the delivery of the Aquatics Centre. The focus of all highways works associated with the project was to support sustainable and active travel, and to maintain traffic flow in the area. The works which had now been completed were as follows:



- Dog Kennel Lane and Bristnall Hall Road – two new zebra crossings;
- Manor Road / Holly Lane – traffic island to signalised junction with pedestrian crossings and advance stop areas for cyclists;
- Manor Road / Londonderry Lane - traffic island to signalised junction with pedestrian crossings and advance stop areas for cyclists;
- Holly Lane / St Pauls Road – give way junction to signalised junction with pedestrian crossings and advance stop areas for cyclists; and
- Londonderry Lane – puffin crossing upgrade to toucan crossing and associated cycle path.

Final designs were being developed for highways works phase two which would include improvements to Queens Road / Londonderry Lane Island and also environmental improvements to Londonderry Road. These designs would be finalised in April 2021 prior to being consulted on shortly after the Games.

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

- Delays in Birmingham had been well publicised, however from a Sandwell the perspective, the project was on target to passed on the Organising Committee on time. Other main capital projects were also on track to be completed in time and the Games would be going ahead as planned. The Project Officer noted the challenges faced by COVID and weather conditions and highlighted the achievements of all authorities working on the Games
- Progress had been made on developing legacy outcomes to make most of the opportunity. A set of outcomes had been drafted by the authority to cover a legacy physical activity, wellbeing and sport, as well as voluntary and third sector engagement in the borough. A working group set up with a view to launch a legacy plan at the one year to go mark, ahead of the Games.



The Council had been working with Swim England to ensure a sustained legacy of diving in Sandwell and the West Midlands. Swim England had appointed a Diving Development Officer for the midlands, a draft Diving Strategy had been drafted and the Council were working with Sports England, the Department for Culture Media and Sport and OCS to ensure that the Aquatics Centre of the strategy.

Agreed that the Director of Regeneration provide a further report to the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board on the Sandwell Aquatics Centre.

Meeting ended at 7:48pm

Click [here](#) to watch a recording of the meeting

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