

Minutes of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

11 July 2023 at 5.53pm
In the Council Chamber - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

Present: Councillor Fenton (Chair);
Councillors Lewis (Vice- Chair), Dhatt, Fisher,
Maycock, Shaeen, Trumpeter, Webb and Younis.

Also present: Lucy Clarke (Partnerships and Communities Manager –
Brushstrokes Community Project)
Kambi Agu (Bearwood Community Hub)

Officers: Gillian Douglas (Director of Housing), Louis Bebb
(Housing Policy and Strategy Lead Officer), Jennifer
Collins (Transformation) and Alexander Goddard
(Scrutiny Lead Officer).

37/23 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors
Davies, Khan and Ms Brown (Co- opted Member).

38/23 Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

There were no declarations of interest made at the meeting.

39/23 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 23
March 2023 are confirmed as a correct record.

40/23

Urgent Additional Items of Business

There were no urgent additional items of business to consider.

41/23

Borough of Sanctuary Sandwell Strategy

The Board received an overview of the Council's Borough of Sanctuary Sandwell Strategy. The draft strategy was undergoing development and aimed to ensure that Sandwell was a welcoming place for asylum seekers, refugees and migrants.

It set out the Council's ambition to be awarded 'Council of Sanctuary' status, and to join the national 'City of Sanctuary' movement via the Local Authority Network.

The application had been independently assessed by a panel of community groups and individuals with lived experience, and once successful the Council would be recognised as a 'Council of Sanctuary' for a period of three years. In addition, proposals indicated that the panel of community groups would issue recommendations to the Council, detailing how to further welcome asylum seekers, refugees and migrants.

Progress towards obtaining this status had been made, in particular, Thimblemill Library (Smethwick) had become the first 'Library of Sanctuary' nationwide.

The Partnerships and Communities Manager – Brushstrokes Community Project, set out that the Borough of Sanctuary Sandwell Partnership had been established with 75 members from community groups. The Partnership had conducted benchmarking exercises with neighbouring councils and had heard representations from residents through consultation exercises.

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

- Members agreed that the ambitions of the Sandwell Borough of Sanctuary Strategy were aligned to the Council's aims and ambitions;
- it was acknowledged that the distribution of asylum seekers across the Borough was not even, with the Smethwick locality accommodating a higher proportion of new arrivals;
- acknowledged that provision of community resources, places of worship and support services contributed to the decision of asylum seekers when expressing where they wished to be accommodated;
- that English for Speakers of other languages provision was limited and that waiting lists were extensive for those studying English;
- asylum seekers and refugees may have specific special educational needs, for which support would need to be provided;
- whilst the Home Office could grant permission for asylum seekers to gain employment after they had sought asylum for 12 months, opportunities were restricted to jobs on the Home Office's Shortage Occupation List, which may not align with an individual's skill set or prior experience;
- affordable housing provision was limited across the Borough which posed a barrier in some instances to housing opportunities;
- individuals who were resettling were likely to have greater health and wellbeing needs – a collaborative approach between the Council, community groups and support services would help meet these needs;
- the Council had recently appointed a Refugee Co-Ordinator within the Housing Directorate;
- access to healthcare was a key barrier which had been identified, the translation of information was proposed to support with GP registration and navigating the NHS systems;
- female health care, including access to sexual health and period products should be incorporated within the strategy;
- the establishment of community groups within libraries had been a positive support as it had allowed new

arrivals to socialise and embed themselves within the community;

- additional communication methods of publicising the consultation were suggested, including via Community Groups could increase response rates;
- the publicising of the consultation as part of the Windrush and 50 years of Sandwell celebrations may reach a greater audience;
- funding was often restricted to specific groups (eg. Homes for Ukraine) and was not universal in nature;
- an holistic approach, taking into account all needs, including mental health, education and social isolation would most benefit new arrivals;
- elected members would benefit from training on the subject matter to better inform decision making.

Resolved that:-

- (1) the Director of Housing considers the feasibility of embedding ESOL tuition for asylum seekers and refugees into the Borough of Sanctuary Sandwell Strategy;
- (2) the Director of Housing considers the inclusion of the educational needs of asylum seekers and refugees under eighteen years old within the Borough of Sanctuary Sandwell Strategy including SEND, transport and language needs;
- (3) the Director of Housing explores the cascading of consultations via town- based community teams to increase response rates and to all Members;
- (4) the Borough of Sanctuary Sandwell Strategy is publicised as part of the Windrush and 50 years of Sandwell celebrations;
- (5) the Director of Housing explores the inclusion of female health care, including access to sexual health and period products within the Borough of Sanctuary Sandwell Strategy;

- (6) training is provided to Members to increase awareness and better inform decision making in relation to the Borough of Sanctuary Sandwell Strategy;
- (7) the Director of Housing explores the adoption of a holistic approach when progressing the Borough of Sanctuary Sandwell Strategy.

(Councillor Trumpeter left the meeting during consideration of this item).

42/23 **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.

43/23 **Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board Work Programme 2023/ 24**

The Chair presented an overview of the Board's proposed work programme for the 2023/ 24 municipal year. Each Council directorate was invited to a work programming session on 12 June 2023, which allowed Members of the Board to discuss services, key issues and priorities.

Resolved that the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board Work Programme for 2023/ 24 is approved.

44/23 **Cabinet Forward Plan**

The Board received and noted the Cabinet Forward Plan.

Meeting ended at 7.56pm

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