

Notes of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

**2 September 2021 at 5:45pm
Online Virtual Meeting**

Present: Councillor Mabena (Chair)
Councillors Randhawa and Ashman;

Officers: Gillian Douglas (Director of Housing); Neville Rowe (Housing Strategy and Research Manager); Alex Goddard (Democratic Services Officer); Gabrielle Evans (Democratic Services Officer).

Quorum was not obtained at the commencement of the meeting. In accordance with the Council's Procedure Rules (Standing Orders) in Part 4 of the Constitution which can be found [here](#), the meeting continued for the purpose of examining the business before it, at the discretion of the Chair of the board.

18/21 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies were received from Councillors Carmichael, Fisher, Gavan, G Gill, Kausar, Rouf and K Singh.

19/21 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 1 April 2021 were received.



20/21 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interests made at the meeting.

21/21 **Additional Item of Business**

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

22/21 **Review of Property Age Designation**

The Director for Housing and the Housing Strategy & Research Manager presented the report to the board.

It was explained that the current volume of age designated properties acted as a disproportionate barrier for residents seeking to access affordable housing and impeded the Council's ability to carry out its statutory functions, in particular regarding Care Experienced Young People, those who fell within the requirements set out in the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 and those seeking to move on from supported housing provision.

Removing the 25 years plus age designations from the properties would help in part to address the above, particularly in one bedroom properties where currently around 60% (3,018/4,883) were excluded from anyone below the age of 25. It was explained that on 26 February 2020 the Cabinet approved a Housing Allocations Policy Review (Minute Number 51/20 refers) which instructed officers to commence a review of the age designations currently applied to approximately half of the Council's flatted accommodation. This in part was triggered by responses to the Housing Allocations Policy Review survey, where 74% of housing applicants who completed the survey (630 in total) either strongly agreed or agreed that more flats should be available to people under the age of 40.

Excluding properties with a 50 plus age designation, in Sandwell just over half of the Council's stock portfolio of one and two bedroom flats were affected by either a 25 plus, a 35 plus or a 40



plus age designation. Set against the customer base of applicants where 70% are below the age of 40, this situation did not support the principles of inclusion and left a significant imbalance between the supply and the demand for social housing.

(Councillor Ashman joined the meeting at 6:06pm)

In June officers began exploring the review of the 25 plus age designations. By reducing the age restriction to applicants who were 18 years plus on these units would return 827 flats back into general needs and would increase the one-bedroom unit stock access for the 18 to 25 age group from 38% to 49%. Because of the already wide age variance of many of these blocks the impact of bringing them into general needs would not have a significant impact on the overall average age of head of household.

On 21 July 2021, consultation notices were sent to 827 properties seeking views and opinions on the proposal to remove the 25-plus age restriction from their block. In total 41 responses were received, representing a 5% response rate. The majority of the responses opposed the removal of the age designation, all based on the concern that removing the restriction would lead to increased incidents of anti-social behaviour (ASB) together with community cohesion strains brought about by a clash of lifestyles.

Sample data indicated that in reality, there was no significant difference in incidents of ASB in age restricted blocks and in other local authorities reports of ASB had actually decreased.

Officers confirmed that if the removal of the age designations went ahead, any issues would be monitored and managed sensitively. To achieve this and in line with current policy to facilitate tenancy sustainability all applicants were assessed for any support needs required to maintain their tenancy. Options included the provision of floating support together with support from the Welfare Rights Team if required.

It was explained that the age profile of tenants in flats would only change gradually as it was dependent on empty properties becoming available in the blocks.

Post tenancy checks were also completed and scheduled based on a risk assessment, with a scheduled programme of regular



visits to new tenants planned throughout the year and each tenant had a named neighbourhood officer to refer to.

Once Stage One was completed as outlined in the report, Stage Two of the review could commence, supported by the learning gained from Stage One.

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

- The Neighbourhood team would work in local areas to ensure that tenancies would start on the right footing and assess the risk that tenants may pose or be put in. The Council also made sure that tenants understood the terms of their tenancy agreement to prevent any issues.
- There was a need to promote community cohesion those tenants with different lifestyles and the Council would take a proactive and positive approach to building relations between tenants and consider the make-up of tenants in each block.
- There were residents who had been on the housing register for 2-3 years that hadn't been in touch to update the Council on changes to their lifestyle or needs. Officers had begun home visits to seek missing intelligence and work in a multi-agency way to find out more about the needs of residents. It was noted that rent arrears were a good indicator of a change in lifestyle. The intelligence gathering was also key to residents with disabilities who may be at risk of fire safety hazards.
- The consultation window was three weeks long. Most responses were received in the first week, by the third week there weren't any further responses. Officers noted that it was sent out during a holiday season and some residents may have been away, however no further postal or email responses were received after the closing date.
- There were 300 void properties at any one time. This was due to churn of tenancies and the need to refurbish properties and was not considered to be a high number of void properties.
- It was not uncommon to receive zero bids on a 40+ property however for the same property that wasn't age restricted, the Council would expect upwards of 60 bids.



- Most local authorities had their age designation policy under review or had already removed it.

The members present supported in principle the proposals to take the current review of the Council's age restricted housing stock forward to help make best use of existing stock and to ensure compliance with equality duties.

Meeting ended at 6:21pm

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