

Minutes of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

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

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

Also present: Councillor Padda (Cabinet Member for Housing); Gillian Douglas (Director – Housing), Lisa McNally (Director – Public Health), Nigel Collumbell (Service Manager – Housing), Louis Bebb (Housing Policy and Strategy Lead Officer), Alexander Goddard (Democratic Services Officer), John Swann (Democratic Services Officer)

25/22 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Fisher and Kaur.

26/22 Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

There were no declarations of interest made at the meeting.

27/22 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meetings held on 2 August 2022 and 30 August 2022 be confirmed as correct records.

28/22 Urgent Additional Items of Business

There were no urgent additional items of business to consider.

Update on Review of Voluntary and Community Sector Grants

The Board received the report on the **Update on Review of Voluntary and Community Sector Grants** and an overview of progress regarding the re- alignment of funding streams with the Corporate Plan.

The Director for Housing advised the Board that the Council currently spent 6.3m per annum in grants with 55 organisations in receipt of long-term reoccurring funds. The review identified that in the view of commissioning officers 91% of groups added value to the communities.

It was reported that the target saving across all directorates was 10%, for Housing this represented £630,000, however it was important that savings were proportionate and did not impact negatively upon communities. The Board was informed about plans to digitise the grants system, thus enabling online monitoring.

The Board was briefed about the small grants process which Sandwell Council of Voluntary Organisations administered on behalf of the Council. This process totalled £150,000 per annum, with groups being eligible to bid for up to £5,000 while being required to evidence that the community would benefit.

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

- The current process favoured established organisations and an open and transparent process may benefit new and emerging groups.
- That there was no plan for a competitive grants process at present but that long- term this could be explored.
- A competitive process might encourage innovation within the third sector and would be fairer in principle.
- Robust service-level agreements and performance monitoring of the service delivered by Council-funded organisations worked well and mitigated the need for a contract to be in place.

- Multiple Council funding streams made up the £6.3m annual expenditure, with differing governance arrangements depending on the stream. It was noted that the sector was not wholly reliant upon the Council to fund its activities.
- Services were audited to ensure that communities received high quality provision and it was noted that all concerns should be passed to the council to investigate.

Resolved that:-

- (1) the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board supports the development and introduction of an open and transparent Council funding process;
- (2) the Director of Housing consider the above as part of any redesign of grant making processes.

30/22

Housing Needs Assessment 2022

The Board received a presentation and summary of the **Housing Needs Assessment 2022**.

The purpose of this report was to create an understanding of the borough's demographics and demand for social housing to inform the Councils strategy moving forward. It was identified that the Council owned 21% of all residential units in the borough and of these 51% were houses, 41% were flats and 8% were bungalows and maisonettes.

The Council recognised that issues including the Right to Buy scheme was exacerbating the housing shortage in Sandwell. The Board noted that 457 properties had been purchased through the Scheme over a three- year period.

In addition, there were a significant number of privately-owned properties across the borough that were unoccupied; according to Council Tax records around 3,500 were unoccupied.

The Directorate of Housing also recognised that there are specific groups including asylum seekers, those with mobility

issues and adults with learning disabilities that needed to be considered within future housing developments.

Key findings of the Housing Needs Assessment 2022 included:

- Sandwell had a higher proportion of social housing stock (26%) compared to the national average of 17%.
- Sandwell's older population had grown slower than expected, instead the borough's younger population had seen the biggest growth.
- 3- bed properties were the highest proportion of the Council's stock, despite a greater demand for 1 and 2 bed properties on the housing waiting list.
- Re- let numbers were decreasing annually and has done so since 2017.

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

- That Sandwell was a densely populated area, higher than the West Midlands and national average, meaning availability of suitable land to build on was limited.
- Neighbourhood planning, in addition to house building took into account factors including access to green spaces and air quality.
- Compulsory purchase orders for long- term empty dwellings were being considered and the Director of Housing undertook to bring a draft strategy to a future meeting of the Board.
- Council homes void turnaround typically took a month depending on the nature of works required to bring it back to a lettable standard.
- Council house tenants experienced barriers whilst re-locating or downsizing due to property availability.
- The Council cannot currently build more properties than those lost via the right to buy scheme meaning that a collaborative approach with the private sector and registered social landlords was crucial.

Councillor Jalil left the meeting during consideration of this item.

Options for rent and service charge increases review 2023/24

The Board received a report on the Options for rent and service charge increases review 2023/24. The Board heard that proposals for 2%, 5% and 9% increases of the service charge for residents were currently being considered; all of which were below the current rate of inflation – the consumer price index (CPI) which is currently set at 10.1%.

The rent and service charge increases were being considered as the Council had been required to reduce rent charges by 1% per year for 4 years, from 2017- 2020. This had placed pressure on the Council's Housing Revenue Account.

Benchmarking exercises had been conducted against other local authorities suggested that 5-6% was a reasonable increase.

The Director for Housing outlined that inflationary cost pressures and the impact upon business had contributed to the discussions. It was also noted that due to caps on price increases the Council could not increase charges later in the municipal year.

The Board also heard plans to move away from the current system of tenants paying rent in arrears to paying upfront, this was to be articulated to residents and introduced gradually to ensure residents were not impacted financially.

The Board was further advised that the number of tenants paying at least one service charge was 10,437, representing 38.9% of council house tenants.

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

- Whilst increasing charges was not a desirable option, it was accepted that it was a necessity in order to adequately provide housing services and complete property repairs and improvements.

- The reasons for increasing charges needed to be well communicated to tenants, as the country was in a cost of living crisis.
- The Cabinet Member for Housing outlined that in order to maintain the current service price increases were required.
- The Council has low rates of eviction and utilises systems to identify those tenants who were arrears so support could be provided.
- Inflation within the construction sector was currently 20% which further impacted repairs and improvements to housing stock.
- It was noted that housing benefit would cover increases.
- Housing Associations were lobbying for a 7% increase; the Board felt that this was an acceptable and understandable level of increase.

32/22

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 Service Manager for Housing had attended a meeting of the group and had formulated how reports would be presented in the future.

The Chair of the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group outlined that the Group would be undertaking reviews on the following key areas and reporting back to the Board with any recommendations arising:

- Housing Hub
- Home Checks
- Building Safety
- Responsive repairs and customer satisfaction

The Board noted that the Chair and Vice- Chair of the Tenant and Leaseholder Scrutiny Group were due to attend the Tenant and Resident Conference in early October.

Work Programme and Cabinet Forward Plan

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

The Board discussed the cost of living crisis and noted that this was scheduled to be brought to its next meeting in November 2022. The approach of the council and third sector groups was discussed, including the establishment of Warm Banks and communications to residents.

The Director of Public Health advised the Board that a coordinated and rapid approach needed to be taken and engagement with the Voluntary and Community sector, as well as faith groups would be important when considering Winter Preparations. This mirrored the successful and nationally-recognise approach that had been utilised in Sandwell during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The Board's input into the Council's corporate response to the cost of living crisis was both needed and valued. It was therefore agreed that a Working Group be established to advise the leadership team on relevant matters.

Resolved that a Working Group comprised of the members of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board be established to support and review the Council's approach to the cost of living crisis.

Meeting ended at 7.33pm

Contact: democratic_services@sandwell.gov.uk