

# Minutes of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

**Tuesday 10 September 2024 at 6.04pm  
In the Council Chamber - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

**Present:** Councillor Lewis (Chair);  
Councillors Dhatt (Vice-Chair), W Gill, Rahman, A  
Singh and Tromans.

**Also Present:** Councillor Cotterill.

**Officers:** Alan Lunt (Executive Director – Place), James  
McLaughlin (Assistant Chief Executive), Phil Connor  
(Interim Neighbourhoods Project Lead), Mark Sheldon  
(Project and Development Officer), Alexander Goddard  
(Scrutiny Lead Officer) and John Swann (Democratic  
Services Officer).

## 32/24 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors  
Chidley, Davies, Iqbal, Jeffcoat and Owen.

## 33/24 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

## 34/24 **Minutes**

**Resolved** that the minutes of the meetings held on 14  
March 2024 are confirmed as a correct record.

35/24 **Additional Items of Business**

There were no urgent additional items of business to consider.

36/24 **Housing Repairs - Addressing the Backlog and Improving the Service**

The Board received an overview of the housing repairs service. The service had been under considerable pressure due to new building and fire safety legislation and a higher volume of repairs reported by tenants.

The Building Safety Regulator, established under the Building Safety Act 2022, had the power to inspect and impose sanctions upon the Council if the stock was not adequately maintained. There was also a legal requirement to engage and consult our tenants effectively.

It was reported that the service standards (targets for completion of different categories of repair) were to be reviewed in collaboration with tenants to ensure expectations were achievable.

Benchmarking exercises against other councils had taken place and the service standards and timescales of Sandwell Council were set at a higher standard than in most comparable authorities.

It was reported that the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) had been impacted by rent having increased slower than the rate of inflation and the cost of providing the repairs services.

In addition, the Safety and Quality Consumer Standard required the Council to know the condition of all housing stock. The Council was in the early stages of data collection to complete the programme of stock condition surveys. It was noted that these surveys were resource intensive.

It was accepted that service pressures, lack of funding and the lack of contractors had contributed to a backlog of repair jobs.

Efforts had been underway to improve the service and these included:

- Expansion of the dynamic resource scheduling software to maximise productivity.
- Unifying the service across the Borough to reduce the north/south service delivery divide.
- Review of job descriptions of personnel in consultation with trade unions.
- The introduction of the 'right first time process' which aimed to reduce the need for multiple visits to fix an issue.
- The consolidation of contracts which were more attractive to the market and delivered more value for the council.

Priority had been given to emergency and urgent repair tasks to reduce the backlog which had increased the proportion of emergency jobs completed within timescale by 9%.

A Housing Resolution Team which was external to the wider council complaints team had also been established to change how complaints were handled and improve the customer experience.

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

- It was agreed that the action plan to address the housing repairs issues would be cascaded to the Board.
- Of the 120,000 repair requests, over 33% were classified as 'emergency'. Industry standards suggested that 10% should be classified as emergency, 20% as urgent and 70% as routine.
- The classification of emergency repairs was due to be revised as it was broader than other providers and included non-emergency urgent repairs. This had resulted in the Council having to complete 'non-emergency' repairs within the 24-hour timeframe.

- The percentage of emergency and non-emergency repairs completed within timescales (target of 95%) were required to be reported to the Building Safety Regulator.
- A tenants conference had taken place, during which consultation of possible changes to the repairs policy had taken place and service pressures had been relayed to tenants.
- The Council had not collected data centrally relating to the six key safety elements (gas, electric, fire, water, asbestos and elevators) and these would be recorded as part of the stock condition surveys. As a result, the Council had self-reported itself to the Building Safety Regulator.
- The directorate of place was undertaking efforts to procure and implement new software systems, these were:-
  - Repairs and Asset Management – This software would allow officers to collect and monitor the condition of the housing stock, including adherence to the decent home standard. It was envisaged that the new system would be in place in 2025.
  - Housing and Tenancy Management – The software currently in use was no longer supported by the manufacturer, although a six-month extension had been agreed. It was envisaged that the new system would be in place in 2025.
  - Compliance – This software would collect and monitor compliance with the requirements of the Building Safety Regulator – including the six key safety elements. It was envisaged that this system would be operational by April 2025.
- It was confirmed that the three software systems would be integrated with each other.

- The 'right first time process' had been rolled out across the Council following a pilot period, although the service had faced recruitment challenges, improvements were anticipated within the next twelve-month timescale. As part of this, teams and supervisors were grouped; this ensured that only specialist supervisors were signing off jobs as completed.
- Productivity within the direct labour organisation had increased over the previous year, with operatives now completing a rate of 4.1 jobs per day rather than the 2.5 rate of twelve months ago.
- Although retention rates of staff were very high, the recruitment of employees was challenging across the sector, particularly as private sector companies could afford to pay higher wages. Rates of pay had been benchmarked with other local authorities and the Council had a well-supported workforce with good terms and conditions.
- It was acknowledged that the Council had an aging workforce and a Workforce Strategy was being created which would ensure staff had opportunities for learning and education.
- Members identified that the Workforce Strategy should detail engagement of potential employees (via local colleges or similar), apprenticeships, staffing pipelines and efforts to ensure staff morale was high.
- Quality satisfaction surveys were completed by homeowners after repairs had taken place, responses indicated that 95% were satisfied by the quality of repair, compared to a target of 92%.
- Historically 80 contracts had been in place with contractors which supported the repairs function. These had been 'bundled' and consolidated into a reduced number of broader contracts which were more attractive to companies when the Council awarded the contracts.

- Key considerations when awarding contracts in line with the Council's procurement process included value money and utilising local firms.
- It was reported that staff had been sometimes resistant to change within the service, an example included staff resistance to utilising the dynamic resource scheduling software as it meant staff didn't receive a list of jobs at the beginning of the day.
- It was acknowledged that tenants were frequently incorrectly reporting routine repairs as emergency to speed up the repairs process. This had resulted in incorrect trade staff being despatched to site which meant the job took longer to complete.
- Translation services were available to those using telephone to speak to staff at the contact centre.

The Executive Director of Place undertook to submit regular reports to the Board to ensure Members could maintain oversight.

**Resolved:-**

- (1) that the Executive Director - Place submits quarterly updates to the Board of the procurement and implementation of the three housing software systems;
- (2) that the Executive Director – Place submits quarterly updates containing key performance indicators to the Board in relation to Housing Repairs.

37/24

**Neighbourhood Working – Implementation of the New Model**

The Board received an overview of the new Neighbourhood Working Model.

A review of neighbourhood working had been commissioned in Autumn 2023, following which its findings and recommendations had been collated and approved by Cabinet in July 2024.

It had been identified that neighbourhood working was not effective in some instances and that staff often had similar responsibilities but worked in different departments rather than collaboratively. Consultation was due to take place with both trade unions and impacted staff to progress the new model.

The creation of ward plans was being explored, to align with the Council plan and to enable members to champion local matters and to further their role as community leaders at a ward-based level.

Proposals included ward budgets for members to use for schemes within their wards, the indicative figure for which was £1,500 per member, although this was not yet confirmed.

The estimated date for implementation of the new model was April 2025.

It was proposed that the Board would receive an annual report on this matter annually.

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

- Administrative costs would be associated with processing grant applications for ward budgets from community groups requesting support.
- The introduction of Ward Coordinators was welcomed by members, however there was a consensus that requests made by Ward Coordinators on behalf of members were being disregarded by senior officers.
- The model was proposed to increase value across the organisation and at ward level, however buy-in from officers was essential for this to take place.
- Collaborative working between officers and members was important to ensure collaborative working was taking place.

- A leadership and management conference and development programme was due to take place, during which Chief Officers would set out 'what good looks like' so behavioural and cultural expectations could be set.
- Similar models at other Councils had been effective – notably in Rotherham which had a similarly diverse population to Sandwell.
- A consultation had taken place to build up a picture of the priorities and concerns of residents, however only approximately 1,000 responses had been received. Whilst this had allowed a broad picture to be built at town level, the low level of responses did not enable a list of ward priorities to be created.
- It was proposed that a quarterly update on ward activity and an annual report would be submitted to Council.
- Ward plans would benefit from standardisation and alignment with the Council plan, however local priorities should also be incorporated within them.
- The new ward plans would incorporate the local network of voluntary and community groups, businesses and retailers, ward officers, Council services and Business Improvement District (BID) teams.
- The new model would be funded from existing budgets at no additional cost to the Council.
- A review of voluntary and community sector funding was being conducted and was due to be concluded in November 2024.

**Resolved:-**

- (1) that the Assistant Chief Executive ensures ward plans reflect local priorities and are aligned with the Council Plan;



- (2) that the Assistant Chief Executive submits updates in relation to the implementation of the New Neighbourhoods Working Model to the Board;
- (3) that the Assistant Chief Executive undertakes a Borough-wide survey engagement exercise to ensure the ward plans reflect local priorities.

38/24      **Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Action Tracker**

The Board noted the status of actions and recommendations it had made.

39/24      **Work Programme**

The Board received the draft work programme for the municipal year of 2024/ 25. A work programming session had taken place on 9 July 2024 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 2024/25 is approved.

40/24      **Cabinet Forward Plan**

The Board noted and received the Cabinet Forward Plan.

Meeting ended at 8.40pm  
(meeting adjourned between 7.22- 7.35pm and 8.26- 8.36pm).

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