

Minutes of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

**Thursday 5 December 2024 at 6.06pm
In the Council Chamber - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

Present: Councillor Lewis (Chair);
Councillors Dhatt (Vice-Chair), Chidley, Cotterill,
Davies, W Gill, Jeffcoat, A Singh, Tromans and Ms
Brown.

Also Present: Councillor J Singh.

In attendance: Sue Smith (Member of the Tenants and Leaseholders
Scrutiny Group).

Officers: Alan Lunt (Executive Director – Place), Nigel
Collumbell (Assistant Director – Housing Management),
Karl Robinson (Head of Housing Solutions), Christine
Davis (Tenant Engagement Officer) and John Swann
(Democratic Services Officer).

41/24 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Iqbal
and Rahman.

42/24 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

43/24 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 10
September 2024 are confirmed as a correct record.

44/24 **Additional Items of Business**

There were no urgent additional items of business to consider.

45/24 **Housing Improvement and Transformation Update**

Further to Minute No. 36/24 (meeting held on 10 September 2024) the Board received an update in relation to the housing improvement and transformation plan.

The Building Safety Regulator (BSR) and the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH) had made significant changes to the way landlords were required to manage and maintain properties and digital records, and report compliance and performance.

As a registered provider of social housing, the Council was required to urgently establish a system and processes to ensure it was compliant with the new regulatory requirements. Non-compliance with some aspects of the new landlord requirements were now an offence.

On 30 October 2024, the RSH had issued a Regulatory Judgement in relation to the Council's adherence to the consumer standards regulatory framework. The Council had received a 'C3' categorisation which was defined as having 'serious failings in the landlord delivering the outcomes of the consumer standards and significant improvement was needed'.

Key failings had been identified and these included:

Asbestos

- The Council was only able to evidence that asbestos management surveys/ inspections had taken place on 2% of relevant buildings.
- As a result, data cleansing to identify evidence of inspections had been conducted and, where necessary, officers had re-inspected properties. It was

anticipated that the Council's Asbestos Register would be 100% compliance by March 2025.

Electrical safety Inspections

- Although 96% of council homes had received electrical safety inspections, records had not been kept on the completion of remedial actions arising from those inspections.
- As a result, the highest priority remedial actions were being carried out at the point of inspection. Remedial works that were not urgent were being completed in date order, an additional contractor had been appointed to speed up works and to ensure accurate record keeping.

Repairs Backlog

- At the time of the Regulatory Judgement, the Council had over 14,000 overdue repairs, 90% of which were yet to be allocated to personnel for completion.
- As a result, data cleansing had been undertaken to quantify the severity of the jobs that made up the backlog. As of mid- November 2024, there were 11,678 outstanding routine jobs, with all urgent or emergency jobs having been completed.
- Outstanding works were to be packaged up in batches and outsourced to an external contractor with an anticipated start date of April 2025. Properties in which vulnerable people resided would be prioritised for completion.

Stock Condition

- There was a lack of effective and up- to- date stock condition data.
- As a result, two incumbent contractors were due to deliver 50% of the stock condition surveys by the end of 2025. The Cabinet was scheduled in December 2024 to approve a further contractor to deliver the remaining 50% of the stock condition surveys by the end of 2026.

The Council had agreed with the Regulatory Judgement and was meeting regularly with the RSH so it could monitor the Council's progress towards compliance with the Consumer Standards Framework.

On the advice of the RSH, the Council's partner consultants were due to carry out a review of the updated information provided to the RSH to ensure progress was monitored in an objective and independent manner.

Three operating systems were being procured to support the housing improvement journey:

- Compliance Software
 - A procurement exercise had been undertaken and it was envisaged that the software package would be in place by April 2025. This software was required to enable the Council to maintain accurate records on compliance with the six key safety factors.
 - In the interim, data on these six factors had been cleansed and updated:
 - Fire Safety – 94.98% compliant.
 - Gas Safety – 99.5% compliant.
 - Electrical Safety – 96.5% compliant.
 - Water Management – 100% compliant.
 - Asbestos Management – 59% compliant.
 - Life Maintenance – 100% compliant.
- Asset Management Software
 - The Council did not have a dedicated system in place to store and analyse stock condition data. A software package was estimated to be operational by March 2026 to demonstrate to the RSH that the Council was equipped to appropriately maintain the council's housing stock.
- Housing Management Software
 - The Council had secured an extension to its support and maintenance contract for the current system, OpenHousing, until 2027. Efforts were underway to develop a specification for a new single integrated Housing Management system, and it was estimated that the software would be fully operational by September 2027.

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

- An officer led Housing Improvement and Transformation Board had been established which would report progress regularly to the Senior

Leadership Time and the Cabinet Member received weekly updates.

- It was agreed that the costs and details in relation to the external consultants that had been appointed would be provided to the Board.
- The Council would not incur any financial penalty as a result of not being able to evidence compliance in relation to the six key safety factors.
- All high- risk buildings, including tower blocks had been evaluated and confirmed as fire safety compliant. It was acknowledged that refusal by tenants to allow access had hindered efforts to ensure compliance.
- Stock condition surveys were to be redone on a five-year rolling basis.
- The Executive Director – Place undertook to provide the Directorate Action Plan and Risk Register to the Board in January 2025.
- The Council was able to utilise funding from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) if required to reduce the backlog of housing repairs.
- Sickness levels of internal housing repairs staff were increasing, and the workload was understood to be a factor.
- During the roll- out of the new software packages staff would be trained on how to use them. It was anticipated that there would be a brief crossover period where both the existing and new systems would be operational to allow data to transferred from existing systems.
- The private rented sector team was engaging with landlords to ensure that properties were up to the required standard.
- A number of complaints had been received in relation to the standard of gardens for prospective tenants at council houses. Whilst the council ensured all gardens were safe prior to letting, budgetary constraints meant that they were not restored to a pristine standard.
- Electrical safety data was being collected at pace, with the oldest properties being prioritised. It was agreed that details of any electrical fires that had occurred in council properties within the previous five years would be shared with the Board.

It was agreed that both the Board and the Tenants and Leaseholders Scrutiny Group would receive regular progress updates.

Resolved:-

- (1) that the Executive Director - Place submits the Directorate Action Plan and Risk Register to the Board in January 2025;
- (2) that the Executive Director – Place provides figures to the Board in relation to:
 - (a) the estimated cost of remedying the repairs backlog;
 - (b) the confirmed cost of remedying the repairs backlog subsequent to procurement processes taking place;
 - (c) how this cost is to be met, including the impact on the Housing Revenue Account reserves;
- (3) that the Executive Director – Place reports any delays if applicable of electrical safety inspections to the Board.

(Ms Brown left the meeting during consideration of this item.)

46/24 Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy Update

The Board received an update on the delivery of the Homelessness and Rough Sleeper Strategy, which had been approved in 2022.

The key priorities set out within the Strategy were:

- Preventing homelessness.
- Improving communication, education and engagement.
- Enhancing housing options.
- Improving partnership, collaboration and whole system.
- Eliminating rough sleeping.
- Making best use of resources.

Progress had been very positive for all key priorities, however the 'Improving partnership, collaboration and whole

system' theme had encountered some slippage. This was due to the other themes being higher priority and the need to ensure progress was considerable before diverting resources to wider system influences.

It was acknowledged that the homelessness sector had undergone considerable change since 2022. When the strategy was written there were only 40 households in temporary accommodation, however this had subsequently risen to 240.

Existing council stock had been converted into temporary accommodation (TA) to reduce the Council's reliance upon bed and breakfast accommodation. This included Applewood Grove, Manifoldia Grange and Holly Grange, which combined represented 90 accommodation units and had saved £1.2 million of expenditure for accommodation costs.

There were approximately 19,000 applicants on the housing waiting list. There had been a 78% increase in those presenting as homeless since 2022/ 23.

Factors that had led to an increased number of individuals presenting as homeless included:-

- increased levels of eviction in the private rented sector (PRS) following the Covid eviction freeze;
- demand outstripping supply in the PRS, which had led to landlords increasing rent charges;
- greater demand on homelessness services due to resettlement schemes and asylum decisions.

The Council's homeless prevention rates were between 60-70%, which was amongst the highest in the country. The Council's preferred model was to support people in their own homes for longer rather than place them in temporary accommodation. This had resulted in reduced costs for the Council and higher outcomes for residents who, with support, could maintain their tenancy.

The homelessness prevention grant funding from central government was due to be reduced by 41% by April 2025, due to changes in the funding formula. Whilst this had not yet been finalised, if confirmed this would reduce homelessness staff capacity by 50%, and the Council's

prevention model would cease to exist as funding would allow crisis management only. Should the changes take place it was envisaged that more people would present as homeless and the number of households in temporary accommodation would increase.

Additional challenges included the £2.4 million per annum spent on bed and breakfast fees. The Cabinet had recently approved the sourcing of PRS interim accommodation, and a tender was currently being prepared, which aimed to source 150 properties. This would enable accommodation sites with support staff and cooking facilities for residents and reduce bed and breakfast costs currently being paid by the Council.

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

- There had been a 23% reduction in council home re-lets. This was as a result of the Council being better at sustaining tenancies and tenants being unable to move to the PRS due to financial constraints, which had been exacerbated by the cost of living crisis.
- Central government was due to abolish evictions under Section 21 in the Renters' Rights Bill, whilst this would end no fault evictions it was envisaged that evictions would increase in the short-term. This was because landlords with challenging tenants may evict them before the legislation came into place and due to expectations that landlords would leave the market.
- The Homelessness Partnership Forum would include a representative with lived experience of homelessness from January 2025.
- A panel, constituted of those with lived experience of homelessness could be of benefit, and support the Rough Sleepers Strategy.
- The Head of Housing Solutions and PRS undertook to provide clarity to the Board in relation to the housing allocations policy's approach to individuals with debt.
- Those who were placed in long-term accommodation were provided with wrap-around support to ensure placements were stable.
- The average length of stay in temporary accommodation was approximately 15 weeks, although this was longer for larger households.

- Families were not placed in hostels to ensure that they had their own bathroom facilities.
- Hotel accommodation was cheaper to block- book for multi- year periods however this could result in rooms being funded by the Council that were not utilised.
- The Council continued to engage with homeless people who declined previous offers of accommodation to ensure they could be placed appropriately.
- Void council properties were returned as ready- to- let within an average timescale of 55 days, which was comparable to other local authorities, with approximately 350 void properties at any given time.
- There were approximately 2,500 empty homes in the Borough, however efforts were underway to try and acquire these at an affordable rate.

Resolved that the Executive Director – Place establish a panel, constituted of those with lived experience of homelessness to support the Rough Sleeper Strategy.

The Board placed on record its thanks to the Housing Solutions team and commended officers on their notable and considerable achievements in relation to homelessness.

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

47/24 **Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Action Tracker**

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

48/24 **Cabinet Forward Plan and Board Work Programme**

The Board noted its work programme and received the Cabinet Forward Plan.

Further to Minute No. 39/24 (meeting held on 10 September 2024), the Board was conducting a scrutiny review with the draft title of 'Bringing Communities Together' and established a working group to progress the review.

Resolved that a Working Group comprised of Councillors Cotterill, Dhatt, Davies, W Gill, Jeffcoat, Lewis, A Singh and Ms Brown is established to conduct the scrutiny review on bringing communities together.

Meeting ended at 8.15pm
(meeting adjourned between 7.05- 7.14pm and 8.06- 8.11pm).

Contact: democratic_services@sandwell.gov.uk