

**Minutes of the Housing and Public Realm
Scrutiny Committee
Thursday 10th June, 2021, 2021 at 6.00 pm
In the Council Chamber, Council House, Dudley**

Present:

Councillor I Bevan (Chair)
Councillor S Henley (Vice-Chair)
Councillors K Ahmed, A Aston, D Borley, J Clinton, A Davies, A Finch, P Sahota, S Saleem,
D Stanley and T Westwood.

Officers:

B Heran – Deputy Chief Executive, P Davies – Director of Housing and Community Services
and K Griffiths – Democratic Services Officer (Directorate of Finance and Legal).

Also in attendance

Two members of the public

1 **Chair's Comments**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the first meeting of the Housing and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee, in particular the new Members elected on 6th May, 2021 and provided a brief introduction of his expectations and requirements of Committee Members throughout the 2021/22 municipal year.

2 **Apology for absence**

An apology for absence was submitted on behalf of Councillor W Sullivan.

3 **Declarations of Interests**

Councillor S Henley declared a non-pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 7 – Overview of Safe and Sound (Dudley’s Community Safety Partnership) and Focus on Community Cohesion Strategic Group due to his employment with the West Midlands Fire Service.

4 **Public Forum**

There were no issues raised under this agenda item.

5 **Annual Scrutiny Programme 2021/22**

A report of the Lead for Law and Governance (Monitoring Officer) was submitted on items to be included in the Annual Scrutiny Programme for detailed consideration by this Scrutiny Committee during 2021/22.

Reference was made to the restructure proposals for the Directorates of Housing and Community Services and Public Realm and the loss of dedicated staff in those areas. It was suggested that an item be included in the annual scrutiny programme to update Members on transformation progress, including structure, interim arrangements, budgets involved and the functions of each Directorate. It was important for Members to understand the priorities identified in the Dudley Council Plan 2019-22 and be able to scrutinise departmental performance, including comparisons for previous years, key and future work plan priorities, failings, improvements, and lessons learned in order to ensure that an effective and dynamic Council Plan was delivered, aligning the core Council priorities. Member support was essential to ensure the successful delivery of the service moving forward. The Deputy Chief Executive acknowledged the points raised and would liaise further with the Chair of the Committee and Democratic Services with a view to including the item in the 2021/22 scrutiny programme.

Members expressed disappointment at the lack of scrutiny/member participation prior to decisions being made and emphasised the importance of scrutiny. The Deputy Chief Executive highlighted the function of Communications and Public Affairs, however, emphasised that publication of information in local newspapers was out of the control of the Local Authority. Comments were made on the number of items outlined in the work programme hindering the ability to effectively scrutinise matters and it was considered that scrutiny of one or two items per Committee was preferred. It was envisaged that should items need to be discussed and scrutinised in more detail, additional meetings/working groups would be considered.

Resolved



- (1) That the information contained in the report and the items in the Annual Scrutiny Programme for consideration by this Committee during 2021/22 be noted.
- (2) That the Committee confirm the programme of business below, subject to the need for flexibility to reflect any changes that might arise during the municipal year:

Thursday 10th June, 2021

Housing White Paper (Tenants Charter)
Overview of Safe and Sound (Dudley's Community Safety Partnership) and
Focus on Community Cohesion Strategic Group

Wednesday 22nd September, 2021

Use of Glyphosate Weed Killer
Housing Board/Dudley Federation of Tenants and Residents Association
(DFTRA) and tenant participation
Draft Annual Housing report

Thursday 18th November, 2021

Medium Term Financial Strategy
Review of Housing Medium Term Financial Strategy
Highways Maintenance (to include information on potholes and general
condition of roads

Thursday 27th January, 2022

Safe and Sound (Dudley Community Safety Partnership)

Wednesday 30th March, 2022

Black Country Transport Hub Collaboration Agreement
Waste Strategy

- (3) That consideration be given by the Deputy Chief Executive, the Chair of the Committee and Democratic Services on including and scheduling an item to the Scrutiny Programme in relation to the transformation progress.
- (4) That the Lead for Law and Governance, following consultation with the Chair and Vice-Chair, be authorised to make all the necessary arrangements to enable this Committee to undertake its programme of scrutiny work during the 2021/22 municipal year.
- (5) That the terms of reference for the Housing and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee, as set out in the Appendix to the report submitted, be noted.



5 Housing White Paper (Tenants Charter)

A report of the Director of Housing and Community Services was submitted on the Housing White Paper bringing a change in the relationship between the Regulator of Social Housing, social landlords and tenants and develop into important legislation to incorporate the learning from the Grenfell fire tragedy and the last five years of regulatory approach.

The Director of Housing and Community Services gave a verbal presentation, referring to key information associated with the Housing White Paper plan. The White Paper was launched in consultation and engagement with social housing residents as a result of the Grenfell Tower tragedy in June 2017, which raised critical questions for everyone involved in social housing. The White Paper's vision was to raise the standard of social housing, to make clear the standards that every social tenant in England was entitled to expect from their landlords, ensure that people felt safe in their homes and were able to have problems fixed before they spiralled out of control. It was also expected that complaints should be investigated effectively and to be supported with first steps of ownership. The Charter aimed to give social housing tenants a voice and to ensure that they were listened to and protected and empowered by a regulatory regime, together with a culture of transparency and accountability.

While much of the responsibility for delivering the expectations set out in the White Paper rested with social landlords, its implementation would be underpinned by a strengthened consumer regulation regime that would be carried out by the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH). Proactive consumer regulation and tenant satisfaction measures were important supporting tools to help deliver the outcomes and support assurances that standards were met.

Changes to legislation would be time consuming and during that time the Government would be consulting with stakeholders, including local authorities and tenants to ensure that the social consumer regulation was fit for purpose and complemented the economic regulation work. Collaborative working between landlord and tenant was essential to ensure the effective delivery of the White Paper charter outcomes.

Following the presentation, Members had the opportunity to ask questions, make comments and responses were provided where necessary, as follows:-

- Reference was made to incorporating the general repair/littering of roads into the services outcomes associated with the requirements of the White Paper.



- Robust building and fire safety regulations was considered paramount to ensure tenants were safe in their homes. Increased awareness for tenants on fire and structural protections in place to manage risk to buildings, smoke and carbon monoxide alarms fitted to all properties, information in relation to electrical safety and tenant participation were all considered critical processes to support the White Paper outcomes. Members were advised that a review of the Decent Homes Standards Policy was currently being carried out to ensure that landlords were meeting the high performance standards expected from tenants. Ongoing safety work and monitoring was essential, particularly as gas was being phased out and would be more reliant on electric alternatives.
- It was acknowledged that the system used to report maintenance issues/repair work required modifications and Members were assured that frequent monitoring in relation to the services was carried out to identify improvements. It was essential that tenants had clear instructions and knowledge of the procedures on the requirements of reporting repairs and maintenance issues.
- The Government's definition on renting was that affordable homes would cost no more than 80% of the average local market rent. Home ownership was a little more complicated with mortgage payments on a property being more than would be paid in rent on council housing, but below market levels.
- It was acknowledged that a number of council/private tenants did not adhere to tenancy conditions leading to poor internal and external conditions of properties. It was emphasised landlords should be more proactive and given additional authority to ensure that tenants did not breach tenancy conditions. It was accepted that private sector landlords could do more to promote tenancy conditions and it was noted that additional employees had been taken on to focus on issues associated with private sector landlords and to align the services and ensure that a consistency approach was delivered. It was considered that Member participation was also essential to the successful management of the service.
- Concern was expressed at the length of time building materials were left on a property following maintenance/repair work being carried out prior to collection. It was acknowledged that the service required improvements and ongoing consideration was being provided to improve the delivery of that service area. Members were advised to contact the Director of Housing and Community Services should they identify any materials left on a property for prolonged periods.
- It was acknowledged that very few complaint cases had been referred to the Housing Ombudsman Service. The process for dealing with complaints was frequently monitored with the majority of cases being dealt with by the Local Authority satisfactorily prior to the referral to the Ombudsman. However, the service was frequently being monitored for any improvements, however, in order to ensure the service was delivered effectively, it was acknowledged that collaboration with tenants was an essential part of the process.



- Reference was made to the Allocations Process. Members were advised that a robust review had taken place and considered by the Housing Allocations Working Group in 2019/20 and was now considered an area of best practice. The Policy was updated to ensure that a fair and proportionate approach across the service was provided to applicants.
- Reference was made to reduction/removal of carbon emissions from homes and the move towards a zero-carbon climate. Further consideration and alternative methods/systems on how to remove all man-made greenhouse gas emissions from the atmosphere would be considered and discussed in further detail at the Zero Carbon Climate Working Group. The Local Authority was already promoting cycling in the Borough to reduce the fuel emissions caused from vehicles.
- Dedicated staff was considered an essential part in delivering the outcomes outlined in the White Paper, frequent training was provided to all staff on the requirements of the Charter to ensure that the service was being provided effectively. The Director of Housing and Community Services commended the incredible work provided by the staff during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Resolved

- (1) That the information contained in the report, be noted.
- (2) That a further report be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee once the White Paper moved through Parliament into legislation.

6 Overview of Safe and Sound (Dudley's Community Safety Partnership) and focus on Community Cohesion Strategic Group

A report of the Director of Housing and Community Services was submitted to provide an overview of Safe and Sound (Dudley's Community Safety Partnership) and to provide detail in respect of the work of the Community Cohesion Strategic Group.

In presenting the report submitted, the Director of Housing and Community Services gave an overview of the report, and in doing so, referred to the structure chart and priorities outlined in Appendix 1 of the report submitted. Members were advised that the Responsible Authorities had a statutory duty to ensure that key agencies worked collaboratively in a Community Safety Partnership.

Priorities were identified through Dudley Borough's Strategic Assessment, Dudley: Have Your Say and West Midlands Now and outlined in paragraph 17 of the report submitted, together with a focus on the West Midlands Police High Impact Areas for Dudley.



The purpose of the Community Cohesion Strategic Group was referred to and the work provided by the Group which focused on hate crime, modern slavery and preventing extremism and the programmed work/training of the Group moving forward.

Following the presentation, Members had the opportunity to ask questions, make comments and responses were provided where necessary, as follows:-

- Although Members acknowledged the work provided by the Community Safety Partnership, concerns were expressed with the increase in the number of crimes reported on the streets of Dudley Borough and the lack of resources available. It was envisaged that statistics would not improve until dedicated resources were placed in key areas of concern to tackle crime and anti-social behaviour. Improvement strategies had been discussed and implemented with increased Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) in the Borough, Task and Finish Groups had been established to discuss identified outbreaks of crime and possible solutions moving forward, however, it was acknowledged that ongoing collaborative working with key agencies was essential in preventing crime and meeting regulatory requirements. The lack of data in relation to crime and anti-social behaviour was referred to and it was suggested that crime maps for each area in the Dudley Borough be provided highlighting crime levels and statistics raising awareness for both Ward Councillors and members of the public of the potential risks associated in various areas.
- In referring to the low level of response received following a recent small pilot carried out in local schools in relation to reporting hate crime, it was anticipated that the issue would be discussed further at Task and Finish Groups to raise awareness and to emphasise the importance of reporting such crimes.
- As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the programmed training on Modern Slavery had been postponed, however, National Referral Mechanism training had taken place virtually and was now being rolled out to appropriate staff across the Local Authority. Additional basic training was now available as an e-Learning package through Dudley Safeguarding People Partnership for both Local Authority and multiagency staff. The lack of training on Modern Slavery for Members was referred to and it was suggested that Members of the Local Authority also be offered training, which would increase awareness and help members identify key signs of potential offences. The Director of Housing and Community Services indicated that a link to the e-Learning package would be circulated to all Members of the Council to watch.
- Reference was made to the Dudley Children and Young People's Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and what it was responsible for. Members were advised that the service involved a number of key organisations working together to protect and safeguard children and young people. Referrals to MASH were made by any of the key organisations and extensive training was provided to all involved in the MASH to ensure the effective delivery of the service.



- Members welcomed the report and the work provided by the Safe and Sound (Dudley's Community Safety Partnership), however, key information required further publicity in order to raise public awareness and the process involved in reporting identified crime. The use of Community Forums was referred to as an opportunity to update Members and members of the public on any identified crime and to promote Safe and Sound awareness, together with support from local Members of Parliament (MP's), Police Crime and Commissioner and the Mayor of the Combined Authority. The Director of Housing and Community Services expressed appreciation for the comments made and further consideration would be made and included in a report to be submitted to the Committee on 27th January, 2022.

Resolved

- (1) That the information contained in the report, presentation, and as presented verbally at the meeting, be noted.
- (2) That the Director of Housing and Community Services submit a further report to the Housing and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee on 27th January, 2022.
- (3) That the Director of Housing and Community Services be requested to circulate the e-Learning package to all Members of the Council on Modern Slavery.

The meeting ended at 7.50pm

CHAIR

