

Minutes of the Place Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 15th July, 2015 at 6.00 pm
In Committee Room 2, The Council House, Dudley

Present:

Councillor A Finch (Chair)
Councillor M Aston (Vice-Chair)
Councillors J Hill, Z Islam, K Jordan, I Kettle, D Perks, H Rogers, K Shakespeare, G Simms and E Taylor

Officers:

M Williams (Chief Officer – Corporate and Customer Services) – Lead Officer to the Committee, P Coyne (Chief Officer – Planning and Economic Development), M Williams (Chief Officer – Environmental Management), S Evans (Head of Housing Options), I Gardner (Head of Construction), P Griffiths (Head of Investment – Investment and Procurement, H Marsh-Geyton (Head of Waste Care), J Scott (Principal Executive Support Officer) – all Place Directorate and R Sanders (Assistant Principal Officer, Democratic Services), Directorate of Resources and Transformation.

1. **Apologies for Absence**

An apology for absence from the meeting was received on behalf of Councillor K Casey.

2. **Appointment of Substitute Members**

Councillor E Taylor had been appointed as a Substitute Member for Councillor K Casey for this meeting of the Committee only.

3. **Declarations of Interest**

No member made a declaration of interest in respect of any matter to be considered at this meeting.

4. **Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meetings of the Adult Community and Housing Scrutiny Committee and the Urban Environment Scrutiny Committee, held on 9th and 30th March, 2015, respectively, be received.

5. **Public Forum**

No issues were raised under this agenda item.

6. **Terms of Reference for the Place Scrutiny Committee**

The Committee considered a report of the Strategic Director (Resources and Transformation) on the terms of reference of the Place Scrutiny Committee for the 2015/16 municipal year.

Resolved

That the terms of reference of the Place Scrutiny Committee, as set out in the Appendix to the report submitted, be noted.

7. **Annual Scrutiny Programme 2015/16**

The Committee considered a report of the Lead Officer and Strategic Director (Resources and Transformation) on the items agreed by the Overview and Scrutiny Management Board for inclusion in the Annual Scrutiny Programme for detailed consideration during 2015/16, these being:-

- Business friendly planning.
- Recycling participation.
- Housing voids/hard to let properties.

A brief summary on each topic was given by the relevant Chief Officer/ Head of Service, in which the following issues were referred to in particular:-

Business Friendly Planning – the Chief Officer (Economic Regeneration and Transportation) referred to the remit of the Committee to consider a variety of ways for improving and engaging with business in which key stakeholders were to be identified as to which would be influential in driving service improvements and achieving the long term objective of the Council of inward investment. The Chief Officer referred to the importance of mitigating bad experiences of businesses in the planning process and to the need to take appropriate action to intervene should this occur. .

In so doing, he referred to the initiatives that had already taken place, including the 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. duty officer service for enquiries and the free pre-application advice offered with the aim of clients incurring unnecessary costs and indicated the work being undertaken whereby advice would be proffered at an early stage regarding the availability of alternative sites should land for which planning consent was sought for business be deemed inappropriate. The Chair invited Members of the Committee to feed

back to the Chief Officer on any matter they considered should be included.

Reference was made to a possible need for greater consultation with businesses on certain specific issues of concern, for example the erection of a bus stop or public utility repair work proposed outside a small shop which could affect trade. The Chief Officer confirmed that this could be looked at but cautioned that the Council had little influence with public utilities. In response to a question on whether it was anticipated that witnesses would be called, the Chief Officer indicated that this was an option open to the Committee to pursue and suggested that the Committee might wish to interview representatives of businesses or their agents whom had had experience of the planning consent process.

Housing voids – the Head of Construction summarised the current position on voids, giving statistical information on the 663 homes in the Borough currently empty and indicated the different reasons why the situation pertained. The average re-let time was 92 days for all properties but this included properties with high investment needs and properties for which there was no demand. The average re-let time for routine voids was 53 days.

In the presentation the Head of Construction gave the reasons for low demand and stated the initiatives being taken to re-let low demand homes. Details were given in relation to the costs of returning voids to occupation, differentiating between routine voids and voids requiring more extensive work, including the installation of such facilities as new kitchens, bathrooms, rewiring, plastering and work to remove asbestos. Voids with structural work necessary to return them to occupation were considerably more expensive.

The Head of Construction outlined the way in which tenants were currently selected for empty homes and suggested that the Committee might wish to review current practice. He also suggested that the Committee might wish to consider the Empty Homes Quality Standard. He indicated how the bidding process for empty homes operated and gave statistical information in respect of properties for which bids were made, numbers for which were falling. The relationship between income received from letting and the ability to let and the consequential receipt of funding necessary for the satisfactory maintenance and improvement of the Council's housing stock was emphasised.

A question and answer session followed in which the following points were raised:-

Voids –

- On the issue of sustainability modelling, the Head of Investment referred to a proposal to engage a consultant who would assist in ensuring a vigorous and robust process was in place to justify weighing the value for money implications of restoring to use a low demand property against the ability to let the property taking into account significant investment need. Several members were unsupportive of this, expressing the consideration that Council officers should have necessary expertise to make this judgment without

outside assistance. The Head of Investment agreed to report back to the appropriate Chief Officer accordingly.

- In response to a comment by a member that the time taken to re-let routine voids appeared excessive, the view was expressed that comparisons should be made with other Authorities and it was agreed that this be arranged.
- In response to a comment that outgoing tenants should take responsibility for the condition in which properties were vacated, the Head of Construction confirmed that a transfer to another property would not be effected until particular conditions relating to the condition of the current property had been met.
- A member questioned the sustainability of investing in a property for the following 30 years when the property was over 60 years old. The Head of Investment confirmed that some properties, particularly high rise, had significant investment needs and decisions had to be made about their sustainability over a long period.
- It was suggested that the Committee look at the Allocations Policy Process for problem families together with whether the background checks and vetting of procedures for new tenants were sufficient. A report back on these issues was requested.
- The quality of repairs undertaken was questioned, with doubts raised over value for money. The view was expressed that the Committee should consider how the quality of repairs was monitored. It was also considered that timescales for repair should be looked at. The output of housing teams and working practices of housing teams was questioned.
- The view was expressed that the Committee should consider problems relating to access to properties involving mainly elderly tenants who resisted modernisation.
- The timescale for carrying out Aids and Adaptations for disabled/elderly tenants was requested.
- The usefulness of the choice based lettings system in stabilising problem areas with a view to improving them was questioned.
- Reference was made by one member to information requested previously on expenditure on voids and he asked again for this to be supplied. In relation to the advertisement of voids available for letting, he suggested that this could be extended to social media with the support of the Council's Communications Section as, although he followed Dudley on social media, he had not seen voids advertised through that medium. The same member advocated that the lettings policy be amended to allow applications from applicants who were born and raised in the Borough but no longer lived there.

- Further to clarification being given regarding the practices for asbestos removal, whereby the directly employed Council staff undertook non-licensed asbestos removal and sampling but that outside contractors were engaged for licensed asbestos removal, it was agreed that the issue of asbestos removal be considered as part of the review.

Recycling participation – in reporting on this matter, the Head of Waste Care indicated the plans set out in the Council's Waste Strategy for 2013-20 and the waste care service transformation carried out completed last year which had two key elements, these being to offer an extended recycling service to all residents in the Borough to include plastic bottles and cardboard, as well as cans, glass and paper and to provide households with wheelie bins for non recyclable waste.

The Head of Waste Care gave the background to the services provided to date. It had originally been anticipated that an additional 8500 tonnes of waste would be recycled but there was currently a shortfall of around 3000 tonnes. The perceived reasons were explained, these including that, in some areas the attitude of the residents in the Borough was not always positive in that material that could be recycled was sometimes instead deposited as general waste; there was considered to have been a lack of meaningful communication with residents leading to the conclusion that there was a need for the recycling profile to be raised and wider publicity given; that there has been changes in residents' habits nationally in that there was now far greater use of online newspapers, thus mitigating the use of waste paper bins, which impacted on revenue from this source, and that drinking habits had changed from bottles to cans. The Head of Waste Care also questioned whether a suitable incentive scheme would be advantageous and referred to a long standing vacancy for a dedicated Recycling Officer having now been filled.

The Head of Waste Care suggested that there was a need for interest in recycling and the services available to be stimulated and referred to a number of initiatives that might be engaged in to this effect, including working with schools on various recycling initiatives with the aim of children encouraging parents to recycle, the need to work with the community at every level with a view to changing the current culture and improving and developing innovative methods of communication, initiatives and strategies to revitalise interest, particularly in areas of poor participation.

A question and answer session followed in which the following issues were raised:-

- That it might be useful to sample the waste deposited in black bins with a view to ascertaining the waste that could be recycled.
- That greater guidance should be given on the type of waste suitable for recycling and that publicity to this could be given through a recycling website.
- the Head of Waste Care confirmed that the amount of glass deposited

in bins could be measured at the Waste to Energy Plant.

- The length of time in recruiting a replacement Recycling Officer was questioned, in response to which it was indicated that the quality of applicants had not previously been suitable.
- The point was made that, although newspapers were fewer, a lot more cardboard had been deposited in bins. The Head of Waste Care was of the view that there may have been some confusion with the public regarding the depositing of cardboard, since at one time the policy had been that this could not be accepted, and that it might be necessary for greater publicity to be given to the current policy whereby cardboard was collectable with paper waste.
- A suggestion was made that receptacles could combine different recyclable material. The Head of Waste Care indicated that waste now was regarded as a resource and had a financial value and was separated in order to send it for processing to different plants specialising in the particular type of waste deposited. The Head of Waste Care accepted, however, that better ways of storage could be explored.
- In response to a question, the Head of Waste Care explained the type of plastic that could be recycled and that which could not. The ability to recycle depended upon the density of the plastic and fresh markets were needed to be established for plastic that could or could not be recycled to date.
- A suggestion was made that green waste could be included in the review. The speed in which replacement green waste bins were supplied was also referred to.
- In relation to the latter point, the Head of Waste Care confirmed that this could be looked into but indicated that there was no budget for replacement bins.
- A suggestion was made that fortnightly collections might be advantageous.
- The need to seek the co-operation of businesses, e.g. takeaways, supermarkets was seen as an important issue and it was suggested also that key messages, including the impact of climate change, should be given.
- The need to notify the public more clearly of what could be put into a bin was emphasised.
- A suggestion was made that members might visit the Waste to Energy Plant at Lister Road.

It was recommended by one member that information on the budgets, staffing

and responsibilities of each service area for all topics be included in the review of activities.

Consideration was then given to the appointment of particular members to scrutinise the activities in each respective item approved for scrutiny for detailed consideration and to report back to the Committee accordingly. The following appointments were made:-

- Business friendly planning: Councillors I Kettle and G Simms.
- Recycling participation: Councillors Z Islam and K Shakespeare.
- Housing voids/hard to let properties: Councillors J Hill, D Perks and K Shakespeare (Councillor Shakespeare indicated that she would be prepared to stand down should Councillor K Casey wish to participate in this review).

Resolved

1. That the Annual Scrutiny Programme for 2015/16, as set out in the report and referred to above, be endorsed and;
2. That the information provided in respect of each respective review and the comments made and the responses given, as set out above, be noted; and
3. That the appointment of the particular members to conduct the detailed examination of the services and report back also be noted.
4. That, in relation to the order in which the reviews will be conducted, the following schedule be agreed:-

30th September, 2015 – Housing voids/hard to let properties.
23rd November, 2015 – Budget for 2016/17 and business friendly planning.
20th January 2016 – Recycling participation.

The meeting ended at 8.05 p.m.

CHAIR