

Minutes of the Place Scrutiny Committee

Thursday 9th March, 2017 at 6.00 pm
in Committee Room 2 at the Council House, Dudley

Present:

Councillor A Finch (Chair)
Councillor M Aston (Vice-Chair)
Councillors Z Islam, L Johnson, I Kettle, C Perks, M Rogers, R Scott-Dow, K Shakespeare and V Wale.

Officers:

I Newman – Chief Officer Finance and Legal Services (Lead Officer to the Committee) and K Taylor – Democratic Services Officer (Chief Executive's Directorate) A Lunt - Strategic Director Place; M Williams – Chief Officer – Environmental Services; I Gardner – Head of Housing Maintenance; S Evans – Head of Housing Options and Support and J Cunningham – Interim Chief Officer for Planning and Economic Development (All Place Directorate).

Also in attendance:

Councillor H Rogers (Observer)

28. **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received on behalf of Councillor M Attwood and M Rodgers.

29. **Declarations of Interest**

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

30. **Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 30th January, 2017, be approved as a correct record and signed.

31. **Public Forum**

No issues were raised under this agenda item.

32. **Outcome of inspection of the efficiency of the Direct Labour Organisation**

A report of the Strategic Director Place was submitted on the background behind the reasons for carrying out the inspection and place it in the context of the 30 year HRA business plan and investment requirements, and ongoing work towards producing an HRA strategic asset management plan, including a summary of the main findings of the report and the proposed next steps.

In presenting the report, the Strategic Director Place referred to the detailed inspection of Housing Services undertaken by Ark Consultants, which highlighted that the Direct Labour Organisation (DLO) was found to be performing well. A number of recommendations based on findings were outlined in Appendix A to the report submitted.

Social Housing providers benchmarking results identified a positive and encouraging result for Dudley against best quartile, however reductions in the cost per routine void and major works cost per property was needed and would be achieved by moving to a more proactive maintenance model of planned and programmed repairs and away from reactive works on an ad hoc basis.

The Strategic Director Place referred to the Ark benchmarking results 2015/16, and the recommendations suggested by Ark Consultants, in particular, reducing the level of sub-contracting by carrying out more work in-house, together with a proposal for an outsourced stores provision. A review of sickness and absence within the DLO would also be undertaken.

Assurance was given to the Committee that Dudley was actively pursuing ways to move the DLO to a more commercial basis and to achieve and maintain better value for money, and alongside the recommendations suggested by Ark Consultants, this would form a clear vision for the DLO and set out a clear action plan. Annual reports would also be submitted to future meetings of the Scrutiny Committee.

In responding to a question by a member, it was reported that Dudley employees that were suspected of using Council materials during the weekends on a private basis would be investigated and that appropriate disciplinary proceedings would take place as necessary.

The Strategic Director Place confirmed that the cost of commissioning of 'Ark' consultants to carry out the Inspection process was £24,000, however this was considered necessary and cost effective due to the level of expertise needed and to maintain an independent view and the fact that the DLO is responsible for expenditure in the region of £40m per annum.

Following concerns raised regarding the major work costs per property, the Head of Housing Maintenance, set out that ongoing scrutiny of costs were carried out in order to achieve best value for money.

The Head of Housing Maintenance confirmed that specialist principal contractors, such as Asbestos removal, in some instances, would sub-contract to another company to undertake the work required and that this would continue to be the case..

In responding to a member in relation to the 2% Decent Homes failure rate, the Strategic Director Place acknowledged that the quality of the Decent Homes Standard should be improved significantly, and the costs involved were dependent on the condition of the property. It was also noted that there were a number of low demand properties that were continually being reviewed under the Investment Strategy. A 30 year cost benefit analysis would be undertaken in order to determine whether investment in the dwellings concerned could be justified or whether alternative actions should be considered, including disposal or demolition.

In response to a request made by a member, the Strategic Director Place undertook to provide statistical data in respect of sickness and absence within the DLO and the Council, against figures for comparable organisations nationally.

A member referred to an incident when scaffolding had been erected at a property for maintenance works, and during the repairs another fault had been recognised by the tenant; however this could not be repaired at the same time and therefore resulted in two separate visits to the property. The Head of Housing Maintenance confirmed that this issue had been highlighted and would advise residents to contact the Repairs Management Centre immediately if they identified any issues.

Resolved

- (1) That the information contained in the report and Appendices to the report submitted, on the outcome of the inspection of the efficiency of the Direct Labour Organisation, be noted.
- (2) A further report be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee.
- (3) The Strategic Director Place be requested to provide members with statistical data in respect of sickness and absence within the Direct Labour Organisation and the Council, against national figures.

33. Housing Allocations

A report of the Strategic Director Place was submitted to open the process of reviewing the Council's Housing Allocations scheme, and to invite Members to identify any particular aspects of current policy and procedure that will need to be included within the review, following which officers would produce a detailed plan and timetable.

In presenting the report submitted, the Head of Housing Options and Support referred to the replacement of Dudley's Allocations Scheme with a bandings scheme to provide a simple and transparent process, and the changes implemented in accordance with legislation.

It was noted that the introduction of the requirement of a residency qualification of two years living or working within the borough for anyone wishing to join the housing waiting list had contributed to the reduction of numbers on the waiting list. Vacant properties were advertised on the Dudley At Home website.

The Head of Housing Options and Support outlined a number of issues that Members may wish to be considered arising from stock sustainability and demand issues and Welfare Reform and the challenge of affordability.

The challenges arising from Welfare Reform were referred to and it was confirmed that officers provided guidance on the proposed changes and operated an approach of 'informed choice'

The Head of Housing Options and Support reported that there was a significant number of owner occupiers applying for social housing, and confirmed that in most instances, these were not banded as high priority and any equity or beneficial interest would be taken into account.

In responding to a question by a member in relation to accommodating homeless people in hard to let properties, the Head of Housing Options and Support stated that any action to prevent a person becoming homeless would be explored in the first instance; however it was evident that people were still selective for housing. It was further reported that Dudley is successful in preventing homelessness and has a low level of rough sleepers compared to other authorities.

The Head of Housing Options and Support advised that Dudley had employed 2 fraud officers that operated various investigations, including unannounced visits, in regard to sub-letting social housing and commented on the pro-active fraud reporting system in place, and undertook to provide the Chair with information in regards to fraud prosecutions.

Concerns were raised by a member in regard to the letting of 'Available Now' properties to people from outside the borough. In responding, the Head of Housing Options and Support confirmed that a number of initial checks were carried out for approval to join the housing list, and when 'Available Now' homes are advertised the prospective tenants were then reviewed under the same process as Dudley customers.

A Member referred to an incident when a tenant was sent to Wolverhampton for emergency accommodation which was found to be unsuitable, in responding the Head of Housing Options and Support confirmed that the standards of emergency homes were regularly reviewed and dependent on the circumstances, emergency homes outside the borough were used.

It was also noted that groups such as armed forces, foster parents and people that made a contribution to the community were given additional priority for housing allocations, and that new build letting plans aimed for at least 50% of households to be employed.

Concerns were raised by a member in relation to the 71 turnaround days for routine voids and the potential loss of rental income. The Head of Housing Options and Support stated that this was an average figure, and although acknowledged that 71 days was excessive, the figure would reduce dramatically if hard to let properties had not been included. It was also reported that there had been a reduction of days taken in the turnaround of void properties, and further procedural improvements are taking place.

Reference was made to tenants being removed from their properties following bereavement in the household, and it was confirmed that Officers would balance the demands of the bereaved person against the waiting list. It was noted that spouses would automatically succeed the tenancy however their individual circumstances would be reviewed as they may wish to move to a different or smaller property.

Following a request the Head of Housing Options and Support undertook to provide Councillor Islam a copy of the recent annual report in regard to homelessness.

In responding to a question by a member, it was reported that tenants who were responsible for anti-social behaviour would not generally be re-housed. Each case would be considered individually, and with regard to any safeguarding duties to children.

Reference was made to Universal Credit, in particular that it had been identified that over 80% of tenants were in arrears after transferring to Universal Credit, and direct payments could not be requested unless a tenant was in arrears for more than eight weeks.

It was noted that young adults that had been looked after were given higher priority and supported housing.

In responding to a question by a member, the Head of Housing Maintenance outlined the process for monitoring and paying sub-contractors.

Resolved

- (1) That the information contained in the report and Appendices to the report submitted, on Housing Allocations, be noted.
- (2) The Head of Housing Options and Support be requested to provide the Chair with supplementary data in respect of fraud prosecutions.
- (3) The Head of Housing Options and Support be requested to provide Councillor Islam with a copy of the annual report in regard of homelessness.

34. Tourism and Visitor Economy

A report of the Strategic Director Place was submitted on the ongoing work to grow the borough's visit economy and in particular to inform members of the development of a draft Tourism and Visitor Economy prospectus, attached as Appendix A to the report submitted. A promotional leaflet was also circulated to Members.

In presenting the report submitted, the Interim Chief Officer for Planning and Economic Development referred to the substantial economic impact of tourism in the borough of Dudley and the contributions to the Black Country Visit Economy, including the Black Country Living Museum, Dudley Zoo and the Glass Quarter.

The partnership working with the local attractions was welcomed and the need to utilise local hotels and bed and breakfasts to attract visitors to stay for longer periods.

The short term priorities for the visitor economy service were outlined including the support to businesses in the borough, and the improvement to the promotion and marketing of the borough's attractions.

Members commented positively on the report and leaflet which highlighted the excellent facilities that were available in the borough.

Reference was made to the proposed closure of leisure centres, the quality of open space, and the Council's priority in retaining front line services. The Interim Chief Officer for Planning and Economic Development advised on the joint working with the Chief Officer Environmental Services in regard of the up-keep of open space, and confirmed that there was no intention to close the leisure centres until the new buildings had been developed.

Concerns were raised by a member in relation to the lack of car parking signage and the regeneration around Dudley Town Centre, which may have contributed to the reduction in footfall.

A member made suggestions for the promotional leaflet that was circulated to the Committee, in particular that diversity should be reflected and historic churches within the borough should be referenced and the possibility of famous local people becoming ambassadors for the borough.

The possibility of introducing a 'passport' that covered all attractions to encourage visitors to attend other areas within the borough was also suggested.

Resolved

That the information contained in the report and Appendices to the report submitted, on Tourism and Visitor Economy, be noted.

The meeting ended at 8.03 pm.