

Minutes of the Housing and Safer Communities Select Committee

Thursday 20th July, 2023 at 6.00 pm
**At Saltwells Education Development Centre, Bowling Green
Road, Netherton**

Present:

Councillor A Davies (Chair)
Councillor S Bothul (Vice-Chair)
Councillors A Aston, D Bevan, J Cowell, T Creed, P Drake, I Kettle, K Lewis,
J Martin and M Webb

Officers:

K Jones, Director of Housing and Communities and K Malpass - Democratic
Services Officer (Directorate of Finance and Legal).

1 Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies submitted for this meeting of the Committee.

2 Appointment of Substitute Members

There were no substitute Members appointed for this meeting of the
Committee.

3 **Declarations of Interest**

Councillor J Cowell declared a non-pecuniary interest in relation to Agenda Item No. 5 (Programme of meetings and business items for 2023/2024) as a Council tenant.

4 **Comments of the Chair**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the first meeting of the Housing and Safer Communities Select Committee and provided a brief introduction of his expectations and requirements of Committee Members throughout the 2023/24 municipal year.

5 **Public Forum**

No issues were raised under this agenda item.

6 **Programme of Meetings and Business Items for 2023/24**

The Committee considered the programme of meetings and items of business for detailed consideration by this Committee during 2023/24.

During the discussion, Councillor J Cowell referred to the report on rent increase programmed for the September meeting and queried whether the report would include information on services charges. The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that the intention of the report on rent increase was to enhance Member's understanding on the requirements around rent increase and the impact the current increase had on residents and the Local Authority. Members would be encouraged to scrutinise the current processes in place and support informed decisions moving forward. It was envisaged that information around service charges would be incorporated in the Review of Housing Finance report programmed for 20th November, 2023 where financial proposals would be discussed and considered for the 2024/2025 municipal year.

In referring to the recent establishment of the Housing Assurance Board following Cabinet approval, Councillor J Cowell queried whether regular updates could be provided to the Committee. The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that draft terms of reference were currently being considered which would provide a link between the Housing Assurance Board and the Housing and Safer Communities Select Committee and would be submitted to the Committee once finalised to provide Members with a clear understanding of how the two groups would interact moving forward. It was essential that assurances were given to Members that work within the remit of the Housing Assurance Board was being carried out and what impact it had on communities. Membership of the Board was still being considered and assurances were given to Members that the Committee would be involved in some way to support and scrutinise the work of the Board. It was suggested that future updates provide information on how the Housing Assurance Board would support the work of the Dudley Federation of Tenants and Residents Association and associated groups.

Councillor A Aston referred to the project in relation to the stock condition survey, and queried whether a brief update could be provided on progress towards targets for each scheduled Committee. The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that the proposed report on Property Condition and Compliance update programmed for 13th September 2023 would include feedback on progress relating to the stock condition survey. She indicated that rather than reports being provided to each meeting of the Committee, Members receive regular written updates by e-mail which would allow responses to be provided in a timely manner. Members noted that the project was currently ahead of schedule and was expected to be completed by the end of the calendar year rather than by the end of the financial year.

Councillor I Kettle expressed concern at the low level of housing stock in the Borough that the Local Authority had jurisdiction over, which was considered to be around 13% of houses within Dudley. The lack of support for vulnerable residents in accommodation other than social housing was clear in all wards of the Borough which had resulted in properties being severely neglected due to some residents struggling to maintain properties due to being hospitalised for a period of time, incapacitated or struggling with mental health issues which often resulted in properties becoming empty. It was considered that more could be done within the Housing and Communities Directorate to support a higher percentage of tenants within the Borough to maintain their properties.

The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that around 8.4% of housing stock in the Borough was private rented, which was considered low compared to the national average. The percentage of owner occupiers in Dudley was slightly higher than the national average which produced challenges in terms of understanding property conditions and requirements on how houses should be managed and maintained. The private rented sector had an important role within Dudley and considerable work was required around that sector and it was envisaged that detailed information would be included in the report on the review of private rented sector programmed for 22nd January 2024.

Members were advised that the Local Authority had limited jurisdiction around the owner occupier sector unless properties posed significant risks of danger to the public, in which case Compulsory Purchase Orders could be considered, however, robust legal processes would need to be followed. Residents struggling with mobility or physical health issues may qualify for support from social care, however, appropriate assessments would be required in the first instance.

Councillor A Aston expressed his appreciation that the Committee's remit considered housing matters only, and queried whether there would be an opportunity to invite a representative from an Housing Association to provide the Committee with a presentation on requirements to residents as a landlord. The Director of Housing and Communities provided Members with a breakdown of figures in relation to various sectors of housing stock within the Borough. It was reported that regular meetings between the Local Authority and Dudley Housing Partnership were held, and both organisations were governed by the same requirements of the Decent Homes Standard and other regulatory standards overseen by the Regulator of Social Housing.

Councillor A Davies queried whether there were any groups/organisations that recorded data in relation to social housing, housing associations, private rented and owner occupier properties in the Dudley Borough. The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that she would liaise with the Housing Strategy Team and provide Members of the Committee with a written response.

Councillor I Kettle considered that the current council tax banding system operated by the Local Authority should also be considered as it provided information on the quality and type of housing available within the Dudley Borough. Members suggested that The Director of Housing and Communities investigate the possibility of providing Members the opportunity to allow more detailed scrutiny of the housing stock within the Borough.

Councillor T Creed queried the processes followed when considering options for derelict houses and disposal. The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that a stock appraisal was carried out on poor quality/derelict properties to understand costs involved in repairing and maintaining properties and whether during the net present value period (30-year period) the property would earn back the investment spent to bring it back into use. Consideration would also be given to a number of peculiarities of a property, the size of a property, number of bedrooms, driveways attached to the household, area in which properties were located and whether there were shortages of particular properties. Properties would only be considered for disposal should an appraisal result in significant financial loss for the Local Authority.

Councillor I Kettle indicated that a more proactive approach was required when considering bringing properties back into use and to identify “bolthole” category properties within the Borough. It was considered that there was a significant number of empty homes in the Borough that still held a tenancy, where residents had moved in with a partner but had held onto the tenancy for security reasons which often resulted in properties being left in poor condition.

Councillor A Aston suggested that the programme include additional reports relating to community safety. The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that there was a safety aspect around the items identified in the proposed work programme. Reference was made to the Safe and Sound Board, which was the Community Safety Partnership for the Borough and was a Multi-Agency Board chaired by the Borough Commander. There was a number of sub-groups attached to the Board that reported on various safety elements that fed into the Board frequently. The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that the structure of the Safe and Sound Board would be circulated to all Members of the Committee.

The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that the Local Authority were obliged to provide an annual report on the Community Safety Partnership, which would be submitted to the Committee on 13th March, 2024. It was envisaged that a community safety element would be incorporated into each report programmed for the Committee for the municipal year.

In responding to a question from Councillor K Lewis, the Director of Housing and Communities explained that developing a neighbourhood model for the community would ensure that the Local Authority reconnected with communities. Significant improvements were required, and it was envisaged that the report on the Neighbourhood Model programmed for 22nd January 2024 would provide an update highlighting improvements and progress. Consideration was being given to open community-based offices and the role of Housing Managers has been reviewed to ensure a focus on engagement with communities and Members. Members were advised that following the restructure, Housing Managers were now known as Housing Officers. It was expected that every resident was aware of their nominated Housing Officers and that Housing Officers were prominent in their allocated wards to focus on the needs of the residents moving forward.

In responding to a question from Councillor A Davies in relation to the officer structure of Housing Officers, the Director of Housing and Communities confirmed that there were currently thirty-six Housing Officers and six Team Managers that would be aligned to individual wards in the Borough and consideration would be given to the new boundary changes within the Dudley Borough.

Resolved

- (1) That the report on the programme of meetings and potential items of business for this Committee, be noted.
- (2) That the Director of Housing and Communities be requested to provide Members of the Committee regular updates on progress on the stock condition survey.

- (3) That the Director of Housing and Communities be requested to liaise with the Housing Strategy Team to ascertain whether there were any groups/organisations that recorded data in relation to social housing, housing associations, private rented and owner occupier properties in the Dudley Borough and provide a written response to Members of the Committee.
- (4) That the Director of Housing and Communities be requested to circulate the structure of the Safe and Sound Board to Members of the Committee.
- (5) That the Director of Housing and Communities, supported by the Democratic Services Officer, be requested to consider the possibility of providing Members the opportunity to allow more detailed scrutiny of the housing stock within the Borough.
- (6) That the Director of Housing and Communities be requested to incorporate a community safety element to each report programmed for the Committee for the municipal year.
- (7) That, subject to resolution (5) and (6) above, the Committee confirm the programme of business as outlined in paragraph 4 of the report submitted, subject to the need for flexibility to reflect any changes that might arise during the municipal year.
- (8) 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 2023/24 municipal year.
- (9) That the terms of reference for the Housing and Safer Communities Select Committee, as set out in the Appendix to the report submitted, be noted.

7 **Questions Under Council Procedure Rule 11.8**

There were no questions to the Chair pursuant to Council Procedure Rule 11.8.

The meeting ended at 6.28pm

CHAIR

CESSC/7