

Minutes of the Housing and Safer Communities Select Committee

**Monday 22nd January, 2024 at 6.00 pm
In Committee Room 2
At the Council House, Dudley**

Present:

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

Officers:

K Jones – Director of Housing and Communities, R Cooper – Head of Financial Services, M Jones – Senior Principal Accountant and K Malpass - Democratic Services Officer (Directorate of Finance and Legal)

Also in attendance:

M Smith – Local Democracy Reporting Service

28. **Apology for Absence**

No apologies were submitted for this meeting of the Committee.

29. **Appointment of Substitute Member**

No substitutes were appointed for this meeting of the Committee.

30. **Declarations of Interest**

Councillor J Cowell declared a non-pecuniary interest in relation to Agenda Item No. 7 (Community Housing Services – The Neighbourhood Approach) and Agenda Item No. 8 (Review of Housing Finance), as a Council tenant.

31. **Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 20th November, 2023, be approved as a correct record and signed.

32. **Public Forum**

No issues were raised under this agenda item.

33. **Annual update on the Safe and Sound Partnership priorities and update on improvements to managing neighbour disputes and anti-social behaviour**

A report of the Director of Housing and Communities was submitted on the Safe and Sound Board (Dudley's Community Safety Partnership) providing an update on the Community Safety Partnership and the ongoing work to improve the management of neighbour disputes and anti-social behaviour.

The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that the Safe and Sound was Dudley's Community Safety Partnership, which was required in statute by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, its subsequent amendments and other relevant legislation. A list of Responsible Authorities and statutory requirements of the Partnership were referred to and outlined in the report submitted.

The work of the Dudley Community Safety Partnership was directed by the Safe and Sound Strategic Board. The structure and Membership of the Board were referred to, together with key priorities identified. The Board had sub-groups which focused on a number of specific priority areas. The Safe and Sound Structure Chart was outlined in Appendix 1 to the report submitted.

Priorities were identified through Dudley Borough's Strategic Assessment and through engagement with communities through "Dudley: Have Your Say", an annual public meeting, surveys and through online consultation. Feedback received from Dudley: Have Your Say" was outlined in the report submitted to the meeting, however, it had highlighted that anti-social behaviour, house burglaries and dangerous driving were the main concerns. Members were informed that the 2023/24 public meeting would be taking place on Monday 19th March, 2024 at Stourbridge Town Hall.

Views obtained from last year's survey had informed the current year's priorities which were outlined at paragraph 11 of the report submitted.

The work of the Board was delivered through its sub-groups and those sub-groups were held to account for their contribution to the Board's aims, purpose and performance. There were currently fourteen sub-groups highlighted below with detailed information on progress and highlights over the last twelve month provided at paragraph 17 of the report submitted. The performance of the sub-groups was reported in to and monitored by the Safe and Sound Board. Work would take place in advance of the 2024/25 annual report to the Committee to ensure that the outcomes and direct impact of the sub-groups was presented within the report.

- Dudley domestic abuse local partnership board (and its Sub-groups which include the MARAC Governance Group (Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference for high risk victims of Domestic Abuse), Domestic Homicide Governance Group and the Domestic Abuse and Violence Against Women and Girls Forum);
- Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategic Group
- Violence Prevention Group
- Dudley Combatting Drug and Alcohol Misuse Partnership
- Modern Slavery Strategic Group
- Rogue Landlord Operational Group
- CONTEST Board – currently being developed
- Prevent Delivery Group
- Protect Delivery Group – currently being developed
- Channel Panel

- Community Cohesion / Tension Monitoring Group (including Hate Crime)
- Road Safety Group – newly developed
- Safer Places
- Youth Justice Services (YJS) Management Board

An overview of the crime data for the 2023/24 period was referred to which highlighted that Dudley remained the safest Community Safety Partnership within the West Midlands Police Force area, with the total recorded crime decreasing during Quarter 2, compared to last year.

Training linked to partnership priorities was available on relevant “help hub” topic pages and information was shared on local services, accessibility, various campaigns throughout the year, advice and reporting requirements. The safe and sound website was updated as appropriate and included specific “help hub” pages.

Funding ringfenced for the Safe and Sound Partnership was referred to, however, the 2024/25 budget was yet to be confirmed. Funding was used to progress work around the partnership priorities. A list of projects funded by the Partnership during 2023/24 were outlined at paragraph 21 of the report submitted.

The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that the restructure of the Housing Service was now complete. During 2023/24 the Anti-Social Behaviour Team had relocated to the Safer Communities section from the Community Housing area of the Housing and Communities Directorate. The move aimed to bring together the work across the overlapping service areas and improve relationships and information sharing with key partners.

It was envisaged that the work would link in, where appropriate, with the work of the Community Safety Team in relation to Public Space Protection Orders (PSPOs) and would be the base for the new street officer team, a team of four officers working across Dudley’s hotspot areas to prevent, disperse and enforce against anti-social behaviour.

During 2023, the Anti-Social Behaviour Team had worked to clear the backlog of cases within the service and responded to feedback on the services delivered by the Team. Up until September, 2023, the Team continued to struggle due to low staff resources caused by sickness absence and vacant posts, however, following a recruitment exercise, the Team was now starting to move on to a more stable position.

The Team had begun to develop and improve service delivery with a revised policy in place and a new working procedure in progress that would improve service delivery moving forward.

The Anti-Social Behaviour Team and the Community Housing Team had worked collaboratively to develop and agree a new model for managing anti-social behaviour and neighbour nuisance, with Community Housing Officers dealing with the day-to-day issues on estates and the Anti-Social Behaviour Officers managing more complex/higher risk cases. The Anti-Social Behaviour Team had secured a set number of hours of advice from an external independent anti-social behaviour expert. The hours had been used to undertake independent case reviews, in particularly complex cases, to provide advice and training to the Team and to advise on any changes in policy and practice which would improve or enhance service delivery and outcomes.

Community triggers were now known as case reviews and significant work had been undertaken throughout 2023 to update and amend the case review process, which had led to improvements in data capture and information on websites had been revised to reflect the new terminology of Anti-Social Behaviour Case Reviews. A slight increase in Anti-Social Behaviour Case Reviews had been observed during the current year, however, it was predicated that it was due to the publicity around anti-social behaviour legislation from the Government and from additional publicity.

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

- (a) Councillor C Reid referred to the ongoing issues associated with the lack of presence of Housing Officers responsible for the Wolverhampton Street area and raised concern by the limited support provided which resulted in housing issues being dealt with by Ward Members. Police contact had improved, and a meeting had been arranged towards the end of January to discuss issues around substance and alcohol misuse, rubbish and fly tipping in the area, which had been reported to the Local Authority. It was essential that Housing Officers were present in communities and recognised by Members and tenants. The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that she would identify appropriate Housing Officers and circulate the information to the Member.

- (b) Councillor I Kettle referred to the volume of litter that was scattered around the Borough, particularly from fast food restaurant packaging. Graffiti remained an issue and it was queried when notices would be erected around the Borough notifying perpetrators of the intention to introduce penalty notices of up to £500. Strategies to educate the public on the impact and consequences of anti-social behaviour and graffiti were essential. The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that whilst matters associated with littering and graffiti did not fall within the remit of the Anti-Social Behaviour Team within the Local Authority, she undertook to raise the issues with appropriate colleagues and provide a response to Members of the Committee.
- (c) Councillor A Davies referred to the implications of litter being left unattended in certain areas of the borough which usually escalated to fly tipping. Reference was made to the lack of Estate Caretakers which had contributed to increased littering and fly tipping and whilst contractor caretakers were employed, additional resources were required to tackle the issues. It was requested what strategies were being considered to improve staffing issues within that service.

The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that the responsibility of litter, graffiti and fly tipping were shared across the Directorate of Housing and Communities. Estate Caretaker roles were currently being covered by agency staff in the short term whilst proposals were being considered to look at redirecting internal resources in the long term. Whilst it was recognised that the role of Estate Caretaker was important and beneficial for communities within the Borough, reference was made to the spending restrictions placed on the Local Authority in terms of recruitment.

- (d) In referring to incidents involving online harm, re-offending and serious organised crime, Councillor I Kettle indicated that investigation and action had previously been slow, which had been unacceptable and worrying. He queried what strategies had been put in place to address online harm and support victims as it was considered that the consequences could potentially be fatal.

The Director of Housing and Communities advised Members that the online harm element of the function was the responsibility of the Community Safety Partnership and would raise the concerns at the next meeting of the Safe and Sound Board at the end of January and request appropriate officers provide more detail in terms of the types of online harm being fed through the Community Safety Partnership and what was being done to tackle the issues. A written response would be provided to all Members of the Committee.

- (e) Councillor J Cowell, in her role as Shadow Cabinet Member for Housing, Communities and Leisure, queried whether she would be invited to future Community Safety Partnership Board meetings as it stated in the Membership structure that the member holding that position was a Member of the Board, however, she had not been invited to any meetings. The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that she would liaise with Police colleagues and ensure that future meeting invites were circulated.
- (f) In referring to the Anti-Social Behaviour Team, Councillor J Cowell queried whether the team was operating at full capacity. The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that Hayley Rowley had been appointed to the position of Head of Service and had reviewed team structures, policies and processes to identify efficiencies. With the new structure now in place and resources suitably positioned to roles to avoid duplication of work, improvements would be observed moving forward. In referring to the exceptional work provided by the Head of Service and her Team, Members requested that their appreciation be provided to the Team.
- (g) In referring to Public Space Protection Orders, Councillor J Cowell queried where those Orders were located, and the impact associated with them. The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that the information should be available online, however, she undertook to investigate the matter and circulate the information to all Members of the Committee. In responding to a question from Councillor J Cowell, the Director of Housing and Communities indicated that the Council's Community Safety Officers, in partnership with the Police were responsible for the delivery of the service. Members were advised that the Community Safety Team were based at Brierley Hill Police Station.

- (h) In referring to the Council's budget position, Councillor P Drake queried the realistic measures that could be put in place to address the anti-social behaviour associated with family breakdown, drug and substance misuse and mental health issues. In responding, the Director of Housing and Communities indicated that as a result of the current spending control's and budget pressures, significant work had been carried out on prioritising statutory and core duties to ensure that the Local Authority was fulfilling its responsibilities. Providing services around the Adult Social Care and Children's Social Care were considered a priority and budgets had been shaped around those services to ensure that appropriate services continued to be delivered at the level expected. Members were advised that Housing Officers supported families with various types of anti-social behaviour issues, however, certain aspects required specialist intervention and complex cases would be referred to appropriate services for professional advice and action.
- (i) Councillor P Drake queried what strategies had been considered around tackling burglaries and to ensure properties were safe, which had been highlighted as a priority for tenants. Reference was made to historical provisions that had been put in place to keep homes safe, however, those provisions had now creased. The Director of Housing and Communities confirmed that any discretionary spend from a housing approach would not be offered whilst spending restrictions to control Council's budgets were in place. Focus would be on the delivery of core duties under various legislation.
- (j) In responding to questions from Councillor K Lewis, the Director of Housing and Communities indicated that the Local Authority had a strong and professional working relationship with the Police, particularly on delivering the community safety agenda and duties delivered by the fourteen sub-groups outlined in the report submitted to the meeting, which all reported back to the Community Safety Partnership. Whilst Members were advised that the Safe and Sound Partnership provided an annual update to the Select Committee, a Police representative would be invited to attend for the next update to respond to specific questions raised by Members.

- (k) In referring in particular to the Road Safety Partnership sub-group, Councillor A Davies queried the requirements of measuring key performance indicators to establish performance and whether the services were being delivered effectively. In responding, the Director of Housing and Communities indicated that the Road Safety Partnership sub-group had been established recently as a result of the increased issues and anti-social behaviour associated with car cruising. Members were advised that all fourteen sub-groups were required to provide quarterly updates on performance of action plans in place and were monitored through the Community Safety Partnership Board.
- (l) Councillor A Davies referred to the importance of collaborative working with external partnerships to ensure that the key objectives of the Safe and Sound Partnership were delivered effectively. Concern was raised that the annual community safety fund received from The Office of Police and Crime Commissioner had not yet been confirmed and queried whether the funding was guaranteed. The Director of Housing and Communities confirmed that whilst the funding had not yet been confirmed, the grant would be provided, and Members would be advised of the details once the grant had been secured.
- (m) In referring to the set number of hours of advice secured for the Anti-Social Behaviour service from an external independent anti-social behaviour expert and the requirements of the additional advice, Councillor A Davies queried whether there were any policy changes required following the training provided. The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that a full review had taken place of appropriate policies and procedures and relevant up to date training had been provided to the team. The intention behind securing expert independent advice was for the expert to advise the service on any updated policies moving forward.

Resolved

- (1) That the content of the report submitted to the meeting and comments made by the Members be noted.
- (2) That the Director of Housing and Communities identify appropriate Housing Officers for the Wolverhampton Street area and circulate the information to Councillor C Reid.

- (3) That the Director of Housing and Communities be requested to investigate timescales involved in erecting notices notifying the public of the consequences of graffiti and associated matters and provide a response to all Members of the Committee.
 - (4) That the Director of Housing and Communities be requested to raise Member issues in relation to online harm at the next meeting of the Safe and Sound Board and arrange for a response to be provided to all Members of the Committee on the types of online harm being fed through the Community Safety Partnership and what was being done to tackle the issues.
 - (5) That the Director of Housing and Communities be requested to forward Members' appreciation to the Head of Anti-Social Behaviour and her Team for the exceptional work provided in communities.
 - (6) That the Director of Housing and Communities be requested to investigate location and impact of Public Space Protection Orders and circulate the information to all Members of the Committee.
 - (7) That the Director of Housing and Communities be requested to invite a Police representative to attend the next meeting of the Select Committee where an update on the Safe and Sound Partnership was provided to respond to specific questions raised by Members.
 - (8) That the Director of Housing and Communities be requested to provide information to all Members of the Committee following the confirmation of the annual community safety fund received from The Office of Police and Crime Commissioner.
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34. **Community Housing Services – The Neighbourhood Approach**

A report of the Director of Housing and Communities was submitted on the work underway to restructure and improve the tenancy and estate management services provided to Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council tenants.

The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that the Neighbourhood model and associated restructure of the Housing Management Services had been implemented to improve services and ensure that Housing teams reconnected with customers, Members and communities. The principles of the Model was to strengthen Dudley's approach to neighbourhood management through an increased presence, with greater local involvement of customers, Ward Members and partner organisations.

The restructure of the Community Housing Team had now been completed, with a new structure and roles focused on delivering the neighbourhood model. The team consisted of thirty-six Community Housing Officers, supported by a team of eight Community Housing Assistants, with six Team Managers. Know Your Community Housing Team posters were outlined in Appendix 1 to the report submitted.

Community Hubs and surgeries were being introduced across the Borough as part of the Council's commitment to improve communication with tenants. The Brierley Hill and Halesowen Housing Hubs were now open to the public and were located on Chapel Street Estate, Brierley Hill and Highfields Estate, Halesowen. The offices would be open for surgeries on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays between 10.00am and 2.00pm for pre-booked appointments or walk-in enquiries.

Options were being considered for a permanent Housing Hub in Stourbridge, however, surgeries were currently taking place weekly at Stourbridge Library and Baylie Court at a variety of times to meet the needs of tenants with different commitments. Surgeries for North Dudley tenants would be held at North Dudley Family Centre, initially for three hours each week, however, the service would be reviewed and time increased should it be required. Tenants that lived in the central Dudley area, surgeries were held on Tuesdays and Thursdays between 10.00am and 3.00pm at Dudley Council Plus.

For tenants that resided in the south Dudley area, it was planned that a Housing Hub would be located within the office of the Dudley Federation of Tenants and Residents Associated (DFTRA). Further information would be published once arrangements had been finalised.

Since the implementation of the Neighbourhood Model, the Community Housing service had developed a different approach to improve high rise estates by completing four High Rise Living events targeting six high-rise buildings across the Borough. The High-Rise Living Events had been successful and had involved other service areas and key partners. Further events were currently being planned at Chapel Street, Brierley Hill and Highfields, Halesowen.

The Team had also supported the work of other service areas, including door knocking, awareness raising and advice in relation to access for compliance visits and tackling tenancy fraud.

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

- (a) Councillor J Cowell referred to the high-rise living events that had recently taken place and indicated that low-rise accommodation and areas within larger estates would also benefit from similar events which would increase and improve customer involvement. The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that the intention of the report was to provide details on initiative and events that had occurred to improve customer engagement. A review of the customer involvement strategy was currently being developed which would focus on improving customer engagement, eliminating duplication and filling any gaps within the service.
- (b) Councillor J Cowell raised concern in relation to the cost involved in producing the Know Your Community Housing Team posters. Whilst the information was considered beneficial, the Team frequently altered and continuously updating and producing posters would create financial strain on the Council's budget. The Director of Housing and Communities acknowledged that there may be changes within the Team from time to time, however, whilst the posters would be reviewed and updated periodically, the intention was to make them available to the public online and only circulated in exceptional circumstances.

- (c) Councillor A Davies referred to the importance of regular updates to the Select Committee on customer involvement and feedback. It was essential that the Strategy was delivering on its key aspirations and customers were seeing improvements. The Director of Housing and Communities reported that the performance impact would be measured frequently and reported as necessary.

Resolved

That the content of the report submitted to the meeting and comments made by Members be noted.

35. Review of Housing Finance

A joint report of the Director of Housing and Communities and Director of Finance and Legal was submitted on the Review of Housing Finance.

In presenting the report, the Head of Financial Services highlighted key paragraphs within the report, and referred in particular to the proposals considered by Cabinet at its meeting on 13th December, 2023, as outlined below:-

- a draft Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget for 2024/25 in the light of the latest government announcements on housing finance and latest spending and resource assumptions.
- a revised Public Sector Housing capital programme for 2023/24 to 2026/2027.
- rents for council homes with effect from 1st April 2024.

The report provided an update on the position for the current financial year in terms of the HRA and the latest variations expected against the original budget as outlined in Appendix 1 to the report submitted. In line with Government guidance, it was proposed that a rent increase of 7.7% be introduced to partly mitigate the impact of inflationary increases on pay, utilities and the cost of borrowing along with the outcomes of the Stock Condition Survey (SCS). The impact of the proposed increase was outlined in paragraph 16 of the report submitted. Inflationary pressures were expected to continue into 2024/2025, with assumed pay awards of 4% for 2024/2025 and 2% thereafter. Borrowing costs were expected to remain high in the short term and utility prices were assumed to increase in line with inflationary increases.

In February, 2023, Council approved the introduction of service charges at a nominal rate of £5.20 per week. It was now proposed that service charges be introduced at full cost recovery, resulting in a charge on average of £12.46 per week for tenant in homes with communal areas.

The proposed draft HRA budget for 2024/25 to 2026/27 was outlined in Appendix 2 to the report submitted. The budget had been based on implementing the maximum allowed of 7.7% rent increase and service charges at direct cost recovery, which would take effect from 1st April, 2024, building in additional resources to meet inflationary pressures. A number of savings and growth proposals had been prepared and prioritised and had been presented to the HRA budget summit on 22nd November, 2023. Details of the proposals were outlined at paragraph 20 of the report submitted. Proposals had been based on a number of estimates, assumptions and professional judgements, which were subject to continuous review.

In February 2023, a five-year housing public sector capital programme was agreed, which reflected enhanced investment using the HRA's new borrowing flexibility. The five-year capital programme was developed based upon the themes set out within the Council's ten-year Housing Asset Management Strategy (HAMS) approved by Cabinet in October 2019. In light of budget pressures, the five-year programme had been reviewed and the amended approach and options were approved by Cabinet at its meeting in February, 2023.

The proposed capital programme outlined at Appendix 3 of the report submitted summarised current anticipated spend for 2024/25. 2025/2026 and 2026/2027 had been based on what was currently known about investment needs. However, the five-year capital programme would need to be further reviewed following the completion of the SCS, which could inform a change in programmed spend in the first three years. The programmed spend had not currently been profiled for 2027/2028 and 2028/2029 as it would need to be informed by longer term investment needs and the robust and up-to-date property information that the surveys would provide.

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

- (a) Councillor C Reid raised concern with the proposal to introduce a £12.46 per week service charge for tenants in homes with communal areas, together with a proposed 7.7% rent increase and 4.99% Council Tax increase, particular during a cost-of-living crisis and feared that an increase in arrears in housing payments would be observed as a result.

The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that decisions in relation to increases in housing services and rent were not taken lightly, however, difficult decisions were essential to manage the HRA. The £12.46 service charge was an average figure and the actual charge applied would depend on the eligible services provided in communal areas, including grounds maintenance, communal clearing and all communal health and safety checks. Eligible service charges would be covered by housing benefit and universal credit payments for those people that were in receipt of full or partial support, which was estimated at 70%. It was predicted that approximately 30% of customers were not eligible for financial support towards their rent and service charge and would potentially struggle to pay the increased housing costs. Initiatives were being considered to provide a transition fund from the 2024/25 financial year where customers that were not eligible for any financial support and were struggling significantly could apply for funding towards service charges. Whilst still in its initial planning stages, Members were advised that the fund would be available for customers to apply for at the start of the 2024/25 financial year.

- (b) In responding to a comment by Councillor C Reid, the Director of Housing and Communities indicated that Dudley was the only housing provider in the area that currently did not charge for eligible service charges in communal areas. However, due to the Council's serious financial pressures, introducing charges for eligible services was essential. In responding to questions from Councillor A Davies, the Head of Financial Services confirmed that approximately £4.8m would be generated each year from service charges and assured Members that tenants in homes with communal areas would see improved services due to the additional investment being provided to maintenance programmes in communal areas outlined in paragraph 20 of the report submitted.

- (c) Councillor J Cowell queried when service charges on different property types would be clarified. The Director of Housing and Communities confirmed that charges would vary from property type and services operated in communal areas. Collaborative work with the Income Team was being carried out and it was assumed that tenants would be notified of the service charge applied and rent increase at the same.
- (d) Councillor J Cowell queried the impact on the HRA as a result of non-payment of service charges and the requirement to go through legal and court action. Whilst accepting that unexpected costs would be unavoidable, the Head of Financial Services stated that consideration was being given to a financial allowance which would be included in the budget to offset against such costs, however, regular monitoring was essential to address any issues arising from the introduction of service charges.
- (e) Councillor J Cowell referred to the difficult process involved when apply for discretionary housing payments and queried whether the method adopted when applying for financial support for service charges would be a simpler process. The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that discretionary housing payments were administered through the Revenues and Benefits Team and adhered to appropriate legislation. Consideration on the model, requirements and eligibility used to support customers that were not eligible for any full or partial benefit was currently being considered, however, the financial support would be available for customers to apply for at the start of the 2024/25 financial year.
- (f) Councillor C Reid expressed concern at the historical failures that had occurred, particularly the costs associated with void turnaround times, which had resulted in increased rent, Council Tax and service charge proposals for tenants. In responding, the Head of Financial Services acknowledged that it was a difficult financial position, part of the budget pressures had been attributed to increased inflation costs, materials, compliance issues, borrowing costs and the national living wage.

The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that traditionally housing rent for Dudley tenants had been low in comparison to neighbouring Local Authorities and with the four-year rent decrease introduced in 2016 for all housing providers, Dudley had accumulated a significant financial loss. Whilst the impact of the proposals on tenants was acknowledged, difficult decisions were essential to maintain the HRA budget moving forward.

- (g) In responding to a question raised by Councillor J Martin, the Head of Financial Services confirmed that work associated with the SCS had created significant expenditure from the HRA account which had not previously been budgeted for, however, it was an essential programme to bring the Local Authority's housing stock in line with Government requirements. Councillor J Martin referred to the budget forecasts of £24.8m for responsive and cyclical repairs (maintenance) and queried why the costs associated with the SCS, management and expertise had been charged under that budget. In responding, the Head of Financial Services indicated that the work delivered on the SCS incorporated management support and whilst it could be perceived as £24.8m would be focused on just repair work, the required costs would need to be covered from the HRA budget.

Councillor J Martin expressed concern that tenants were now required to pay increased housing fees to manage the HRA budget as a result of the previous negligence of management around the requirements of the SCS. Whilst the Director of Housing and Communities acknowledged that Dudley had been behind in carrying out SCS which had resulted in a decision being made to carry out surveys on 100% of housing stock, which had created a significant financial pressure on the current HRA, she indicated that SCS were required to be carried out annually. It was expected that housing providers carried out SCS on approximately 10% of stock annually and costs to the HRA would be spread across a ten-year period.

- (h) In responding to a question raised by Councillor A Davies, the Head of Financial Services confirmed that the costs associated with the requirements to carry out 10% of SCS on housing stock would have been included in the responsive and cyclical repairs (maintenance) budget.

- (i) In responding to a question raised by Councillor J Martin, the Director of Housing and Communities indicated whilst most housing providers followed a 10-year SCS programme, Dudley established that there was a number of properties within the Borough that required a survey being carried out to establish the condition of those properties. Following the announcement of the Secretary of State asking all housing providers to assess housing stock and identify any concerns around damp and mould, Dudley used the opportunity to carry out a more robust assessment of each property and obtain new Energy Performance Certificates to ensure data was up-to-date which would inform robust investment programmes moving forward.
- (j) Councillor J Martin referred to the £98.4m of income generated from rent which was expected to increase to £110.6m by 2026/2027 which would accumulate reserves to the HRA. It was considered that the proposed rent and Council Tax increases and the introduction of services charges was not affordable to the 30% of customers not in receipt of full or partial financial support and would create financial pressure to that category of customers, particularly should the increase impact negatively on the percentage paid for tax payments.

The Head of Financial Services indicated that the figure of £110.6m by 2026/2027 was an estimated figure based on assumptions and professional judgements. The full extent of any remedial work associated with the SCS would not be confirmed until the programme had been completed. The Local Authority had traditionally been a low reserves authority and whilst the impact of increased costs on tenants were acknowledged, it was essential that the HRA budget was financially sustainable. In responding to a question from Councillor A Davies, the Head of Financial Services indicated that any reserves in the HRA budget would be focused on remedial work associated with the SCS.

The Director of Housing and Services outlined the advantages of having robust and up-to-date data on all of the Local Authority's housing stock which would provide accurate and proactive investment programmes moving forward and Members were assured that improvements would be observed by members of the public. Part of the SCS would look at the Local Authority's compliance around the decent homes standard where more robust requirements for landlords would be issued by Government in the near future. It was essential for the Local Authority to be in a position where investment could be provided on any unexpected cost arising from the updated version of the Decent Homes Standard.

- (k) Councillor J Cowell queried whether Savills were fulfilling the requirements of their contract given the insufficient time operatives were present in properties to carry out SCS. The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that Savills were experts in stock condition surveys, however, they were not contracted to report routine repairs or maintenance issues and would request tenants to report such issues through the normal repair/maintenance reporting procedure. Savills specialised in targeted work around housing health and safety rating systems, decent homes standard, Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) and damp and mould assessments. Intelligence received from Savills had highlighted that any issues observed around safeguarding, vulnerability, hoarding and sub-letting, whilst it did not cover the requirements of the contract, operatives would refer such issues back to the Housing Team for appropriate action. In responding to a concern raised by Councillor J Cowell in relation to damp and mould issues not being reported appropriately, the Director of Housing and Communities requested that any concerns received from customers be referred to appropriate officers to enable independent checks to be carried out.
- (l) Councillor T Creed referred to the significant costs associated with the SCS and queried whether housing assessments could be carried out by Community Housing Officers as part of their role. The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that the SCS was a specialist project carried out by operatives that required a surveyor qualification and specific training and expertise.

- (m) In responding to a question raised by Councillor T Creed, the Director of Housing and Communities outlined the role of Housing Officers indicating that officers were responsible for tenancy and neighbourhood management including providing support and advice to tenants on adhering to tenancy conditions, managing noise and neighbour nuisance and maintaining tenancies. Housing Officers would refer concerns associated with damage and property condition to appropriate officers but did not specialise in the requirements of SCS.
- (n) In responding to a question raised by Councillor T Creed, the Director of Housing and Communities indicated that the 10% annual stock condition programme would be reinstated following the completion of the full SCS and the obligations to carry out SCS every 10 years would be fulfilled.
- (o) In responding to a question raised by Councillor I Kettle, the Head of Financial Services confirmed that whilst the Local Authority had entered into a Lender Option Borrower Option (LOBO) that was split between the General Fund and the HRA, the majority of the budget of £17.7m on payable interest was through the Public Works Loan Board, with an interest of between 3% and 5% depending on when the loans were taken out.
- (p) Councillor A Davies queried whether the SCS would be completed by March 2024 as advised. The Director of Housing and Communities reported that the completion date was on target, however, it was envisaged that a number of customers would refuse access to properties which would delay the process whilst legal processes were followed. The process around accessing properties had been refined and reduced to three access attempts following which an Abatement Notice would be served under the Environmental Protection Act around Statutory Nuisance. The requirements of the Notice were referred to, together with the definition of the emergency access procedure where any cases considered as an emergency, operatives were allowed to access the property without permission. Non-urgent cases would be referred to the Court for a warrant. Members were advised that twenty-seven Abatement Notices that expired over the Christmas period had been served which had resulted in all customers allowing operatives access to properties to carry out gas service checks.

Resolved

- (1) That the latest Housing Revenue Account outturn forecast for 2023/24, outlined in paragraphs 5 – 9 and Appendix 1 of the report submitted, be noted.
 - (2) That the proposals considered by Cabinet at its meeting held on 13th December, 2023, relating to the Housing Revenue Account budget for 2024/25 onwards, as detailed above, be endorsed.
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36. **Quarterly Housing Performance Report –Quarter 2 (1st July – 30th September, 2023)**

A report of the Director of Housing and Communities was submitted on Quarter 2 of the Corporate Quarterly Performance report for the financial year 2023/24 covering the period 1st July to 30th September, 2023, specifically referring to services within the Housing and Communities Directorate. Further detail relating to directorate service delivery were outlined in the Service Summary Sheets attached as appendices to the report submitted.

The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that the report provided progress against the delivery of the three-year Council Plan priorities and the Future Council Programme.

Dashboard summaries highlighted four corporate quarterly measures for Housing and Community Services, one highlighting “on or exceeding target” with the other three highlighting “below target”. Further information was included in the appendix to the report submitted.

In referring to PI 2027 – Satisfaction on how anti-social behaviour complaints were handled, it was reported that satisfaction had reduced compared to figures reported during Quarter 1. There had been a large turnover of staff and sickness levels had caused concern, which had affected service delivery. A full review of resources, skills, policies and procedures was ongoing to develop a more responsive, customer focused service moving forward. Members were informed that anti-social behaviour cases had been transferred to other officers to manage during the interim period.

In terms of PI 913 – Proportion of homes that did not meet the Decent Homes Standard. It was reported that performance figures in previous years had been based on stock data which may have been incomplete or inaccurate. Data concerns had been the subject of a self-referral to the Regulator of Social Housing and significant progress had been made following the Regulatory Notice issued in April, 2023. An ongoing programme of Stock Condition Surveys (SCS) was currently taking place on all Dudley's housing stock and actual decency levels would be confirmed following its completion during Quarter 1 2024/25.

In terms of PI 1191 – Average re-let time for standard re-let, it was reported that the average re-let times had increased from 49.26 days in Quarter 1 to 56.74 days in Quarter 2, compared to 65.91 days for the same period last year. However, the re-let time for standard voids continued to vary between property types. Performance for houses identified a decrease from 56.33 days in Quarter 1 to 45.88 days in Quarter 2. For bungalows, there had been a decrease from 51.85 days to 48.84 days, for maisonettes, there had been a decrease from 59.13 to 53.31 days, for all flats excluding sheltered there had been an increase from 41.89 days to 47.05 days and for bedsits, excluding sheltered housing, there had been a significant increase from 28.33. days to 45.1 days. The increase had been most significant across the sheltered housing properties with sheltered flats increasing from 89 days to 186 days and sheltered bedsits increasing from 36 days to 105.8 days, which was attributed to the ongoing review and refurbishment of the sheltered housing stock.

In terms of PI 1899 – Rent loss, it was reported that the cumulative rent loss due to voids remained the same as Quarter 1 at 2.28% which was an increase from 1.95% compared to the same period last year. A breakdown of rent loss for various property types was outlined in the report submitted to the meeting. Whilst improvement programmes were currently being identified to improve figures, rent loss associated with strategic voids would continue and managed through efficient decision making and project management. The end-to-end review on voids continued and current focus within the services was on stock condition, which could potentially see an impact on void loss in the short term as additional checks were undertaken at void stage. Investment decisions had been made on a number of voids during Quarter 2.

Directorate Service Plans featured service improvement actions and were updated each quarter and presented to Members. Directorate Service Summary documents provided a detailed account of services delivered and were highlighted in paragraph 10 and Appendix 2 of the report submitted.

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

- (a) In referring to PI 1191 – average re-let for standard re-lets, Councillor A Davies raised concern at the level of time it had taken to re-let various property types, particularly referring to Jack Newell Court. The Director of Housing and Communities acknowledged the concern raised and assured Members that a review to refine procedures to minimise rent loss and void turnaround times was ongoing. In referring particularly to Jack Newell Court, delays to the refurbishment programme had been caused due to issues associated with the Covid pandemic followed by greater demand for contractors and increasing costs of materials and labour.
- (b) In referring to PI 2027 – satisfaction – way anti-social behaviour complaint was handled, Councillor J Martin sought clarification on the number of residents that had been dissatisfied with the service provided. The Director of Housing and Communication indicated that following feedback received from residents, sixty customers had responded to either being dissatisfied or neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

Councillor J Martin indicated that customer perception was important especially with a number of housing service charges increasing. It was essential that the Local Authority delivered an efficient service that benefited tenants, communities, Council Officers and Members, however, it was clear that a high percentage of residents had been either dissatisfied or neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with the service received.

- (c) Councillor J Martin expressed concern with the high level of staff turnover and long-term sickness absence within the Anti-Social Behaviour Team, which had been a long-term issue and required action to address the issues. The manner in which cases had been transferred from Community Housing Officers to the Anti-Social Behaviour Team remained an issue, which had led to staff leaving the Local Authority or commencing sick leave due to the high level of stress caused. It was essential that Community Housing Officers were supported to feel empowered within their role and deal with low level anti-social behaviour cases earlier in the process rather than matters escalating to more serious and complex cases and it was queried what support was available to maintain staffing levels and deliver services at a standard expected by customers.

The Director of Housing and Communities acknowledged the issues raised and indicated that work to address and improve services had commenced. Services were being redesigned to ensure Community Housing Officers were visible in communities and had capacity to address low level anti-social behaviour complaints allowing more complex cases to be referred to the Anti-Social Behaviour Team for a more specialist approach. The Anti-Social Behaviour Team also dealt with wider resident issues such as neighbour disputes between various types of property ownership and referred to the significant work associated to manage complaints which could potentially escalate to Court action and possibly eviction.

- (d) In referring to the significant improvement required to ensure the effective delivery of the service, Councillor J Martin suggested that neighbouring Local Authorities be approached with a view to adopting best practice initiatives to maximise improvement opportunities. The Director of Housing and Communities confirmed that intelligence sharing exercises did take place with colleagues in neighbouring Local Authorities to establish best practice and together with the support secured from an independent anti-social behaviour expert, and policy and process reviews taking place, Members were assured that improvements would be observed moving forward. In responding to a question from Councillor J Martin, the Director of Housing and Communities indicated that whilst mediation was offered to tackle neighbour disputes, a more robust approach was required to promote the service in a more effective manner.

- (e) In responding to a question from Councillor A Davies, the Director of Housing and Communities confirmed that whilst the Anti-Social Behaviour Team was located within the Safer Communities Service area, the Team was not a sub-group of the Safe and Sound Board and performance and impact would be reported through appropriate corporate quarterly performance indicators.
- (f) Councillor C Reid referred to the 46% of the properties that were attributed to rent loss and queried strategies to improve figures. The Director of Housing and Communities provided a breakdown of the type of properties that contributed to the 46% of rent loss, including high investment need properties, properties that were being held for decant and properties that were being refurbished for sheltered accommodation. It was reported that a decision sheet process had commenced for approval to dispose of properties awaiting investment decision and it was anticipated that the Decision Sheet would be approved in the near future and the positive effect of the decision would be evidenced in future performance figures.
- (g) Councillor I Kettle complimented the Director of Housing and Communities on the work associated with retaining five properties due to issues of fraud and queried the figures associated with fraud within the Borough. The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that whilst the Local Authority was one in a small group of authorities to have retained their Housing Fraud Team, the Team operated with very few officers. The role of the Housing Fraud Team was outlined, with the majority of fraud assessments being carried out following the receipt of Right to Buy applications to ensure tenants were not applying to purchase a council house by deception. The Team also relied on referrals from Members/members of the public reporting possible fraud and also issues being identified through the SCS. Reference was made to a Housing Fraud event that had taken place during October 2023 to raise awareness of housing fraud and encourage customers to report suspicious activity to ensure the Council's housing stock was utilised effectively and by customer need. Members were advised that figures associated with fraud were low, however, accurate figures for the 2023/24 financial year would be circulated to all Members of the Committee.
- (h) Councillor I Kettle requested that appreciation be provided to the Housing Team for the work, support and expertise in tackling homelessness and begging in the Stourbridge area.

- (i) Councillor J Cowell queried the 2.28% attributed to rent loss for Quarter 2 and whilst the information suggested that the figure remained stable compared to Quarter 1, the cash equivalent displayed a significant increase. The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that figures presented in each performance quarter was the total cumulative of rent loss and whilst the percentage figure remained stable, the cost equivalent varied for each quarter depending on the rent collected each month. The indicator was a national performance indicator and used for benchmarking purposes and the Local Authority was unable to change the wording or method of calculation, however, further information would be included in future reports to provide clarity.
- (j) In referring to PI 1191 – average re-let for standard re-lets, Councillor J Cowell queried the impact of damp and mould in void properties. The Director of Housing and Communities indicated that SCS would be carried out on void properties that had not had a survey carried out and should damp or mould issues be identified, work would be completed whilst the property was at void stage unless to undertake the work would cause a significant delay to the re-let process.
- (k) In referring to the four key performance indicators outlined in the report submitted, Councillor A Davies queried when improvements would be observed. Whilst it was accepted that PI 913 – Proportion of homes that do not meet Decent Homes Standard relied on the outcome of the SCS, the Director of Housing and Communities was optimistic that improvements would be observed by the end of the 2023/24 financial year. Improvements around PI 1899 – rent loss would be determined on when the decision sheet was approved and signed, and the timescales involved in selling the properties. In responding to a further question from Councillor A Davies, the Director of Housing and Communities indicated that the properties awaiting investment decision, once disposed of, would not contribute to the performance figures. It was anticipated that those properties awaiting an investment decision would be offered to an external partner as a package to market and sell, which would avoid any unnecessary delays. Delays may be observed around conveyancing, however, it was expected that improvements would be highlighted during Quarter 4.

Resolved

- (1) That the Quarter 2 Corporate Quarterly Performance report covering the period 1st July to 30th September, 2023, and the comments made by Members, be noted.
 - (2) That the Director of Housing and Communities be requested to provide Members of the Committee with an accurate figure of cases associated with housing fraud for the 2023/24 financial year.
 - (3) That the Director of Housing and Communities be requested to forward Members' appreciation to the Housing Team for the work, support and expertise in tackling homelessness and begging in the Stourbridge area.
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37. Progress Tracker and Future Business

In providing an update on the Action Tracker, the Chair indicated that all outstanding responses had now been actioned. He expressed his appreciation to all officers for the work carried out.

Resolved

That the information contained in the Action Tracker and Future Business for the Committee, be noted.

38. 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 8.05pm

CHAIR