

**Minutes of the Place Scrutiny Committee
Thursday 31st March 2021, 2021 at 6.00 pm
on Microsoft Teams**

Present:

Councillor M Rogers (Chair)
Councillor A Finch (Vice-Chair)
Councillors I Bevan, B Challenor, J Cowell, K Finch, D Harley, Z Islam, L Johnson, J Martin
and C Perks

Officers:

B Heran – Deputy Chief Executive, H Marsh-Geyton – Acting Director of Public Realm,
J Stevenson – Head of Housing Maintenance (Directorate of Public Realm), P Davies –
Director of Housing and Community Services, M Bradbourn – Head of Housing Projects,
T Mountford – Head of Housing Options and Support (Directorate of Housing and Community
Services), K Griffiths and K Buckle – Democratic Services Officers (Directorate of Finance
and Legal).

Also in attendance:

R Parmley and A Hill – Housing Board for Agenda Item No. 8 – Housing Board Update
M Smith – Dudley Federation of Tenants and Residents Association for Agenda Item No. 8 –
Housing Board Update

23 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors M Aston and P Sahota.

24 Appointment of Substitute Members

Councillors J Cowell and C Perks had been appointed as Substitute Members for
Councillors M Aston and P Sahota for this meeting of the Committee only.

25 **Declarations of Interests**

Councillor J Cowell declared a non-pecuniary interest in Agenda Item 9 – Homelessness Prevention and Response as she had previously engaged with the Homelessness Prevention Team and due to her being a Council tenant.

26 **Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 28th January, 2021 be confirmed as a correct record and signed.

27 **Public Forum**

A Member of the Dudley Federation of Tenants and Residents Association (DFTRA) raised concern in relation to the Housing Board Update item to be considered later in the meeting. It was considered unfair that a recommendation was being made for a non-voting Co-opted Member to be appointed to represent the Housing Board on the Housing and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee for the 2021/22 municipal year as it was considered there was a conflict of interest as both the Housing Board and DFTRA were funded by the Housing Revenue Account. A number of constitutional issues were also raised, and it was noted that the matter would be discussed during consideration of the report in question.

28 **Housing Maintenance Grey Fleet**

A report of the Acting Director of Public Realm was submitted on progress to date regarding the replacement of the grey fleet vehicles utilised by the Councils Housing Maintenance Team.

In presenting the report submitted, the Head of Housing Maintenance gave an overview of the report, and in doing so, stated that grey fleet vehicles were owned by operatives to deliver the service. Information in relation to the costs involved with travel, cover for vehicle breakdowns and the risks associated with grey fleet vehicles to the Local Authority and to the employee were provided. It was noted that whilst progress had been made in relation to the replacement of the grey fleet, the process had been delayed due to issues associated with the COVID pandemic. Trade Unions had been involved in discussions in relation to the replacement of grey fleet vehicles.

It was recognised that a clear definitive plan was essential to reduce the number of grey fleet drivers across the service. Current policies and practices had been considered, both on a local and national level regarding the management of the grey

fleet. Additional factors considered included the age of vehicles, insurance status, MOT checking, risks and penalties associated with grey fleet vehicles, operating costs and efficiencies that could be achieved by replacing the grey fleet, the advantages on the environmental aspects of newer and better maintained vehicles and the CO2 engine emissions.

A significant consultation exercise had taken place with tradespeople regarding the use of the Council's Corporate Fleet and the advantages associated with climate change particularly, as the Local Authority had a legal duty to assist the UK to achieve national targets and reduce greenhouse emissions by 80% by 2050.

Requirements relating to the procurement process of providing a more modern fleet had been considered, including affordability, fit for purpose, low or zero carbon emissions, vehicle safety and storage options to provide maximum delivery. Hybrid and electric vehicle alternatives were considered an essential future development; however, it was recognised that the infrastructure to support such vehicles was currently not available.

The replacement of grey fleet vehicles would see an increase in the Council's fleet by around 20% and would be charged through the traditional open book accounting arrangements to reflect transparency of costs. It was envisaged that using a more Corporate Fleet would improve the health, wellbeing and safety of the employees as the vehicles would be newer, better maintained and would meet current legislation requirements.

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

- Reference was made to a previous report considered by the Committee during the 2019/20 municipal year in relation Housing Stores and Materials Contract. It had previously been reported that grey fleet vehicles were unable to remove surplus materials left onsite following contracted work carried out due to insurance purposes. Although it was considered that future cost savings and benefits had been identified in the report, the issue of whether the Corporate Fleet would be insured to remove such materials was unclear. It was acknowledged that although it was an essential element of the service and potentially a future objective, requirements of the current Waste Licence arrangement considered it necessary for a lorry service to be provided to collect waste and surplus materials following any completed contracted work, however, it was envisaged that the number of larger lorries used would reduce.
- The benefits that a new Corporate Fleet would provide was acknowledged, however, it was considered that issues in relation to fly tipping could be managed through the Waste Care service in order to further reduce the number of lorries being used to collect surplus materials. It was acknowledged that the Local Authority worked collaboratively with Jewson's to deliver various aspects of the service, however, collection of packaging, material and other waste was the responsibility of the Local Authority.

Consideration had been given to the advantages of combining the Waste Services across the Local Authority and would continue to be monitored moving forward. The Corporate Fleet vehicles would be adapted in line with the requirements of the trade and fitted out with essential tools and equipment for optimum service delivery. Although it was recognised that the Corporate Fleet would be able to remove some smaller waste materials, they were not equipped to remove large material waste. However, it was acknowledged that further consideration was necessary to consider adapting the requirements of the contract with Jewson's.

- Concern was expressed in relation to the lack of infrastructure available to support hybrid and electric vehicles and it was considered necessary for the Local Authority to review priorities and bring the Local Authority in line with other organisations already providing these vehicles. The Acting Director of Public Realm acknowledged the concerns raised and indicated that the use of electric vehicles and the costs and benefits associated with introducing a greener fleet would be considered further moving forward. The issue would be discussed further at the Member Climate Working Group.

Resolved

- (1) That the content of the report regarding the replacement of the grey fleet, be noted.
- (2) That the measures being undertaken to further improve the service through the effective management of vehicles used by trade operatives, be supported.

29 **Housing Board Update**

A report of the Director of Housing and Community Services was submitted on the Housing Board's role and activity.

In presenting the report submitted, the Director of Housing and Community Services gave an overview of the report, and in doing so, stated that in Dudley, tenant representation, engagement and involvement as a whole was relatively undeveloped and considered that there was capacity for the Housing Board, DFTRA and other organisations to be more involved with the services provided. It was envisaged that the Housing White Paper, setting out the Government's plans to reform the housing market and boost the supply of new homes in England, would expect increased proactive and engagement opportunities with communities. A wider range of engagement opportunities/mechanisms for all types of tenants was considered essential moving forward to maximise delivery opportunities.

An overview of the work carried out by representatives of the Housing Board was provided to Members and although disappointed with the comments made during the Public Forum by a representative of DFTRA, maintained that the Housing Board had



attempted to work collaboratively with DFTRA since being established in 2014. Although, initially the Board had a full representation of members, over time, due to various reasons, membership had reduced. It was considered tenant engagement was key in delivering the service and the Housing Board had increased their meetings to two per month. Although the lack of engagement with Officers and Members of the Local Authority had been a concern, the Board was determined to deliver the service that they had intended to carry out as part of the values and purpose of the Housing Board. It was acknowledged, however, that work was required to review the Housing Board's Constitution to bring it up-to-date and in line with requirements, to establish links with the Local Authority and reconnecting with communities in the Borough, as well as updating the digital opportunities available and a more diverse membership. The Housing Board was a non-political Board, membership was voluntary and members had a wealth of various experiences and determination to succeed.

It was acknowledged that working collaboratively with the Local Authority was essential and recognised that initially declining a place on the Council's Committee following the establishment of the Housing Board had been an error of judgement. Various initiatives that the Housing Board had been involved in were referred to, however, concern was raised that during the creation of the Housing Strategy, various comments and questions submitted by the Housing Board to the Local Authority had not been considered.

In concluding, advantages were referred to in accepting a representative of the Housing Board to be appointed as a non-voting Co-Opted Member of the Housing and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee and future collaborative working to ensure efficient service delivery.

Following the presentation, and the comments made during the Public Forum, it was suggested that the recommendation be considered and adapted to include the appointment of non-voting members from a number of organisations to serve only when housing issues were submitted for Scrutiny. Members then had the opportunity to ask questions, make comments and responses were provided where necessary, as follows:-

- Comments were made in relation to the current requirements of the Housing Board as set out in their Constitution. Concerns were raised about residents being unaware of the Board and the purpose of its establishment; reference was also made to there being a lack of correspondence/documents/minutes and a website together with a number of Constitutional breaches.
- Reference was made to the previous Area Committees administered by the Local Authority which provided residents the opportunity to raise local issues with Local Councillors and to form good Member/Officer and resident relationships. It was recognised that partner relationships with the Local Authority and other associations continued to ensure the effective delivery of the service.



It was considered essential that further consideration and discussion take place in order to resolve the concerns raised. Reference was made to the current working arrangement with ARK, a housing consultancy practice and the potential to use the Company as facilitator between the two organisations to form a positive working partnership moving forward.

The Director of Housing and Community Services acknowledged concerns raised by the Committee and undertook to consider the matter further, in consultation with the representatives of the Housing Board and DFTRA with a view to bringing a report back to a future meeting of the Housing and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee Working Group.

Resolved

- (1) That the information contained in the report, be noted.
- (2) That, subject to the establishment of Working Groups at the first meeting of the 2021/22 municipal year, further consideration be given to the matter and to consider a recommendation to Council to appoint non-voting Co-opted Members to represent the Housing Board and Dudley Federation of Tenants and Residents Association, to comment on Housing issues only, on the Housing and Public Realm Scrutiny Committee in the 2021/22 municipal year.

30 Homelessness Prevention and Response

A report of the Director of Housing and Community Services was submitted on the current position in relation to homelessness in the Dudley Borough.

In presenting the report submitted, the Director of Housing and Community Services gave an overview of the report, and in doing so, stated that Dudley had the best homelessness service in the West Midlands, in terms of prevention. The Homelessness Prevention and Response Team (HPRT) and the Outreach Housing Support Team worked collaboratively and operated a proactive, prevention focussed approach to homelessness in the Borough, evidenced by the relatively low numbers of rough sleepers and households that were accepted as unintentionally homeless and in priority need.

It was recognised that homelessness was an extremely complex matter and reasons for people becoming homeless varied. The overall number of people that approached the Local Authority as homeless during the COVID pandemic had remained consistent in line with previous years, however, the reasons for becoming homeless had changed, seeing an increase in single younger adults with no dependents. Collaborative working with services across Housing, Adult Social Services, Public Health and the Police had continued to take place to ensure accommodation was made available and equipped with basic necessities through various projects for very complex homelessness cases during the COVID crisis, which had been recognised and commended by the Borough Commander.



Various successful bids had been made over the past year and the Local Authority had received £650,000 from central grant money from Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), that had allowed the service to expand the support services, particularly Housing First to develop some “move on” accommodation and work more effectively with people in danger of being evicted despite the moratorium on evictions through the Court.

Services provided by Housing First had expanded and now worked more closely with rough sleepers and people who had a history of rough sleeping, providing dedicated support in securing accommodation and delivering information and advice on maintaining a tenancy.

The Housing Support Service had also managed to secure £110,000 in backdated benefits for people, raised people’s awareness of homelessness, raised £200,000 worth of eligible grants, and had made over £1m worth of discretionary housing payments. Funding opportunities continued to be pursued and applied for to further develop the services and meet the changing demands of homelessness in the Borough.

In concluding, the Committee were advised that the Homelessness Services were funded from general fund housing core budgets and Government grants.

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

- Members commented positively on the report and the work involved by various Teams in the service area. However, in referring to a specific issue affecting a particular ward in the Borough, a Member raised concerns in relation to the lack of information provided to Ward Members and the service provided by Officers. The Director of Housing and Community Services acknowledged the issues raised and indicated that lessons had been learned following that experience. Further discussion was essential in relation to the matter and the Member indicated that he would contact the Director of Housing and Community Services direct following the meeting.
- Reference was made to the lack of communication from neighbouring authorities when placing people in temporary accommodation in Dudley and queried the process involved. Close working partnerships with Dudley Housing Partnership and Housing Associations continued to monitor out of borough residents and the Local Authority had sight of any planning applications being submitted for development and any concerns were referred to the Rogue Landlord Group, a multi-agency service, for investigation. Issues had been identified around exempt accommodation, particularly used by the Ministry of Justice and managed through an organisation that provide living support. The Local Authority had no enforcement powers over such properties and the location was often unknown. The Director of Housing and Community Services acknowledged the concerns and indicated that communication had been referred to the Ministry of Justice and



MHCLG outlining the importance of such locations and placements in the Dudley Borough being known to the Local Authority.

- Concern was raised in relation to the interest free loans being offered by Castle and Crystal Credit Union and the potential for debt. It was acknowledged that the Local Authority worked collaboratively with charities providing advice to people on finance and offered a deposit bond scheme, a scheme targeting people in need of housing but had difficulty accessing privately rented accommodation, because they were unable to meet the landlords requirements for a cash deposit. The interest free loans were offered as a one-off grant in order to prevent homelessness.

Resolved

- (1) That the approach to the response and prevention of homelessness in the Dudley Borough be noted.
- (2) That the Homelessness Annual Report and Homelessness Strategy in the new municipal year, to maintain sight of the approach and response to homelessness in the Borough, be supported.

31 Housing Market: Affordable housing and potential assistance to first time buyers to access the housing market

A report of the Director of Housing and Community Services was submitted on the current position in relation to affordable housing and potential assistance to first time buyers to access the housing market.

In presenting the report submitted, the Director of Housing and Community Services gave an overview of the report, and in doing so referred to key issues relating to affordable housing, routes to ownership and the options available in terms of social housing and private renting.

The Council's current Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) required all new housing schemes of more than 15 units to include 25% affordable housing, delivered on site and integrated within the wider scheme unless otherwise agreed.

The option for a mortgage varied depending on economy, job opportunities and income, however, in the Budget for 2021, Central Government were proposing to introduce a mortgage guarantee scheme to help people with small deposits to get on the property ladder and offer initiatives to lenders who introduced 95% mortgages.

Affordability issues developed when housing needs expanded. Within the Local Authority's stock, around 1,200 homes per year were let with approximately 4,000 households on the housing register, with roughly half being existing tenants seeking to transfer and the other half new applicants.



The Local Authority had not directly participated in the shared ownership housing market, however, were working with housing associations who delivered a range of shared ownership housing options.

Reference was made to a number of Registered Provider led schemes that would deliver opportunities to purchase affordable home ownership homes over the next 12 to 24 months.

Dudley was now an Investment Partner with Homes England and able to access various grants depending on the nature of the scheme. A number of new builds for social rent were currently being developed to meet local demand. Unfortunately, the Local Authority was not in the shared ownership market as that would require a policy change to be able to supply that type of housing. The Local Authority had previously built some homes for outright sale on general funded land and recouped the costs and used to cross subsidise affordable housing.

In referring to recent Government changes, Local Authorities were now authorised to increase the use of capital receipts from Right to Buy, up to 40% towards the cost of a replacement home. The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) borrowing cap had been removed allowing further opportunities for the Local Authority to build more homes and were currently identifying opportunities to develop Council homes to meet demand in the Dudley Borough.

It was acknowledged that the housing market had increased over time and figures associated with affordable rented accommodation in the Borough was requested on a ward by ward basis.

The Director of Housing and Community Services referred to meetings that had taken place with the Director of Regeneration and Enterprise and various Heads of Service in relation to developing a map of major regeneration initiatives, including jobs and training opportunities taking place in various wards. Awareness of key developments would provide the opportunity to work alongside partner organisations to maximise benefits to local communities.

Resolved

- (1) That the contents of the report be noted.
- (2) That figures in relation to affordable rented accommodation on a ward by ward basis throughout the Dudley Borough be provided to Members.

32 Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Housing Investment

A report of the Director of Housing and Community Services was submitted on the work to create an implementation plan for the approved Asset Strategy.



In presenting the report submitted, the Director of Housing and Community Services gave an overview of the report, and in doing so, stated that the work was being facilitated by the Housing specialists Ark and had involved tenant representatives to develop ways to consult tenants. The work would then be widened to include Ward Member level consultation over the summer with a view to an Implantation Plan from 2020 to 2022 t being developed

The Director of Housing and Community Services indicated that the Asset Strategy was in the process of being updated to include updated figures, condition of stock and financial remodelling following the removal of the HRA borrowing cap. Since introducing the “red amber green” grading, concerns had been raised that a category red home required demolition and green was considered investment. The revised five-year HRA capital programme had been agreed to reflect latest housing stock figures.

The Local Authority had a number of housing experts working collaboratively with the Housing Board, Dudley Federation of Tenants, Residents Association (DFTRA) and other organisations to identify future investment projects and develop an overall Asset Investment Plan. The implementation plan would require major investment decisions and it was essential for a full consultation exercise to take place with communities, tenant representatives and local Ward Members to ensure the changing housing needs for the next 30 years were identified and delivered.

Resolved

That the contents of the report be noted.

33 Annual Overview and Scrutiny Report 2020/21

A report of the Lead for Law and Governance (Monitoring Officer) was submitted on the annual overview and scrutiny report for 2020/21.

Following the presentation of the report, Members were invited to suggest any items that they wished to be included within the Annual Scrutiny Programme for 2021/22.

Resolved

- (1) That the annual overview and scrutiny report for 2020/21 be noted.
- (2) That the Lead for Law and Governance (Monitoring Officer), following consultation with the Chair and Vice-Chair, be authorised to make any necessary amendments to update the annual report prior to its submission to the Council.

(3) That the following items be rolled forward for inclusion in the draft Annual Scrutiny Programme for 2021/22: -

- Waste Strategy.
- Highway Maintenance, to include information on potholes and the general condition of roads in the Dudley Borough.
- Wednesbury to Brierley Hill Metro Extension.

The meeting ended at 7.39pm

CHAIR

