

Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 5 September 2019

Attendance

Members of the Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Paul Appleby (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Mary Bateman
Cllr Greg Brackenridge
Cllr Alan Butt
Cllr Jacqui Coogan
Cllr Bhupinder Gakhal
Cllr Keith Inston
Cllr Beverley Momenabadi
Cllr Mak Singh (Chair)
Cllr Martin Waite

Employees

Martin Stevens (Scrutiny Officer) (Minutes)
Ross Cook (Director for City Environment)
Kate Martin (Director for Assets and City Housing)
Steve Woodward (Head of Environmental Services)
Colin Parr (Head of Business Services)
Jenny Lewington (Service Manager Housing Strategy and Policy)
Claire Walters (Programme Manager – City Environment)
Helen Scullard (Service Support Manager)

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

1 **Apologies**

Cllr Obaida Ahmed sent her apologies for the item on burial grounds and the crematorium as a Member of the Health Scrutiny Panel that made the recommendation that the item should be received by the Scrutiny Panel.

Cllr Sohail Khan sent his apologies for the item on burial grounds and the crematorium, as he had attended the Special Health Scrutiny Panel meeting which considered the processes to be followed after a death.

2 **Declarations of interest**

Cllr Gurmukh Singh declared a non-pecuniary interest, on the items on the agenda regarding housing, as a landlord and a trustee of a charity helping to support the homeless and veterans.

Cllr Martin Waite declared a non-pecuniary interest on the items on the agenda regarding housing as a Board Member of the WV Living Shareholders Board.

3 **Minutes of the previous meeting**

Resolved: That the minutes of the Vibrant and Sustainable Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 20 June 2019 be confirmed as a correct record.

4 **Matters arising**

There were no matters arising from the minutes.

5 **Burial Places in Wolverhampton and the Crematorium**

The Head of Environmental Services introduced a briefing note on burial places in Wolverhampton and the Crematorium. The briefing note had been commissioned following a special meeting of the Health Scrutiny Panel which looked at the processes to be followed after a death.

The Head of Environmental Services remarked that there were a number of cemeteries across the City which were closed but the Council were responsible for maintaining. Consideration would need to be given to sustaining burial capacity in the future. The briefing note identified a couple of privately owned sites which could be purchased, with appropriate funding available, to ensure continuity of service at Danescourt and Penn Cemetery.

The Head of Environmental Services stated that Bushbury Crematorium was the 16th busiest individual crematorium out of the 290 crematoria in the UK. It was the busiest individual crematorium in the West Midlands region. Bereavement services were able to cater for the multi-faith needs of the City and provided burial spaces across the cemeteries maintained by the Council.

Members complimented the Head of Environmental Services for providing an informative report on burial places and the crematorium. They also praised the Bereavement Services team for receiving the Gold Award based on national standards.

A Panel Member asked if the estimated financial costs associated with purchasing new land for burial provision could be supplied in the future. The Head of Environmental Services responded that they would have to work with the Corporate Landlord Department and Estate Services to assess which options would be suitable, which would include an assessment of whether the land was fit for burial. They were currently looking at some drainage solutions for Bushbury cemetery to enable more of the ground to be used. He agreed that a future report could detail some of the options in the future.

The Chair asked if the Council was currently in liaison with any private landlords about the potential purchase of land for burial purposes. The Head of Environmental Services responded that there were no current negotiations, but they were looking at certain areas. There was a garage area in Bilston Cemetery, which they were looking at with Corporate Landlord, with a view to demolishing and using the space for future burial provision. Securing future land for burial purposes was very much a work in progress, there was burial space available within the City at the moment.

A Panel Member commented that he thought the owner of the land adjacent to Penn Cemetery was looking to develop the land to keep horses.

A Member of the Panel asked about the ability of Bereavement Services to meet people's expectations for an expedited burial due to religious reasons. The Head of Environmental Services responded that the service did their very best to accommodate families for faith needs where they could and in the main they were able to meet expectations, but he accepted there were some exceptions, particularly when demand had been high. They were often able to accommodate burials for faith requirements at weekends. It could sometimes depend on the availability of the funeral directors and their availability to liaise with them. It was therefore not solely down to the Council to ensure a burial happened within a certain timeframe, as the Council was reliant on other partners.

A Panel Member asked about availability of the crematorium and the Bereavement Service at weekends. The Head of Environmental Services responded that they did do burials at weekends for faith needs. They were however reliant on funeral directors' availability and resources such as the availability of the Chapel. The main slots were Monday to Friday with the exception of burials for faith purposes at weekends. Generally, not all of the available slots were filled within the week. They could explore extending the availability but that would have a resource implication.

6 **Work Programme**

Resolved: That the Scrutiny Work Programme be agreed.

7 **Housing Strategy**

The Director for Assets and City Housing introduced a report on the City Housing Strategy. As had been agreed at the previous Panel meeting, when a report had been received on the draft strategy, the full Housing Strategy was now before the Panel for pre-decision scrutiny.

The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy commented that the three key objectives for the 2019-2024 strategy were more and better homes, safe and healthier homes and access to a secure home. The strategy set out how the Council and its partners would drive forward the improvements that had been identified as required over the next 5 years.

The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy remarked that an internal consultation had been conducted, where they had met senior leaders and Managers within the Council and various Leadership Teams. An external consultation had also been completed, this had taken the form of an on-line survey, which was also available in hard copy. In addition, they had been to a variety of forums including the Youth Council, Better Homes Board and the Equality Forum. A significant amount of feedback on the draft strategy had been received. Over 150 responses had been received to the online survey, with 80% of the responses coming from residents. Appendix 2 to the report, circulated with the agenda, provided a summary of the responses received from the consultation and how they had responded to them. They had made some changes and strengthened certain areas as a consequence of the consultation.

A Member of the Panel raised a point about mobility. He wanted to ensure that access was made as easy as possible, as in the past the Local Authority had built on land that was cheap with bad access and poor transport links. The Director for Assets and City Housing confirmed that it was a key part of the planning policy and it was a key part of the affordable housing programme. All of the plans were also subject to approval from the Council's Planning Committee. As part of the larger regeneration schemes they were also looking at spatial planning for health to ensure there was suitable access for community services such as GPs and medical centres.

A Panel Member praised the Housing team for the work they had been carrying out with rough sleepers in the City. The Council was beating the national trend by reducing the number in the City rather than it increasing.

A Member of the Panel asked how the Housing team were engaging with the third sector to help rough sleepers in the City. The Director for Assets and City Housing confirmed that they had a number of stakeholder forums, and had some commissioning arrangements. The relationships were positive and they were a key part to delivering their services.

There was a discussion about how the Council assisted people to downsize to a house which was more appropriate for their needs.

A Panel Member asked for it to be noted that no points had been raised about development on Greenbelt land during the meeting.

Resolved: That the City Housing Strategy 2019-2024 is submitted to October 2019 Cabinet for adoption.

8

Housing Allocation Policy

The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy commented that this was the first full wholesale review of the Allocations Policy since 2007. Minor changes to the policy had been made since 2007 to ensure the Council complied with national legislation. There were some significant changes being proposed to the Allocations Policy. A Steering Group had been established consisting of Housing Strategy Officers, Wolverhampton Homes representatives, Tenant Management Organisations and Legal Officers, who had met regularly to consider how the Allocations Policy should be updated. Officers had also conducted internal consultation within the Council by attending meetings such as Leadership teams. The briefing note contained the revised objectives for the Allocations Policy. She cited the objectives as follows: -

- Ensure people in the greatest housing need have the greatest opportunity to access suitable housing that best meets their needs.
- Make use of a range of housing options and tenures to prevent and relieve homelessness.
- Make best use of the Council's and partner registered providers' housing stock.
- Manage applicants' expectations by being realistic about stock availability, to support them in making informed choices about their housing options, and the extent to which they are able to express reasonable preference.

- Ensure that the Council's legal duties and corporate responsibilities are met and that they contribute to delivering the Council's priorities.

The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy remarked that they were proposing that choice-based lettings be retained, allowing people to bid for the properties they had an interest in, rather than operating a waiting list where the first suitable property available would be allocated to the person at the top of the waiting list. They were looking to modernise Band 4, which was the band given to people that were in no housing need and were suitably housed already. They had over 5000 applicants in that band. Only 2% of properties were allocated to Band 4 at the present time, which equated to approximately 100 properties per year. They wanted to better assist the people in Band 4 with more realistic housing options. This could include guiding them into the private rented sector or homeownership options. They wanted to make better use of the 2% of the stock allocated to Band 4.

The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy stated that a revised banding system was proposed for bands Emergency, 1- 3. They were considering introducing a new emergency plus band, which would give additional priority to applicants with a full homelessness duty who were also care leavers, members of the armed forces, require a substantially adapted property, were significantly overcrowded or anyone who required immediate rehousing due to a significant threat to life, to ensure those with the highest level of need were given the most priority.

The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy commented that they were proposing a revision of the right sizing criteria to try and make it fairer for people who were under or over occupying. A new banding priority was being proposed for people wishing to have a larger property because they wished to foster or adopt. It was clarified in the full policy document that it could not just be people expressing an interest in fostering or adoption, they had to have reached a certain point in the process. They were also looking to introduce additional priority for care leavers within the City. It was proposed that Wolverhampton care leavers be excluded from any residency requirements (requiring them to have lived in the City for at least up to the age of 25).

The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy remarked that one area they were looking to make fairer was regarding rent arrears. Presently there was a £60 rent arrears limit, where you would be either temporarily downgraded in the banding system or prevented from bidding on properties. It was proposed that the limit would be increased to £400 which was the average monthly rate. They were also proposing some new exclusion criteria, the current policy meant you were either on the register or excluded completely. It was proposed that the new policy would allow you to be excluded for certain parts, such as a specific geographical location or a type of property, i.e. high rise, where they may be a danger to themselves or other people. It was intended that these exclusions could be reviewed at any time.

A Panel Member asked what action against a perpetrator the proposed new policy would allow when an existing tenant had been found guilty of an offence, such as assault against a person who lived locally to the perpetrator. The Director for City Housing and Assets said they would discuss the matter with the Probation Service and the Police. If there was a risk they would use a multi-agency approach to determine the action to be taken.

A Member of the Panel remarked that she could not support recommendation 11 (Appendix A to the report) – “Allow children of the same sex to share a bedroom post the age of 15”. The current situation was that children of the same sex who reached the age of 15 had to have separate bedrooms, in terms of their housing application. She could not support the recommendation because the age group was such an important time for secondary education examinations. Sharing a bedroom could affect the studies of the individuals concerned.

A Panel Member commented that they could not support recommendation 9 (Appendix A to the report) – “Allowing a maximum of two refusals of offers of housing in a 12-month period before suspending a housing application for six months.” She believed that it should stay the same as the current situation which was that applicants (excluding those owed a homeless duty), could refuse three offers of suitable accommodation in a 12-month period before their application was suspended for a period of three months. Her experience working at Badger Court had informed her that some young people were not fully aware of the consequences of refusing applications until the second occasion of refusal. She felt the proposed new rule was too harsh.

A Panel Member asked about the preparing for a tenancy online training modules. She was aware of a lady who had recently undertaken the training but had significant technical issues. She didn't want the online training to hold up people in need of housing from being allocated. She had found some of the questions very difficult to answer and asked for the test to be reviewed. One of the questions was about the benefits Universal credit had replaced, which she was sure most people would not know the complete correct answer. The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy responded that the online training modules were run by Wolverhampton Homes in conjunction with the Council. The new allocations policy proposed increasing the support that was available to applicants. The Officers took on board her comments about the preparing for tenancy online training needing review.

A Member of the Panel commented that when some of the recommendations were seen together as a collective rather than in isolation, he had a concern for unintended consequences on the matter of community cohesion. He cited recommendation 6 (Appendix A to the report) – “Remove the priority attached to a quarter of all properties that become available to let to someone with a local connection to an area over those with the greatest housing need,” and recommendation 21 (Appendix A to the report) – “Amend the ‘residency rule’ which requires applicants to have lived in the City for 2 or more years before their housing needs can be fully assessed, to exclude refugees and travellers”. He felt seeing these two recommendations together could fuel far right politics. He suggested that rather than removing the local connection part of the policy, as suggested in recommendation 6, it could be revised instead. The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy responded that in connection with the points the Councillor made, they understood the importance of community cohesion and they had tried to strengthen the local connection in relation to another policy. The policy for the allocation of new build Council properties had seen the local connection strengthened. The Councillor commented that to determine local connection areas, rather than using arbitrary lines on maps, could the Council use other methods such as drive time, walk time or GIS radius systems.

A Panel Member remarked that he had some concerns of unintended consequences in relation to recommendation 3 (Appendix A to the report) – Increase the priority given to Wolverhampton Care Leavers and exempt them from any residency requirements up to the age of 25. He was aware that some children and young people were fostered out of the City for safety and wellbeing reasons. If they returned to Wolverhampton when leaving care, a vulnerable person could end up being exploited by people who they had escaped from. So, whilst he wanted to help care leavers, he did not want them to perversely suffer from the new policy due to an unforeseen safeguarding issue. It was therefore important that appropriate safeguards were in place in the policy for care leavers. The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy responded that they had developed the proposal in consultation with the Leaving Care Team. The proposal had also been to the Care Leave Forum during the consultation who had welcomed the proposal. She did however appreciate the comment and said it was something they should build into their consultation to ensure safeguards were in place.

A Member of the Panel asked why recommendation 19 (Appendix A to the report), was proposed - "Ensure the Allocations policy meets current needs by removing those criteria that are not used i.e. "the two tenancies for one rule." They asked the question, why the fact that a rule was rarely used, was justification for it to be abolished. They asked for this to be reconsidered. The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy responded that they would give this rule some further consideration.

Resolved: That the final proposals for the Housing Allocations Policy be received for pre-decision scrutiny at the Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel, before the final recommendations are put to Cabinet, currently scheduled for January 2020.

9

Empty Homes Policy and Strategy Action Plan

The Service Support Manager introduced a report on the Empty Homes Policy and Strategy Action Plan 2019-2024. The new strategy proposed increasing the options of financial assistance for owners of empty homes who had low incomes and might be unable to bring a dilapidated property up to the standard where it could be occupied or sold. Options for a loan which could be repaid through rent if the Council nominated the tenant, or through a charge on the property when it was sold, could also be offered.

The Service Support Manager remarked that they now wrote to the owners of an empty property after 3 months rather than six. This was an effective way of helping to prevent properties being unoccupied for long periods of time.

Members of the Panel welcomed the report and had a discussion about their experiences of empty homes in their wards and the reasons that had caused them to be empty.

Resolved: That the Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel endorse the Empty Homes Policy and Strategy Action Plan 2019-2024.

10 **Exclusion of press and public**

Resolved: That in accordance with Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the press and public be excluded from the meeting, for the discussion on the briefing note - Keep Your Street Neat, under paragraph 7 – Information relating to any action taken or to be taken in connection with the prevention, investigation or prosecution of crime.

11 **Keep Your Street Neat Briefing Note**

There was a confidential discussion on the Keep Your Street Neat Briefing Note.