

Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 11 February 2016

Attendance

Members of the Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Mary Bateman
Cllr Philip Bateman
Cllr Val Evans
Cllr Bhupinder Gakhal
Cllr Christopher Haynes (Chair)
Cllr Keith Inston
Cllr Lynne Moran
Cllr Caroline Siarkiewicz
Cllr Andrew Wynne

Employees

Richard Phillips	Solicitor/Senior Solicitor
Earl Piggott-Smith	Scrutiny Officer
Mila Simpson	Section Leader, Housing Strategy
Chris Hale	Head of Housing
Lesley Roberts	Strategic Director of Housing
William Humphries	Service Lead, Environmental Health

In attendance

Cllr Steve Evans	Cabinet Member for City Environment
Mark Henderson	Director of Housing, Wolverhampton Homes

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 Chair Announcement**
In the absence of the Chair Cllr Ian Angus the meeting was chaired by Cllr Christopher Haynes.
- 2 Apologies**
Apologies were received from the following member(s) of the panel:

Cllr Ian Angus
- 3 Declarations of interest**
There were no declarations of interest recorded.

4 **Minutes of the previous meeting (3.12.15)**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 3.12.15 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

5 **Matters arising**

There were no matters arising from the minutes.

6 **Review of Age Designations on Council Flats**

Mila Simpson, Section Leader, Housing Strategy, introduced the report and gave a brief overview of the key elements of the proposal to review age designations for allocating Council flats. Section Leader explained that the report was being presented to the panel for pre-decision scrutiny. The report will be presented to Cabinet on 23.3.16 for their consideration and approval.

Section Leader explained that a review of the age designation policy that sits within the Council's housing allocations policy had identified a number of issues with properties that have an age designation applied to them. For example, the current policy had a detrimental impact on families with children, particularly single parent households, who are unable to access age designated flats because they did not meet the criteria.

Section Leader also explained that the age designation policy did not apply to leaseholders living in blocks and they could choose to sell the property to anyone, thereby undermining the policy.

Section Leader explained that age designations of Council flats made it difficult to let some properties due to lower demand and as a consequence properties had been allocated to applicants with a lower housing priority. Section Leader commented that the proposed policy change was intended to make best use of the Council's housing stock.

The panel queried the potential increase in the number of Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) cases arising from intergenerational living. Section Leader outlined a series of activities aimed at minimising the likelihood of this happening. This includes the tenancy checks done to prevent future difficulties when allocating properties to new tenants. In addition, pre-tenancy work is done with successful applicants to explain their responsibilities and the action that can be taken in response in complaints about their behaviour. Section Leader added that housing managers will also monitor tenancy issues in designated flats and deal with them accordingly.

The panel accepted the need to make the best use of limited housing stock in order to meet demand for affordable housing. The panel did express concern about the proposal to mix older and younger tenants in the same block of flats, which could lead to nuisance complaints. Section Leader explained that in addition to other options, there is a mediation service available to deal with issues that may arise.

The panel discussed the current age profile of tenants currently living in age designated properties and how this would be affected by the proposed changes to minimum age. Section Leader explained that the majority of blocks where it is recommended that age designations are removed are currently restricted to people aged 30 or over.

Former sheltered blocks are currently restricted to people aged 50. The vast majority of these would retain an age designation of over 50 years if the proposal was approved by Cabinet.

The panel commented that they understood the need to make more flexible use of current housing stock. The panel commented that the plans were likely to raise concerns among the public and it was important that the community likely to be affected understood the reasons behind the proposed changes.

The panel commented on the importance of having an effective communication strategy to explain the plans and continually reassure existing tenants.

The panel discussed the impact of leasehold properties in age designated blocks on the policy and the creation of mixed communities.

The panel queried the small numbers of the people who responded to the consultation – 23 responses were received to letters sent to 2295 households affected by proposed change. Section Leader commented on the work done to encourage tenants to provide feedback on the proposals. The panel queried what work has been done to communicate the message about the proposals. Service Lead explained the work done to keep residents informed about the changes.

The panel discussed the need to provide residents with regular information about the progress of the plans, particularly for people who are not comfortable using online sources. The panel commented that a communication plan should be prepared and shared with Councillors who would be affected by the proposed changes.

Mark Henderson, Director of Housing, Wolverhampton Homes explained that a citywide ASB service managed by Wolverhampton Homes has increased the effectiveness of responding to such complaints.

Director of Housing responded to comments about the issue of ASB. Director of Housing supported the comments of the Section Leader in relation to pre tenancy work. Director of Housing commented on the ability of the service to develop plans following the formation of a single cross tenure ASB Team based around electoral wards. Director of Housing explained that the ASB team can deal with a mixed population in the future.

Section Leader commented on work done to respond to concerns about ASB and the use of mediation officer to intervene where needed.

Service Lead commented that the review had been undertaken to address the housing needs of an ageing population in the future. Service Lead explained the range of work being done to address these needs.

Cllr Steve Evans, Cabinet Member for City Environment, commented that public confidence in the ASB team was a key part of efforts to reassure the public who may have concerns about the proposal.

Cabinet Member for City Environment commented on the changes made following a review to the previous structure which led to the creation of a single team and number to deal with ASB queries. Cabinet Member for City Environment commented that many people already live in mixed communities with people of different ages, and this has not led to the problems highlighted as concerns by Councillors.

Section Leader agreed to further look at comments received from the public to the proposals.

Resolved:

The panel agreed to receive details of interim public communication plan to tenants covering the period from publication to the date it will be considered by Cabinet. The panel comments on the report to be included as an appendix to the report presented to Cabinet.

The majority of the panel accepted the recommendations.

Cllrs Haynes and Wynne wanted it recorded that they rejected the proposal to remove age discrimination across those properties affected.

7 Taking Forward the Management of the City Centre Public Realm - briefing paper

William Humphries, Service Lead, Environmental Health, introduced the briefing paper and explained that the title should have been city centre regulation to better reflect the focus of the work. Service Lead explained that the title of future reports to the panel on this topic would be changed accordingly.

Service Lead explained the reasons for wanting to update the panel on this issue and to highlight the difficulty in finding long term solutions that would mitigate the impact of the issues detailed in the briefing paper.

Service Lead explained that the issues need to be considered in the context of Government attempts to deal with specific nuisance problems in a specified area through new powers detailed in ASB Crime and Behaviour Act 2014. Service Lead explained that the Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO) was aimed at stopping individuals or groups committing anti-social behaviour in public spaces. Service Lead gave examples of local authorities seeking to use the PSPO who failed to get public to support the proposal when they were consulted about the plan to restrict a specific activity. A breach of the order could lead to number of escalating scale of action.

Service Lead explained that the power has been not as successful as was hoped when first published and Councils were looking at other options to mitigate the issues such as begging, busking and street preaching which has been identified from complaints received as an issue. Service Lead explained in further detail the reasons for including the issues listed in the paper as being a priority for action. Service Lead gave a summary of the current and future action planned to deliver the necessary improvements.

Service Director commented on the issue of commercial bins stored on the highway and the problems caused by some city centre businesses not having a secure location and space and options being considered, for example, bin sharing or storing bins in an agreed secure location.

The panel commented that it was difficult to reach a view about the suitability of the proposed responses to the issues listed without information about the size of the problem, for example, what proportion of business in the city centre place their commercial bins on public highways?

The panel queried the potential to use Council planning control powers to restrict and or mitigate the problems caused by commercial bins. Service Lead commented that some businesses were located in premises that could not be used to store bins due to the limited size available.

The panel discussed the issue of begging in the city centre and there was concern that the police were reluctant to use their powers to deal with this issue or intervene when they see instances. Service Lead explained the work being done to provide services to encourage people to use alternatives. Service Lead commented that a night shelter for homeless people will be opening shortly in Wolverhampton. However, based on past experience some homeless people may be unwilling to accept the offer due to the restrictions that apply to people who stay there.

Service Lead explained that a defence that has been used by people accused of begging was that there were offered money by a member of the public and did not ask for help.

Service Lead explained that the Vagrancy Act 1824 allows beggars to be fined. However, in practice the courts were unlikely to impose a fine which they would be unlikely to be able to pay. Service Lead explained the work being done to encourage public to give money to charities rather than directly to beggars. The scheme would involve collection boxes being made available in city centre shops. Service Lead accepted the difficult in finding a solution to the issue of begging but argued the need think of different ways of addressing the problem.

Cabinet Member for City Environment commented that the current policy towards begging will be reviewed in 2017 but was open to the idea of using the current civil enforcement team as part of multi approach to mitigating the effects of issues which cause a nuisance.

Cabinet Member commented on the idea of developing a code of practice for buskers to deal with nuisance issues in the city centre, but such a plan would depend on getting agreement and also there were practical problems in enforcing statutory nuisance provisions. Service Lead commented on the number of complaints received from city centre businesses about noise levels which they consider is having a negative effect on efforts to make the area more attractive to shoppers and visitors.

The panel discussed the issue of the impact of begging on city centre businesses and commented on the need to recognise that people may be in genuine need and experiencing hardship.

A panel member commented that the experience from other cities such as Oxford suggesting that begging in the city centre does not affect the number of tourists wanting to visit.

The panel discussed the issue of street preaching and their use of loud hailers which had received complaints from both members of the public and businesses about the nuisance caused.

The panel welcomed the report.

Resolved:

The panel to receive a progress report in 12 months on the impact of current and planned changes to city centre regulations and other initiatives aimed at mitigating the effects of issues highlighted in complaints received from businesses and members of the public.

8 **Wolverhampton City Council/Wolverhampton Homes Housing Support Services Review**

Mark Henderson, Director of Housing, Wolverhampton Homes, introduced the report and explained that panel members were invited to comment and contribute to initial ideas for the future provision of housing support and service. Director of Housing explained that this is a joint review between Wolverhampton Homes and the City of Wolverhampton Council. Director of Housing explained that the total cost of providing current level of service by both organisations is estimated to be £2.5 million annually and there were opportunities to review areas of duplication.

Director of Housing explained that there are discussions on-going about the idea of setting up a co-located team providing housing support and housing options advice on a similar basis as the Anti-Social Behaviour Team to provide advice. However, no decision has yet been made.

The panel commented that difficult to assess the impact of any proposed changes to the service without details of the client base and the numbers of staff providing support. Director of Housing explained that the service receives enquires from 60-80 families moving into the City, but also provides help to people who need help to manager their tenancy.

Chris Hale, Head of Housing, commented on the support available to people who are homeless and the importance of early intervention to avoid the problems caused. Head of Housing commented that the plans provide an opportunity for both organisations to work better together and achieve better outcomes. Head of Housing commented on the importance of checking that the budget is spent in the right way.

Lesley Roberts, Strategic Director of Housing, commented on the need to provide the right help and avoid duplication.

The panel welcomed the report

Resolved:

The panel to receive a progress report with the findings of the housing support services review in December 2016

9 **Improving the City Housing Offer Housing Company Outline Business Case Exclusion of the public and press**

[To pass the following resolution:

That in accordance with Section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business as they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information falling within paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A to the Act relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information)]

Lesley Roberts, Strategic Director of Housing, presented the report to the panel.

The panel welcomed the report.

Resolved:

Cllr Bateman agreed to be the nominated representative of the panel on the Councillor Steering Group to consider and comment on proposals to set up a Housing Company.