



# Vibrant, Safe and Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Panel Minutes - 18 March 2015

## Attendance

### Members of the Vibrant, Safe and Sustainable Communities Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Stephen Simkins (Chair)  
Cllr Andrew Wynne (Vice-Chair)  
Cllr Mary Bateman  
Cllr Greg Brackenridge  
Cllr Barry Findlay  
Cllr Malcolm Gwinnett  
Cllr Keith Inston  
Cllr Tersaim Singh

### Employees

Deborah Breedon	Scrutiny Officer
Nick Edwards	Service Director - City Assets
Christopher Hale	Head of Housing

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## Part 1 – items open to the press and public

*Item No.*      *Title*

- Chairman's Announcement**

The Chair, Cllr Stephen Simkins, gave notice of thanks to officers and to the police liaison officer for support to the scrutiny function during the year. He thanked officers and partners who had provided detailed reports on key issues throughout the year and he thanked panel members for contributions made to debate at each meeting and he especially thanked the Vice-Chair Cllr Andrew Wynne for his valuable contributions at agenda planning meetings and in the Scrutiny Panel meetings.

Cllr Andrew Wynne, Vice-Chair echoed the comments of the Chair and on behalf of the Panel, welcomed the manner in which the Chair had conducted the meetings, in an impartial and fair manner.
- Apologies**

Apologies were submitted on behalf of Cllr Richard Whitehouse and Cllr Ian Brookfield who had other council business to attend.
- Declarations of Interest**

Cllr Tersaim Singh declared a non-pecuniary interest in item 5 on the agenda relating to 'Improving the City Housing Offer' as a member of the Wolverhampton Homes Board.

4 **Minutes of previous meeting (5 February 2015)**

Resolved:

That the minutes of the previous meeting (5 February 2015) be approved and signed as a correct copy.

5 **Matters arising**

There were no matters arising

6 **Improving the City Housing Offer**

Nick Edwards, Service Director City Assets and Chris Hale, Head of Housing were in attendance at the meeting to provide a presentation 'Improving the City Housing Offer' and to respond to questions arising from a report also relating to 'Improving the City Housing Offer' that had been previously circulated to the Panel and agreed for action by the Cabinet on 11 March 2015.

The Service Director advised that the purpose of the item was to summarise the challenges facing the Council in improving delivery of a 'fit for purpose' city housing offer across all tenures and building on the progress made to date, to set out a framework for progressing this across the city and to highlight the priorities for 2015 and onwards.

The Head of Housing gave a presentation which brought together the strands of the housing offer ranging from supporting people in need of housing to aspirational housing. It highlighted the challenges faced and the plans to deliver housing opportunities across all tenures.

The Service Director advised that the Cabinet report contained the agenda for where the Council goes next to improve the city housing offer.

There followed a period of questioning, the subject and response were recorded as follows:

Government target:

The Head of Housing confirmed that the Council will need to work with developers as the land identified could be quite difficult to build on and there will need to be work with affordable homes providers to improve the viability.

Inner Ring Road and city centre living:

The Service Director advised that regeneration programme is wider than the city centre and that one element is to increase number of city centre accommodations. He indicated that building in the city centre would help to attract people to live there, current regeneration projects are:

- Offices
- Youth zone
- Mander Centre
- Leisure based scheme
- West side market area (potential residential development)

The city centre has got to be right before housing comes into the city centre. The Service Director advised that issues such as unsightly 'for rent' boards by the Blue

Brick Hotel had to be addressed and that officers were investigating and will improve the situation.

Older people housing:

Housing older people in bungalows was raised as a particular point. The Service Director advised that there have been elements of recent developments that provide supported housing and that the aging population is a challenge and one of the priorities in the work going forward.

Developers – planning officer advice:

The Service Director advised that the Council is trying to give a full package to developers not just a planning response and that developers want to look at infrastructure, demographics and employment rates to build a picture of the area and what is required. The joined up response is a work in progress and Taylor Wimpey will be giving feed back to the Council of their experience of working with the Council.

Shortfall in housing in the City:

The Head of Housing advised that this is due to a number of factors but mainly due to the economic downturn. Councillors considered that bringing 200 houses back into use this year is only a part of plugging the gap, the Head of Housing advised that a number of measures are being developed and used, including putting a mixture of empty properties back into use / new build and so on to try to get some traction and move forward on this agenda.

Empty Housing – private owners:

The Head of Housing advised that there are a number of stages and tools available to the Council to engage with the owner to put private properties back into use, such as:

- Discuss with the private owner
- Enforcement tools
- Enforcement to bring back into use; compulsory purchase order (CPO) which can sometimes urge people to move on
- Wolverhampton Homes (WH) operated private sector leasing scheme which provides for managing the property on behalf of the home owner

Cllr Greg Brackenridge indicated that in his ward Wednesfield South there were approximately 400 properties empty, he suggested that this could be a huge amount of empty houses up to 5,000 if this was replicated across the city. He indicated that approximately 12,000 names were on the waiting list for social housing and that putting private properties back into use should be a priority. The Service Director advised that there is an evolving fund for empty property; that work has commenced to look at Council tax data cleanse and to try to address empty homes in locality.

Licensing schemes:

The Head of Housing referred to selective and additional licensing schemes and their applicability to areas in the city centre CH1. He advised how improving conditions in rented accommodation was a priority. The rules around licensing schemes are very specific. Additional licensing for houses of multiple occupations (HMOs) is part of the work moving forward to get into communities, work with the landlords and partners and improve the housing offer.

Trees in private housing:

The Service Director responded to questions about the cost of dealing with large trees in Council gardens when the property is Council owned there can be some direction to the type of tree planted but where the property is privately owned there is only an ability to influence. This can however stretch to the species of trees.

Derelict sites:

The Service Director advised that there are a number of comparatively big sites across the city where the Council is working with owners to develop the land. The delays to housing developments have been primarily due to the national drop in funding source (previously used to close the gap for developers). Without the funding source, either other sources have to be identified through developers or the Homes and Community Agency (HCA). The message needs to be strengthened that there is economic growth across the city to encourage investment from housing construction companies.

Ground conditions:

The Service Director referred to the ground conditions of available land for housing in Wolverhampton. He indicated the instability and condition of some building land is challenging, some have a number of mineshafts and the poor ground condition is reflected in the price for land. Some housing group receive affordable housing grants and there are a number of other factors to work with developers on to secure the build for example - a recent development in Wolverhampton where 40 houses were pre-sold, there have to be ways of bridging the gap and making the development viable.

Housing Design:

Councillors raised concerns about some of the new design social housing builds in the city. It was suggested that the designs may actually encourage anti-social behaviour (ASB) such as the design which enables young people to play football in alleys and against walls which causes offence to residents. It was suggested that officer and Council resources are utilised trying to stop the behaviour. Cllr Stephen Simkins suggested that the Council should 'design it out'. The Head of Housing advised that the Police architectural design team are involved in the process, and design them out (rather than not design them in). The Head of Housing advised that the Council learns as it goes forward.

Rogue tenants:

The Head of Housing advised that part of the work being developed is encouraging the tenants and landlords in rented sector to work together. The tenants have to sign up to agreements to act responsibly as well as the landlord as part of tenancy agreements.

Councillors were advised that 'Homestamp' has been developed across the West Midlands and will be used by reputable landlords as part of the tenancy agreement. Tenants and landlords engage with the Council to modify their behaviour in a long term approach.

Next stages:

In response to a suggestion to carry out a scrutiny review relating to the housing offer the scrutiny officer indicated that the Review of Private Rented Sector Housing had been carried out last municipal year and the first progress report is due to Scrutiny

Board at its next meeting and that many of the recommendation had yet to be implemented.

There was a suggestion from the Chair that there should be a review of planning design in the City. The Head of Housing advised that the Black Country Core Strategy is due for review, the process starts in 2015 and that scrutiny panel could input into the wider Black Country review.

The Service Director indicated that it would be helpful for scrutiny to generally consider a number of ideas to move the housing offer forward in the new municipal year to have key input and help shape housing policy.

Resolved:

That the comments of the scrutiny panel be shared with the Cabinet member for Economic Regeneration and Prosperity and considered when preparing the work programme for scrutiny 2015-16.