**Tenant & Leaseholder Scrutiny Group**

**Saturday 16th March 2024, 9:00am-1.30pm**

**Sandwell Council House**

**Chair – Phillippe Brown**

**Minutes**

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| **Circulation:**  **Scrutiny Members** |  |  |
| Ahmed Abdulrahman  Anthony Averis  Phillippe Brown  **Sandwell MBC** | Shenelee Brown  Stembile Mhlanga  Alison Allen | Aynols Reid  Delroy Thomas  Sue Smith |
| Chris Davis (Support Officer)  Nigel Collumbell  Dean Epton | Yvonne Willetts  (Minute Taker)  Sarah Ager  Tom Hogan |  |
| **Apologies:**  Ellen Fenton  Manny Sehmbi | Marianne Monro |  |

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| **Items for Discussion** | | |
| 1. | **Introduction to Formal Meeting**  Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. Formal introductions were made.  Apologies from Cllr Ellen Fenton, Marianne Monro, and Manny Sehmbi  Aynols Reid has received the Smethwick lifetime award for work that he has done over the years. Chair offered congratulations on behalf of the group.  Members of the Tenants & Leaseholder Scrutiny Group have been recognised for the work that they are doing and have been awarded certificates as a thank you from the Council.  Chair ran through the agenda.  The minutes from meeting 16th December had previously been circulated. No amendments were requested, and the minutes were agreed. | Chair |
| 2. | **Declaration of Interest**  The organisation Sandwell Visually Impaired (SVI) has been contacted by an officer from the council regarding information access for residents who are visually impaired.  Documents can be prepared in braille by SVI for the council at a charge.  Tony Averis declared his involvement with the group. | Supporting Officer MM |
|  | **Action Log Review** |  |
| 3. | **Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget 24/25**  Dean Epton attended to give a presentation of the HRA budget for the coming year. The presentation has been delivered to Cabinet, Full Council and SNAC.  He began by speaking about some of the changes that will impact the budget.   * Regulations are changing from 1 April and the Regulators of Social Housing (RSH) will be more proactive, carrying out inspections every four years. Inspections will include views from tenants, residents, and officers. * The new Consumer Standards will also be introduced from 1 April.   The requirements of the standards are not yet fully understood. They are not specified and will be agreed with tenants.  Work is ongoing to determine what is to be delivered in every home to meet the standards and the programmes that will be needed to achieve this.  The stock condition surveys are currently taking place, this will help to identify what is needed and will determine numbers.  Decent Homes 2 specifications are referenced in the Consumer Standards.  The biggest challenge will be the supply chain, labour, and materials.  A set of assumptions are used to the draft the 2024/25 HRA budget which include:   * Rent increase by the maximum allowed – 7.7%.   The rent restriction has been removed. Most local authorities will apply the maximum 7.7% set by the Government.  Councils would like a 10 year rent agreement to ensure stability for future planning.   * Service charges increase – 7.7% * Pay assumptions – 5% * Other inflation assumptions   Budget income will come from   * Rent and service charges - £135m. * Right to buy receipts * Borrowing - £26m   Money is borrowed and paid back over a period and interest is charged. There is an allowable level of debt and there is capacity to borrow more.  This money is used to carry out capital works e.g., improving tower blocks.   * Government grants - £5.71m   The total income generated will be £151.11m for 24/25.  There are two accounts with HRA – Revenue and Capital  **Revenue Account**  Most of the expenditure will be   * Repairs and maintenance 48% * Supervision and management 48%   This includes £30m paid to services provided by other areas in the council. These services include CCTV, rubbish collection, grounds maintenance, ASB. Also, Urban Design, the development and building projects and maintenance team based within Sandwell Council.  The regulators will expect to see evidence that these services are delivering value for money. Conversations are currently taking place and new Service Level Agreements are being put in place to ensure this.  It was suggested that this may be an area that the TLSG would like to scrutinise.  **Capital Account**  Capital is split between improving existing stock, new bathrooms, kitchens etc, and new builds. Investment in existing stock will increase due to the standards set by the Regulators and the Building Safety requirements.  The cost of building a new house is high which means that the numbers built will decrease. Some councils have decided not to build at all.  There are currently schemes where the cost of building a 2/3 bed home, including land remediation, is £700,000. These schemes have been rejected by SMBC.  Funds from rejected schemes will be used to improve existing stock until it becomes more cost effective to build new homes.    The cost of the capital programme over the next five years is £223m. Of this £103m was intended for new builds and £120m for improving existing homes.  The overall budget will stay the same, but the balance may change.  Money for the Capital budget comes from:   * Government grants for energy efficiency * Right to buy receipts – around 250 houses are lost from stock each year. Some houses are bought off the market to increase stock. * Major Repairs Reserve – major works were suspended during lockdown and is now available to spend. * Borrowing – roughly £75m will be borrowed.   Rules are set by the Section 51 Officer to ensure that spending is appropriate, and borrowing is kept at an affordable level.  **Right to Buy Receipts**  The rules are around Right to Buy are being tightened at a national level.  Some properties may be excluded from right to buy.  If right to buy receipts are not spent within five years, they are returned to the Government with cumulative interest at around 4.52%.  There was a limited period when councils were allowed to spend 100% of right to buy receipts. This is no longer available and now 40% of funds will be given back to the Government.  There may be further changes to this rule going forward.  There is a cap of 20 on the number of properties that can be bought, in a year, off the open market. More properties can be bought if the council also builds more houses.  The types of properties purchased need to meet the population demands and the value must be within the affordable rent rates.  The Housing waiting list is long, and people are waiting four years plus. The Council is working proactively with partners in housing associations to ensure there is affordable/ social housing.   * Incentives are given to landlords in the private sector. * New build is not stopping but must be viable. * Exchanges are being encouraged and incentives given to downsize to free up bigger homes.   There are no plans to change policies but there is capacity to allocate properties for fixed terms to take into account future changes of circumstances for the occupier. SMBC has not utilised the facility previously, but this may be considered as part of the best use of stock process.  Land can be bought using funds from right to buy receipts.  **Transformation Plan**  A transformation plan is in place and is led by Michael Turnbull. The plan is a two year long project.  There are six workstreams within the plan.   1. **Systems** – IT systems are needed for storage of data and to manage processes which enable the council to be a compliant landlord. This is a requirement of the Building Safety & Compliance regulations. The existing Housing Management and Job management systems are no longer fit for purpose and need to be replaced. This can be one system or a series of integrated systems. An external company, ITICA, have been engaged to produce an options appraisal of available systems. 2. **Data & Performance** – This workstream is required to ensure that SMBC have the mechanisms in place to demonstrate performance - to show what is being done and to remediate poor performance. The council has a legal requirement to record this data. Dashboards are being developed to run reports for review and comparison with other landlords. 3. **Business Processes** – The Hackett report produced after the Grenfell disaster stated that there should be a building safety process with no single points of failure. The workstream will review all the Housing Directorate internal business processes to ensure this, in alignment with Systems workstream and Data and Performance workstream. 4. **Resources and People** - The Regulators require that everyone involved with social housing should but competent and qualified. The workstream will be a review of qualifications and accreditations that are a necessary to competently deliver Housing Directorate functions. The workstream will involve mapping the skills of existing staff against competency requirements, gap analysis, and creation of training and development plans.   SMBC has an older workforce and there is an expectation that some staff will not go through the training programme. An active apprentice programme is being developed to compensate for this. There are also staff who are already qualified and this needs to be recognised and recorded. Recruitment is already an issue across the sector but at some point, the qualifications may become essential criteria for applicants. An alternative would be to employ people on the understanding that they will attain the qualification within a specified period. Qualifications will eventually be built into the apprentice training.  Funding for training is included in the budget.   1. **Improvement Opportunities** – this workstream will capture all improvement projects that fall outside workstreams 1 – 4. 2. **Customers** – Meetings with TLSG and the wider customer groups will ensure that everything has a customer lens and what the customer wants is being delivered. | Dean Epton |
| 4 | **TLSG Audit Recommendations Updates**  Information was circulated prior to the meeting.  Everything is going well across **Housing Hub**   * The new telephone systems will transform the way that customer enquiries are dealt with and should improve the service. * Calls to officer working from home can be redirected to mobile numbers. * The system will give a specific date and time for customers to receive a call back.   **Home Checks** are not being completed as quickly as expected – 22% have been done.   * There has been positive feedback through the satisfaction surveys with overall satisfaction of 96%. * Discussions have been taking place with other teams for support in getting more checks completed and speeding up the programme. * The Income Team already carry out home visits and may be able to assist with the checks. * There are TLSG recommendations around refinement of how the surveys are carried out and tweaking the questions.   The group asked for regular updates regarding Home Checks. |  |
| 5 | **Tenant Satisfaction Perception Survey**  An action plan has been created to target areas with low satisfaction scores:  **Complaint handling**  There is now a dedicated complaints team.  More surveys are being carried out with customers who have been through the process.  **Listening and acting on feedback**  As part of the tenant satisfaction survey 2200 people were interviewed. Two hundred of those customers have been identified and can help with understanding what needs to be done differently and what needs to improve.  They are being contacted for more detailed feedback. They will be updated regularly.  **Anti-social behaviour**  ASB is complex subject, and the desired outcome is not always achieved from a customer point.  The good work being done by the team, the police, CCTV, and the wider group will be promoted to help change customer perceptions.  Casework is being audited to find if there are any areas for improvement.  The ABS annual report will be coming out at the end of April to provide context around the process.  The document will be circulated after the meeting. |  |
| 6. | **TSM Dashboard – Quarter 3 report**  An interim Head of Building Safety & Compliance, Tom Jones, has been appointed.  Tom is not confident that the data submitted in the dashboard is accurate.  Data reporting has been mandatory since April and will be recorded by other means until the new system is procured.  Work is being done to combine data so that it is held in one place and will be validated for accuracy.  Weekly operations committee meetings are being held and have been dedicated to compliance, following self-referral.  Tom is carrying out additional audits to validate the data.  He is confident that the areas that are reporting 100% are accurate.  The process for fire safety checks is correct but further auditing is being done around the reporting.  **Transactional TSMs**   * Gas – is reporting at 99% compliance. Work is being done around changing the process for access. * Asbestos – there are some concerns around the reporting. This is being reviewed and validated. * Water safety – confident that the data is accurate. * Lifts - Safety in communal passenger lifts. Data is accurate.   The process around lift breakdown is being updated.   * Electrical Installation Condition Report- EICR are not mandatory as part of the consumer checks but is being treated as a key area of compliance.   This is the area that was self-referred to the Regulator.  Focus has been on the addresses that have not been checked for over 10 years.  Resource is needed to work on data quality.   * Repairs completed within timescale – performance is worse than reported in previous quarters.   There is a large backlog of repairs and work is being done to clear jobs.  A restructure is in progress, there are 72 vacancies in the Repairs team.  Third party contractors are being used to do some of the work and additional contractors are being procured.  There is no clear evidence of measuring productivity, and this is being looked at to maximise resources.   * Decent Homes will be reported at the next update. * Voids – There will be a lot of changes around delivery due to under performance and poor value for money.   The inhouse resource has been reviewed to maximise efficiency and improve performance. Staff are no longer managed on a geographical basis and some employees are being moved to the Repairs Team.  There are six contractors who manage voids looking at 1500 – 2000 properties per year. The contract will run for four years and going forward work will be allocated to maximise the resource and ensure good value for money.  The voids turnaround time is coming down and is compares favourably with other local authorities.  The document will be shared once the data has been validated and the group are to decide how they want data presented.  The chair asked to be notified if there are any delays with circulating data going forwards.  Action: SA - to provide Voids data at the next meeting. |  |
| 7. | **Stock Condition Survey**  As part of the Improvement Plan a contract was procured to carry out stock condition surveys. A budget has been allocated for this from Revenue.  Rapleys have been engaged to do 5000 surveys and work began December 2023.  So far 237 surveys have been completed but Rapleys are putting in extra resources to ensure they complete the programme as per the contract.  A stock condition manager has been recruited to manage the contract and develop a plan with time frames.  He will be carrying out some quality checks and data around this will be available next week.  The Stock Condition Manager will also be going out to tender to get another 9000 checks completed in the next 12 months.  Surveys will look at the condition of kitchens, bathrooms, roof, windows, and doors and determine when they need to be refitted.  These surveys will not include garages.  The Regulators require that stock condition data is less than five years old. The long term plan is to bring the service in house and have surveyors who inspect stock on a rolling basis of five years. This will also aid long term investment and financial modelling.  The surveys will give an indication of the costs involved with bringing properties up to decency and attaining the EPC - C ratings.  In the past retrofit has been done estate by estate basis and components were replaced due to age and not condition. This is no longer the case going forward work will be done where it is most needed.  All available resources are being used to collate data relating to stock condition.   * Retrofit assessments * Energy efficiency programmes * Referrals from Repairs * In house resources – will collate additional information. * Data will also be provided by the Voids team for any replacement work they do.   An Asset Management system is needed to hold this data and this feeds into the Transformation Plan.  Contract Management is being looked at to ensure that all contracts are robust. Time limits will be built in with penalties and more enforcement to ensure that contractors adhere to the agreements. |  |
| 8. | **Consumer Standards Update**  More information has been released around how the Regulator will record the outcomes from inspections. Tom Hogan attended to update the group.   * Inspections will be rated from 1 to 4 - with 1 being the highest.   Realistically most authorities will rate 2 with underperformers rating 3 or 4.  The Consumer Standards will go Live from 1 April and inspections will begin straight away.   * The deadline for submitting Tenant Satisfaction Measure returns is 30 June 2024. Other data returns need to be submitted by mid-July. * Results from inspections will start coming through during the summer.   Louis Bebb is preparing a document detailing the current position for Sandwell MBC and this can be made available for the group.  **Safety and Quality Standard**  Some assessments would currently be marked as not met but work is being done to achieve compliance.   * Stock quality * Decency * H&S * Repairs and maintenance * Adaptations – the standard is met.   **Transparency, Influence and Accountability Standard**  Not enough is known to state whether his standard has been met. Input is needed from tenants and residents. Information needs to be published online to demonstrate transparency.   * Fairness and respect   More work needs to be done to evidence this.  There is also a culture change within the council to become more customer focussed.  The complaints process has been changed with a dedicated team working on complaints.  An independent Review team is also in place.  The customer satisfaction survey will tell if the changes have been effective.  The TLSG can feedback from their own experiences and those of neighbours and other residents. They can highlight problem areas so that effective action can be taken.  A member of the group suggested re-wording the feedback text sent following a repair visit. The questions mostly refer to the work that has been carried out and do not ask if the officer was polite and treated the customer with respect.  It was agreed that questions should cover the enquiry/ work completed and whether this delivered in a polite and courteous manner. This will be looked at Nigel and Tom.   * Diverse needs   The standard is not met but plans are in place to address this e.g., translation and interpreting services.   * Self-referral   There are examples of instances where the council have self-referred demonstrating awareness of performance.  **Neighbourhood and Community Standard**  This area is more positive, but improvements can be made. Work is being done with the police and other organisations in the local area.  A good range of services is provided, and the standard is judged as met.  **Tenancy Standard**  This around ensuring there are fair policies in place for allocating properties.  Making best use of stock. There is a proper mutual exchange system in place and work is being done to improve and refine this.  Eviction is always the last resort. |  |
| 9. | **Tenant Engagement Framework Update**  **Tenant & Resident Engagement Strategies**  As part of the Building Safety Regulations, Resident Engagement Strategies had to be devised for each of the 55 high-rise blocks.  Over the last 12 months officers have been in consultation with residents in the blocks around the what the content of each individual strategy should be. The strategies are based on what residents have fed back around what is important to them.   * The consultation involved knocking on every resident’s door to get their feedback. There was a total of 800 responses. * A document was pulled together from the responses. * A focus group reviewed the document, and the document was refined based on their suggestions. * Plain English, large font and visuals were requested. * A draft document was sent to all residents at the start of the year and around 250 responses were received. * This is not a one off project and engagement will continue going forwards. * Sixty six people have expressed a wish to be involved in building safety going forwards and discussions are taking place. * Most comments related to issues faced within the blocks including ASB and stranger tailgating.   All the issues raised have been actioned by Tom Hogan’s team.   * The schedule for maintaining lifts was included in an amended version of the document.   A company has been commissioned to do a full inspection of lifts to identify where investment is needed.  Communications are being looked at regarding notifying residents of breakdowns, services and maintenance will be included as part of this. A new process will be signed off in the next few weeks.  Publishing the service schedule online is being considered.  Action: Officers to look into producing a lift maintenance service for display.   * Also included in strategies is key fire safety advice bespoke to individual blocks. * The final version of the documents will be issued next week. * An example of a strategy was presented to TLSG. * Members of the team are included with contact numbers. * A report of the full journey will be shared with the group and all the strategies will be published on line. |  |
|  | **Other tenant engagement work**  Further tenant engagement was included in the briefing note circulated before the meeting.  Training for frontline officers will be taking place in the summer and will be delivered by Chris Davis and SCIPS. | TLSG |
| TLSG Members Business | | |
|  | Update on TAG/TLSG working together.  SNAC Update  Updates from Chair//Vice Chair/Members  Any Other Business | Chris Davis |
|  | **Date of next formal meeting:** - Saturday 22 June 2024 |  |