

SCRUTINY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE

Tuesday 4 October 2022, 6:00pm

In the Council Chamber at the Council House, Walsall

Committee Members present:

Councillor J. Murray (Chair)
Councillor Nawaz (Vice Chair)
Councillor B. Bains
Councillor P. Bott
Councillor Cooper
Councillor Ditta
Councillor Hicken
Councillor K. Hussain
Councillor Samra
Councillor Singh-Sohal
Councillor Lee

Portfolio Holders present: Councillor G. Ali (Virtual)

Officers present:

Deborah Hindson Interim Executive Director (Resources & Transformation)
Craig Goodall Principal Democratic Services Officer
Edward Cook Assistant Democratic Services Officer
Simon Neilson Executive Director (Economy & Environment and Communities)
(Virtual)
Michelle Dudson Head of Customer Engagement (Virtual)

In Attendance:

Rachel Crownshaw Executive Director of Operations, Green Square Accord
Ross Kuklinski Director of Homes & Communities, Green Square Accord
Fay Shanahan Corporate Director of Operations, WHG

409/22 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received for Councillor Follows.

410/22 Substitutions

Councillor Lee substituted for Councillor Follows.

411/22 Declarations of interest and party whip

There were no declarations of interest or party whip for the duration of the meeting

412/22 **Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)**

There were no agenda items requiring the exclusion of the public.

413/22 **Minutes**

A copy of the Minutes of the meeting held on 16 June 2022 was submitted [Annexed].

An amendment to the minutes was requested to change 'Proud Workstreams' to 'Proud Programme'.

A Member queried why the special meeting requested at the June meeting to consider an item on the Black Country Plan was postponed? The Chair explained that the reason for the postponement is that the consultation for the existing report (the regulation 18 report) closes on 5 September. The next version of the report (the regulation 19 report) will be available for consultation following Cabinet on 19 October 2022. Changing the date that the Plan is scrutinised, until after 19 October, creates the opportunity for the Committee to feedback/make recommendations on the latest version of the Plan during a live consultation process. The Member explained that he disagreed with the decision and intended to call-in the Cabinet decision on the Black Country Plan.

Resolved:

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 16 June 2022, as amended, a copy having previously been circulated, be approved and signed by the Chair as a true and accurate record.

414/22 **Registered providers of social housing in Walsall**

The meeting received presentations from two registered providers of social housing in Walsall.

Walsall Housing Group (WHG)

A presentation was received from Fay Shanahan, the Corporate Director of Operations, WHG. The last years had been challenging for WHG due to COVID-19 and subsequent supply challenges, but a backlog of repairs had now been nearly completed. Satisfaction rates had fallen from 90 to 81% which needed to improve. The Community Housing model launched in September 2021 had been well-received, increasing resources in communities and dedicated local contacts making customer contact easier. Evictions are very low, but occupancy is at 99.8%, with 16,000 on the waiting list posing a big challenge. 418 new homes were built in 2021-22. Over 2,000 residents had been helped to claim unclaimed benefits and the in-house hardship fund has been doubled in response to the cost-of-living crisis.

Responding to questions, the Corporate Director of Operations, explained that of the 16,000 on the waiting list, approximately 6,000 were 'active' applicants and the vast

majority of these were within Walsall borough. The waiting list had grown due to the buoyancy and high costs of the private rental market. The Right to Buy scheme had further depleted stock with approximately 200 homes being sold per year. She suggested that the Council could help reduce this by facilitating more house-building, especially by accelerating the planning process as WHG had resources to expand its building programme. Regarding the allocation of housing and the waiting list, WHG's allocation policy aligned with the Council's and changed accordingly. Waiting list times varied on property types and the geographic preferences of applicants, with longest waits being for larger housing. Older persons accommodation had less demand and thus older residents were sometimes encouraged to downsize if this was appropriate. Properties adapted for accessibility are advertised as such, but they are not necessarily rented out to those with these requirements.

Responding to questions about housing stock numbers and sustainability, the Corporate Director of Operations, explained that pre-fabricated housing is currently more expensive than traditional housing, but may be utilised more in future if costs fall. Grant conditions from Government on sustainability are for new housing but there is a preference for investing in existing housing as off-loading these will simply mean these properties are re-rented as they are, but by private landlords. Efforts are ongoing to carbon neutrality, but housing must also be fit for purpose.

Regarding questions of fly-tipping and litter, WHG has spent £500,000 clearing rubbish off their properties and partnership working with the Council on this issue was welcomed. A new fly-tipping reporting function is being assessed. Retrofitting and upgrading of houses is emphasised over replacement to improve sustainability of housing, but this is a challenge with some older housing stock. Flat safety is ensured through audits and a digital system with building models, shared with the fire service to provide greater building information. Ongoing strike action within WHG should have limited disruption as it is approximately 1 in 8 workers. The latest pay offer would amount to a 7+% pay-rise.

Addressing Member concerns about communication, it was explained that WHG's complaints team is being bolstered with dedicated leads to coordinate responses to enquiries from MPs and Councillors, which will also help Councillors to serve their constituents. A desire was expressed for closer cooperation between Councillors and WHG's local community contacts. If a Member or customer has an emergency, they are encouraged to call rather than email. Customer voice is enabled through a range of measures from surveys to bespoke scrutiny panels with specific foci, the latter of which report directly to the Board. Leaseholders also have avenues for contact and representation. Independent mediation services are used and actively encouraged.

Green Square Accord

Members received a presentation from Rachel Crownshaw (Executive Director of Operations, Green Square Accord) and Ross Kuklinski (Director of Homes & Communities, Green Square Accord) about Green Square Accord's (GSA) operations within Walsall Borough. GSA was formed following the merger of Accord and Green Square in April 2021. All 26,000 of GSA's have been surveyed following a self-referral to the Building Safety regulator post-merger, which did delay some

customer enhancements. It was acknowledged that customer service required improvement, with the biggest issue being customer access to getting issues solved and things getting lost between teams. The Voice of the Customer Strategy was designed to enable customer involvement. In the past year, 51,000 reactive repairs were completed. 722 properties were built in 2021-22 with over 70% being affordable rent or social housing. Over 100 rough sleepers in Walsall have been found homes in partnership with Housing First.

Responding to questions, the GSA representatives identified that GSA has 3944 properties within Walsall but they will have to provide information to the Committee as to how many have been built or are planned in Walsall, as well as how many are GSA-managed but not owned. Whilst the number of calls received equates to approximately 1% of total stock per day, this is not seen as a particularly high volume by GSA, but they would prefer it to be less. There is a specific email address for Councillors and MPs to contact which will be provided to members and the new locality model is establishing a senior individual in a given area tasked with reaching out to Councillors and MPs amongst other tasks. Members expressed a desire that they be updated on similar developments in future and that a meeting with ward councillors would also be appreciated. It was explained that many of the comments previously made to WHG were also applicable to GSA.

Within Walsall there are 3 care schemes under GSA and where anti-social behaviour is encountered in these settings there are cross-operation threads which can pick this up. There is no waiting list within Walsall as a portal application scheme is used, but there is high demand. Any vacant properties in Walsall tend to be age-restricted. Right-to-buy is not applied to GSA's properties in Walsall currently and applies to below 0.5% of the total GSA portfolio. Networking with other social housing providers and other partners does take place and is beneficial for sharing information and learning.

In response to questions about customer satisfaction there is an acknowledgement that more needs to be done to improve customer relationships and this is being done. There are challenges in enabling customers to move between properties as needs change and developing this flexibility is a critical area needing improvement. The objective is for people to be able to live in their homes as long as possible which requires necessary modifications and future-proofing in new builds.

GSA does build pre-fabricated properties which have similar costs to traditional houses but take less time. Economies of scale could make these cheaper in future. Wrapped and plastic-free homes have offered efficiency savings which will be provided to Members, and more 'wrapped' properties are planned. All repairs should be completed within 28 days and emergencies within 4 hours, though supply issues and access to properties can affect this.

Following the presentations, Committee members discussed them and the responses they had received and made a series of recommendations set out below.

Resolved

That:

1. Scrutiny is concerned at the time taken to decide on planning applications delaying much needed housing as pointed out by Registered Social Housing landlords. The Scrutiny Overview Committee therefore asks Cabinet to look at the resources required to speed up the Planning process and further recommends that the Head of Planning and Development Control bring a report to the Committee on this issue at its meeting on 12 December 2022.
2. The Scrutiny Overview Committee calls for the Executive Director of Economy, Environment and Communities to attend a meeting in-person to report on steps to ensure that available land for housing development is utilised.
3. The Scrutiny Overview Committee requests Cabinet to examine whether they feel there is a need for increased competition in the social housing sector within Walsall.
4. Walsall Housing Group provide Members with the following information:
 - a. Number of right to buy and right to acquire sales;
 - b. Contact details for community housing officers;
 - c. Details of 'pin drop'.
5. GreenSquareAccord provide Members with the following information:
 - a. The Councillor enquiry email address;
 - b. The number of right to buy sales;
 - c. The energy costs savings for residents in the Darlaston 'wrapped house';
 - d. How many new homes have been built and are planned to be built in Walsall;
 - e. How many housing first schemes are there in Walsall;
 - f. The number of care schemes and managed agent properties operating in Walsall.

415/22 **Effectiveness of Scrutiny**

The Committee discussed whether it was best to defer this item to a future meeting of the Committee to enable better consideration of the item. Members expected the next ordinary meeting of the Committee in November to be dedicated primarily to scrutinising the Black Country Plan. Members expressed a desire that financial scrutiny training be provided in the not-distant future, before the December meeting of the Scrutiny Overview Committee.

Resolved:

That:

1. The item Effectiveness of Scrutiny be deferred for consideration at a special meeting of the Scrutiny Overview Committee;
2. Financial scrutiny training be made available for all Council Members prior to December budget-scrutiny scrutiny committee meetings.

416/22 School Gate Parking Working Group – Terms of Reference

Councillor Samra introduced the terms of reference drafted by members of the Working Group, providing an overview of the objectives and membership. The Terms of Reference had been distributed to Members via email prior to the meeting. The Working Group has already met twice and intends to meet monthly.

Resolved:

That the School Gate Working Group Terms of Reference be approved.

417/22 Feedback from Overview & Scrutiny Committees

Members received the reports of the Chairs of the Overview & Scrutiny Committees on meetings of their committees since 16 June as presented in the written report.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

418/22 Recommendation Tracker

Members received the tracker of recommendations from previous meetings, including progress made and outstanding items.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

419/22 Areas of Focus 2022-23

Members received the Committee's Work Programme and considered the Forward Plans of the Council and the Black Country Executive Joint Committee [Annexed].

Cllr P. Bott requested that the report into Children's Play Strategy be shared with him once it is produced for the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Resolved:

1. That the Work Programme and Forward Plans be noted;
2. That West Midlands Police be invited to a future meeting of the Committee to provide an update;
3. That item Proud workstreams item include report or presentation by the Chief Executive.

420/22 Date of next meeting

The next meeting would be held on Thursday 16 November 2022 at 6pm.
There being no further business this meeting was terminated at 9.27 p.m.

Signed:

Date: