

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

**HOUSING AND NEIGHBOURHOODS O&S COMMITTEE –
PUBLIC MEETING**

1400 hours on Thursday 21 January 2021, Online meeting

Present:

Councillor Penny Holbrook (Chair)

Councillors Deirdre Alden, Marje Bridle, Roger Harmer, Mahmood Hussain, Shabrana Hussain, Mary Locke and Ken Wood

Also Present:

Councillor Sharon Thompson, Cabinet Member for Homes and Neighbourhoods

Councillor Majid Mahmood

Mira Gola, Head of Business Improvement and Support

Julie Griffin, Acting AD, Housing

Paul Lankester, Interim AD, Regulation and Enforcement

Mr M Shafique, Lead Petitioner

Darren Share, AD, Street Scene

Jayne Bowles, Scrutiny Officer

Emma Williamson, Head of Scrutiny

1. NOTICE OF RECORDING/WEBCAST

The Chairman advised that this meeting would be webcast for live or subsequent broadcast via the Council's Internet site (www.civico.net/birmingham) and that members of the press/public may record and take photographs except where there were confidential or exempt items.

2. APOLOGIES

None.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

None.

4. ACTION NOTES AND ACTION TRACKER

(See documents 1 and 2)

The following points were raised:

- **HLB quarterly reports** – It was agreed these will be circulated to Members outside of committee meetings to enable them to pick up any issues locally in their wards, with any cross-cutting issues being brought forward for work programme discussion;
- **Local Partnership Delivery Groups** – there had been an issue with invites sent out at short notice and it was agreed this would be picked up with officers;
- The Chair requested that completed actions be taken off the tracker.

RESOLVED:

- The action notes of the meeting held on 17 December 2020 were agreed.
- The action tracker was noted.

5. PETITION – HANDSWORTH CEMETERY

(See documents 3, 4 and 5)

The petition, consisting of an online petition and separate paper petition, had been started following incidents of flooding at Handsworth Cemetery and had been presented to City Council in November 2020. The petition was subsequently referred to Overview and Scrutiny by the Council Business Management Committee.

Cllr Majid Mahmood, as one of the presenting councillors, Mr Shafique, one of the lead petitioners, Cllr Sharon Thompson, Cabinet Member for Homes and Neighbourhoods, and Paul Lankester, Interim AD, Regulation and Enforcement, attended for the debate.

Apologies were submitted on behalf of the second lead petitioner, who was unable to attend.

Cllr Mahmood and Mr Shafique made the following points:

- The second paper petition had been started for those who did not have access to the online petition;
- It was suggested that a Friends of Handsworth Cemetery group be set up;
- It was further suggested that a Charter for service-users should be produced;
- Appreciation was expressed for what the Council is doing and it was noted that Councillors had given their apologies following the flooding at the cemetery. However, it was stressed that the situation had been very distressing for people, some of whom had buried relatives only the day before;

- There is a need for the Council to be more pro-active, rather than addressing issues after the event;
- For at least one of the flooding incidents, no cemetery staff had been available;
- It had also come to light that morning that there were no grave liners at the Sutton New Hall Cemetery and it was questioned how this could have happened;
- There is also an issue with damage being caused by badgers at Yardley Cemetery;
- Maintenance issues need to be addressed at all cemeteries.

In response, Cllr Sharon Thompson and Paul Lankester made the following points:

- The scenes at the cemetery following these incidents were distressing and apologies were conveyed to the families;
- Reassurance was given that they are doing all they can to prevent this happening again in the future;
- The flooding in October was in a different section to that seen in August;
- Cemetery staff are now working from early in the morning until burials are complete, but it was noted that the incident of flash flooding had occurred in the evening when staff would not have been on site;
- There is an emergency number which people can ring but it was acknowledged that this needs to be displayed more prominently and more widely promoted;
- They are intending to start a Friends group, and to implement groups across the city. This had been held up by the pandemic but will be progressed as soon as it is safe to do so;
- They would also endorse producing a Charter and this will be pursued;
- It will take a few weeks to complete the works at Handsworth, however the repairs already carried out have held good;
- With regard to the grave liners at Sutton New Hall, with an increase in deaths there had been an increase in the purchase of these and there had been procurement issues, but more had been ordered;
- With regard to the badgers at Yardley Cemetery, they have tried to get a licence to move them but cannot do that while they are cubbing;
- The Council Delivery Plan includes a capital programme for work on cemeteries and a major investment programme into the future will be recommended;

In the course of the discussion, and in response to Members' questions, the following were amongst the main points raised:

- Concerns were raised that as global temperatures rise there will be more flash flooding and it would be more efficient to put in place planning requirements, eg permeable surfaces;
- This is a matter for the wider Council, involving Planning and Highways with regard to surface water flooding;
- The Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment had made a site visit to Handsworth Cemetery and issues around flooding and resilience will be picked up with him;

- There is a need for investment in the service and facilities;
- It was queried whether the situation was due to lack of resources and routine maintenance, such as clearing drains and removing tree roots, not being carried out;
- Members noted the point made about capital investment for the future but questioned whether there were sufficient funds available now;
- In terms of the October incident, if maintenance had been carried out, for example kerbing, this could have helped, however that was not the case for the incident in August, which had been due to severe flash flooding;
- There had been works not carried out due to resource issues but there is now a budget to deal with tree roots and gulley cleaning;
- Pro-active drainage surveys will be carried out at all cemeteries with colleagues in Inclusive Growth, to ascertain what might be necessary;
- Members stressed the importance of good communication and welcomed the idea of setting up Friends groups, as well as a Charter covering standards of service and including the emergency telephone number;
- It was agreed the Charter should be co-produced with Friends groups and other stakeholders and noted that services should be judged through customer satisfaction;
- The visibility of the emergency telephone number was discussed and it was noted that this was on display in the office but obviously the signage is not as good as it could be as people had not seen it;
- In response to a question about the number of staff at Handsworth Cemetery, Members were told that there would have been two or three members of staff in the office and at least four working on site;
- Staffing levels are currently being reviewed to ensure cover is right;
- Concerns were expressed that there was a feeling in the Muslim community that services were being neglected;
- Cllr Thompson highlighted that she has run Zoom calls with Muslim funeral directors and has met with representatives, as well as regular meetings with faith leaders and Public Health;
- Drop-ins have also been set up for Members but there has been a low uptake and she is willing to meet with Councillors.

The following final comments were made by Cllr Mahmood and Mr Shafique:

- Thanks were expressed to all for the debate and the work being done was welcomed;
- An expected timeframe for the works at Handsworth Cemetery to be completed was requested and a site visit with the Lead Petitioners was suggested;
- It was also suggested that perhaps there should be a Cabinet Advisor for Bereavement Services.

The Committee agreed the following recommendations:

- To support the setting up of a Friends of Handsworth Cemetery group and the implementation of groups across the City and a timeline was requested;
- To support the production of a Charter, to be co-designed with all relevant stakeholders, again a timeline was requested;

- That the capital investment and maintenance programmes be shared with Committee as soon as possible.

RESOLVED:

- Chair to write to the Cabinet Member for Homes and Neighbourhoods setting out the Committee's recommendations;
- The report was noted.

6. PERFORMANCE MONITORING

(See document 6)

Mira Gola, Head of Business Improvement & Support, Julie Griffin, Acting AD, Housing, and Darren Share, AD, Street Scene, attended for this item, and highlighted the following key points:

- This report is in line with the new performance framework;

Housing:

- The contractors' names have been added where previously referred to as "Contractors A, B, C and D";
- Work is being done with contractors on issues relating to void performance;
- With regard to repairs within 2 hours, data reconciliation work has now been completed;
- With regard to temporary accommodation, they are doing all they can by way of mitigation and the new operating model will focus on prevention and sustainable accommodation;

Street Scene:

- The wording for the number of missed collections has been amended to include the word "*reported*";
- It has been a difficult year and there have been operational issues during Covid;
- They are now getting more residual waste;
- It was acknowledged that more needs to be done, eg around missed collections;
- The new vehicles have started to arrive.

In the course of the discussion, and in response to Members' questions, the following were amongst the main points raised:

Housing:

- The issue of contractor performance in the south of the city, and the suggestion that Councillors have regular meetings with contractors, to be picked up outside of the meeting;
- It was noted that on the whole, repairs performance is good, with some complex repairs cases held up due to Covid;

- There are financial penalties for contractors if the KPIs are not met and confirmation of what they are was requested;
- An issue was raised in relation to appointments and contractors just turning up at properties and it was agreed this would be picked up outside of the meeting;
- With regard to potential delays due to Brexit, this is as a result of bottlenecks at ports and a delay in supplies, but this is being looked at;
- It was confirmed that the target for void turnarounds is 28 days;
- There was a view that the number of households in temporary accommodation should be shown as a number rather than a ratio. It was pointed out that this has to be displayed as per population, however a breakdown could be included in the narrative;
- The length of time it takes to process new housing applications was queried and it would be useful to have that regularly reported;
- In response to a suggestion that there should be a KPI for HMOs and Exempt Accommodation, Members were told that this could be looked at in respect of HMOs and how many are licensed;
- With regard to the Government funded pilot in the Exempt sector, it was suggested that perhaps there could be a KPI of the number of inspections to determine the impact of the funding;
- Members were advised that this is something that could be explored, but it is difficult at the moment due to Covid. However, they are liaising with the Ministry regarding an extension for the pilot.

Street Scene:

- Members were pleased to see the word "*reported*" had been added to the number of missed collections, however there was still concern that where whole roads are missed these are not included and a request was made for this to be looked at again;
- The booking system for Household Recycling Centres has reduced queues and made people think about why they are going, leading to waste being segregated correctly;
- There will be a review before a long-term decision is made on whether the system should be kept;
- It was noted that the recycling figures are for August and it would be helpful to see more recent data;
- Members were told that there is more recent data available but the report being presented was for Month 8;
- In terms of encouraging people to recycle more, this has been difficult during Covid, however they have been tagging bins and they are working with Veolia getting material ready to launch a Waste Prevention Strategy, hopefully by April.

RESOLVED:

- The report was noted.

7. WORK PROGRAMME

(See document 7)

RESOLVED:

- The work programme was noted.

8. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Noted.

9. REQUEST(S) FOR CALL IN/COUNCILLOR CALL FOR ACTION/PETITIONS RECEIVED (IF ANY)

None.

10. OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

None.

11. AUTHORITY TO CHAIRMAN AND OFFICERS

RESOLVED:

That in an urgent situation between meetings the Chair, jointly with the relevant Chief Officer, has authority to act on behalf of the Committee.

The meeting ended at 1622 hours.