

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

HOUSING AND NEIGHBOURHOODS O&S COMMITTEE –

PUBLIC MEETING

1400 hours on Thursday 25 June 2020, 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 John O'Shea, Cabinet Member for Street Scene and Parks

Julie Griffin, Acting Assistant Director, Housing

Joe Hayden, Parks Services Manager

Paul Lankester, Interim Assistant Director, Regulation & Enforcement

Gary Messenger, Head of Service, Housing Options & PRS

Darren Share, Assistant Director, Street Scene

Baseema Begum, Scrutiny Officer

Emma Williamson, Head of Scrutiny Services

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

(See document 1)

The Chair confirmed the following actions outstanding:

- Cllr Cotton has confirmed that Public Space Protection Orders (PSPOs) can be brought to Committee in autumn before any other action is taken.
- Information requested on Barry Jackson tower was circulated earlier this week.
- Performance data requests and suggestions will be picked up at a future meeting when information on performance data is available.

Cllr Bridle raised concerns about a big increase in fly-tipping and suggested a task group meets in July to discuss the issue further. The Chair agreed that the issue should be considered with a separate informal meeting in July and referenced the good work of Barking and Dagenham Council in this area.

RESOLVED:

- The action notes of the meeting held on 27 February 2020 were agreed.
- An informal meeting to discuss fly-tipping issues to be scheduled for 23rd July. Scrutiny officers will circulate a time to ensure availability of members and the Cabinet Member for Street Scene and Parks, Cllr O'Shea.
- The next proposed formal meeting to be held on 30th July. Proposed meeting dates for the rest of the municipal year will be circulated.

5. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PARKS

(See document 2)

The Chair welcomed Cllr John O'Shea, Cabinet Member for Street Scene and Parks and officers to the meeting.

With reference to the report circulated, Cllr O'Shea highlighted that staff had worked very hard to ensure that parks were being kept clean and tidy. Friends of Parks groups were also praised for their work.

Cllr O'Shea added that staff were doing their best to encourage people to adhere to social distancing guidelines. In the majority park users were compliant however staff were faced with poor behaviour and incidents of anti-social behaviour were reported. Safe working practices are also in place for staff.

The next challenge is the reopening of play areas in parks and Cllr O'Shea stated that advice on keeping children safe while using play equipment will be issued.

Members praised the good work of all parks staff in ensuring that the city's parks were a safe place to use for everyone and during the discussion with the Cabinet Member and officers the following points were responded to:

- The regular cutting of grass on verges is not being done due to the mowers being quite heavy and requiring two people to safely handle in the normal vehicle. This can't be done under the current social distancing guidelines. However, some housing sites (such as those with vulnerable residents) and highways are being prioritised and are being mowed by single crews. It is anticipated that more areas will be covered from 4th July.
- There are very few council operated toilets in parks and any toilets are currently closed due to a lack of resource in keeping these clean and safe. Those parks with toilets located within visitor centres or cafes that are not council owned are not yet open. A review will take place next month with the emphasis on keeping staff safe and providing a safe service for people to use.
- The Police are responsible for enforcing the law in relation to gatherings in parks where anti-social behaviour is taking place. Additional patrols have been put in place at larger parks.
- Safe working practices and guidelines in relation to litter picking are available on the Birmingham Open Spaces Forum webpage.
- A huge increase in park usage has resulted in an increase in littering and this is incurring additional clean-up costs to keep parks safe and tidy. Work is being done into looking at procuring bigger sized bins that would save money and time in the longer term. Evidence from other areas that have trailed recycling bins in parks shows that they do not work effectively as the waste is not separated at source and is therefore contaminated.
- All events in parks are cancelled until the end of July and no future bookings are being taken. Events will not recommence until it is safe to do so in line with government guidance.
- Once play areas re-open it is anticipated that these will be cleaned daily as it is not practically possible to do it more often. Parents will need to take responsibility for their child whilst using play areas.
- The locking of park gates to avoid anti-social behaviour and criminal behaviour is being reviewed and local members will be consulted on any future proposals.
- Future Parks funding will be used to manage and support parks in the future. Options will be looked at citywide and the Committee will have the chance to be involved.
- There has been a substantial loss of revenue to the Council as a result of the pandemic with some costs not being able to be recovered. As such this will have an impact on the Parks budget.

RESOLVED:

- Confirmation as to whether the MAC has re-opened and if the toilets are available for public use will be circulated.
- A response to be provided to Cllr Alden on Police awareness and response to anti-social behaviour in the car-park at Cannon Hill Park.

- The standard email response to written enquiries from Members will be updated to reflect the latest position.
- Members will be advised in due course on the rescheduling of the Keep Britain Tidy campaign in September.
- Safe working practices and guidelines in relation to litter picking will be circulated.
- Locking of gates by businesses based at Ackers Park to be checked.
- The Chair will write to the Head of Parks on behalf of the Committee to thank parks staff for their hard work to keep them safe and open for use during the lockdown.
- The report was noted.

6. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HOMELESSNESS

(See document 3)

Julie Griffin and Gary Messenger talked Members through the presentation circulated and made the following points: -

- During the pandemic the focus has been on ensuring the safety of staff and tenants. Vulnerable tenants were prioritised, and staff have been making weekly contact.
- Lettings to properties have been suspended unless necessary and these were done virtually. It is anticipated that the service will be re-opening soon.
- Emergency or urgent repairs only have been carried out at Council-owned properties. Routine repairs were on hold however this has returned to business as usual from 15th June with safety measures in place.
- Capital works have been running where safe to do and this is now at full strength.
- Following the announcement of lockdown, the service was challenged to house rough sleepers at very short notice. Nearly all rough sleepers were placed in hotel accommodation. As of 22nd June, the hotel has been handed back with all occupiers moved on to other options.
- Those with no recourse to public funds will be supported for an additional 3 months with further support to be assessed on a monthly basis.
- Government has allocated £430m for housing and the support of rough sleeping over a 4 year period. £160m has been bought forward and the city is working with the Combined Authority on this. £70m of the total allocation is to specifically deal with homelessness including an allocation to support rough sleepers. So far between £1-2m has been used to support rough sleeping including specific projects, hotel costs and recruitment of specialists to target this vulnerable group.
- An additional bid to government has resulted in £105m allocation to support rough sleepers including a specific amount to link in with agencies that deal with drug and alcohol misuse. Birmingham has been held up as a national exemplar of good practice by the government.

In response to issues and queries raised by Members it was confirmed that:

- In relation to a backlog of housing applications and getting people into new homes in the next few months it was confirmed that the backlog is being worked through by a team of dedicated officers.
- Building of new housing has slowed down due to the pandemic and this has in turn slowed down the availability of housing. It is anticipated that with unemployment likely to rise in the next 12 months, and the impact on evictions, the Private Rented Sector (PRS) team has been looking at launching a new project providing landlords with a rent bond and insurance. The team has also been working with other investors and organisations in terms of providing temporary accommodation for those who may become homeless and this is proving to be quite a challenge. A new operating model for the service is due to be rolled out in the autumn based on homelessness prevention.
- There has been an increase in anti-social behaviour (ASB) and domestic violence (DV) incidents. Additional resources are being deployed in response to this and the service is working with the Community Safety Partnership (CSP) to address in a proactive way.
- All rough sleepers are known to the outreach team; however, it is a challenge to keep a track of all rough sleepers. There has been an increase in rough sleepers on the streets following leaving hotel accommodation however there are plans and pathways in place for each individual and this is monitored. In addition, the Rough Sleeping team has been strengthened with additional specialist and outreach support workers.
- The Council is working with partners including the Combined Authority, CSP and neighbouring authorities in terms of responsibilities relating to homelessness and rough sleepers to avoid crossover. In terms of individuals presenting who are from outside the area, efforts are made in contacting the relevant responsible local authority.
- In respect of evictions relating to council tenants, there has been an increase in new people in arrears with rent. Early intervention and prevention work is being done including accessing benefits, and payment plans are in place to support people. The Council is also working with registered providers on this.
- Evictions within the PRS are unknown and once the eviction ban is lifted there is no way of knowing what the potential impact will be as it does depend on the landlord's individual circumstances. The Council is also working with the Private Landlords Forum. Early intervention and engagement is taking place with tenants to find out why they are being evicted and to work out what the next move is to avoid them being placed in temporary accommodation or B&B.
- Rough sleepers who were housed in a hotel following lockdown have been moved onto a mix of accommodation suited to their individual need. This will enable the service to map out future risks and opportunities.
- Mapping is being done on an expected increase in future homelessness to allow for future planning. It is being monitored on a weekly basis. Julie Griffin undertook to update the committee on this at a later date.

RESOLVED:

- Gary Messenger to provide figures on processing of housing applications including waiting times.
- Further information to be provided to members on the types of accommodation offered to homeless people and rough sleepers following being housed in hotels during the lockdown.
- The Chair will write to the Acting Assistant Director, Housing on behalf of the Committee to thank staff for their hard work during the lockdown.
- The report was noted.

7. IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON BEREAVEMENT SERVICES

(See document 4)

Paul Lankester outlined the key points from the report circulated and highlighted that:

- There was an increase in demand due to an increase in cases referred to the Coroner resulting in some backlog of inquests. Awaiting further guidance on what will happen in cases where juries are required.
- Registrations other than death registrations were suspended. At the height of the pandemic there were 450 cases and backlogs have now been dealt with.
- The Service dealt well with demand with only a few delays. Funeral directors and community groups were worked with to get funerals dealt with as fast as possible especially where burials are required quickly for religious reasons.
- In line with government guidance cemeteries were closed to the public and mourner numbers restricted at funerals and crematoriums. Hours were extended for those cemeteries that required urgent burials.
- A new temporary mortuary facility at Sutton New Hall was set up in 10 days as essential cover. It was a useful learning point for the future, in terms of assessing the freezer storage capacity for the region.
- The Council is waiting for further government guidance on arrangements for funerals from 4th July.
- There are in the region of 6000 outstanding births to be registered. New arrangements are in place to register births on a face to face basis and will be worked through on a chronologically unless there is an urgent need such as the family leaving the country.

The following points were then made by Members and responded to: -

- Concerns about registering births in relation to benefits and healthcare was raised and it was confirmed that parents/guardians can access benefits and the registry office is notified of births by hospitals and midwives so there are records in place to ensure children aren't 'lost' in the system.
- There have been staff concerns about parents registering in person however plans for staff safety have been put in place.

- The Cabinet Member for Homes and Neighbourhoods was praised for her co-operation in involving cross-party members in discussions such as the consensus on restricting access to cemeteries.
- Sutton New Hall temporary mortuary facility will be decommissioned in the next two weeks.
- The Cabinet Member will be considering revising the opening hours of cemeteries back up to normal levels for those wishing to visit.
- In terms of lessons learnt it was confirmed that
 - A different registration process was put in place at the start of the pandemic giving a better performance. This was done by focusing in on what was needed and where for example redeploying administration staff;
 - Procedures were put in place that helped with pre-registrations of births and deaths;
 - I.T. issues and the need for printing even if electronic documents are sent, as these need to be printed and kept on file.
 - Government legislative guidance announced to public before being released to local authorities was a challenge in getting processes in place.

RESOLVED:

- The Chair will write to the Assistant Director, Regulation & Enforcement on behalf of the Committee to thank staff for their hard work during the pandemic.

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

None.

9. OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

None.

10. 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 1627 hours.