

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

CO-ORDINATING O&S COMMITTEE – PUBLIC MEETING

1000 hours on Friday, 10th December 2021, BMI Main Hall,

Action Notes

Present:

Councillor Carl Rice (Chair)

Councillors: Mohammed Aikhlaq, Deirdre Alden, Debbie Clancy, Roger Harmer, Narinder Kaur Kooner

Also Present:

Peter Bishop, Director for Digital and Customer Services

Robert Connelly, Assistant Director for Governance

Wendy Griffiths, Assistant Director for Customer Services and Business Support

Christian Scade, Interim Head of Scrutiny and Committee Services

1. NOTICE OF RECORDING/WEBCAST

The Chair advised that this meeting would be webcast for live or subsequent broadcast via the Council's Internet site (www.youtube.com/channel/UCT2kT7ZRPFCXq6_5dnVnYlw) and that members of the press/public may record and take photographs except where there were confidential or exempt items.

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies were submitted on behalf of Cllrs: Liz Clements, Mariam Khan, Saima Suleman, Ewan Mackay, and Mick Brown.

3. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

None declared.

4. ACTION NOTES

(See document No. 1).

RESOLVED:

The action notes of the formal meeting held on 15th October 2021 were agreed.

5. CUSTOMER SERVICE STRATEGY

(See document No. 2).

The Chair advised that items 5 and 6 would be switched due to Robert Connelly having submitted his apologies for lateness.

The report was presented by Peter Bishop, Director for Digital and Customer Services, and Wendy Griffiths, AD for Customer Services and Business Support, who outlined the delivery strategy to improve services and contact with customers. It was noted that the report would be considered by Cabinet on 14th December 2021. It was recognised that the Council's service delivery needed to be improved, and that the volume of complaints highlighted this.

It was explained that since March, the Customer Service team had looked at all customer experiences. Out of the 1,200 services run by the Council, only 5% of these sought feedback, and only 2% of these services were managed by Customer Services. Part of the problem with Customer Services for the Council was that it had an excessive amount of contact telephone numbers and a lot of web pages that were out of date, meaning there was a different convoluted complaint process for most individual service areas. In addition, it was noted that there was a need to digitalise processes wherever possible, to make customer services easier to access, and to enable customers – where possible - to self-serve. The Council also ran a survey on its customer services process which had received over 1,500 responses.

It was explained that the Council was trying to embed a standardised way of dealing with customers. The strategy was about setting out these principals. Part of the proposed model was about building in capacity in the services to challenge every interaction with customers and to ask: were they as good as they could be?

It was highlighted that the strategy asked for £1.7 million of funding to make savings of £10 million over four years and looked across several priority areas. Over the first 12 months it would oversee a programme to get priority areas right, which would then be scaled up to the 1,200 services areas and pre-emptive demand would be used for other improvements which would assist in fixing the basics.

In the ensuing debate the following points were made:

- The Chair commented that the success of the strategy would depend on the Customer Service Team working collaboratively with the individual Directorates and Service Leads.
- However, it was also noted that the active support of senior leadership was not enough to make the strategy work on its own, and it was suggested that the issues Customer Services faced were also regarding cultural ways of working and a lack of accountability for individual service areas, which it was argued, the strategy did not solve.

- It was highlighted that there was also an issue with people not getting acknowledgement of when they made a complaint or when a complaint had been closed. It was recognised that this was something that needed to be improved on.
- The Chair also highlighted the need to ensure Member involvement in the strategy, and to enable this, data regarding Customer Service performance needed to be provided to the Committee on a regular basis.
- The Committee requested that officers discuss with the Leader how information on Customer Services could be included in the Executive Business Reports, presented on a quarterly basis to City Council, in order to increase accountability on the issue.
- Additionally, it was noted that there was a £10 million savings ask from this programme, with £5.9 million identified as savings in year one. The £1.7 million ask from Customer Services to build an in-house core team to drive the improvements. After the first year, the strategy aims to be business as usual for the Council and therefore Customer Services will not be requesting further funding.

RESOLVED:

- That the Leader of the Council be asked to ensure Executive Business Reports to City Council include information on Customers Services.
- That updates on Customer Service Strategy Implementation and complaints be considered by the Committee in February and March 2022. These reports should be presented with input, and attendance at meetings, from the Interim Chief Executive and the Heads of Service for Refuse, Housing and Inclusive Growth. This should include performance on the business case.

6. UPDATE ON ELECTIONS BILL AND 2023 PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY BOUNDARY REVIEW

(See document No. 3).

Robert Connelly, Assistant Director for Governance presented the report and highlighted that although the Elections Bill was expected to have received Royal Assent by May 2022 it was important to note that the Bill would have no impact on how the local elections in May 2022 would be conducted. It would likely come into force by May 2023, but there were still lots of unanswered questions over how it would look.

The Committee was informed that the biggest and probably most visible change to the current system was that at polling stations electors would need to produce photographic ID before they were allowed to cast their vote for all elections. If people did not have appropriate ID then it would be the Council's responsibility to provide this for them free of charge. It was explained there was still work to be done to clarify what documents would be suitable as photo ID. The first scheduled

elections in Birmingham this would apply to would be the parliamentary election in 2024, and the WMCA and WMPC elections the same year. There were concerns raised about people turning up without ID to the first few elections. However, it was highlighted that a big national campaign was expected to publicise these new rules but as Birmingham had no scheduled elections in 2023 care would need to be taken so that any awareness campaign in 2024 was properly targeted at Birmingham residents.

It was also highlighted that there would be a need to monitor whether the introduction of ID cards would encourage people to switch to postal voting.

The Bill did not just cover voter ID cards, though. In addition, it proposed that electors must re-apply for a postal vote every three years and there would be limits to the number of people that you could act as proxy for, which would be limited to two people. Also, political campaigners would be banned from passing over completed postal votes. However, it would become much easier for British citizens overseas to vote in parliamentary elections, with no limit on how many years you have been away from the UK to be eligible to vote for. The voting rights of EU citizens had also changed, and they would no longer be able to vote unless they had settled status in the UK. Finally, there would be an introduction of electronic and digital imprints of political campaign leaflets which would have to be replicated online.

During the discussion the following points were raised:

- There was concern around the Council's capacity to produce ID cards for electors - free of charge – to those who did not have the appropriate ID. Nationally it was expected that this would equate to approximately 2% of electors, which in a city the size of Birmingham would be around 15,000 electorates – however it was explained that this number might be much higher.
- It was noted that there was a need for the voter ID application process not to be solely digital, and that it was essential that the Council knows what this would look like, as not all people had access to the internet.
- It was acknowledged that the legislation would likely lead to staffing issues around polling stations, which the Council already struggled to fully staff. Staff would need to be properly trained to check ID's and the limitations on postal voting may lead to an influx at the polling stations. It was suggested that the added requirements may act as a barrier to some people wanting to work at election time.
- The new additional requirements will also put significant pressures on core election teams at probably the worse time and again it is still unknown what additional resources will be required.
- There was also the issue of checking identification of people who must cover their faces for religious reasons, as it is thought that many current polling stations do not have a separate room/facilities to check identities.

- There was concern that there had been a drop in numbers in this year's electoral register in comparison to previous years. There was concern that more people were deciding that they did not want to be on the register. It was acknowledged that there was a need to investigate this alongside the political parties. However, Robert Connelly felt that registration was "event lead" and people would register when they had something such as a parliamentary election.
- In terms of the Parliamentary Boundary Review it was highlighted that Birmingham would go from 10 constituencies to 9.95, with one Birmingham constituency expanding to include two wards from neighbouring Solihull.

7. WORK PROGRAMMES

(See document No. 4).

It was noted that the Customer Service report would come back to the Committee in February and March. This would include input from the Interim Chief Executive and the heads of three service areas - Refuse, Housing and Inclusive Growth - which had been identified as priority areas regarding complaints handling.

On 8 December 2021, following the rapid spread of the Omicron variant, the Prime Minister confirmed that England would move to Plan B, which required people to work from home where possible. It was explained that there had not been any changes to legislation in relation to holding committee meetings online. Therefore, in order to vote on decisions or recommendations, a Member of a Committee must physically be present at the meeting at which the matter was considered. As a result, it was noted in-person formal committee meetings would need to continue, unless things changed.

8. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next meeting would be held on the 21st January 2022 at 10am

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

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 11:47 hours.