

Birmingham City Council

Coordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date: 27th January 2023



Subject: Cabinet Member Priorities, Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Community Safety and Equalities

Report of: Cllr John Cotton, Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Community Safety and Equalities

Report author: Richard Brooks, Director of Strategy, Equality and Partnerships

1 Purpose

- 1.1 To provide the Committee with an overview of current priorities and issues relating to the Cabinet Member's responsibilities covered by the Committee, specifically:
- Tackling Inequalities
 - Equalities within the Community
 - Social Cohesion and Inclusion
 - Third Sector Partnership and Engagement
 - External Challenge

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 That the Committee consider the report and identify issues for further scrutiny as part of their future work programme, with possible examples including:
- 2.1.1 The activity and impact of the Cost of Living Response Programme.
 - 2.1.2 The Warm Welcome initiative and/or the Food Aid Fund as examples of innovative approaches to third sector partnerships and engagement.
 - 2.1.3 The Birmingham City Observatory as a new means of driving equality and inclusion through open data.

3 Report

- 3.1** This report focuses on two new areas of activity that have not previously benefited from scrutiny and which implicate many aspects of this portfolio. These are the Cost of Living Emergency Programme and the City Observatory. The report also covers some equalities and cohesion activities and comments briefly on domestic abuse.

3.2 Cost of Living

- 3.2.1** The City of Birmingham faces unprecedented challenges in supporting its communities through the Cost of Living Crisis. Inflation is now at 10.5%, the highest rate for decades, and has particularly affected essential goods including household energy, basic foods, and fuel. The price rises are exacerbating already serious challenges in fuel, food, and general poverty across the city. At the same time, overall public sector budgets are constrained by low overall economic growth and the recent exceptionally high costs of responding to Covid.
- 3.2.2** In the face of these challenges, on 6th September 2022, Birmingham City Council declared a Cost of Living Emergency. On 11th October, the announcement was followed up by a report encompassing a number of recommendations to Cabinet.
- 3.2.3** The recommendations, accepted by Cabinet, included:
- The allocation of up to £5m of the Financial Resilience Reserve to the Cost of Living Emergency programme.
 - The approval of the delegation of expenditure to the Director of Strategy, Equality and Partnerships and the Section 151 officer, in consultation with the appropriate Cabinet Members.
 - The creation of a Cost-of-Living Strategic Response Group to oversee the Cost-of-Living delivery workstreams including the response to a set of immediate priority actions.
- 3.2.4** Over the past three months, the Council has moved at pace to deliver this programme. As detailed below, the Cost of Living programme, with a broad network of partners across the city, has built an extensive network of Warm Welcome Spaces; new capacity to offer advice on money and benefits; provided cash to support food banks and other food projects across the city; created a top up fund for fuel deprived households and progressed a comprehensive support scheme aimed at easing the cost of living burden for our own workforce.

- 3.2.5 Following the decision by Cabinet, the Strategic Response Group (SRG) was set up as part of robust governance arrangements for the programme. The group sets strategic direction and agrees key priorities. Chaired by the Director of Strategy, Equality and Partnerships, membership includes all the council's relevant senior departmental directors and legal representation. To provide an expert, external perspective, senior representatives of the NHS Integrated Care Partnership and the Birmingham Voluntary Services Council are also members of this senior group. The SRG maintains a critical overview of the council's responses, owns key risks and issues; signs off the communications strategy, and considers spending proposals and proposes them for Member decisions as appropriate

The Five Immediate Cost of Living priorities

- 3.2.6 The Cabinet Paper of the 11th October 2022 stated that our Cost-of-Living response should align with and accelerate longer-term strategic work; for example, Early Intervention and Prevention, and Net Zero. It was further recommended in the report (and accepted by Cabinet) that the work focus on four broad themes:

1. People - Increase income and reduce costs
2. Public Sector and VCS – collaborate, rally, and support our partners
3. Business – Protect jobs and prevent bankruptcy
4. Places – Increase energy efficiency

- 3.2.7 Within these themes, there was some initial mapping of current and planned activity to form a view of what short, medium- and longer-term actions were required. This exercise identified the following areas as short-term priorities:

1. Ensuring the provision of a network of **warm spaces** across the city.
2. Improving the availability of **advice to residents**, with a focus on increasing benefit take up.
3. Increasing **energy efficiency**, with a focus on reducing fuel costs for vulnerable Birmingham households.
4. Increasing the **supply of food** through foodbanks across the city.
5. Supporting the Council's own workforce.

- 3.2.8 Over the past three months, the programme has progressed these immediate actions as detailed below:

- 3.2.8.1 **Warm Welcome:** a total of 202 Warm Welcome spaces have been registered on the council website, with 142 now up and running. These Warm Welcome spaces are intended to be friendly, social areas that do not stigmatise its users. A programme of activities is planned across the network and, where appropriate, the co-location of services such as money advice, legal aid, and support on health issues.
- 3.2.8.2 **The Warm Welcome** has produced remarkable levels of collaboration and civic contribution by city partners. Warm Spaces include pantries, cafes, museums, mosques, and other faith centres - and even a bowls club. The network of these spaces, convened by the council, is inspiring and capturing new innovation, volunteering, and corporate giving. We have offered a small grants programme to Warm Welcome network members, and plan to develop a subset of the network into larger Hubs offering a wider range of support.
- 3.2.8.3 **Foodbanks:** A package of support for the city's foodbanks and other emergency food projects has been advanced. Launched in December, 100 applications for cash grants of £800 per month (for six months) have by 15th January 2023 been approved. This will enable the foodbanks across the city to buy culturally appropriate food during the winter. These grants are essential because traditional sources of donations and food giving from supermarkets and individuals have diminished as the cost of living bites.
- 3.2.8.4 In addition, the Cost of Living programme supported Holiday Activities and Food for children during the school holidays. This involved matching DFE funding to produce 30,000 meals for children and families. Youth Centres have also been provided with small grants to buy new cooking equipment. This will enable the centres to serve 75,000 meals per year for young people.
- 3.2.8.5 **Advice and support on income maximisation** has been extended. The Council's Neighbourhood Offices have increased opening times by 5 1/2 hours per week, and the Customer Contact Centre phone lines are now open for an additional two hours in the evening (5-7pm). As a result, there has been additional income maximisation for citizens of at least £446,000 since November from the Neighbourhood Offices alone. A further increase in advice through community organisation grants is projected to create £2.5m in new benefits for vulnerable Birmingham residents.
- 3.2.8.6 **Energy measures** are also now ramping up. Additional energy vouchers have been approved for approximately 5,000 vulnerable homes, often with pre-payment meters. These are being distributed by the council's Local Welfare Provision team.
- 3.2.8.7 A comprehensive package of **Employee Support** is now available. This includes access to financial advice and, through the Citysave

Credit Union, information on regular savings and fair-priced loans. There is free confidential health and wellbeing support as well as access to warm workspaces across the city. These “warm” locations are across many libraries, leisure centres, and council buildings.

- 3.2.9 Over the last three months, and as approved by Cabinet, it was important for the SRG to focus on the immediate priorities. Next steps in the programme include the development of a business support package as well as new ideas for the evolution of the Warm Welcome Spaces, Foodbanks and the Money and Benefits programme.
- 3.2.10 As stated above, the Warm Welcome Spaces network offers new opportunities for providing advice, guidance, and wider community development. There are also embryonic plans to create new capacity at certain foodbanks for the creation of a sustainable food pantry model. This is where citizens can buy more affordable food in exchange for a small monthly fee. The extension of Money and Benefits advice has seen impressive returns and reveal an opportunity to grow this service further.
- 3.2.11 As the Cost of Living programme transitions from the immediate actions to wider capacity building and resilience, there are new proposals in the pipeline for harnessing corporate social responsibility and building a legacy from the Commonwealth Games volunteering.
- 3.2.12 In conclusion, the Cost of Living programme has afforded new opportunity for internal and external collaboration and the acceleration of delivery. The programme has catalysed innovative approaches to third sector partnerships and engagement. Learning from this initiative will be captured in an initial evaluation covering the first six months of the emergency and our response.
- 3.2.13 The Cost of Living programme has benefited greatly from an inclusive communications plan with communication in braille, deaf sign and in ten Birmingham languages. The Council's website has been developed to provide extensive information and access to support across the programme: [Cost of living support | Birmingham City Council](#)
- 3.2.14 The City Observatory discussed below, has provided robust data which has allowed the effective targeting of resources in vulnerable communities, not least through its Financial Resilience dashboard.

3.3 Birmingham City Observatory

- 3.3.1 The Birmingham City Observatory is a new public, open-source platform providing large quantities of data and insight, curated for Birmingham. It is run by the Insight, Policy & Strategy Team within the Strategy, Equality & Partnerships Directorate, and builds on the work of the council's Data Programme & Digital

Strategy. The Observatory was launched in November 2022 and is publicly accessible: www.cityobservatory.birmingham.gov.uk

3.3.2 The purpose of the Observatory is to improve outcomes for the citizens of Birmingham and improve equality across the city, through providing data and insight and facilitating collaboration and innovation. This includes:

- Improving access to good quality data and insight – providing a ‘single source of the truth’ about key issues for the city.
- Informing decision making, policy and strategy development.
- Supporting improved organisational performance, including by facilitating scrutiny.
- Allowing datasets to be combined to create new insights and new value.
- Enabling the sharing of data and supporting a community of data users across the city.

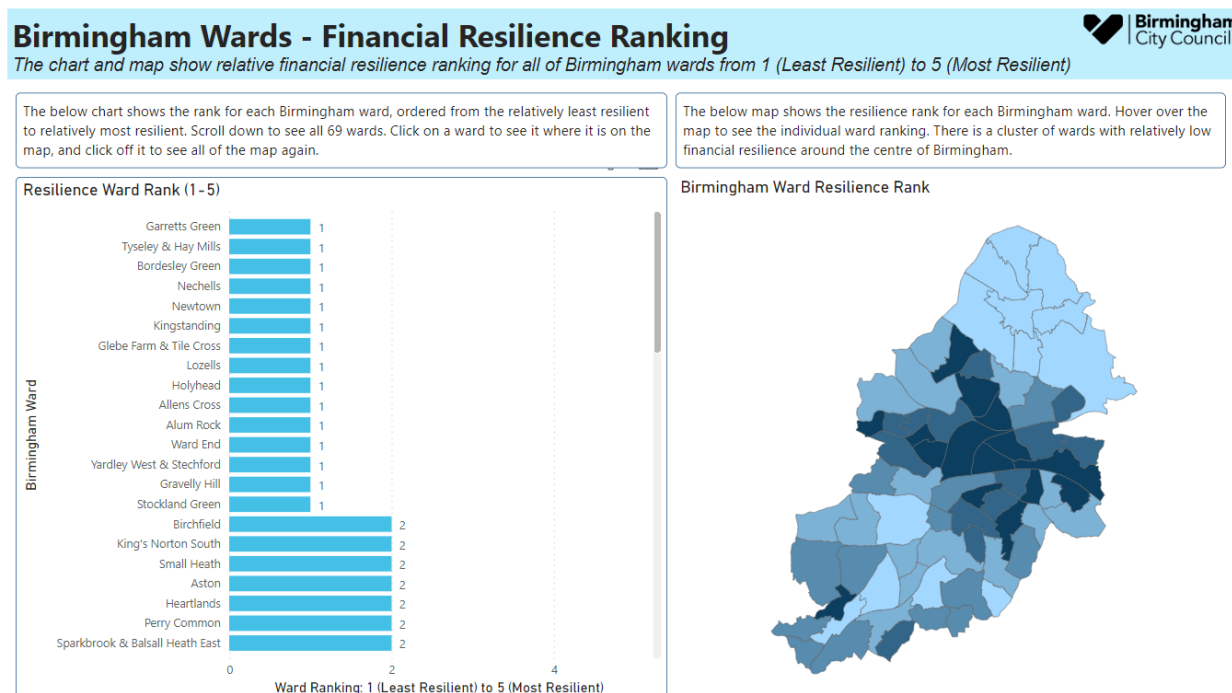
3.3.3 The Observatory is intended to embody modern principles of transparency, openness and good digital design. For example:

- The content is always available. There is no need to commission & retrieve data from owners, the Observatory platform is public and users access the content directly.
- Data sets are regularly and updated with automated processes to ‘pull through’ data from source, with regular and frequent additions to the site. In the longer term, the aim is to include true ‘real-time’ city data.
- The Observatory supports the ambition to use the same information for internal decision making within BCC as we share with external partners and the public.
- Data is published alongside insight that illuminates the issues and consequences, not just raw numbers.
- The Observatory team we will actively manage internal and external engagement, seek feedback and improve. The intention is to discover, develop, publish and promote partners’ data and insight.

3.3.4 Equality and cohesion issues are central to the Observatory’s mission, especially through illuminating the diversity and character of the city; highlighting the true pattern of outcomes and performance across the city; and driving better decision making and improved performance.

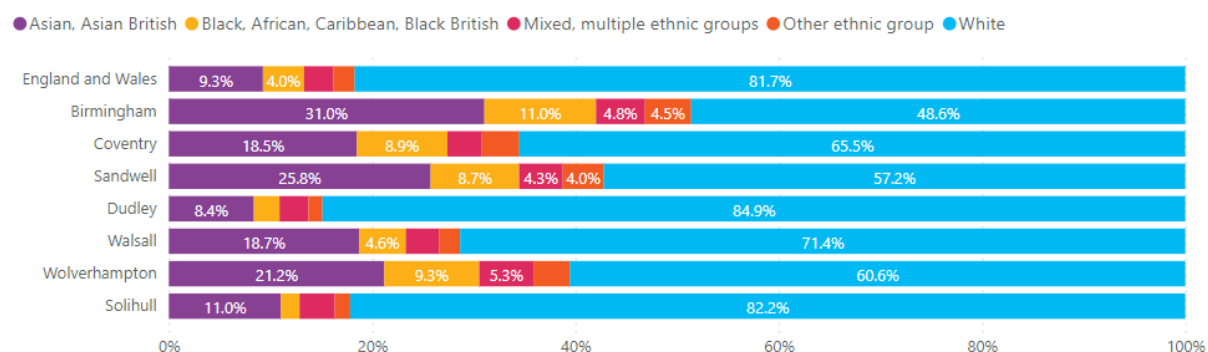
3.3.5 In relation to the Cost of Living crisis, the City Observatory has published a novel Financial Resilience Dashboard that highlights which wards are most exposed to financial pressures. The dashboard combines measures including fuel poverty, welfare benefits and unemployment, the index of multiple

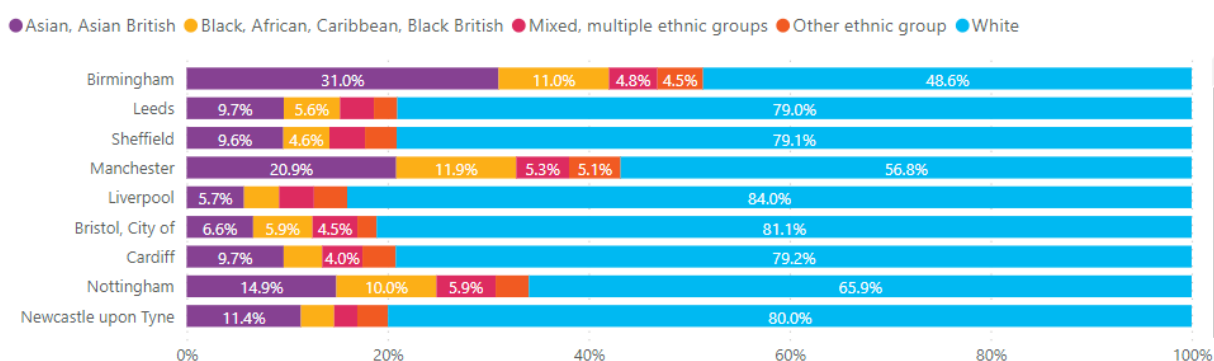
deprivation, and children in vulnerable households. Observatory dashboards are accessible here: <https://www.cityobservatory.birmingham.gov.uk/insights> . The following map shows an overall summary of financial resilience by ward from the dashboard, and ward level summaries are available alongside this.



Source: Birmingham City Observatory, Financial Resilience Dashboard

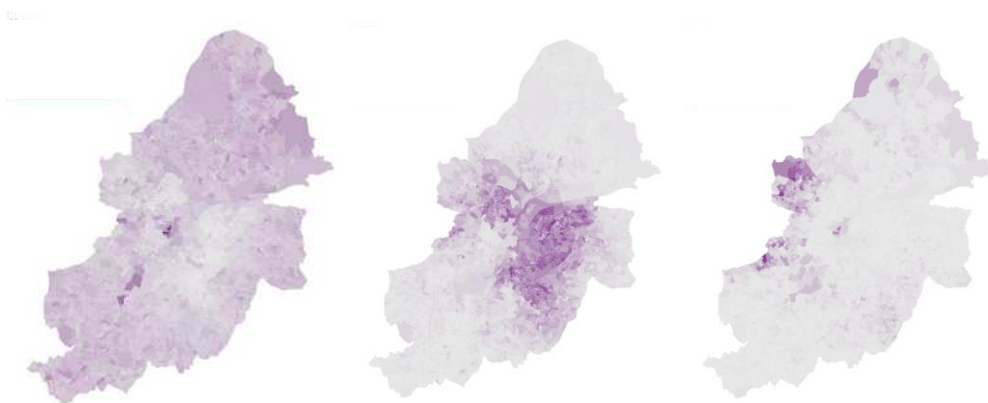
3.3.6 The latest update to the City Observatory is a large dataset released from the 2021 Census Programme, which has been transformed into an interactive dashboard facilitating a detailed understanding of key aspects of the diversity of Birmingham and allowing comparison with other areas. The two screenshots below show a comparison of ethnicity between Birmingham and the other Core Cities, and Birmingham and the other members of the West Midlands Combined Authority. Both highlight our exceptional diversity:





Source: *Birmingham City Observatory, Census 2021 Dashboard*

- 3.3.7 In addition, the Census dashboard allows micro-local level mapping of key issues, allowing the City Council to evaluate more easily whether services are being provided equitably to our diverse communities. The following three screen shots show the concentrations of different faith population of Birmingham, from left to right: Christian, Muslim and Sikh.



Source: *Birmingham City Observatory, Census 2021 Dashboard*

- 3.3.8 This City Observatory is a rapidly developing platform. Over the course of 2023 a key priority will be engagement with internal BCC directorates and services, to ensure that the value of the Observatory is maximised (for example by publishing the most important BCC data and providing insight that informs key policy and strategies). Wider engagement with the City Partnership is also key. At the public launch of the Observatory a wide range of organisations were represented and involved, including from the public, private, and voluntary and community sectors. Our city Universities are another key stakeholder group, and we have active partnerships with both Birmingham City University and with the University of Birmingham in relation to the Observatory.

3.4 Equalities and Cohesion within the Community

- 3.4.1 Since the approval of Everyone's Battle, Everyone's Business (EBEB) Equality Action Plan, the Council has worked on delivery with communities,

stakeholders, and staff. To that end, a number of partnerships have been established. These include:

- **Gypsy Roma and Traveller communities Partnership.**
- **Proud Rainbow City Partnership** which considers community safety and engagement with LGBTQ+ communities.
- **Real Living Wage Partnership** brings together large employers and the voluntary and community sector to promote Birmingham as a Real Living Wage City. Its main aim is to increase the number of employers paying the real living wage. Encouragingly, a total of 133 employers have now signed up, an increase of 33 since 2021.
- **Community Stakeholder Panel** includes community champions, and the voluntary and public sectors. The panel was established to ensure that the city's diverse communities are fully represented. This forum oversees the CWG Stronger Communities programme and the delivery of EBEB actions.

3.4.2 In addition, representatives from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) have sometimes fed back they were disengaged from council processes and funding opportunities. In response, the Council now has regular formal roundtable discussions with CEE organisations to discuss and respond to any issues of concern.

3.4.3 In promoting women's rights and safety, the Council also works with the voluntary and community sector to co-design and deliver the **Inform Women, Transform Lives - Carter award campaign work**. A City-wide media campaign, the focus is on supporting refuge and migrant women experiencing domestic and sexual violence.

3.4.4 The Council's approach to building and promoting community cohesion includes:

- The launch of Birmingham's refreshed **Faith Covenant** with Faith communities in November. The principles have been refreshed to reflect the vital role faith communities play across the city, not least, recently, in setting up the Warm Welcome spaces. A Faith Covenant Partnership will be established in 2023.
- To support our CWG community cohesion legacy commitments, this year the Council will co-deliver a number of community-led activities. These are designed to build an empowered community. In particular, there is a desire to understand more clearly, the patterns of migration and settlement and how they promote but can also disrupt cohesion.

3.4.5 A number of events to celebrate Birmingham's diversity also took place last year. These included:

- **Windrush Day 2022.** The New Street Station screening of the unveiling of the Windrush Day statues in London on 22nd June.

- **B2022 Commonwealth Games Community Engagement event** held in the summer.
- **Islamophobia Awareness Month** launch on 14th November at the Council House
- The co-designed **Heritage Trails** programme, funded by Birmingham City Council via our Commonwealth Games Community Fund celebration in December.

3.5 Domestic Abuse

- 3.5.1 An update on Domestic Abuse priorities was represented to Housing and Neighbourhoods Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 15 December 2022. Progress towards reviewing the domestic abuse strategy is ongoing. A multi-agency working group has been established to review the strategy and feedback progress to the Domestic Abuse Local Strategic Partnership Board. Group membership includes representatives from West Midlands Police, BCT, CPS, NHS, specialist third sector, and Housing. The first meeting has been scheduled for January.
- 3.5.2 Officers have been liaising with Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee regarding their input and involvement in the strategy review. A roundtable was held in December with Scrutiny members and key partners who have been delivering the strategy, to review the current strategy and discuss key issues going forward. A dedicated session on Domestic Abuse is due to take place on 17 February 2023.
- 3.5.3 Officers have met with partners drafting the Homeless Prevention Strategy, and partners in Community Safety drafting the Violence Against Women and Girls strategy to ensure cohesion and partnership across the strategies.

4 Any Finance Implications

- 4.1 Not applicable for this report.

5 Any Legal Implications

- 5.1 Not applicable for this report.

6 Any Equalities Implications

- 6.1 Equalities issues are addressed within the body of the report as one of its main subjects.

7 Appendices

- 7.1 None.