

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

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

1400 hours on Thursday 14 October 2021

Main Hall, Birmingham & Midland Institute

Action Notes

Present:

Councillor Marje Bridle (Chair)

Councillors Deirdre Alden, Roger Harmer, Mahmood Hussain, Mary Locke, Mike Sharpe and Ken Wood

Also Present:

Sarah Ager, Senior Service Manager, Housing

Jonathan Antill, Head of Business Improvement and Support, City Operations

Louise Fletcher, Senior Service Manager, Housing

Mira Gola, Head of Business Improvement and Support, City Housing

John Jamieson, Acting Assistant Director, Housing Management

Darren Share, Assistant Director, Street Scene

Natalie Smith, Head of Service, Housing Management

Jayne Bowles, Scrutiny Officer

Daniel King, Graduate Management Trainee, Scrutiny Office

Emma Williamson, Head of Scrutiny

1. NOTICE OF RECORDING/WEBCAST

The Chair advised that this meeting would be webcast for live or subsequent broadcast via the Council's meeting You Tube 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 received from Councillor Penny Holbrook.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

None.

4. ACTION NOTES AND ACTION TRACKER

(See documents 1, 2, 3 and 4)

RESOLVED:

- The action notes of the meetings held on 17 June 2021 and 18 August 2021 were agreed;
- The action notes of the informal meeting held on 23 September 2021 were noted;
- The action tracker was noted.

5. PERFORMANCE MONITORING

(See documents 5 and 6)

The Chair introduced Mira Gola, in attendance to present the Month 5 City Housing performance report, and Jonathan Antill, in attendance to present the Month 5 City Operations Waste Management performance report.

Also in attendance for this item were John Jamieson, Acting Assistant Director, Housing Management, Natalie Smith, Head of Service, Housing Management, and Darren Share, Assistant Director, Street Scene.

The key points in both reports were highlighted and it was noted that from Month 6 onwards the last two KPIs in the City Housing report would be included in the City Operations report as the responsibility for the Private Rented Sector now sits within that directorate.

In the discussion which followed, and in response to Members' questions, the following were among the main points raised:

Housing:

- There were concerns raised regarding the difficulties some residents were experiencing in getting through to the contact centre and Members were told that for a sustained period there has been an increase in the volume of repairs calls versus resources available;
- There is some analysis being done, looking at the nature of the calls and the reason for the increase, but it is fair to say there has been an increase in the demand for repairs;
- They are looking to see if there are any particular trends other than the two factors of coming out of lockdown restrictions and people being at home a lot

more, for example working from home and so more inclined to report repairs;

- Contractors are facing issues with regard to scarcity of materials, increasing costs, resources and supply chain, as much as anyone else in the building industry, and this is an issue in terms of ensuring the required performance is achieved against the various KPIs;
- In response to a query raised around down-sizing and freeing up larger properties for families, Members were told there is a scheme called Wise Move which is aimed at helping tenants – generally by nature more elderly and vulnerable tenants in homes which are too large for their needs – and more information can be provided on that;
- Most people down-sizing are in Band 1;
- There have been recent meetings around housing solutions and looking at a more proactive approach and there has been some success over recent months;
- Members agreed it would be interesting to see figures indicating how many people are moving on from larger properties;
- In terms of voids, which it was acknowledged would be discussed in more detail later on the agenda, Members raised concerns about the state of properties and gardens entering the void process and that if more was done in terms of tenant management, ie going out and inspecting properties to check they are being looked after, then when it comes to turning round voids it wouldn't take so long;
- Officers are aware of the need to be pro-active and look at tenancy visits as part of the housing transformation review. It has been difficult to go out and visit people throughout Covid but this does need to be addressed going forward as the current model is about responding to service requests;
- There has been a move from annual visits to a targeted approach and in the main the majority of those visited were maintaining their properties and they are now looking towards an early intervention approach, whereby at the time of letting, they are identifying issues which will require ongoing support;
- With regard to overgrown gardens, as part of the tenancy conditions it is the responsibility of the tenant to maintain the garden and if it is identified that a tenant is not capable of doing this they will have a further conversation to see if the garden needs to be cleared for them and what support they might need;
- It was noted there is no performance management score for tenancy management and John Jamieson told Members they are conscious of the lack of visibility and are looking at developing indicators around tenancy management;
- Members noted it would be interesting to see how hopefully things will change with a more pro-active approach being taken.

Waste Management:

- It was confirmed that Grounds Maintenance would be included in future City Operations performance reports;

- With regard to missed collections, there is an ongoing pilot with in-cab technology (“slab in the cab”) to address the issues relating to missed collections or customers requiring assisted collections;
- The way they operate at the moment, the crew has assisted collections listed on a data sheet and the team is responsible for checking that sheet and making the collection;
- The “slab in the cab” trial changes that with the assisted collections appearing as a visual picture on the actual tablet in the cab and it is believed that assisted collections will improve with this technology;
- Concerns were raised about street cleanliness coming through as amber as that does not seem to tally with residents’ experiences – one concern was the cleansing rotas and it was queried whether it would be better to see a scaled down rota that can actually be delivered;
- It was explained that street cleansers had been used to prop up the refuse collections and that whilst they can look at changing the rotas, the problem is then they are scaling back which will affect the way they operate;
- The Mobile Household Recycling centres (MHRCs) were welcomed and in terms of who is crewing these Members were told that some street cleansing staff have been used with their posts back-filled by agency staff, as they wanted to use experienced people. However, no staff from refuse collection crews are being used for the MHRCs;
- It was agreed the timing of the MHRCs needed to be looked at, especially in view of the clocks going back, and they are looking to re-align the times to start later and finish later;
- With regard to fly-tipping, they have put extra crews out but have not been able to recruit extra HGV drivers, so a lot of fly-tipping collections are being made with smaller vehicles;
- There are two crews now operating to collect fridges as there had been a backlog, however that is now coming down with around 100 fridges a day being collected;
- There will also be extra resources between now and just after Christmas to collect leaves;
- There were concerns raised regarding bins not being put back in the right place after collections and it was acknowledged that there are some good teams who do this and other teams who are not so good, but pods should be put back in and bins should be put back right;
- There has been a change in the waste stream with more card coming in which is important as that brings in an income, however there are issues when large boxes are left out but if they are cut up and flattened then the crews should be picking that up to be recycled;
- A request was made for street cleansing performance information by ward to be provided and also an indication of how current performance on street cleansing compares with pre-pandemic performance.

RESOLVED:-

- Further information to be provided on the Wise Move scheme aimed at helping tenants to downsize, to include figures indicating how many people are moving on from larger properties;

- Grounds Maintenance to be included in future City Operations performance reports;
- How street cleansing performance in this report compares with pre-pandemic performance to be confirmed;
- Report on LAMS data on street cleanliness by ward to be provided alongside future performance reports.

6. HOUSING UPDATE

(See documents 7, 8, 9 and 10)

John Jamieson, Acting Assistant Director, Housing Management, Natalie Smith, Head of Service, Housing Management, Sarah Ager, Senior Service Manager, Housing, and Louise Fletcher, Senior Service Manager, Housing, attended for this item, which is in three parts – Repairs and Capital Investment, Voids and Tenant Engagement Review.

Repairs and Capital Investment

John Jamieson went through the presentation and highlighted the following points:

- There is a fire safety and building safety theme running through the overview, which is particularly important as a city with over 200 high rise blocks;
- There is a fire safety steering group which meets on a three weekly basis, chaired by Sarah Ager as Head of Capital Investment and Repairs and including representatives from West Midlands Fire Service and other experts. The group oversees all issues particularly around changing legislation, the impacts and what that means for us as a city;
- Regular meetings of the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Early Adopter Group which looks at innovations and the impacts of reports coming out, are also attended;
- There is a comprehensive report on fire safety going to Cabinet in December;
- New posts are being brought in to improve the safety of residents in flats with the appointment of Building Safety Managers and Building Safety Officers responsible for day-to-day safety;
- There are demands and pressures on the capital investment programme and key to that at the moment has been the fire safety programme, including sprinklers;
- There has been an injection of just over £12m extra capital funding from the HRA to keep pace with work and meet targets;
- There is substantial construction improvement, looking at solutions to safeguard the lives of blocks for potentially another 30 years and measures to help make properties greener and more carbon efficient;
- On repairs and maintenance, engagement is being maintained with contractors to ensure KPIs are met;
- There is a separate report on Voids which will go into more detail, but it was noted that there is a need to address repairs to improve turnaround times;

- With regard to the contracts, extension discussions are still ongoing and subject to acceptable commercial terms and acceptable performance;
- The decision in March at Cabinet was to seek to re-procure the contract for the South and they are currently out to tender for that with temporary terms due imminently and a report targeted for December with a contract to commence in April;
- They are looking at various options for April 2024 in terms of commissioning, looking at various options in terms of what the recommended commissioning strategy will be, subject to Cabinet approval.

During the discussion, and in response to Members' questions, the following were among the main points raised:

- The work being done on fire safety was welcomed and a request was made for an update on the breakdown of where we are with each tower block to be provided, and also the outcome of the job evaluation for the Building Safety Managers;
- There were concerns about the lack of investment on climate change related issues, particularly improving the standard of insulation on our properties, and the funding position was queried;
- There have been recent officer meetings regarding Route to Zero and housing stock and there is a team within Inclusive Growth looking at this;
- They are looking to establish a team within Housing to explore options and funding solutions and they are also looking at the HRA and opportunities to increase the amount of investment in our stock;
- They are conscious of the huge task ahead in terms of upgrading our stock and whilst doing external fire safety work they are taking the opportunity to address thermal efficiency of buildings, changing windows etc;
- Members sought reassurance that materials will be sourced from local suppliers and it was confirmed that local supply is part of the stipulation within the BBC4SR. In terms of doors and windows they do stipulate with contractors to use Shelforce and they are looking at opportunities to increase income to Shelforce in the future;
- In response to a question about talking to other Local Authorities to pick up ideas of what other people are doing around the green agenda and fire safety, Members were told that on fire safety there is the Early Adopter Group previously referred to and organisations like Housemark in respect of benchmarking. However, there is not a great deal being done with other Local Authorities on the green agenda;
- The housing transformation programme covers housing management, capital investment and repairs and there is some external support in at the moment doing a root and branch review and one of the reasons for this was to bring in examples of good practice from elsewhere across the whole piece;
- In terms of the whole prevention approach, Members were told that Housing became a stand-alone directorate in May and sits overall with Julie Griffin as Managing Director of City Housing, but links with Graeme Betts. Housing Solutions are not represented at this meeting but they will provide support around housing options.

RESOLVED:-

- Update to be provided on the sprinkler installation/fire safety works programme for high rise buildings;
- Outcome of the job evaluation for Building Safety Managers to be shared with Members.

Voids

Natalie Smith and Sarah Ager introduced the report, which covers the key parts within the Voids process and examples where improvements can be made. The following points were highlighted:

- Currently, pre-vacation visits are taking place only in the south and they are looking to increase staff to cover the other side of the city;
- The aim of the visits is to address any ongoing issues as quickly as possible and to alert contractors if there are likely to be delays or a major works void;
- There are some concerns around void turnaround times and they are working across all contractors to share best practice.

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

- Members referred to their recent visits to voids and highlighted what they considered to be a failure in tenancy management or support in terms of the standard of the properties, with particular reference being made to overgrown gardens;
- There was a view that there has clearly been a breakdown in how we communicate with tenants and it was suggested that the committee should do an in-depth inquiry into Voids and for visits to RSLs to be arranged so that Members can compare standards and how they get their stock ready to re-let;
- It was suggested that if the properties we hand over are not in a good state to begin with we should accept they are not in a good condition and offer an incentive for tenants moving in to decorate, for example offering a two month rent-free period;
- It was acknowledged that improvements need to be made in terms of tenancy management and to be more pro-active with a focus on prevention, with more visits to properties and to discuss whether people are in the right property, for example some might prefer to be in a property with no garden to maintain;
- They are also looking at high cost voids to see what the profile is, eg is it elderly residents, young single people, to get some understanding around where to target support and the visiting approach;
- Overgrown gardens are about 40% of their work at present and there is a need to come up with a better solution to manage it;
- The importance of getting out to the estates and working in partnership was stressed, for example working with Welcome Change, and we also have our own vulnerable tenants garden scheme;

- It was also pointed out that if tenants are ex-forces, the British Legion will help with grass-cutting, for example;
- More in-depth detail on the figures for major works voids was requested, including when they became voids and why they are still voids.

RESOLVED:-

- More detail to be provided on the figures for Major Works Voids – when they became voids and why they are still voids;
- Further work on Voids, to include visits to RSL properties, to be discussed with the Chair and scheduled into the work programme.

Tenant Engagement Review

Louise Fletcher, Senior Service Manager, Housing, gave Members an update on the tenant engagement review currently being undertaken.

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

- The review is about measuring what is done around engagement and ensuring every tenant has a voice, not just those involved in a formal setting;
- Members requested that they be given an opportunity to give evidence to the review and Louise advised that although they have reached the end of evidence-gathering she would request that this be factored in before the report is finalised;
- The Chair thanked Louise and said she looked forward to the outcomes and recommendations of the review being shared with the committee.

RESOLVED:-

- O&S members to be given an opportunity to give evidence/views to contribute to the review;
- Once the review is completed, outcomes and recommendations to be shared with Committee.

7. WORK PROGRAMME

(See document 11)

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 1615 hours.