

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

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

1400 hours on Thursday 27 January 2022 (On-line Meeting)

Present:

Councillor Kate Booth (Chair)

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

Also Present:

Councillor Shabrana Hussain, Cabinet Member for Homes and Neighbourhoods

Chris Jordan, Assistant Director, Neighbourhoods

Varun Sitaram, Head of Business Improvement and Change

Karen Cheney, Head of Service, Neighbourhood Development and Support Unit

Mira Gola, Head of Business Improvement and Support

Julie Griffin, Managing Director, Housing

Gary Messenger, Assistant Director of City Housing Services and Support

Jonathan Antill, Head of Business Improvement and Support

Nick Reid, Depot Manager

Christian Scade, Interim Head of Scrutiny and Committee Services

Ceri Saunders, Acting Group Overview & Scrutiny Manager

Baseema Begum, Scrutiny Officer

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. APPOINTMENT TO COMMITTEE

The appointment of Cllr Kate Booth as Chair was noted.

3. APOLOGIES

Councillor Mike Sharpe.

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

None.

5. ACTION NOTES AND ACTION TRACKER

(See documents 1 and 2)

The action notes of the meeting held on 11 November 2021 were noted and will be agreed at the next formal meeting.

The following points were made in relation to the action tracker:

- Cllr Bridle raised an outstanding item of action relating to the committee's July meeting and asked if this could be followed up as it had not been received.
- The Chair requested that all outstanding requests for information listed on the action tracker are followed up and an update on progress made given at the next formal meeting.
- In relation to Cllr Bridle's query on when the meeting with Knowsley Council is scheduled as part of the Litter Bins Inquiry it was confirmed that dates for meeting in February were being sought from Knowsley Council and Members will be canvassed once these have been received.

6. LOCALISATION UPDATE

(See document 3)

The Cabinet Member for Homes and Neighbourhoods, Cllr Shabrana Hussain, was in attendance for this item, together with Chris Jordan, Assistant Director, Neighbourhoods, Varun Sitaram, Head of Business Improvement and Change, and Karen Cheney, Head of Service, Neighbourhood Development and Support Unit (NDSU).

Cllr Hussain introduced the report and made the following points: -

- The Council launched a new approach to Localisation with its 'Working Together in Birmingham's Neighbourhoods' document that set out some key areas of activity including setting up ward forums and ward plans, supporting areas wanting to develop neighbourhood parish councils and looking at what more can be done to support local community groups who have played a vital role during the pandemic.
- Cross directorate working is taking place on the Localisation Star Chambers process. This looks at how each directorate can contribute to the Localisation agenda and identifies areas where further progress can be made.

- The £2m Commonwealth Games Celebrating Communities Fund was utilised based on ward priority plans with the second round of funding having just ended and monies will be going out soon.
- 13 Wards in the city have access to the Local Community Infrastructure Levy of £2.5m. The NDSU team will be supporting this process further.

Varun Sitaram spoke about the strategic context of Localisation stating that: -

- Localisation features very heavily in the Council's existing policy propositions including the medium-term financial plan and more recently Birmingham's Levelling up strategy published in November. The latter highlights themes around local economic development, early intervention and prevention and at-scale housing retrofit amongst others.
- The Star Chambers process allows visibility and understanding of current and emerging initiatives by people working together to deliver the commitment set out. In this way good practice is identified and championed. Currently the second round is in progress.
- Feedback on the second round will be shared with this committee when it has been completed, however the main themes focussed on have been commissioning community cafes in public health and the inspiring future leaders' programme.
- Corporate Procurement Services has launched 'Match My Project', an on-line portal that links community groups and businesses together. Work has continued in preparation for the Commonwealth Games to emphasise the importance of social value with contractors and the outcomes so far are:
 - 53 local organisations have been engaged with;
 - £37,000 of small grants have been awarded;
 - 44 hours of volunteering has taken place; and
 - over £22,000 of resources has been given to local organisations and groups.
- Funding has also been approved to enable officers to assist with external funding bids and community engagement in business cases through the 'Use-it' project in East Birmingham.
- A new approach is being developed to enable crowdfunding through funding sources for ward and neighbourhood projects being conducted in conjunction with the NDSU.

Chris Jordan highlighted some key details in the report and progress made on the Localisation Delivery Plan at appendix 1: -

- The Council moved to a change of policy position in 2018-2019 on Localisation with a set of ambitions and progress continues to be made in these areas over the last 2-3 years.
- A key ambition in the 2019 policy paper was ensuring that resourcing was getting in at a local level and there are examples of where this has been achieved such as the Commonwealth Games Celebrating Communities Fund of £2m that has drawn in over 500 applications. The new ward participatory decision-making process will be used to assess those applications.
- The second area of resourcing is in relation to the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). This has been more challenging in terms of progress made but

there are 13 wards in the city where appropriate development has taken place. The process to spend this funding will be finalised in the coming months and is expected to include small grants, crowdfunding and large commissions of projects all linked to the priorities set out in ward plans.

- Cabinet approval has been given on reviewing applications for neighbourhood and parish councils. 3 areas of the city have shown interest and Balsall Heath has progressed further with a governance review process due to start on 31st January.

Karen Cheney added the following points in relation to the work of the NDSU: -

- Many of the applications for the Commonwealth Games Celebrating Communities Fund were from small hyper local community organisations that the NDSU were unaware of and this has been very positive and something to build on going forward.
- As part of this a new method was trailed in getting these groups to submit applications with the NDSU funding a capacity building programme. Birmingham Community Matters and Locality were commissioned to work with these small groups who were interested and wanted to put in proposals. This included working with groups to show them how to submit a good proposal and ensuring that they were aware of all the additional expectations and requirements. This gave groups a wider opportunity for support, open dialogue and to meet and network with other similar groups.
- £50,000 from the Government's 'Levelling Up' fund has been secured to boost engagement and participation in neighbourhood planning. This will be used to support those areas that are interested and give them more information on how to progress further. The funding will be used to invest in officer capacity and developing a toolkit to support this work. Funding will need to be used by the end of the 2022/23 financial year.
- With reference to neighbourhood councils it was clarified that the role of the local authority is to provide information to interested areas on what this entails and how people can get involved. For example, in supporting Balsall Heath Strategic Partnership the Council will be providing information at sessions ahead of a referendum later this year.
- Ward Plans and Priorities 2018-22 documents have now been produced by Ward Forums for 60 of the 69 wards. Following further requests for completion by the Cabinet Member for Homes and Neighbourhoods there are still 9 that are outstanding.
- Further to the Council Constitution (May 2021) stating that wards should hold at least four ward forum meetings per year there are 12 wards that haven't had any meetings so far and this will need to be chased up.

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

- Members welcomed the wide and diverse set of applications for the Commonwealth Games Celebrating Communities Fund and the discovery of small new organisations wanting to do things in their community.
- For those wards without ward plans and those who have not yet held ward forums it was confirmed that the NDSU team have been working hard in

supporting Members to deliver them. Likewise, Group secretaries and Whips have been spoken with and advice and guidance is being sought from Legal Services in respect of what more can be done as it is a requirement as set out in the Council's constitution. It is hoped that outstanding plans will be completed by the end of this municipal year.

- Ward Forums are very important and during the pandemic there has been the opportunity to hold virtual meetings that has proved valuable and this has enabled a wide range of the community to get involved. However, there is an issue with those that are digitally excluded.
- It is important for the committee to understand how the 4 key measures of success of the Localisation programme (as set out in the 2019 Cabinet report) have worked and how these have been implemented practically on a local level. There was concern on the practical delivery and it was suggested that senior directors could look at their service areas more closely and suggest those services that can be operated more at a local level. This would tie in with what Members need in their wards to help deliver residents priorities as set out in ward plans.
- There were changes made to decision-making, external reporting with budgetary issues prior to a new policy approach to Localisation in 2019 where the focus has been on engagement and interaction and the culture of the organisation changed to reflect this. This new approach has seen a move away from a devolved management and decision-making structure. It will be interesting to understand how the Localisation policy has fared over the last 3 years in assessing whether the actions delivered have had an impact on the 4 measures of success in the policy.
- There was concern on the value of ward plans; since being put in place it was felt that little to no direct action had taken place as a result of the priorities listed. In some cases, things had been done through other means or were already earmarked to be done so the ward plan was deemed to be irrelevant.
- It was clarified that ward plans were set up on the basis of getting actions agreed at the point of discussion with clear ownership of delivery and who would be involved (whether this was an officer, councillor or community organisation). However, it is clear from feedback that actions in ward plans have not progressed as desired and therefore it is imperative that senior officers help to unlock mechanisms at a strategic level to deliver Members priorities including getting access to resources that link to ward plans.
- There was concern about the high turnover of officers supporting ward work and ensuring that officers are matched to appropriate wards as in some cases they may not have visited and don't understand how a particular ward works geographically. This would need to be looked at as part of any refresh of the Localisation policy.
- Closer working with the 10 pioneer neighbourhoods would be additionally beneficial to getting all the city's neighbourhoods fit for local working.
- It would be helpful for council officers to link in with the Co-operative Council's Innovation Network in relation to progressing the work on Localisation.
- More interaction with Members on the location of mobile household recycling centres (MHRCs) would be beneficial as Members know their ward

best as currently locations are chosen by officers. Some Members struggled to contact staff to change location to a more suitable place where the service would be used more.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member and officers for their time and hoped that the points raised would be taken away and worked on.

The report was noted and:

- Cllrs Booth and Bridle will meet to discuss how the committee can take forward a piece of work assessing the implementation of the Localisation policy to date. The Chair agreed that this item would be added to the committee's next formal meeting agenda for wider discussion and the Cabinet Member for Homes and Neighbourhoods will be receiving a formal response in due course.

7. PERFORMANCE MONITORING

(See documents 4 and 5)

The Chair stated that this item was in two parts with consideration of the Month 8 City Housing performance report first and the Month 8 City Operations Waste Management performance report to follow.

Mira Gola and Jonathan Antill took the committee through the key points in each report respectively.

Also, in attendance for this item were Julie Griffin, Managing Director, Housing; Gary Messenger, Assistant Director of City Housing Services and Support and Nick Reid, Depot Manager.

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

- Improvements made on reducing the time taken to bring void properties back into use was welcomed.
- The voids figure included in the report is an average figure. It excludes sheltered accommodation and those that are set for demolition but does include long term voids. However, it should be noted that target figures are retrospective so in essence it is when the properties are let that they will be counted in the performance measure.
- The service is focussing more on void management and void improvement. Further work will be undertaken looking at improving the void standard and how this can be afforded within the housing revenue business plan. This also links in with the wider work on managing housing stock effectively by enforcing tenancy conditions.
- Increasing the supply and accessibility of good quality affordable housing is the key to bringing down the numbers of households in temporary accommodation and the flow into temporary accommodation to prevent homelessness. Work is taking place with the new Director of Place, Prosperity and Sustainability on accelerating good quality affordable housing on this agenda.

- Within the new Housing Solutions operating model additional staff have been recruited to work on prevention activity to ensure that people don't have to fall into temporary accommodation. The new operating model also provides wrap around support for those that are in temporary accommodation to try and move them into suitable homes quickly with a new Accommodation Finding team in place.
- Increasing communication and getting people to approach the service early when at risk of becoming homeless is key. The service is working hard on this agenda and to put interventions in place to avoid people reaching crisis point and having to go into temporary accommodation.
- However, it is acknowledged that it is exceptionally challenging, and work is also ongoing with landlords in the private rented sector (PRS) to help mitigate although only approximately 15% of properties fall under LHA rates. The Accommodation Finding team will be tasked with meeting landlords that want to work with the Council.
- It was agreed that the findings of the Housing Ombudsman report produced on a weekly basis could be used as part of the quarterly report back to this committee demonstrating the response and the improvements that the service has made. This would allow for greater visibility and keeping track of trends. The financial implication of the findings against the Council can also be included.
- In relation to contractor performance listed in the performance indicators it was acknowledged that there was inconsistency including geographically and that the contracts were being monitored very closely and dialogue was being had on poor performance. Resource issues have been a key factor including staff absence due to COVID-19, access to supply materials and the poor condition of void properties meaning a delay in access to undertake work. However, a root and branch review has been undertaken on how housing stock is being managed and the findings are currently under evaluation.
- Full contractual arrangements were let in 2016 on a four year plus two-year extension plus two-year extension basis. The contract extension period has been negotiated over the last 6 months and the arrangements for the North will remain the same. East and West will transfer to Engie and an update on the South can't be shared at the moment due to legal issues.
- The City Housing Liaison Board receives a comprehensive suite of measures around contractual performance including information on appointments and this committee has also previously requested this information.
- The City Housing Directorate has been undergoing a major transformation programme looking at every aspect of the landlord function focussing on improving services for tenants. This includes offering more digital interaction for example on appointments with real time information being shared on when the contractor is on route to the tenant's property.
- Depots report on a daily and weekly basis in respect of missed collections.
- Missed collection statistics are collated centrally. Those reported by residents to councillors who then get in touch with the depot directly are not counted separately. Therefore, these will not appear in the centrally recorded statistics. There was concern that the figures are not accurate and one way to

remedy this would be to copy in customer enquiries into the email to the depot manager so that the missed collection is counted.

The Chair thanked the officers for their attendance.

The report was noted and:

- Details of the contractor to be appointed to the south of the city to be shared with committee when this is available.
- Data from depots on missed collections for whole roads to be provided to the committee.

8. WORK PROGRAMME

(See document 6)

The work programme was discussed, and the following points were raised:

- Cllr Wood raised the need to set aside some time to scope out the work that the committee would like to conduct into void properties.
- Further to the Localisation update a discussion item will be added to the committee's agenda for February in relation to a formal response to the Cabinet Member.
- The Chair agreed to speak to Christian Scade with respect to future work programming. It was noted that the committee was yet to conclude its work on litter bins and that new areas of work could be scoped at a future meeting ready to start in the new municipal year.

The work programme was noted.

9. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

Noted. The next meeting is scheduled to be an in-person meeting.

10. OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

None.

The meeting ended at 16:07 hours.