

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

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

1400 hours on Thursday 10th March 2022

Committee Room C, Council House Extension, Margaret Street

Action Notes

Present:

Councillor Kate Booth (Chair)

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

Also Present:

Councillor John Cotton, Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion, Community Safety & Equalities

Julie Griffin, Managing Director, City Housing (Online)

Paul Lankester, Interim Assistant Director, Regulation and Enforcement

Hayley Prime, Service Manager, Neighbourhoods (Online)

Martyn Smith, Operational Manager (ECU Lead), Neighbourhoods (Online)

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 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

An apology was received on behalf of Councillor John O'Shea, Cabinet Member for Street Scene and Parks.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

None.

4. ACTION NOTES AND ACTION TRACKER

The action notes and action tracker from the 17 February 2022 will be reported to the next meeting.

A letter approved by the committee at last month's meeting on the lack of progress made in relation to the implementation of the 'Working Together in Birmingham's Neighbourhoods' policy to be sent to the Cabinet Member for Homes & Neighbourhoods by Christian Scade on behalf of the Chair.

5. UPDATE ON BEREAVEMENT SERVICES

(See document 1)

Cllr John Cotton, Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion, Community Safety and Equalities, and Paul Lankester, Interim Assistant Director of Regulation and Enforcement, were in attendance for this item.

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

- Since taking over responsibility for the Bereavement Service last year the service has continued to work with faith, voluntary and community groups. Funeral directors have also been involved in round table discussions on a bereavement services charter (which has been circulated to the committee).
- Work is also ongoing with charities and there are ongoing works in crematoria and cemeteries.
- Would like to place on record the gratitude to hard working officers during a challenging time.

Paul Lankester then highlighted some of the key points from the report and made the following comments: -

- There has been difficulty in recruiting staff both internally and through an agency.
- The number of deaths has slowed down over the last month but still remain high.
- There is a long-term aim to build a new mortuary. The current mortuary capacity has improved, and lessons have been learnt during the pandemic.
- Bereavement Service – Sutton New Hall has been immense over the last year. Expansion to Kings Norton cemetery. Cllr Cotton and Paul Lankester have visited sites and talked to staff who kept standards high including during the poor weather.
- There was some confusion with the public understanding that they couldn't get bookings where the problem wasn't with the service but with funeral directors having the capacity. Work is being done with funeral directors and we are getting back to normal post pandemic. Cremations are maintaining closure of curtains as they are remaining cautious to avoid Covid.

- For a period of time will have to do face to face death registrations as the Coronavirus Act runs out (as pandemic was online).

Thanks were given to all Members who have visited and given support – this has been welcomed and appreciated by staff.

During discussion with Members the following were among the points made and responded to: -

- Thanks were given to all staff in the service on behalf of the committee, recognising in particular the challenge presented by the pandemic and how dignity was maintained for service users.
- Questions were raised about the provision of plots at the main cemeteries in the city and Members were reassured there was 30-40 years' provision available at present.
- The report highlights that the birth rate is growing and there was a concern raised at the backlog for registering births and the potential impact this could have on associated benefit payments with the increase in the cost of living issues. Concern was raised that some children will slip through the net with the backlog of registering births.
- Staffing issues around absence and moving priority to other areas of the service have impacted on registering births and it is difficult to say when the backlog will be cleared as new staff require training. Members were reassured that we are working with other local authorities too and in a mutual aid arrangement to try and reduce the backlog. Every time there is a wave staff are deployed from working on births to deaths. An investment in our own staff is also needed and we are looking at apprenticeships and people from within the local community to represent the local area.
- Members were informed that the new coroners court opened on 9th March.

RESOLVED: -

- The report was noted.

6. REVIEW OF HOUSING ALLOCATIONS

(See document 2)

Julie Griffin, Managing Director, City Housing and Hayley Prime, Service Manager, Neighbourhoods presented this item virtually.

The review of the Housing Allocations Policy is going to Cabinet in March and looks at vulnerable people and housing needs and a new housing model. It has been out to consultation. We are currently receiving unprecedented demand with 21,000 applications on the list, averaging around 500 per week. Only 3,500 people are housed in council housing per year.

During discussion with Members the following comments and responses were made:

- Members wanted to know more about the consultation, including how many people we spoke to by category. Officers confirmed we had received 178 public responses and that all registered providers gave feedback too.

- Questions were raised about larger families being restricted on the size of property they could bid on and officers confirmed this was reviewed, and they can now bid on a smaller property as long as it does not become statutory overcrowded. Also included in the policy is that larger families that need 6/7 bedrooms (of which there are only a very small number available) can be allocated two properties together and if the family has adult children they can be split.
- On the flip side, Members were also keen to see an improvement to the waiting time for families seeking to downsize and needing support to do it with a wait of 8 weeks.
- Officers agreed there was a need to make this process as swift as possible which also prioritises and frees up bigger properties by those under-occupying and incentivising this. The goal is to process applications in under 6 weeks.
- Another issue raised was about accessing housing advice. Members heard that the council is doing a complete review of its services and work with partners, and for now advice would be available from the Housing Options Centre (HOC) and signposting to housing options. Appointments are available for face to face meetings in Newtown at the HOC or via telephone call, telephone interview or virtual interview.
- On hotel type accommodation and banding, officers told committee that for families in bed and breakfast we have increased the banding award for families in temporary accommodation. The programme is focused on the ongoing B&B reduction plan and families in temporary accommodation as a whole.
- Currently on average families are in B&B for 11 weeks. Since Christmas there has been unprecedented demand with the council receiving over 400 applications per week for those presenting as homeless and work is being done to reduce this number.
- Cllr Sharpe requested a contact to deal with help for the armed forces and specifically veterans. He was informed armed forces are priority 1 highest and excluded from local connection as they might not have this so exempt from these criteria and exclude any capital they might have. This included bereaved spouses and partners of armed forces personnel. However, there is not a specific officer contact for veterans. All staff that deal with military personnel have been trained to deal with those leaving the armed forces.

RESOLVED: -

- Information to be provided on the allocation of available housing – the local connection criteria waiting times across neighbouring authorities (requested by Cllr Wood), comparison data from registered providers and a breakdown of actual numbers showing those consulted with and number of responses received.
- A copy of the Bed & Breakfast reduction plan to be shared with committee.
- A written response on the help and information provided to Armed Forces be shared with committee (requested by Cllr Sharpe).
- The report was noted.

7. PROGRESS REPORT ON IMPLEMENTATION: REDUCING FLY-TIPPING

(See document 3)

The Chair outlined that further information was requested on this report at the last meeting with respect to recommendations 1 & 3 and welcomed Martyn Smith, Operational Manager, who joined the meeting virtually and talked members through the additional information provided.

During discussion with Members the following comments and responses were made: -

- Information had been requested in advance on camera locations.
- Request from Cllr Davis, Chair of Licensing committee who wanted guidance on how fixed penalty notices are issued.
- A template letter that was shared with the papers is not always the style that might be used. The content is dependent on the type of referral – where there is no further information via an anonymous report we must be guarded about what we say to alleged offenders. Also, there might be reports where someone coming forward is not willing to give a witness statement.
- Members were concerned that R03 was assessed at level 1 as a progress marker which was not right as the review on prosecution strategies against Barking & Dagenham had not been done. They queried which Cabinet Member has the authority to agree policy change to our enforcement policy and whether they had been party to this assessment of the recommendation.
- It was clarified that regulation and enforcement activities are party to a scheme of delegation through the constitution and has to be covered by statutory enforcement policy and key regulatory committee administered through Licensing & Public Protection Committee, and that the Cabinet Member for Street Scene and Parks is the responsible Cabinet Member.
- Another concern was the 33% increase in Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) issued last year. Members were keen to understand how the comparison of 2020/21 with previous years worked as the year was far from normal; how these figures relate to Covid levels and how these compare to Barking and Dagenham.
- The committee was told that at the beginning of lockdown and Covid there was a surge in reporting of fly tipping. Reports were high and lots of people were happy to make statements and be eye witnesses but this has now gone back to pre-Covid levels.
- The final main issue was around the location of cameras. The first five locations of cameras in the city allocated two cameras in one ward and members wanted to understand the rationale for this decision, and whether cameras were intended to be covert or overt and promoted as a deterrent.
- It was explained that the use of cameras can be split into two different categories – targeted operations (used as a tool within a wider investigation) and determination of where to put the camera might be part of this. The second is to identify locations where fly tipping is heavy. Areas with the highest incidences of fly tipping are a priority then roll out wider according to level of high prevalence and frequency.
- Cameras are covert if they have been authorised by the court and the equipment varies in size and where placed. Cameras may provide evidence and you may not know what they are there for and it depends on evidence.

- Members had understood that the cameras would be moving across various spots across the city and concern was raised at the failure to hit the timeline agreed in the original report of March 2021 and it is still not discharged.

RESOLVED: -

- The report was noted.
- Number of Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) issued over the last 2 years (and the reasons why these have changed, i.e. council policy) and in comparison, with data to be obtained for Barking and Dagenham over the same period.
- Request for the Tracking Report to come back to the first meeting of the new municipal year as Members requested clarity on:
 - R01 - Members were not clear that the information provided met the recommendation outlined in terms of camera locations in new areas (not what was already there). Committee understood it to be new cameras that could be moved in and around the city and in new places to apprehend offenders. Therefore, further clarity is requested.
 - R03 – Cannot be classed as ‘1’ i.e. completed as review of prosecution strategies not done so further information needed. Clarity needed on who the Cabinet Member is who has the authority to agree a change to the council’s policy and oversees the enforcement policy and who can decide if the review has been completed or not.
 - The briefing note produced for Cllr Davis by Martyn Smith should be shared with Committee.

8. WORK PROGRAMME

(See document 8)

The Chair highlighted Void properties as a key item of work that the committee is keen to carry forward and start more in-depth work on in the new municipal year.

Members have also shown an interest in looking at a wider strategy around a litter policy and it was noted that priority areas of work will be determined by the new committee.

RESOLVED:

- The work programme was noted.
- Void Properties and a Litter Strategy to be added to the future work programme so the new committee members can determine priorities against resource available to the committee.

9. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

The Chair noted that this was the last meeting of municipal year due to the April meeting having been cancelled.

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

None.

11. OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

None.

12. 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 16:12 hours.