

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL
CO-ORDINATING O&S COMMITTEE

1000 hours on Friday, 11th March 2022, Charles Dickens Room, BMI

Action Notes

Present:

Councillor Carl Rice (Chair)

Councillors: Mohammed Aikhlaq, Deirdre Alden, Kate Booth, Debbie Clancy, Mariam Khan, Roger Harmer, Narinder Kaur Kooner, Ewan Mackey, Saima Suleman and Mick Brown.

Also Present:

Julie Griffin, Managing Director Housing

Steve Wilson, Housing Director

Gary Messenger, Assistant Director of City Housing Services and Support Housing

Guy Chaundy, Housing Modernisation and Partnership Manager

James Wagstaff, Head of Enforcement & Planning Technicians

Philip Edwards, Assistant Director Transport & Connectivity

Cllr Shabrana Hussain, Cabinet Member for Homes & Neighbourhoods

Wendy Griffiths, AD for Customer Services and Business Support

Christian Scade, Interim Head of Scrutiny and Committee Services

Daniel King, National Management Trainee

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 Cllr Liz Clements.

3. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

None declared.

4. ACTION NOTES

RESOLVED:

The action notes of the formal meeting held on 22nd January 2022 were agreed and it was noted that the action notes from the informal meeting held on 18th February 2022 would be considered at the next meeting.

5. COMPLAINTS SERVICE UPDATE (HOUSING AND INCLUSIVE GROWTH)

A. HOUSING

The item was introduced by Julie Griffin, Managing Director for Housing. The council oversaw a housing stock of around 60,000 units. There had been transformation activity in the directorate last year, which involved carrying out root and branch reviews of services and base-lining services to ask a number of questions about the improvement activity needed. This also looked at devising a workforce development plan and how to introduce training.

There were 6 key areas of City Housing's transformation plan:

1. Customer engagement - build effective relationships with our customers
2. Operational effectiveness – including comprehensive Performance Management Framework
3. Workforce development - enhancing learning and staff development
4. Asset Management and Building Safety - evidence and enhance safety
5. Regulatory Compliance – including consumer and safety regulation and White Paper
6. Strategy development - clearly defined strategic aims

There had been a reduction in complaints during the last month, and the majority direction of travel was positive. It was noted that there was no organisation that has no complaints. There were three contractors the council used to deal with repairs to their housing stock: Fortem (2.62% of jobs had complaints), (Wates 2.19%), and Equans (1.43%). In the city overall there were around 250,000 repairs a year on 60,000 units.

The largest area of complaint was the delay in doing work, and the complaints team had been giving the housing directorate intelligence, so it understood the reason for complaints and gave the reason to analyse the areas going wrong. It was noted that although the complaint was important for customer, what was more important was learning from it, sorting the problem at the root and rectifying the process.

Another area of complaint was in communications with customers, and delays in doing something to address problems. For housing repairs, there had been changes with the contractor arrangements which had been communicated and were due to happen at end of month. The Wates contract would end on 31st March and Equans

would take over responsibility for that area because they had been the best performing contractor. This would see the number of contractors used go down from 3 to 2. Wates would still continue with some major capital projects. It was noted that all contractors were scrutinised and if they performed well there was a payment mechanism, and they were penalised if they perform poorly; and Equans had been performing well.

It was highlighted that domestic abuse had increased over the last 2 years over lockdown and this had led to an increase in cases for Housing Management. There was intensive work to examine the caseloads per officer, and how the department could spread the workload out to get to customers quicker. The department wanted to modernise engagement and communication with customers, this meant engaging more with the local housing boards and residents' groups so it could get that information to where it needed to be. It was highlighted that there was a need to increase frontline presence and it was now time to get frontline officers back on the estates and seeing residents.

There had been a conjoined approach with waste-services which had improved responses to fly-tipping, which focused on moving the rubbish and deciding where the money comes from later.

It was highlighted that the service had been under considerable strain for a number of years, owing to the national housing crisis, and the council currently had around 4,000 households in temporary accommodation. 9 complaints out of the 4,000 households in temporary accommodation had been recorded. There were also 20,000 citizens on housing register.

The number of complaints had reduced significantly, and would reduce further once the Service had finished mobilisation and embedded into new ways of working. However, given wider issues pressures would remain. There were nearly 500 applications a week to join the housing register, but the lack of affordable housing made the situation challenging in finding suitable accommodation. It was suggested that the council needed to look beyond its own social housing with more emphasis on the private sector to help alleviate that pressure.

It was noted that there was now a 7-week waiting time for applications to be assessed. This had reduced from 6 months. In September the council had 16,000 overdue applications which had now reduced to just over 4,000 with the introduction of a dedicated backlog team with the view to reduce to zero over the next couple of months.

It was noted that there was a need to keep stock maintenance survey up to date, repairs should be for emergency only, but the council needed to ensure it had a strategic approach to investing in stock. Member enquiries and complaints, the situation had improved since November 2021 when 24% of member enquiries were closed in the SLA, now it was 42% but this still needed to be improved.

In the ensuing debate the following points were raised:

- It was highlighted that there were diagnostic problems which needed addressing to ensure employees were asking the right question so that the operative would make the right repairs.
- It was asked why it took so long to get customer service data, as if there was a problem in a service area, it needed to know as soon as possible. It was also suggested that proactive maintenance needed to take over from repairs. There was a need to spot issues in surveys of housing stock and put them right.
- It was suggested that getting rid of redundant alleyways was one of the best ways to target fly-tipping, and they should be incorporated into their neighbouring gardens.
- It was noted that the data runs 15 days behind the process, to give the council a chance to respond within the 15-day SLA. The council were trying to move to real time data and reporting, operating on a PowerBI system, so members could go in at any point and have the data in real time. It was suggested that the 15-day delay was not excessive and ensured that the data used was accurate.
- It was noted that the council had looked at getting rid of some alleyways, and other redundant land which attracted fly-tipping.
- It was noted that there seemed to be an issue around who was people's maintenance contact, and people often did not know who their first point of call was.
- It was asked whether Equans good record on complaint had been because they were currently looking after a relatively small number of properties
- It was highlighted that Equans, started out with 8,000 properties in the north of the city, they would inherit the same staff and properties from the Wates contract. It was stated that when contractors were changed, their performance often temporarily dipped before going back up again.

B. Inclusive Growth

Transport

The item was presented by Philip Edwards, Assistant Director Transport & Connectivity. It was highlighted that making sure all complaints go through the system had been a priority, and the focus of the team had been on planning and development, and transport and connectivity. Complaints were stable over recent months, 97% were closed within the stage 1 15-day SLA, and 100% were closed in stage 2 in the last month. It was noted that this was a high performance considering the high number of complaints.

There were three main topics of complaint; Clean Air Zone, low traffic neighbourhoods in Kings Heath, and project delivery, and the root causes of most

complaints was the decisions the executive had made and were currently in the process of making.

It was noted that the feedback from the Clean Air Zone had shown that there was a lack of clarity around the payment process, which was hosted on a government website. The other cause of the issue was around some of the signage, which people either thought was confusing or not visible. It was added that the council had been adding signs in to rectify this.

In the ensuing debate the following points were raised:

- It was highlighted that 60% of people who responded to the Kings Heath LTN consultation were against it.
- It was accepted that there were significant differences in views over the LTN, and that a statement on Kings Heath had gone out and the consultation report had been published.

Planning enforcement

This section of the report was presented by James Wagstaff, Head of Enforcement & Planning Technicians. It was noted that most of the complaints the department received were related to enforcement and planning, which was not surprising as it could often be contentious due to the impact it had on neighbours and communities. There were two areas in particular that received a high volume of complaints: policy and procedure, and communication.

In the subsequent debate, the following points were raised:

- It was asked why the department could not take preventative action when it was clear that a landlord was converting housing into an HMO, and why the council had to wait until the work had finished.
- It was noted that the council needed solid evidence that a breach of planning regulations had been made before they could act and there was a need to consider what was reasonable, as they already had 1,500 open cases.
- It was suggested that the form to raise an issue with planning enforcement needed to be more user-friendly, and that there should be a box to tick to say you are a councillor.
- It was noted that a large number of cases being investigated by planning enforcement were red herrings, some people saw them as an avenue to settle neighbour disputes. It was added that the complaint form was designed for people to understand the regulations and to help the council understand what people's concerns were about.
- It was noted that updating interested parties was a very resource intensive process, the department were dealing with 1500 live cases, all of which featured 1 owner and 2/3 complainants. That's why the complainants had the direct numbers for officers, so residents could check up on the case by picking up the phone, which put the onus back on resident.

- Planning and Development only received 138 complaints, out of 20,000 interactions, it was noted this number was relatively minimal.
- Action: The Committee agreed that planning enforcement required more resources. As a result, the Chair of the Committee agreed to raise this with the Leader of the Council as it was agreed more work needed to be done in the preventative stage rather than just at the prosecution stage.

6. EXEMPT ACCOMMODATION

The report was introduced by Guy Chaundy, Housing Modernisation & Partnership Manager. It was noted that progress had been made since the scrutiny recommendations were agreed, there were some areas where progress was reliant on regulatory change and money from central government. It was highlighted that the report would come back to the committee in six months' time, in which time the council should have a response from the select committee inquiry.

1. Recommendation 1 was organising pilot work and the continuation of pilot resources over the next 12 months, which was classed as being full achieved, and there was a recommendation for a resident engagement officer to the end of next financial year. The business case was put forward for 12-month funding on the basis there would be movements from central government with additional funding. It was noted that waste service were now part of the pilot team to tackle waste issues where there was a high prevalence around this type of accommodation. The targeted and reactive inspections were still in progress and the 20,000 target had not yet been achieved, so far 1,000 inspections had been carried out.
2. The second recommendation was to establish communication links with residents and members to make sure people could escalate problems, the council had made progress and hoped to have this recommendation completed by the end of the month. It was noted the council had established localised groups already, had a website going live this month which provided information about how people can escalate issues.
3. The third recommendation was the work around a supported housing strategy, how the council set out a clear approach to working with providers, getting them accredited, and managing any referral process. The council currently had 14 providers going through the accreditation process, and the first cohort of providers has gone through this. This recommendation was a work in progress.
4. The fourth recommendation was supporting the housing benefit process. Housing benefit would now investigate cases, if there was evidence there that that low level threshold wasn't being met, it would lead to cessation of funds. This would be mobilised by the end of March and could target those

claims that were deemed most at risk of being poor providers.

5. The fifth recommendation was strengthening planning controls, although there were no areas identified for further review, there had been a commitment made to report back twice yearly on planning enforcement issues relating to exempt accommodation. The Leader and the relevant O&S Committee had been asked to review existing practices, enforcement policies and procedures. This had been fully achieved.
6. The sixth recommendation was to work with regional partners and other local authorities, this was still in progress, but the Cabinet Member and Leader had been working with other authorities, and there had been a lot of activity with this. Work done had been done with other core cities and the LGA to ensure the council had a common theme to what it was submitting to the inquiry.
7. The seventh recommendation was lobbying for change, whilst this had been achieved, it was noted that this needed to be ongoing.

Actions:

- The committee supported the initiative to use Article 4 calculations to hold bad providers to account.
- Guy Chaundy was to get in touch with the legal team to provide a timeframe to the amendments that had been agreed by Full Council in December 2021.

7. WORK PROGRAMMES

The work being carried out by each of the Overview and Scrutiny Committees, set out via the work programme report, was noted.

8. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that the next meeting would be held on the 8th April 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, be authorised to act on behalf of the Committee.

The meeting ended at 12:15 hours.