

Report for Overview and Scrutiny - Review of the Birmingham Promise

1. Background

The Birmingham Promise was introduced on 1st April 2015 as a means of setting out a clear set of service standards that are meaningful for the citizens of Birmingham.

Governance, Resources and Customer Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee reviewed an early draft of the Promise at a committee meeting in April 2014 and suggested some key principles for taking the Birmingham Promise forward, namely:

- That the emphasis should be on public facing services “the things that matter to people” and presented in a way that is meaningful to them;
- That there should be simple and transparent reporting mechanisms;
- That it would be useful to do some comparisons with other Local Authorities

A revised draft was then prepared by the Deputy Leader and officers from both Customer Services and the Service Areas. In addition, internet research was carried out to identify similar measures or service standards for the core cities and the West Midlands Local Authorities.

The findings from the meetings and research were discussed at the Governance, Resources and Customer Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee meeting in October 2014. Following that, assurances were sought from each service head that has responsibility for a promise that it was achievable. The final version of the Birmingham Promise was then prepared for approval. This involved having it re-written in plain English.

Corporate Communications took responsibility for preparing the final version that was distributed to frontline services and displayed on the website. This is included in Appendix 1. Posters were also designed and distributed for display in Neighbourhood Offices and Libraries. These posters featured individual elements of the Promise and sign-posted citizens to the website if they wanted to see the full version.

Quarterly updates on the promises have been included in the routine quarterly performance monitoring report to Cabinet. The most recent results are included in Appendix 2.

Since the Birmingham Promise was introduced two measures have had to be withdrawn as it proved difficult to report on them.

These being:

- a) Blue badge renewals
- b) Fleet & Waste missed collections

2. Review of the Birmingham Promise

It was always intended to review the Birmingham Promise after 12 months and then annually to ensure that it remains appropriate and meaningful. The 2015 review of the Birmingham Promise has involved the following:-

- Analysis of the number of views of the Birmingham Promise web page
- Discussion about the Birmingham Promise at the recent citizen panels run by Customer Services
- Service Areas and other stakeholders such as the Corporate Performance Management Team have been asked to provide their views

2.1 Web page statistics

In the seven months to October there were 490 page views of the web page that the Birmingham Promise is on – www.birmingham.gov.uk/birminghampromise and 416 unique visitors. The most page views in one month were in September and October when there were 121 page views each month. This indicates an extremely low level of interest given that the total number of visits per month to the website averages 771,000. The average time spent on the Birmingham Promise web page was 1 minute and 56 seconds.

2.2 Citizen Panels

Customer Services has run two citizen panels in the last month. The panel comprises a group of citizens who are interested in providing feedback about customer service issues. They have received our invitation to participate and volunteered to attend to provide their views.

The first question asked of each panel was “have you heard of the Birmingham Promise?” The overwhelming response was “no”, they have not heard of the Birmingham Promise. One of the 50 attendees advised that they might have heard something about it but were not sure.

The attendees were then asked whether they thought the Birmingham Promise was a good idea. Again the overwhelming response was negative. The views expressed were as follows:-

- That it is just a PR stunt.
- It's only of value if something happens as a result.
- It's more important to actually do something rather than talk about it.
- It's good that there is a Promise but citizens don't feel that they see the outcome enough as BCC is not living up to it.
- They wanted to know if it was measurable, tangible and auditable.
- If it has been around why haven't they seen the benefits of it.

- BCC needs to keep its promises.
- Actions speak louder than words.
- It's political and academic.
- They felt that over the years many promises have been made and then lost in the depth of time.
- They asked what the deterrent was to the department not to break their Promise.

2.3 Service Areas

When the individual promises were put in place, Service Areas were consulted and they agreed to the measures for their specific area. The Service Areas responsible for reporting on the measures in the Birmingham Promise have since been asked to provide their feedback on how it should be developed next year. The specific questions that they were asked to consider were:

- Would you like to change the “promise(s)” about your Service?
- If so, what would you change it to and why?
- Would you like to add any new measures/services to the Birmingham Promise?
- Have you received any feedback from your service users about the Birmingham Promise? What did your service users tell you?
- Do you think that the Birmingham Promise is a useful document/tool? Has it helped to improve service standards?
- Is there anything else that you would like Overview and Scrutiny to consider before determining the format of the Birmingham Promise next year?

When the targets were set Councillors were clear that they wanted the measures expressed in calendar days not working days as they felt that citizens would find this easier to understand and they wanted the target in all cases to be 100%. These decisions affect the views expressed below.

A specific concern was raised in regards to the Your Views measure as it would appear that there are two conflicting targets. The Council Plan target is that 90% of complaints should be responded to within 15 days whereas the Birmingham Promise expects 100% to be responded to within 20 calendar days. The intention was that the 20 calendar days would equate to 15 working days. Service Areas have commented that the expression “working days” is commonly used and well understood by the public. Having two different targets is confusing for the public and for staff. There is also a concern that having two targets for the same measure could result in misunderstanding and lack of clarity by citizens.

A RAG status of red in the Birmingham Promise reporting suggests service failure, however this does not put performance in the context of the volumes and levels of service achieved e.g. in the 1st quarter, 91.6% of routine housing repairs were completed within the required timescale, performance assessed as “red” under the Birmingham Promise. This equated to a total of 29,234 routine repairs completed out of a total of 31,919.

In some instances as the target is set at 100%, it does not reflect published targets and performance requirements as contained within existing contracts eg the repair to street light target. Although this is 100% in the Contract, wherever these targets are not achieved, there are financial deductions to incentivise performance improvement. There is therefore no further action we can legally take, other than to apply said deductions – these are the legal remedies to the ‘breach’ of these particular clauses. However, this is not reflected when reporting against a pass or fail system (red or green).

Similarly, responding to emergency repairs within 2 hours at 95.7% is within contractual target levels and therefore achieved but according to the Birmingham Promise is assessed as “red” ie not achieved. However, this contract also includes a sanction if performance isn’t achieved within the parameters of the contract.

Reporting on the Birmingham Promise has caused additional work for Council departments at a time when staffing levels are reducing and have added a layer of complexity to reporting.

Additions to the Birmingham Promise need to be aligned to the future Council work and it is better to wait for that to come to some conclusions before any Directorate adds or changes the promises. It would be good to link the Birmingham Promise to the City Council budget and business plan that is approved by Council in February / March. The financial plan will be clear on what we are going to stop doing, what we are keeping and what we can “promise” on service standards.

The Promise was generally seen as a good concept but it was felt that it needs more and constant communication with citizens to ensure that the message is being relayed effectively.

2.4 Corporate Performance Management Team

The Performance Management Team is responsible for collating results on a quarterly basis and reporting on the Birmingham Promise. The feedback from this team is given below.

It is unclear why the Birmingham Promise is needed when the Council Business Plan contains a comprehensive range of targets and measures. If contractual targets are less than 100% it is felt that it should be clearly stated as a promise on minimum standards ie a promise to uphold contractual targets. It is important to ensure that all, but, only key critical services are included.

There's a grey area between the Birmingham Promise and the Council Business Plan (CBP) measures. Given the affordability issues it might be more sensible to have a single set of key measures (i.e. a CBP set incorporating the most important minimum service levels).

The Birmingham Promise has inadvertently managed to turn some very high performance (and maybe even top performance) rates into bad news due to any performance less than 100% being classified as "red". This needs careful attention as the Council does not need additional bad news at this time.

A number of the measures were not well thought through or proven even though they were all signed off by officers and members. If it is decided to continue with the Promise in 2016/17, then it is recommended that they are all clearly defined and signed off (by the service and the Cabinet Member) using the Data Quality Assessment Form well in advance of them being submitted for approval by Cabinet. These forms provide no guarantees, but, have helped avoid the types of mistakes experienced in the current Birmingham Promise. This encourages owners to think about data sources, measure calculations, allowable exclusions, data quality etc. Perhaps services should be asked to provide results for a quarter before being accepted as Birmingham Promise measures. This would help avoid the pitfalls and would help assure that the 100% rate (or minimum service level) is achievable.

The Birmingham Promise measures need to be in the Appraisals of the responsible owners. Given that the Kerslake Improvement Panel has a focus on delivery and accountability then there should be an expectation that these do go into the appraisals of the appropriate heads of service. Otherwise, unless there are contractual sanctions, there are no consequences for delivery against the targets. Any conversion of existing measures using working days to calendar days must handle weekends and Bank Holidays in identical ways, as this has caused a number of issues with measures.

Some service promises, e.g. school admissions, are by nature seasonal so will not produce a result each month/quarter. Consideration therefore needs to be given to how they are reported to Cabinet, i.e. are they reported as upheld if none have been handled in the period?

3. Options for 2016/17

Having reviewed the feedback there are a number of options that could be considered for 2016/17 – continue with the Birmingham Promise in its current format; amend the Birmingham Promise; or terminate it. Overview and Scrutiny is requested to consider each of the options:-

3.1 Continue with the Birmingham Promise in its current format

It is not felt that this is a realistic option given some of the issues raised by Service Areas above whereby the Birmingham Promise is in conflict with existing contractual arrangements or potentially could result in fines for BCC. It is therefore recommended that this option is not pursued.

3.2 Amend the Birmingham Promise

If it is considered that the Birmingham Promise is a good concept then potential changes that could be made to it include:-

- Simplifying and reducing the measures so that they are easier to track and concentrate on.
- Focussing on those measures that are really important to citizens.
- Expressing targets in working days not calendar days.
- Where a contractual target already exists use this in the Promise rather than a new measure that has no contractual weight.
- Trial the measures for a quarter before they are included to ensure that they are achievable and that the calculations are robust.
- Having a comprehensive communications plan that publicises the Promise to citizens so that they are aware of it.
- Celebrate good achievement even if the 100% target is not being achieved.
- Focussing more on what we have done to improve performance in the format of “you said we did” rather than performance against targets which do not appear to resonate with citizens.
- Include the Birmingham Promise targets in the appraisals of Heads of Service where their services are featured in the Promise

3.3 Terminate the Birmingham Promise

The 2020 Future Council Vision that has recently been approved by Cabinet promotes the concept of “one vision, one set of priorities and one plan”. The Birmingham Promise would therefore appear to be at odds with this vision. Overview and Scrutiny should therefore consider whether the Birmingham Promise should be terminated.

Continue to report performance against the council plan measures via the Cabinet process.