

**BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL**

**HOMES O&S COMMITTEE – PUBLIC MEETING**

**1400 hours on Thursday 19 October 2023, Committee Room 6, Council House**

**Minutes**

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**Present:**

Councillor Mohammed Idrees (Chair)

Councillors: Ziaul Islam, Rinkal Shergill, Penny Wagg and Ken Wood

**Also Present:**

Councillor Jayne Francis, Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness

Collette Campbell, Acting Strategic Lead, Supported Housing (Exempt)

Andrew Healey, Finance Business Partner, Housing

Stephen Philpott, Director, Housing Solutions and Support Service

Amelia Wiltshire, Overview and Scrutiny Manager

Jayne Bowles, 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 Public-I microsite and that members of the press/public may record and take photographs except where there are confidential or exempt items.

**2. APOLOGIES**

Apologies were received from Councillors Saqib Khan, Lauren Rainbow and Ron Storer.

**3. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS**

Members were reminded they must declare all relevant pecuniary and other registerable interests arising from any business to be discussed at this meeting and the following interests were declared:

Councillor Mohammed Idrees – owns a property which is privately let.

Councillor Ziaul Islam - owns a property which is private let.

Councillor Rinkal Shergill – owns a property which is privately let.

Councillor Ken Wood – owns a property which is privately let.

#### **4. MINUTES**

(See document No. 1)

##### **RESOLVED:**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 21 September 2023 were agreed.

#### **5. ACTION TRACKER**

(See document No. 2)

##### **RESOLVED:**

That the action tracker was noted.

#### **6. COMMISSIONER'S REVIEW AND COMMENTS ON THE AGENDA**

(See document No. 3)

The Chair informed the Committee that following the arrival of the Commissioners to Birmingham, all reports for Committees are sent to the Commissioners for comments before they are published. For this meeting comments had been received on the Budget Savings and Financial Recovery report and those comments would be picked up as part of that agenda item.

##### **RESOLVED:**

That the report was noted.

#### **7. SCRUTINY OF DELIVERY OF 2023/24 BUDGET SAVINGS AND UPDATE ON COUNCIL'S RESPONSE TO SECTION 114 NOTICE AND FINANCIAL RECOVERY PLAN**

(See document No. 4)

Councillor Jayne Francis, Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness, Andrew Healey, Finance Business Partner, Housing, and Stephen Philpott, Director, Housing Solutions and Support Service, were in attendance for this item.

The Cabinet Member passed on apologies from Paul Langford, Strategic Director, City Housing, who was unable to attend the meeting.

The Chair read out the Commissioner's comments and invited Andrew Healey and Stephen Philpott to present the report. In doing so, the following key points were highlighted:

- Appendix 1, the Quarter 1 2023/24 savings update for the entire City Council, showed that savings of £2.5m that were built into the budget last year were considered low risk, so on track with current actions for them to be delivered. Savings of £28.5m were amber risk, so some risk of the current plans not being achieved and £33.5m was considered red risk, so no workable plans or a

significant risk of those plans being derailed with no confirmed mitigations in place.

- Those figures were then built into the forecast to show that there was a problem with the red risk savings.
- Appendix 2 shows a more recent Quarter 2 update for City Housing and those parts of City Operations which fall within the remit of this Committee.
- There was a £0.5m saving against staffing, which was built in on the basis that there is always a level of vacancies due to time taken to recruit people, so against the budgeted establishment there should be some fallout saving. That saving is achieved.
- The £0.6m rated as amber relates to increased income from fees and charges in the directorate. It is considered amber as it is set against rent income and grant income. Rent income was set at a certain level at the beginning of the year and it cannot be assumed that grant income will come through. As income has come in through the year, that saving will be considered as delivered in the next update.
- The £5.5m relating to reducing/eradicating B&B accommodation, essentially half of the budget for Temporary Accommodation, is now considered undeliverable, so black, which is a new category.
- To provide some context, the £5.5m saving target was built on the B&B reduction plan and re-design for Housing Solutions and Support. That process, which had started in 2019, included investment in prevention work and also the Oscott Gardens temporary accommodation homeless centre. However, since then, homeless presentations and the need for temporary accommodation have risen dramatically, partly due to the impact of Covid but also the cost of living crisis.
- A new reduction plan for B&B had been agreed with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the target for reductions had been met in the last five months, however the service is two years behind where it wanted to be to deliver savings and it was accepted that the budget would need to be increased for a while before bringing it down again.

During the discussion, and in response to Members' questions, the main points included:

- Mitigations and further savings to reduce the gap were being explored with the Cabinet Member.
- With regard to staff savings, it was important to have the right level of staffing to deliver services and to look at other ways of doing things, including joining up services. The consideration of applications made under the Mutually Agreed Resignation Scheme was also an ongoing process.
- In response to a query about Home Office placements, it was understood that there were around 3,000 people housed by the Home Office in Birmingham and a decision had been made to fast-track decisions on asylum seekers from seven different countries. The understanding was that approximately 975 households in Birmingham would receive fast-track decisions between August and December 2023.
- The majority of those decisions would be positive, meaning that those people would have asylum with recourse to public funds and be eligible for support. It

was believed the majority would be single people and it was likely there would be an upward pressure in supported exempt accommodation.

- In the case of families whose Home Office accommodation comes to an end, they would in all likelihood approach the local authority and in a large proportion of those cases, temporary accommodation would need to be found for those households.
- The current position with regard to rent collections was queried and it was confirmed that there were two elements – HRA rents and temporary accommodation, the former being dealt with through Revenues and Benefits and the latter dealt with within City Housing.
- The City Housing service was working closely with Revenues and Benefits colleagues to look at rent collection levels and it was agreed that figures would be provided to the Committee.

**RESOLVED:**

- That rent collection figures be provided to the Committee.
- That the report be noted.

**8. EXEMPT ACCOMMODATION INQUIRY RECOMMENDATIONS TRACKING UPDATE**

(See document No. 5)

Councillor Jayne Francis, Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness, and Collette Campbell, Acting Strategic Lead, Supported Housing (Exempt), were in attendance for this item.

The Cabinet Member introduced the report and highlighted the following key points:

- The Council was awarded £3.19m grant funding from the Supported Housing Improvement Programme (SHIP) for the period 2023/25, with the first year 2022/23 being funded by £1.9m from the Corporate Invest 2 Deliver Programme, of which £0.7m would be returned as an underspend.
- The underspend had been due to some problems recruiting to roles due to shortages within the employment market and the short-term nature of roles, as well as the delay in understanding budget spend because of the difficulties with Oracle.
- The SHIP funding will be spent as £1.62m for 2023/24 and £1.57m for 2024/25.
- The multi-disciplinary partnership team work extremely well to improve standards within the sector in terms of property, support and anti-social behaviour. The partnership activities and outcomes to date were listed in Appendix 1 and demonstrate the success of the SHIP in a current area of limited legislation.

The Acting Strategic Lead for Supported Housing referred to the tracking of the recommendations and made the following additional points:

- When the partnership was created in 2020, there were around 20,000 units in the city and that had now increased to just over 25,000, which equated to just under 9,000 properties.

- It was thought it would not be possible to inspect every property before the end of the term of this project in 2025, but in those that had been inspected there had been a noticeable improvement where standards had previously been poor.
- Some really good relationships had been established, particularly with the five main providers in the city, which had helped with the overall success of the partnership.
- The Council was a key stakeholder in ongoing consultation with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities in relation to the Supported Housing Regulatory Oversight Act and that Act would introduce a licensing scheme.
- It was thought through that Act councils would be able to better manage and control standards.
- The Council, with the assistance of Birmingham Voluntary Service Council, had awarded 16 providers or managing agents with the Quality Standard Award and another 19 were awaiting assessments.
- A preferred provider list had been created, which was one of the recommendations of the partnership, and the Probation Service had also adopted a protocol as of July where they have stated they will only support cases going into supported accommodation where there is a local connection to Birmingham and where the provider had signed up to the Quality Standard.
- The Council has a right to buy restricted covenant policy which sets out the framework for the management of properties sold under the right to buy scheme where the accommodation was previously designated as a single private dwelling.
- Flats were also part of the policy but as they usually have a lease, there is not a covenant, however there is a restriction that that particular property would be used for a private residence.
- There was also scope within that policy to look at commercial properties leased or disposed of and adopt a protocol in respect of that provision.

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

- The Committee welcomed the report and the good example of where cross-party pressure had resulted in Government funding.
- There were concerns raised regarding the underspend and handing funding back, however it was clarified that the underspend related to the Invest 2 Deliver programme and not the SHIP grant funding and the reasons for the underspend, as outlined by the Cabinet Member, were reiterated.
- The need to keep on top of inspections was emphasised and it was queried whether the Council ensures tenants know who they could contact regarding sub-standard properties.
- The Committee was informed that when multi-agency inspections are carried out notification letters are sent to providers and managing agents.
- Tenants were not always present during inspections, but where possible they do try to speak to tenants without the providers being present and social workers lead on that.
- Information is also left with tenants after inspections, so they know who to contact if there are any problems.

- There is a gateway process for new providers with an automatic inspection to look at all aspects of provision and feedback to the Benefit Service.

The Committee agreed with the Cabinet Member's assessments for each of the outstanding recommendations.

The standard reporting cycle of six months was discussed, however the Committee agreed that due to the current financial situation more regular updates would be scheduled, with the next one in three months' time.

**RESOLVED:**

- That the Cabinet Member's assessments for each of the outstanding recommendations were agreed.
- That the next tracking report would be scheduled for three months' time.
- That the report be noted.

**9. WORK PROGRAMME**

(See document No. 6)

It was agreed that the November and December meetings would be split into two parts, the first being a formal session to continue scrutiny of the in-year budget savings and recovery plan and the second part being informal for training for the Regulatory Compliance sessions and evidence-gathering for the Homes Standards Task and Finish inquiry. It was noted that additional sessions might also need to be provided to cover this.

**RESOLVED:**

That the work programme was agreed.

**10. DATE OF THE NEXT MEETING**

**RESOLVED:**

That the Committee noted the date of the next meeting on Thursday 23 November at 1400 hours in Committee Room 6.

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

None.

**12. OTHER URGENT BUSINESS**

None.

### **13. AUTHORITY TO CHAIR 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.

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The meeting ended at 1458 hours.