

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

CO-ORDINATING O&S COMMITTEE – PUBLIC MEETING

9.30 hours on Friday, 27 January 2023, Committee Rooms 3 & 4,

Council House, Victoria Square, Birmingham B1 1BB

Action Notes

Present:

Councillor Albert Bore (Chair)

Councillors: Jack Deakin, Mick Brown, Mohammed Idrees, Chaman Lal, Ewan Mackey, Kerry Jenkins, Saima Suleman, Alex Yip, Roger Harmer, Deirdre Alden.

Also Present:

Cllr. John Cotton, Cabinet Member Social Justice, Community Safety & Equalities

Richard Brooks, Director Strategy, Equality and Partnerships (via Teams)

June Marshall, Head of Public Participation

Saba Rai, Behaviour Service Integration Manager

Tim Naor-Hilton, Chief Executive, Refugee Action

Wendy Griffiths, Assistant Director, Customer Services and Business Support (via Teams)

Nikki Spencer, Digital Projects Manager (via Teams)

Christian Scade, Head of Scrutiny and Committee Services

Fiona Bottrill, Senior Overview and Scrutiny Manager

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.

The Chair gave notice of one item of urgent business he wanted to discuss with the Committee regarding the length of reports.

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Cllr. Ahmed and Cllr. Alden gave apologies for the second part of the meeting.

3. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

None.

4. ACTION NOTES –18 NOVEMBER 2022

The Action Notes of the meeting on the 9 December were agreed.

RESOLVED:

- That the action notes of the formal meeting held on 9 December 2022 were agreed.

5. CO-ORDINATING OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE ACTION TRACKER

It was noted that 3 actions outstanding, two of which may be addressed at the meeting.

RESOLVED:

- That Action Tracker was noted.

6. CABINET MEMBER PORTFOLIO PRIORITIES

The Chair welcomed the Cabinet Member to the meeting. The Cabinet Member explained as his portfolio cut across a number of Scrutiny Committees he had already reported to these, his report focused on the Cost of Living programme and the work of the City Observatory. As he would attend the February meeting on Domestic Abuse so this was not included in the report to this meeting.

On the Cost of Living the Cabinet Member reported that following the declaration of Cost-of-Living Emergency on City Council in September, the Council had worked with partners to deliver an impressive programme at speed. This included the allocation of £5 million of the Financial Resilience Reserve and the establishment of the Strategic Response Group. Working with partners a programme had been developed including the provision of warm spaces, advice to residents, energy efficiency, increasing the supply of food through food banks and supporting the Council's workforce.

The City Observatory uses data from national and local data sets. This provides a clear and transparent information on the challenges and opportunities faced by the City which will inform the targeting of resources. The Cabinet Member explained that the data shows the diversity of the City and how this is an asset but also presents challenges and will better inform how to respond to these as set out in the report.

The Cabinet Member had previously reported to Resources OSC on work forces issues including the work on the diversity and representation of staff. He also set out the partnerships that have been established to engage with the diverse communities, the work with employers to increase the number of employees who receive the Living Wage and the number of accredited employers and the renewal of the Faith Covenant.

During the discussion the following issues were raised:

Members see the impact of the cost-of-living crisis in their wards and the Council has increased the hours of the Neighbourhood Advice and Information Centres and the telephone contact to enable people to increase their income through access to benefits. In addition to the local response by the Council and partners a national policy response will be required. The scale of need is huge compared to the cash resources.

Information about the extended hours and support available including benefits is promoted through information literature, social media, community networks.

Members will continue to get updates on this work.

Energy companies are transferring customers on to pre-payment meters. The Council are trying to understand the extent of the issues and lobby Government.

There is ongoing work on the provisions of traveller sites and the Cabinet member will follow this issue up with Cllr. Lal after the meeting.

It was confirmed that the centre in Erdington will open on Saturday morning and the Cabinet Member will provide information on the take up of additional hours for the advice sessions at the centres.

The Cabinet Member agreed that in marking Holocaust Memorial Day the Council will continue to challenge antisemitism and all forms of discrimination and the Council has signed up to International Holocaust Memorial Association definition of antisemitism. The Cabinet Member has met with Jewish community leaders and agreed he was happy to meet with the Board of Deputies and the Jewish Leadership Council and will confirm if the letter was sent to the MPs when the definition was adopted and will restate the message.

to explore how these issues can be addressed through the Hate Crime Strategy.

The Cabinet Member recognised the strength of the partnerships in the City and that it will be important to strengthen and deepen the relationship with partner

organisations to sustain the relationships to address long term needs. This work will be supported by the new Directorate led by the Director Strategy, Equality and Partnerships and the work of the City Board. The Cost of Living Process will be flexible to respond to issues as they arise and a report will be taken to Cabinet to review the programme and consider proposals for longer term support.

The Cabinet Member agreed to send the information that had been shared with Resources OSC to Cllr. Yip.

It was clarified that there is a cap on energy prices not a cap on energy bills and people who live in poorly insulated homes face much higher energy costs and the solution to this is insulating homes.

It is difficult to estimate the value of unclaimed benefits and the work to enable people to access this should not finish when energy costs reduce. A rule of thumb calculation was given which estimates levels of unclaimed benefit are around 10% for income support and with 10% of a population of 300,000 living in poverty and each in entitle to £1,000 unclaimed benefits this would equate to tens of millions of pounds across the city. The figure for unclaimed benefits that are accessed as a result of the programme are greater as people will self-refer using the online tool. The support provided by holiday schemes is meeting needs, however the capacity to meet the volume of places needs to be built and the Cabinet Member will follow up this point with Cllr. Harmer after the meeting.

RESOLVED: -

- That the Cabinet member will follow the issue of traveller sites with Cllr. Lal after the meeting.
- That the Cabinet Member will provide information on the take up of additional hours for the advice sessions at the centres.
- The Cabinet Member to meet with the Board of Deputies and the Jewish Leadership Council and will confirm if the letter was sent to the MPs when the definition was adopted and restate the message.
- The Cabinet Member will follow up the issues regarding building capacity of holiday schemes with Cllr. Harmer
- That the report was noted

7. HOMES FOR UKRAINE

The Chair welcomed members of the public to the meeting and explained that as part of the report a video of feedback from hosts would be played.

The Cabinet Member welcomed Scrutiny's involvement in the programme almost a year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent launch of the Homes for Ukraine scheme. He recognised the work across the City and represented the best tradition of Birmingham as a City of Sanctuary, however he also recognised that there have been issues that need to be explored further.

The Head of Public Participation introduced the video from 10 interviews with hosts. The edited video shown at the meeting was taken from 250 minutes of interviews which is available if needed. It was explained that the hosts were hosting a different number of guests, between 1 – 4 people. The interviews raised the following issues:

- The adjustment that hosts and families have had to make to their lifestyles.
- Difficulty finding school places.
- Difficulty accessing move on accommodation.
- The support provided by other hosts including information about how to access support.
- At the start of the arrangement - there was no central place to go for information, this has now improved.
- Access to English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) and lack of intensive courses.
- Ability to speak English was the key to unlocking opportunities.
- Some guests paid for private ESOL lessons.
- The recognition of the trauma guests will have been through and their mental health needs now.
- Difficulties with accessing Council Tax, Job Centres and Universal Credit.
- How guests continue their Ukrainian university education at home?
- Difficulty in getting evidence to support equivalent qualifications and access to work that use the skills the guests have.
- Support / activities for children and young people over the summer when schools are closed.
- The amount of time taken to support guests for appointments and paperwork.
- Financial implications for hosts.
- Lack of understanding of private landlords and local organisations that guests are residents and will be in the City for a long time.
- Lack of consistency of support by all organisations involved.

The Chair referred to the Motion passed at City Council on 6 December which asked Scrutiny to undertake an assessment of the scheme including feedback from hosts.

The video provides additional information to the written report in the meeting papers.

During the subsequent debate the following issues were discussed:

- The challenges the Council faced due to the speed of the war in Ukraine and the uncertainty of the situation.
- It was questioned if the video fully reflected the challenges hosts and guests have faced.
- Early in the scheme assumptions had to be made about the number of guests who would apply for the novel scheme and the range of needs for support for hosts and guests was not anticipated.
- Other Core Cities took different approaches and relied on mainstream services without any commissioned supporting organisation except in cases of crisis to provide support to Hosts and their guests.
- In many areas the arrangements in Birmingham for hosts and guests is more generous than other areas including increased payments for hosts, 3-month bus passes scheme and the housing move on scheme.
- It was clarified that report that was subject to call in was considered at the September Cabinet, the earlier report was not subject to Call In.
- Members questioned the value for money from the Refugee Action contract, the capacity to deliver the contract and if there has been claw back.
- Members questioned the need for an external organisation to provide the data base. It was confirmed that the pro bono work provided by PWC at the early stage of the crisis did not necessitate the subsequent work, but it was sufficiently valuable to invest further resources and this enabled the Council to remain in control of the data and this justified significant investment.
- The petition to City Council was signed by over 100 host families.
- The level of support provided to hosts by Refugee Action was questioned, the process through which the contract was awarded and value for money it has provided.
- Local organisations have stepped in when support had not been provided.
- What is the process through which guests successfully moved into their own accommodation
- Members has concerns about guests who were in Temporary Accommodation. It was confirmed that out of 319 Homes for Ukraine Households 9 are in Temporary Accommodation.
- The appropriateness of decisions made regarding eligibility for guests to resources for local people was questioned.

- Are guests aware of the mental health support available from Birmingham Therapeutic Services?
- There are lessons to be learned and, with the benefit of hindsight some things would have been done differently and the 3 key lessons were:
Engaging community groups earlier in the process, commissioned a wider range of support at an earlier stage to spread the risk, the role of the City Council in co-ordinating and enabling was underestimated.
- An engagement group has been established to enable the Council to respond more quickly to issues that are raised.

The Chair was of the view that the issues raised required further consideration and a Task and Finish Group should review this outside the meeting and report back. The Chair acknowledged that the Chief Executive of Refugee Action attended the meeting and asked him to make a short comment. He explained that Refugee Action provides support across the UK and has been embedded in Birmingham for over 20 years and provides a range of services including resettlement. He acknowledged that there is learning for the scheme when developing a new model based on empowering and independence with the added elements of role of hosts, housing and DBS checks. Refugee Action had to scale up quickly and struggled in some areas in the early stages. Some of the issues raised by hosts are common with other refugee resettlement programmes. Refugee Action has experience of working with complex situations including safeguarding and domestic abuse and has a corporate partnership relationship with Air B&B which smoothed rematching were relationships had broken down.

The Chair asked a member of the public in attendance to make some comments. These included:

Her work to host a number of Ukrainian guests and facilitating the safe transport of Ukrainians to Birmingham and the West Midlands. She commended the City Council for the way it moved to support the Ukrainian Refugees and Councillors who have worked across the city. However, she raised that hosts supported each other with local organisations while the funding had been directed to a single organisation. She reported harassment of guests, highlighted the mental health impact on hosts and thanked the Cabinet Member and Council officers for their work.

The Chair thanked everyone for their contribution and confirmed the establishment of the Task and Finish Group.

RESOLVED: -

- That a Task and Finish Group be established to consider the issues raised at the meeting regarding the Homes for Ukraine programme.
- The membership of the Task and Finish Group will be Cllr. Bore (Chair) Cllr. Jenkins, Cllr. Harmer, Cllr Yip.
- The Chair will develop the Terms of Reference for the Task and Finish Group to action this work quickly.
- The Task and Finish Group will be supported by officers from Strategy, Equality and Partnerships.
- That the report was noted.

8. CUSTOMER SERVICES TASK AND FINISH GROUP UPDATE

The Chair welcomed the Assistant Director for Customer Service and Business Support and the Digital Projects Manager to the meeting. He reported that the first phase of the work of the Customer Services Task and Finish Group on the 4 services Waste Management, Highways, Housing Repairs and Bereavement Services has been completed and the report includes the recommendations in the Status Updates in Appendix A. He noted the highways status update is reported to the Committee for the first time and the Bereavement Services status update has been updated since the December meeting and is has been circulated to Members. The Bereavement Service recommendations have not changed but the update now provides more detail. He reported that the work of the Task and Finish Group will be the focus of the Scrutiny Business Report to City Council in February and a meeting will be held with the Chair, Assistant Director for Customer Service and Business Support and the Chief Executive to ensure there is a focus on the implementation of the recommendations in an appropriate timescale.

The Assistant Director for Customer Service and Business Support added that the work of the Task and Finish Group had been collaborative and provided the additional level of scrutiny to provide lasting change. She thanked the members of the Task and Finish Group for this work. She also reported that the Customer Service training has been designed for employees who are online and those who are not.

During the discussion a number of points were raised:

In response to a question about the impact of wildlife on grave sites it was confirmed that this had been discussed in detail by the Task and Finish Group.

The Assistant Director for Customer Service and Business Support will raise the issue regarding relatives' responsibility to maintain the grave when relatives are no longer alive and cemetery opening times with the Bereavement Services Manager and provide a response.

RESOLVED:

- That the Assistant Director for Customer Service and Business Support to raise the issue of relative's responsibility to maintain the grave when relatives are no longer alive and cemetery opening times with the Bereavement Services Manager and provide a response.
- Noted that the Task & Finish Group had completed its review of the recommendations submitted to service leads for Bereavement Services, Housing Repairs, Waste Management and Highways.
- Agreed that the Task & Finish Group should take further action to ensure that the identified end-to-end customer service improvements are implemented.
- That the Committee supported the further work of the Task and Finish Group to scrutinise how senior managers are responding to the feedback from the Customer Services Workshops to embed the Customer Services Strategy.

9. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair reported that the Scrutiny Business Report will go to February City Council including the work of the Customer Services Task and Finish Group, the Inquiries and the work on Domestic Abuse in preparation for the single-issue meeting of Co-ordinating OSC in February.

The work of the Homes for Ukraine Task and Finish Group will be reported to a future meeting of Co-ordinating OSC and added to the work programme.

Updates were provided by Committee Chairs:

Commonwealth Games OSC reported that the work on car parking charges that were being consulted on but was no longer happening and the Inquiry Task and Finish Group will review the evidence and complete to report to City Council in April.

Economy and Skills OSC reported that work had focussed on the Employment and Skills Inquiry and will report to City Council in April.

Education and Children's Social Care OSC has a full work programme with some flexibility to include evidence gathering for the Inquiry on Child Criminal Exploitation.

Health and Social Care OSC Inquiry on children and young people's mental is progressing and will report to City Council in June / July. University Hospitals Birmingham reported to the January meeting of the Birmingham and Solihull Joint HOSC on the reviews following the Newsnight investigation and further updated will be reported to the February and March meetings. The HOSC received reports on Adult Social Care Reforms and will consider reports on immunisation in February and in March the Cabinet Member will provide an update and there will also be a report on Day Opportunities and Co-production. The Integrated Care System will report in April.

Housing and Neighbourhoods OSC had focussed on fly tipping and cleaner streets. This work included learning from good practice in other authorities and is in the process of drafting recommendations. It was confirmed that the issue of the standard of void properties is included in the work programme.

Resources: No issues were raised.

Sustainability and Transport OSC had carried out a visit to University Station and will consider two Call-Ins at the meeting on 8 February.

RESOLVED:

That the work of the Home for Ukraine Task and Finish Group will be included in the Work Programme for Co-ordinating OSC.

Notes the updates on the work programme for the 7 Overview and Scrutiny Committees.

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

There were no requests for Call In for Co-ordinating OSC.

11. OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

There were no items of urgent business.

12. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that next meeting of the Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be 17 February 2023.

13. 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 11.34

