

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

CO-ORDINATING O&S COMMITTEE – PUBLIC MEETING

14.45 hours on Friday, 23 September 2022, Committee Rooms 3 & 4,

Council House, Victoria Square, Birmingham B1 1BB

Action Notes

Present:

Councillor Albert Bore (Chair)

Councillors: Deidre Alden, Roger Harmer, Mohammed Idrees, Kerry Jenkins, Chaman Lal, Ewan Mackey, Saima Suleman, Alex Yip

Also Present:

Wendy Griffiths, Assistant Director Customer Complaints and Business Support

Richard Brookes, Director of Strategy, Equality and Partnerships

Darren Hockaday, Director Human Resources and Organisation Development

Guy Chaundy, Housing Modernisation and Partnership Manager

Mike Davis, Head of Service, Neighbourhood Advice and Information

Lisa Taylor, Head of City Finance

Jonathan Woodward, Head of Revenues, Digital and Customer Services

Christian Scade, Interim 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.

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies were submitted on behalf of Cllr. Akhlaq Ahmed and Cllr. Mick Brown.

3. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

None declared.

4. ACTION NOTES

The Chair informed the Committee that following the discussion at the July meeting regarding Domestic Abuse it had been agreed with the relevant Committee Chairs that the issue would be considered as a cross cutting issue in the Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee work programme. It was proposed by Cllr. Jenkins that Cllr. Yip take this work forward.

RESOLVED:

- The action notes of the formal meeting held on 8th July 2022 were agreed.
- The issue of Domestic Abuse to be included in the work programme for Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Cllr. Yip to meet with the Scrutiny Team to take this work forward.

5. CUSTOMER SERVICES PROGRAMME AND COMPLAINTS UPDATE

The Chair introduced the item explaining that he had met with the Assistant Director, Customer Services and Business Support, to ensure the report provided the detail needed by the Committee. He highlighted that the report identified issues that will be familiar to members and the purpose was to understand how this work will progress to the second phase.

The Assistant Director, Customer Services and Business Support explained that the aim of the programme is to drive up Customer standards for council services. This is broader than the services provided by the contact centre which provides 25 services. The Council provides over 1,200 services and all services should focus on customer services. The initial budget of £1.6million to focus on key priority areas Housing (repairs, applications and ASB), Waste (garden waste renewal, replacement and missed bins), Highways (repairs, fly tipping, report pavements, Revenues & Benefits (benefit entitlements), Education & Skills (school admissions, child bus pass), Bereavement Services (register a death).

The principles of the Digital Strategy were instrumental to informing the approach of the Customer Service Programme. The Customer Services Strategy sets out a number of commitments which sets out that customers should be serviced in a way they wish to be served through their channel of choice. The process for the Customer Services programme is to fix the basics, set the standards and then raise the standard with the aim to manage services that provide great customer service and best efficiency. The 'gold standard' for customer services has been set out pictorially to communicate it clearly. Common themes that have been identified are: Communication, transparency in decision making, council services being proactive, treating customer empathetically. For each service included in the programme where there is an end to end review, recommendations. Improving customer services will involve technology, telephony and, customer standards and managing services to get the best efficiency and involve fundamental service change based on data and customer intelligence.

Based on what has been identified in the high volume services, the areas of improvement for phase 2 of the programme are culture change, review of web content to enable all customers to navigate and self-serve on line. The website needs to be accessible from a disability, race and gender equality perspective. A Customer Panel has been established to give customers a voice.

It was highlighted that the Customer Services Programme is 7 months into a 12 month funded programme and the achievements have been a refreshed strategy and customer services charter, 166 outdated PDFs have been cleared from the website, increasing the number of services accessed through the Brum Account, home to school transport has been migrated to the Customer Contact Centre, and culture change workshops. The report set out the scope for the next 3-5 years. The Committee were asked to consider if the priorities for the future work was correct.

In relation to complaints the Assistant Director, Customer Services and Business Support set out that in response to the Scrutiny recommendations it was found that Birmingham has a higher rate of complaints compared to other large authorities, complaints were managed through 3 different systems and there was not enough capacity to respond to complaints, there was no clear process or definition of a complaint or enquiry and no vexatious complaint policy. Investment of £1.2 million was agreed to implement a single complaints system and new policy and a single point for recording. This resulted in an increase in the number of complaints of almost 50% in the volume of complaints due to better transparency. There has been a reduction in the number of complaints escalated to stage 2, at least a 10% reduction in the number of complaints escalated to the Ombudsman and an increase in member enquiries. This data informs service improvement plans to drive improvement.

The next stage of the complaints work will be to launch the Member Enquiry Dashboard, continue service improvement work and build the business case to continue the work of the staff supporting the complaints programme.

Officers were thanked for the detailed report. The following issues were raised by members during the subsequent discussion:

The very high number of complaints and that the first stage of any service recovery is fully understanding the scale of the problem. It was suggested that the improvement journey will take several years.

Clearer reference to the Council values: Putting citizen's first, true to our word, acting courageously, achieving excellence

Consideration to be given to issues identified by Committee for inclusion the Customer Services Programme: Council tax, Use of technology e.g. car parking charges (it was noted the recent Cabinet decision has been called-in), accessibility of blue badge forms, assisted collections, Assisted collections, Anti-social Behaviour, Planning Enforcement

Building in a process to respond to urgent member inquiries e.g. where there is a safeguarding concern or where the complaint cover a number of directorates.

Residents / Councillors should be given accurate response to inquiry / complaint to manage expectations e.g. in response to complaints regarding missed collections.

RESOLVED:

- To recommend to the Housing and Neighbourhood OSC to monitor the back log in housing applications to ensure this continues to reduce.
- To recommend to the Deputy Leader to provide an update to the Chair of Co-ordinating O&S Committee on the future funding for the Customer Services Programme, as the programme has a budget allocation of £1.69m only for an initial 12-month delivery plan and funding is required for forthcoming years (January 2023 to December 2025) if the programme is to be taken beyond January 2023
- A Task and Finish Group of members from 3 main political parties, Cllrs. Bore, Jenkins, Mackey, Harmer to meet with the Assistant Director, Customer Services and Business Support to give further consideration to the programme, the priorities and focus areas for the delivery plan. The Task and Finish Group will be supported by the Customer Services Programme and report back to a future meeting of the Committee Report (October meeting if timescales allow)
- The report was noted.

6. EVERYONE'S BATTLE, EVERYONE'S BUSINESS ACTION PLAN

The Director of Strategy, Equality and Partnerships presented the report on the Everyone's Battle Everyone's Business (EBEB) Action Plan. It was noted that Cllr. Cotton, the Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion, Community Safety and Equalities had given his apologies as he was unable to attend the re-scheduled meeting.

The EBEB Action Plan focussed on the Council's work force to improve equity based on evidence. It was identified that at lower grades the proportion of employees is similar to the ethnic diversity of the city but as the salary grades increase the difference between the proportion of White and Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority staff also increases. This was consistent with feedback from staff who were concerned about fairness in promotion, in access to development opportunities, the representativeness of the senior leadership team and fair treatment at work. Section 5 of the EBEB Action Plan set out a number of positive action measures (not positive discrimination) to address this issue through the Human Resources function, publishing data at a directorate level, developing inclusive leaders, representation on shortlisting and interview panels and improving the trust of the work force.

Members thanked officers for the report and the following points were raised during the discussion:

In response to the question regarding the delivery of Operation Black Vote the Director of Strategy, Equality and Partnerships agreed to provide a response after the meeting.

The Director of Strategy, Equality and Partnerships agreed to provide a written response to the question regarding how the £650k funding allocated to equalities is used to ensure that Scrutiny fully address equalities in all areas of work and provide EIAs in Scrutiny Reports as appropriate.

The differential in representation across the pay grades can be seen in terms of the recruitment area e.g. lower scale roles are likely to be recruited locally which is more likely to result in the workforce reflecting the local population, while higher scale roles will recruit nationally and therefore from a pool that is comparatively less diverse. It was noted that for certain professions there is a limited pool of candidates from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds and recruiting nationally with positive action can increase the diversity of the workforce. The importance of 'growing our own' staff was noted.

The data shows that the ethnicity of 16% of council staff is not known which affects the comparisons that can be made. It was noted that the level of disclosure has increased and Human Resources has worked with Networks and Trade Unions to continue to reduce the number that do not disclose their ethnicity. The data is sufficiently robust to support the views expressed by staff at a high level but is less reliable when considering intersectional issues e.g. race and gender.

From experience it was highlighted that the reason for lower of representation in senior roles is not due to lack of capability or that people in Birmingham are not qualified to undertake these roles and the importance of leaders listening to the experiences of staff was identified as key.

The Director of Strategy, Equality and Partnerships to provide information to the Chair on which actions from 2021/22 EBEB Action Plan have not been completed and have not been incorporated into 2022/23 plan and why. This information will be shared with the members of the Committee.

The City Observatory will be launched next month, and the Director of Strategy, Equality and Partnerships will confirm the timescales to report City Indicators to Co-ordinating OSC.

There is a role for the Resources OSC to receive the Diversity and Inclusion Dashboard following publication in February 2023 and monitors progress against workforce equality indicators.

The Director of Strategy, Equality and Partnerships respond to the question regarding Armed Forces Partnership and preparation for statutory duties under the Armed Forces Act after the meeting.

Section 2.10 of the Action Plan references Period Poverty. This was the subject of a Scrutiny Inquiry, and the implementation of the recommendations were monitored at a meeting of the Health and Adult Care OSC on the 20th of September 2022. This identified a further issue of attendance of students during their period and it was suggested that this is an issue that the Education and Children's Social Care Committee may want to consider.

A report to be brought back to Committee towards the end of the year on implementation of EBEB Action Plan and consideration of audit or effectiveness of Equality Impact assessment.

RESOLVED:

- The Director of Strategy, Equality and Partnerships provide the information requested
- It was recommended that the Resources OSC included the Diversity and Inclusion Dashboard on the Committee's work programme after publication in February 2023 to monitor workforce data and identify progress against workforce equality indicators.
- The report was noted.

7. COST OF LIVING CRISIS

The Director of Strategy, Equality and Partnerships explained that he would provide an updated presentation as this was a policy issue that was developing at pace. It was noted that over 300,000 people in the city are affected by poverty including over 100,000 children. The poorest households are most affected by the cost of living crisis and this is not a passing issue as inflation is expected to remain high through 2023 and this will impact on real income. Energy prices and food are the biggest issue and while the Government has introduced an energy price cap this is not an absolute cap and those in low quality housing in large houses will be the most affected. Birmingham is particularly affected by the crisis due to low employment and high unemployment rates which is 3 times the national average. Bangladeshi and Pakistani households are disproportionately affected and also those who are disabled and experiencing multiple disadvantage. The 2-child limit on Universal Credit and child benefit is also affecting larger families with children born after April 2017. It was also highlighted that most of Birmingham's wards are more deprived than the national average, and for wards that are higher than the national average these will have pockets of deprivation. The importance of increasing benefit take up

was identified as a short-term response, it was estimated that there are 10s of thousands of households that are not claiming a recurrent benefit entitlement. The longer-term response is to increase employment. The discretionary resources within the Council to provide support is limited and so must be focused on where it will have greatest benefit. The Council does not have a statutory responsibility in relation to poverty or the cost of living crisis.

The Council's response has been set out under 4 headings: People, Public and Voluntary and Community Sector including the City Partnership, Businesses and Places. To ensure a quick response 5 priority workstreams have been identified: advice to residents, energy efficiency, supply of food through food banks, warm spaces and support to staff. The Leader of the Council has announced a cost of living crisis and in implementing the programme learning from the response to the Covid-19 pandemic will be applied to ensure that the response is agile and cross service boundaries. Resources will be requested at the Cabinet meeting on 11 October 2022 to support the programme. The governance is based on the emergency planning procedures without enacting emergency powers so policy decision will be made through the normal constitutional procedures.

Members thanked officers for the comprehensive report and the discussed the following points:

In response to a question about data at a Birmingham level on the number of unclaimed benefits it was explained that this information is no longer available. The national estimate is that around 20% of income support is unclaimed. The gap between Universal Credit claims and non-employment also provides an indication of the large sums of money that remain unclaimed. Director of Strategy, Equality and Partnerships set out that as part of the Council's response will be to provide an estimate of the number of unclaimed benefits and the financial value this represented.

The number of children living in poverty is greater than the number of pensioners and the last round of the household support fund being targeted toward pensioners. It was explained that the block of funding for the household support fund are allocated in line with the decision of the Department for Work and Pensions. The request to reallocate the £2 million unspent fund for pensioner households has been refused.

Members requested information to all elected members who provide support to residents through surgeries and case work to enable them to sign post to appropriate support from the Council and other organisations. The Director of Strategy, Equality and Partnerships agreed to provide a briefing and a support pack to all elected members.

Raising awareness of the public in the council's response and support available.

How to improve housing for families living in emergency and temporary accommodation and deliver housing with compassion and build social housing the city needs through short term low-cost behavioural measures, medium term adjustments that are more expensive and longer-term development net zero housing stock.

Households that receive 5 categories of benefit will receive support of £600. However, there are thousands of pensioners and carers that do not receive these benefits but who will struggle with the cost of living.

There is an analysis of the groups of people who have received payments, but these are broad categories, and it may not be possible to analyse this in more detail. The Director of Strategy, Equality and Partnerships will request this information and share this with the Committee. He confirmed that where applications have met the criteria, payments have been made and the funds have been exhausted before the applications have stopped.

The importance of an agile response through the voluntary and community sector to support different groups of people e.g., those who will struggle to make mortgage repayments and have increased costs in energy and food and the ability to respond quickly when there is cold snap to support people using pre-payment meters who cannot spread the costs over a longer period. Director of Strategy, Equality and Partnerships set out the importance of mapping needs against provision as has been carried out for the Ukrainian refugees. A financial resilience dashboard has been developed and can be shared with the Committee. Information on mapping needs versus provision and the financial resilience dashboard to be reported to the Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The bureaucracy involved in the government scheme to provide insulation has resulted in the slow progress in this programme. Director of Strategy, Equality and Partnerships has raised this issue with the housing officer and the Net Zero Team. This will be included in the energy efficiency workstream in this programme which will be reported to the Strategic Response Group.

It was suggested that each Overview and Scrutiny Committee considers the relevant aspects of the cost of living crisis. Issues discussed included the gap in the housing benefit cap and rents, the retrofitting of energy efficiency measures in homes which could be considered by the Housing and Neighbourhood Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the financial implications for the Council that the Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee could consider. The Chair agreed to consider this with the Scrutiny Officers and report back to Committee.

The financial cost to the Council will work in a number of ways including increased cost of services, scaling up the Council's response and also the reduction in income as households are not able to pay the Council. The Council's Section 151 Officer will sit on the Strategic Response Group. It was noted that there has been no change in

the Council's policy on the payment of Council Tax and the suggestion was made that reducing the Council Tax rates would reduce the financial burden on households.

RESOLVED:

- The Director of Strategy, Equality and Partnerships to provide the information requested.
- Chair of Co-ordinating OSC to discuss with Scrutiny Office regarding how each Committee could consider the cost of living crisis within their work programme e.g. Housing and Neighbourhood OSC to consider delivery of the home insulation programme and Resources OSC to consider impact of the cost of living crisis on the Council's financial position and funding of cost of living crisis programme.

8. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME 2022/23

The Chair confirmed the following points with the Committee:

- October Coordinating OSC meeting:
Members of Employment and Skills Task and Finish Group to be invited as the discussion on Devolution will inform the Scrutiny Inquiry.
Add Report on Customer Services Task and Finish Group depending on the progress of the work of the Task and Finish Group.
- Recommendation to the Housing and Neighbourhoods OSC:
To monitor the housing application back log to ensure continued reduction.
- City Indicators to be reported to Co-ordinating OSC (timescales to be confirmed)
- Recommendation to Resources OSC:
To continue to monitor the implications on the Council's budget resulting from the cost of living crisis
- December meeting of Co-ordinating OSC:
Exempt Accommodation report to be deferred to
- November Co-ordinating OSC:
- Report from Corporate Communications Team to the November meeting
- Co-ordinating OSC:
Chair to consider an update on the Election Act to be reported to Co-ordinating OSC following report to Committee in December 2021.
- Co-ordinating OSC
As previously agreed, Domestic Abuse will be included in the Co-ordinating OSC work programme.

RESOLVED:

- The work programme was noted and will be updated to reflect the points outlined by the Chair.

9. DATE OF NEXT MEETING REQUEST(S) FOR CALL IN / COUNCILLOR CALL FOR ACTION/ PETITIONS RECEIVED (IF ANY)

None.

10. OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

None

11. DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

It was noted that next meeting of the Co-ordinating Overview and Scrutiny Committee will be 14 October 2022 at 10.00am.

The Chair explained the reason the September meeting of Co-ordinating OSC did not take place was as a result of the decision made that Committee meetings would not be held during the period of national mourning following the death of Her Majesty the Queen.

A briefing on the Council's performance management framework will be held for Co-ordinating OSC members following the meeting on the 14 October 2022.

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 16.54 hours.