

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

CO-ORDINATING O&S COMMITTEE – PUBLIC MEETING

1000 hours on Friday 13th November 2020, On-line meeting

Action Notes

Present:

Councillor Carl Rice (Chair)

Councillors: Deidre Alden, Albert Bore, Debbie Clancy, Roger Harmer, Penny Holbrook, Ewan Mackey, Rob Pocock and Lou Robson.

Also Present:

Cllr Brigid Jones, Deputy Leader of the Council

Peter Bishop, Director, Digital and Customer Services

Robert Connelly, Returning Officer

Raj Mack, Head of Business Engagement, Information, Technology & Digital Services

Emma Williamson, Head of Scrutiny Services

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.civico.net/birmingham) and that members of the press/public may record and take photographs except where there were confidential or exempt items.

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Cllr Liz Clements and Cllr Kath Scott.

3. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

None.

4. ACTION NOTES

(See document No 1).

RESOLVED:

The action notes from the meeting held on 9th October 2020 were agreed.

5. DIGITAL INCLUSION STRATEGY

(See document No 2).

Cllr Brigid Jones, Deputy Leader of the Council, introduced the presentation as an important piece of pre-decision scrutiny. Recent months have shown the importance of digital inclusion and exposed the inequalities. A person's experience of lockdown is largely determined by access to on-line resources, as a means of socialising, working and participating in schoolwork.

The draft strategy is a joint piece of work with Cllr John Cotton, Cabinet Member, Social Inclusion, Community Safety & Equalities, who unfortunately cannot be here today.

Peter Bishop, Director, Digital and Customer Services, and Raj Mack, Head of Business Engagement, took members through the presentation, explaining the background work to the strategy which included a digital landscape review and a comparison of Birmingham with the national picture. The findings of this, and an outline of the proposed strategy, are set out in the presentation.

Peter Bishop then outlined next steps, which are to develop the draft strategy and the report will be brought to Cabinet in either December or January.

In the following discussion, Members then made a number of points:

- Members welcomed this as a great piece of work;
- Officers were asked for more insight on the problem of digital exclusion, including what level of competence are we looking to get people to, to survive in the digital world; a clearer picture of what good looks like; and how multiple factors come together to act as barriers, for example if you are older, disabled and financially disadvantaged. A skills/competency framework will be shared with members, as will information on the evidence that is available on digital inclusion.
- Peter Bishop agreed that evidence is critical; there is more detailed evidence available, but it is not enough, so part of the strategy is to commission that research.
- The working with partners was welcomed, as was the cross party involvement. Sutton Coldfield Town Council should also be involved. They have proposed to roll out free wi-fi across Sutton Coldfield, but the Council did not work with them on this. Peter Bishop undertook to look into this.
- This agenda links to literacy and to poverty, which are big issues in Birmingham.
- Furthermore, if we do not get this right, we potentially open ourselves up to disability discrimination claims.
- There is a reliance on neighbourhood networks, but proper digital neighbourhood networks are needed. Officers have been approached by many different organisations (e.g. children's poverty organisations) but there is limited capacity to work with all of them.
- Every strategy should acknowledge the Council's climate targets so members would like to see mention of how this strategy will impact on efforts to reduce our carbon footprint.
- We should also support businesses to get digital, not just individuals.

- The Committee would like to see how ward and constituencies are improving in this area over time.
- Government funding has been applied for, but the Council was not successful. There needs to be support for devices and connectivity, so funding is needed to kickstart local activities and to pull partners together, and that is part of the ask of this strategy.
- Residents often complain about 5G masts as they are very big and ugly, but want the services they provide, so that needs to be resolved.
- The details of how the loan scheme will work has yet to be resolved.
- The recognition that there will always be people who cannot connect digitally and so services need to be available other ways was welcomed. It is also right that partners share the responsibility and costs for digital inclusion across the city.

The Chair thanked the Deputy Leader and officers for their time.

6. ELECTORAL INTEGRITY – VOTER ID PILOTS

(See document No 3).

Robert Connelly introduced the report and clarified that he was appearing before the Committee in his role as Returning Officer which is a role independent of the Council.

Voter ID pilots were in the Conservative manifesto, and so legislation is likely to get Royal Assent in early 2022. The intention of the report was to raise awareness amongst members, as if the Council wish to make recommendations on how the pilots are introduced, that needs to be done now. The Council can choose to do nothing, and see what happens, or get involved. He was taking the view that, whether you are in favour or not, we need to ensure this works for Birmingham. Any recommendations would have to be backed up with evidence.

Birmingham does not have elections in 2023 when the ID pilots are likely to be used first time. There is always a risk bringing in new changes for an election and that risk increases for a General Election (turnout tends to be double that of a local election).

Birmingham may wish to run a voluntary pilot in 2022 but what that could look like is yet to be determined following discussions with members and government.

There are many decisions still to be made, including what would local ID cards look like, would the Returning Officer be able to issue these cards, would they be free, could people apply on the day and if so where from. In Birmingham, if 1% of people applied for a local ID card, that would equate to around 7,500 people. The danger is the Elections Office would not be able cope with the demand so other parts of the council would have to assist.

It is yet to be determined if student ID cards can be used and whether ID cards from other areas could be used.

The priority is what is best for electors – and as members know electors best, he would be asking councillors for their views.

In the following discussion, Members then made a number of points:

- All members were pleased that planning had started and welcomed the debate starting now, especially with local politicians;
- Members asked for more information on the pilots that have been conducted elsewhere, including how many were not allowed to vote and whether certain groups were disproportionately turned away for not having ID. If so, it is these groups we should be targeting with support. The Returning Officer undertook to share the report from the pilots.
- It was the view of some members that Birmingham should not do a trial before it was mandatory, and that it's possible that those most likely to be affected negatively are more likely to vote at a General Election only.
- It was not yet known if expired passports will be accepted, though it is likely passports from other countries would be.
- The Returning Officer confirmed that there have not been recent instances of personation in Birmingham (no instances referred to the police in the last five years).
- Widespread, nationwide publicity is needed, and the Council should lobby the Government for that.
- Whilst the view was expressed that allowing applications for ID cards up to 5pm on polling day was too late, it was noted that often people do leave things to the last minute (as demonstrated by voter registration) so the worst case scenario should be considered.
- Some members noted that some people associated the introduction of Voter ID as voter suppression, so we must do everything we can to avoid that impression, including looking at voter registration and whether changes discourage registration or voting. The Returning Officer replied that voter registration is often event driven – such as a General Election or referendum – so tend to see very high volumes before a General Election. He undertook to supply further data on voter registration, however noted that the electoral roll for the 2019 General Election was at its highest. Voter ID is used in other countries with few issues, and so it may be a matter of getting over the first few years of a different system.
- Members agreed that any pilot should be across the city and not focused on specific wards, so that there was no disproportionate impact.
- The excellent information and presentation for candidates from the Elections Office was praised, and the important role of political parties and candidates in getting information out was noted.

The Chair thanked the Returning Officer for his attendance.

7. WORK PROGRAMME

(See documents No 4 and 5).

Emma Williamson, Head of Scrutiny Services, updated the committee on items including:

- Proposed inquiry on exempt accommodation – an introductory session is being planned for the December meeting with the Cabinet Member for Homes and Neighbourhoods, with a view to then agreeing the terms of reference. That helps ensure that the inquiry complements the work of the Cabinet Member on the national pilot and gives voice to residents and agencies.
- Customer services inquiry – following the presentation of the report at Full Council last week, work will continue on the member protocol. The proposal is to have an informal meeting in December to consider a draft – date to be agreed but will be week commencing 14th December.
- Update on other inquiries:
 - Housing and Neighbourhoods: Fly-tipping inquiry report now being drafted;
 - Health and Social Care: starting Infant mortality evidence gathering in December;
 - Economy and Skills: Property assets inquiry evidence gathering is underway;
 - Resources: intends to pick up work with the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources on a policy and process to support the Cabinet Member in his oversight role of consultants and agency workers.
- On the Scrutiny Framework, a working group meeting is scheduled for the following week.

A request was made to contact broadband suppliers to look at supply to Birmingham and what is currently affecting the service, given the increased working from home and in particular the difficulties experienced by Cabinet Members at Cabinet that week. It was agreed to ask officers to see if there was data on the quality of supply to Birmingham and any future plans or upgrades. It was important to ensure that there was a good basic service across the city, and this was not held up in order to provide super speeds that few actually need.

The Chair also mentioned that an informal meeting may be needed after the December meeting and he would update members in due course.

8. DATE AND TIME OF THE NEXT MEETING

The next meeting is the 11th December 2020 at 1000 hours.

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

None.

10. OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

None.

11. AUTHORITY TO CHAIRMAN AND OFFICERS

RESOLVED:

In an urgent situation between meetings, the Chairman jointly with the relevant Chief Officer has authority to act on behalf of the Committee.

The meeting ended at 1205 hours.