

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

CO-ORDINATING O&S COMMITTEE – PUBLIC MEETING

1000 hours on Friday 9th October 2020, On-line meeting

Action Notes

Present:

Councillor Carl Rice (Chair)

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

Also Present:

Cllr Ian Ward, Leader of the Council

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

None.

3. DECLARATION OF INTERESTS

None.

4. ACTION NOTES

(See document No 1).

RESOLVED:

The action notes from the meeting held on 18th September 2020 were agreed.

5. LEADER'S UPDATE

(See documents No 2,3 and 4).

Cllr Ian Ward, Leader of the Council introduced the items he had been asked to bring to the Committee. Firstly, in reference to the report to Cabinet on the Assurance Framework, he updated members that unfortunately he not yet had a response from the Secretary of State confirming that the Council were out of government intervention, but officials have accepted that it ended in July and no further action would be taken in respect of the City Council.

Secondly, he reported on the communications he had with Government, referring to the 30 letters that were attached to the agenda papers. Another letter had been sent this week, and reported in the media, from himself, the Deputy Leader and the Chief Executive of the Birmingham Chambers of Commerce to the Chancellor and Health Secretary about the proposal to introduce a three tier system of dealing with the pandemic. This was intended to provide clarity so the public can more easily understand the measures, which is understandable, but they asked that any decision is based on the data (and data in Birmingham does not show transmission is high in hospitality venues), that criteria for escalation through tiers is clear and based on evidence and that there were clear criteria to come back down through the tiers; and that if further lockdown measures were brought then a sufficient package of support was made available for businesses.

The latest figures showed that cases of Covid-19 in Birmingham were 150 per 100,000 people (as of the day before with a three day time lag); testing was showing a positivity rate of 9%, the highest it has been. The test rate is 2,000 per 100,000.

The main causes of transmission in the city were still about households mixing in homes and gardens; only 2% is driven by socialising in hospitality venues. The introduction of tier 2 would impose restrictions on socialising in hospitality venues and that would have detrimental impact on the local economy.

Other examples of lobbying included working through the West Midlands Combined Authority to submit responses to Government on the summer statement and the English devolution white paper as well as joint submissions with Core Cities on the green economy and levelling up.

The final document circulated was the Economic Recovery Plan, which is currently out for consultation and comments from scrutiny would be welcomed. There is a section on the city centre but there is also an intention to renew the Big city Plan, and a document will be put out for consultation next month. The Plan also flags up important employment sites, emphasises the importance of local centres, shows how housing need will be tackled, including delivering the social and affordable elements; and green recovery and transport links.

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

- With regards to the letter on hospitality restrictions, was the Leader of the Opposition approached as surely this is stronger if cross party? The Leader confirmed that he had not, but that is a good point that it is more powerful if cross-party. There have been examples of good cross party working, and it was suggested that that should be more prominent as people would like to see that.
- There are cases of Covid-19 increasing in student areas, so what is being done with national leaders as this is not just a Birmingham problem? The Leader

confirmed that they are working closely with universities, and measures are being put in place that are best practice. The Government are, quite rightly, focused on keeping students in education and we are in constant dialogue. The Leader has spoken to Andy Street, West Midlands Mayor, about how this can be tackled.

- Residents in Birmingham should be congratulated on how well the restrictions are being observed here. Students are also behaving remarkably well. The Leader agreed with this.
- There is a lot of testing going on in Birmingham, and so more cases are being picked up in comparison to the first part of the pandemic. The positivity rates are increasing from 2.5% in August to 9% now, so that is not a good position. The majority of cases amongst students did not occur in halls of residence.
- There is a risk that if we put restrictions in that are not justified by the data then we will lose the public's support.
- It was noted that the news that morning had reported higher rates of transmission in hospitality venues, but it was not clear where that was and what the data was actually saying. The Leader noted that the particular issue in Birmingham was at wedding celebrations and those should be the focus of restrictions not a blanket ban.
- The development of the green belt in Sutton Coldfield includes 6,000 homes. The Leader explained there has been a small delay in getting agreement of all the landowners, but they are now confident the agreement will be in place early next year which will lead to an outline planning application.
- A lot of letters have been sent, and it was queried whether there are better ways for the Leader of the largest Council to communicate with government. The Leader confirmed that they have been communicating in other ways, including Zoom calls with Government Ministers and officials.
- The timing of the relaunch of the Big City Plan was questioned, as businesses may reduce their demand for office space in response to the pandemic and longer term, with more people working from home. The Leader said that the indications so far were that businesses were looking at re-purposing office space rather than reducing, with more interactive spaces.
- On the green agenda, the prominence of this is welcomed, but there was concern that we are still looking at a Passive House pilot, rather than looking at how we move to build these at scale. York Council are building 600 of these.
- When asked about the plans to keep council leisure centres open, as these are important for health, the Leader said that he was disappointed to receive short notice on Serco's decision to consult on redundancies – this is a national move but they have been told that this is not acceptable. They received supplier relief from the City Council to support keeping facilities and jobs open. There is also inequity in the government's compensation scheme: if leisure centres are in-house then compensation for loss of income is available, but not for those outsourced like Birmingham's.
- With regards to Chamberlain Square, the monument has now been cleaned and looks transformed. Unfortunately, there are two other issues which is why the barriers are still there – the water feature is leaking and there is water leaking into the car park below.

- Transport is an issue with regards to enforcement of safe travel rules; the Safer Travel Team are working on that. However, this does rely on the co-operation of the travelling public.
- The Assurance Framework report refers to continuing external support, and the Leader was asked to provide more detail. He stated his support for the LGA Peer Review process for external challenge and would like a corporate peer review in the future, once senior positions are finalised. He is also in touch with the LGA's Chief Executive and Donna Hall, who was one of the Non-Executive Assistants. He is also a believer in mentoring, and all Cabinet Members have had one via an LGA programme. That programme ended but he has continued his mentoring support.
- It was noted that cases at University of Birmingham started to spike at the end of the first teaching week; it is well placed to do remote lectures, but there is an insistence on some face to face. The Leader agreed there was a duty of care to surrounding neighbourhoods.
- The Leader also agreed that it was very frustrating, that other EU governments have allowed the re-purposing of EU funding for job creation to be used for jobs retention, but the UK government has not responded positively to that. There is little support for the arts and culture sector, so that is a real area of concern.
- The reported intimidation of a member of the armed forces undertaking support for the drop and collect testing service was raised, and the Leader was asked what was being done to let residents and councillors know when it was happening in their area. The Leader said that they were looking to improve communication so they are aware when military personnel will be undertaking drop and collect in their area. The personnel have also been issued with Birmingham City Council tabards.
- There is an increased use of electric taxis, which is welcomed. The Clean Air Zone (CAZ) will be introduced on 1st June 2021.

The Chair thanked the Leader for his time.

6. WORK PROGRAMME

(See documents No 5 and 6).

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

- The item on the digital inclusion strategy is now scheduled for November, and so citizen engagement will move to December;
- The informal meeting on the refreshed performance framework will take place week commencing 19th October and the date will be confirmed later that day;
- The previous report to Committee on delegations by Cabinet report will be picked up as part of the Annual Review of the Constitution. The amendments to the Constitution being considered by Council Business Management Committee in November will not include this, as more work is needed on the process to support it;

- The Scrutiny Framework work is continuing with a member workshop held on 24th September. Nominees for the working group are now being gathered, and an outline draft to discuss is being prepared.
- There are a number of inquiries being undertaken by Scrutiny at the moment:
 - The Customer Services inquiry report will be finalised later today and shared with the Executive;
 - The Health and Social Care O&S Committee will commence an inquiry into Infant Mortality in December;
 - The Housing and Neighbourhoods O&S Committee is collating the evidence in its inquiry into Fly-tipping.

Cllr Robson then updated the committee on a proposed inquiry by the Economy & Skills O&S Committee on Property Assets. A draft terms of reference will be circulated to members for comment.

Following a question from Cllr Pocock, the Chair then reiterated the intention to undertake an inquiry into Exempt Accommodation, suggesting that Co-ordinating O&S could lead on the work, but individual committees undertake evidence gathering. Cllr Holbrook undertook to share the findings of previous work undertaken by the Housing and Neighbourhoods O&S Committee.

7. DATE AND TIME OF THE NEXT MEETING

The next meeting is the 13th November 2020 at 1000 hours.

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

None.

9. OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

None.

10. 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 1125 hours.