

BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL

**HOUSING AND NEIGHBOURHOODS O&S COMMITTEE –
PUBLIC MEETING**

1400 hours on Thursday 22 April 2021, Online meeting

Present:

Councillor Penny Holbrook (Chair) – in the chair for items 5 (latter part) to 11
Cllr Mahmood Hussain (Deputy Chair) – in the chair for items 1 to 5 (early part)
Councillors Deirdre Alden, Marje Bridle, Roger Harmer, Mary Locke, Shafique Shah and Ken Wood

Also Present:

Councillor John O’Shea, Cabinet Member for Street Scene and Parks
Louise Fletcher, Senior Service Manager
Mira Gola, Head of Business Improvement and Support
John Jamieson, Head of Service - Housing Management
Gary Messenger, Head of Service - Housing Options and PRS
Deborah Moseley, Acting Senior Service Manager, PRS
Darren Share, Assistant Director, Street Scene
Jayne Bowles, Scrutiny Officer
Emma Williamson, Head of Scrutiny

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

Cllr Locke submitted an apology for lateness.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

None.

4. ACTION NOTES AND ACTION TRACKER

(See documents 1 and 2)

The following matters were raised:

- **Localisation Update** – it was confirmed that the plan is to programme an update for the June meeting;
- **Sprinkler Installation Programme** – a briefing note on the year-end position will be circulated to Members as soon as possible.

RESOLVED:

- The action notes of the meeting held on 25 March 2021 were agreed.
- The action tracker was noted.

5. HOUSEHOLD RECYCLING CENTRES BOOKING SYSTEM

(See document 3)

Councillor John O’Shea, Cabinet Member for Street Scene and Parks, and Darren Share, Assistant Director, Street Scene, attended for this item.

The Chair invited Cllr O’Shea to introduce the report and in doing so he made the following comments:

- At the start of the first lockdown, all the HRCs had been closed, in line with other local authorities across the country;
- Four of the five sites were re-opened on 4th May (with Castle Bromwich having to remain closed due to roadworks), however there were massive queues, causing major disruption around the sites and long waits;
- The online booking system was introduced to control the number of slots available, which completely removed the queues and made entrance to the sites straightforward;
- At that point there was a minimum 3 day booking ahead, however it is now possible to look with 2 hours’ notice if slots are available and they are working with Veolia to increase the number of slots and move to live booking online;
- Reference was made to the survey in Cllr Locke’s ward which had shown that the booking system is incredibly popular with local residents who were happy about the cleaner air around the Lifford Lane site.

In the course of the discussion, and in response to Members’ questions, the following were amongst the main points raised:

- As far as the future goes, the booking system will be kept under review;

- At this point, it would be difficult to commit one way or the other in case there is a roll back on restrictions over the coming months so it will be kept in place and the aim is to get to a point where bookings are pretty much live;
- There was some concern about the huge reduction in tonnage presented at the HRCs when comparing June 2019 and June 2020 figures, with members querying whether this had meant more roadside collections or increased fly-tipping;
- It was noted that it had been made clear that the HRCs were not re-opening for normal business, but for essential trips only for rubbish which needed to be got rid of and could not be kept at home, and this had resulted in an increase in kerbside tonnage;
- The tonnage from HRCs in March this year was 6,190 tonnes and bearing in mind the March opening hours are shorter than June would be, the figures are probably not far off where they should be;
- Very few local authorities operated a booking system before the pandemic, however quite a few adopted this way of working afterwards, with Birmingham being the leader in the region;
- It would be worthwhile getting the temperature of public opinion, either through members or directly from the public, as to how well the system is working as a guide once consideration can be given to returning to normal operation;
- People are encouraged to book online and it is possible to book for other people with their details, however there are always concerns about digital exclusion and bookings can also be made by ringing the call centre;
- In response to a question about private skip companies and concerns that some of the not so reputable ones might tip rubbish from over-filled skips onto streets, which is essentially fly-tipping, Cllr O'Shea told members that he would welcome evidence of that as we would prosecute;

The Chair thanked Cllr O'Shea and Darren Share for their attendance and for the report.

RESOLVED:

- The report was noted.

6. PERFORMANCE MONITORING

(See documents 4 and 5)

Mira Gola, Head of Business Improvement and Support, John Jamieson, Head of Service – Housing Management, Gary Messenger, Head of Service – Housing Options and PRS, Deborah Moseley, Acting Senior Service Manager, PRS, and Darren Share, Assistant Director, Street Scene, attended for this item.

Mira took Members through the Month 11 report (the latest finalised report available for this committee meeting) and highlighted the key points.

In the course of the discussion, and in response to Members' questions, the following were amongst the main points raised:

- A request was made for numbers as well as percentages to be provided for the first three Vital Signs KPIs – emergency repairs, routine repairs and right to repair – to get a clearer understanding of the volume of repairs the service is dealing with, as percentages can give a false impression;
- Reference was made to the usefulness of the HLB performance reports which offer more detail and comparisons between different parts of the city and it was agreed that it could be helpful to bring these to committee;
- In recent months there had been some small variations between the contractors on routine repairs but all have for the most part remained green or amber on performance for those indicators;
- There are some performance issues on certain elements for certain contractors which have needed to be addressed, such as emergency repairs, but generally there is not a huge difference;
- It was noted that the standout contractor, Engie, had managed to remain on green for all indicators;
- One Member pointed out that they are noticing in their casework housing repairs being done reasonably well, but responses in relation to housing tenancy management issues were taking longer;
- It was explained that on average there had been a 30-40% increase in issues being raised, particularly around anti-social behaviour, and there had also been a need to move some resource to help focus on domestic abuse, with increases of 25-30% or more in domestic abuse in council tenancies;
- These increases in demand were being dealt with with the same numbers of staff and sometimes visits had been replaced by telephone contact but they are trying to keep on top of these issues;
- In terms of voids, Members agreed that there was a need to have a closer look at this to understand the process and timescales for getting properties back into use, particularly with the number of people currently in temporary accommodation, and the level of work that is needed to get these properties up to standard, and that this should be added to the work programme;
- Members were told that a piece of work on voids is already being undertaken with contractors, looking at performance in a range of areas to improve the process and the penalties where they are not performing;
- It was recognised that the last year had been difficult in terms of voids, particularly the viewing process, and there had been a lower turnover because of the pandemic;
- It was thought that the percentage of available properties as part of overall stock will include properties scheduled for demolition but still within the portfolio at this time, so in various states of being de-commissioned and a number of these would not be habitable;
- It was agreed it would be useful in future to have a breakdown of the number of properties scheduled for demolition versus those being turned around to rent out again;
- With regard to temporary accommodation, it was noted that there is a big difference between B&Bs and purpose-built accommodation and it would be useful to know how many people are in each type of accommodation and also how many are outside of the city;

- In response, Members were told that current figures are 3,500 in temporary accommodation, of those 1,750 are in our own stock, 1,000 in private lease schemes, 250 in our own hostels and 500 in B&B accommodation;
- Some hostels had experienced reduced capacity due to Covid outbreaks and at one point were running at 50% capacity, this had been an issue across the country and they are now getting back up to speed;
- With regard to street cleanliness and staffing levels, Members were told that the position has improved, with members of staff shielding with long term issues now having returned to work and the vaccination programme has shown less people off with Covid-related sickness;
- There has recently been a re-focus on street cleansing and this will be prioritised;
- It was queried why the committee was receiving December figures and Members were told that the specific measure for street cleansing is quarterly, however more recent data is available and the possibility of receiving written updates was discussed;
- Members also felt it would be helpful to see how Birmingham compares with other core cities on street cleanliness;
- With regard to recycling, it was noted that rates around the country have gone down but that it would be helpful to have local authority comparative figures to see how Birmingham is doing;
- Members were told there is data available and a benchmarking report could be produced to show where Birmingham is in relation to the surrounding authorities and core cities;
- In response to a query in relation to fly-tipping actions coming back to committee, it was confirmed that no date had been agreed yet but this was expected to be programmed for June or July;
- The introduction of the blue BRAG rating was queried, as it used to be just red, amber and green, and a request was made for colour to be used in future reports as they are now viewed online;
- It was suggested that perhaps once a year a review of the performance indicators should be scheduled in, as Members recognise they are sometimes saying the indicators are not really giving them what they need but that these can't be changed mid-stream;
- The Chair asked officers to pick this up after the meeting as this might be something that would need to be raised with the Deputy Leader as the performance framework is within her portfolio.

Turning to the note which had been provided on the work of the PRS Team on improving properties in the private rented sector, Deborah Moseley highlighted the following points:

- Even with Covid, staff had been working to hit the targets set and these have been exceeded;
- Staff have had to go into some high risk buildings, with some residents not always co-operative in terms of hands, face, space;
- They are looking at new initiatives as the eviction ban will be lifted soon, to ensure PRS residents can stay in their homes;

- Cllr Locke expressed her thanks to the team for the help received with a couple of serious cases in her ward and all the support that had been provided;
- A question was asked around what steps are taken to encourage people in private rented properties to come to us and highlight any issues they have, particularly those who might be putting up with sub-standard accommodation, or those in fear of losing their tenancy;
- There is a website and they are looking at ways to improve that, along with looking at vehicles not normally utilised, for example leaflets in supermarkets, GP surgeries, schools and other areas where families and individuals go, encouraging people to contact the council early to flag up issues and seek help;
- The Chair commented that her ward has some of the highest amounts of PRS in the city and the service from the PRS team is nothing but exemplary, with responses within 24 hours from the general email address.

RESOLVED:

- The following requests and suggestions to be followed up:
 - Numbers as well as percentages to be provided for the first three Vital Signs KPIs – emergency repairs, routine repairs and right to repair;
 - Voids – in future, a breakdown to be included of the number of properties scheduled for demolition versus the number of properties being turned around to rent out again;
 - Voids to be added to the work programme for 2021/22;p
 - Explanation as to why the Blue BRAG rating has been introduced;
 - Colour to be used in future reports;
 - Annual review of performance indicators to be discussed;
- The report was noted.

7. HOUSING LIAISON BOARDS/TENANT ENGAGEMENT

(See document 6)

John Jamieson, Head of Service – Housing Management, and Louise Fletcher, Senior Service Manager, attended for this item.

The Chair advised committee that unfortunately the Chair of the City HLB was currently unwell and therefore unable to attend the meeting but that the presentation was intended to be an update for Members on how tenant engagement could be strengthened.

Louise Fletcher presented the overview and background, highlighting how tenants had been supported through Covid and the steps going forward.

The following points were made:

- There is not a Housing Liaison Board in every ward, but in as many wards where there is interest;
- There is a Performance Monitoring Group which specifically looks at the HLB report and the performance of contractors and has a real say in how services are delivered;

- There are groups of tenants who go out and do walkabouts and this activity has recommenced in the last week or so;
- Covid has had a significant impact as most activities are on a face-to-face basis, however people have been encouraged to still raise issues;
- Virtual meetings have also been encouraged but this has not been easy as some tenants have never engaged in that way and/or do not have the facilities;
- However, where virtual meeting has not been possible, they have continued with the framework and telephone contact, and feedback has been positive;
- Since October, there have been virtual meetings of the City HLB and the Performance Monitoring Group, which has worked well and comments and queries, particularly about performance, have continued via email;
- There has been regular contact with tenants throughout the pandemic, including help with food parcels and making sure tenants are not lonely or isolated and many have been grateful for the support;
- There are risks with the current model – there are a few members with ill-health and a lot of the people engaged in the movement from the outset are older/retired and not necessarily representative of the tenant cohort;
- Mechanisms need to be found to reflect the total tenant group and they are looking at how to develop different methods of engagement and enhance communication tools;
- It would be ideal to have a tool to send messages out at the touch of a button to make sure messages are going to the most vulnerable people;
- A major change they need to be conscious of is the Social Housing White Paper and the need to make sure every tenant has a voice and as not everybody can use the internet, there need to be other means to get involved;
- The next steps are to continue with virtual meetings. There is an interim arrangement in place due to the Chair not being well and activities on estates are re-starting as Covid restrictions are lifted;
- They have looked at reviewing all tenant engagement and are looking at procuring an external to look at what improvements can be made and ensure risks are responded to, whilst making sure they work with those tenants who are already engaged;
- They will make sure an improvement plan is developed to ensure they are empowering tenants and involving them in the process, including electronic surveys which can feed directly into a report.

In the course of the discussion and in response to questions from Members, the following were amongst the main points raised:

- The Chair asked for the Committee's very best wishes to be passed on to the Chair of the City HLB, who has been a stalwart of the organisation for many years and has done a great job;
- Members stressed how important it is that whatever the future model might be it is co-designed by the tenants who are already involved and urged that if an external provider is brought in to undertake the review, that this should be someone from the third sector/charity sector;

- Officers agreed this would be a good idea, but pointed out that they do have to go through the normal procurement process;
- It was noted that engagement with residents has always been an issue and that Covid has forced people to go down different routes of engagement, which is not ideal as a lot of people still enjoy face-to-face and getting out to meet people;
- It was suggested that it would be good to consult with partners in the city, such as RSLs, to see how they engage with tenants and they could offer advice and help;
- In response, Members were told that the feedback from RSLs is that they are similar to us in terms of how they engage, however they are more innovative as they are a lot smaller and tend to know their tenants better and are more savvy about social media;
- It was suggested that if tenants are to be able to properly scrutinise the housing service, it would be helpful for basic performance information on repairs, voids, how long it takes to re-let properties, etc, to be made available to HLBs on a ward basis rather than leaving it to the City HLB;
- Members were told that the City HLB report is shared at a local level but will query whether it would be possible to drill down to wards;
- With regard to the timeline for the review, the aim is to have the opportunity advertised in the next month or so with a view to completing the review by the end of the year;
- The Chair requested that, at the appropriate time once the contract is awarded, the project programme be brought to Committee to give confidence that it is strong enough to engage both existing and new tenants.

The Chair thanked officers for their attendance and for the presentation.

RESOLVED:

- A further report on what the review will look like, and the project programme, to be scheduled for later in the year;
- The report was noted.

8. WORK PROGRAMME

(See document 7)

The Chair told Members that work programme items for the 2021/22 municipal year would be set by the Committee in June.

The following possible items were noted for adding to the list of items to be programmed:

- Review of performance indicators;
- A more detailed look at HLB performance data;
- Voids;
- Cleaning up gateway routes into the city leading up to the Commonwealth Games (Cllr Barrie's question to City Council).

RESOLVED:

The work programme was noted.

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

None.

10. OTHER URGENT BUSINESS

A query was raised with regard to when there would be a return to face-to-face meetings and Members were advised that this would be communicated in due course.

11. 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 1613 hours.