

Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 22 July 2021

Attendance

Members of the Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Paul Appleby (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Harman Banger (Via MS Teams)
Cllr Mary Bateman
Cllr Greg Brackenridge
Cllr Christopher Burden
Cllr Alan Butt
Cllr Keith Inston (Via MS Teams)
Cllr Barbara McGarrity QN (Chair)
Cllr Andrew McNeil

Witnesses

Shaun Aldis (Chief Executive of Wolverhampton Homes)

Employees

Martin Stevens DL (Scrutiny Officer) (Minutes)
Ross Cook (Director of City Housing and Environment)
Jenny Lewington (Service Manager – Housing Strategy and Policy)
Julia Cleary (Scrutiny and Systems Manager)

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 **Apologies and Substitutions**
An apology for absence was received from Cllr Christopher Haynes.

There were no substitutions.
- 2 **Declarations of interest**
Cllr Paul Appleby declared a non-pecuniary interest on the housing items as a Member of the Wolverhampton Homes Board.
- 3 **Minutes of the previous meeting**
The minutes of the previous meeting held on 25 March 2021 were confirmed as a correct record.

The Chair made reference to CCTV cameras, she stated in her electoral ward fly tipping was a particular problem and hoped that cameras would be installed in the most common fly tip areas.

The Chair with reference in the minutes to the Climate Change Focus Group and the Citizens Assembly, proposed that the residents who attended the assembly should receive feedback on the outcome of the Assembly.

Resolved: That the residents who attended the Citizens Assembly on Climate Change receive formal feedback on the outcome of the Assembly.

The Director confirmed that he would arrange for the residents to receive a letter.

4 **Wolverhampton Homes Delivery Plan / Performance**

The Chief Executive of Wolverhampton Homes introduced the report on the Wolverhampton Homes Delivery Plan / Performance. He remarked that the landscape within housing was changing. There was a wave of new legislation on the horizon, which had been referred to in, The Queen's speech earlier in the year, some of which was as a consequence of the Grenfell Tower tragedy in 2017. The Decent Homes Standard was being reviewed including electrical safety and smoke detection. In the agenda pack there were six key documents: -

1. The Wolverhampton Homes Performance Report
2. The Operational Delivery Plan
3. Performance Data
4. Performance Indicator Data
5. The Wolverhampton Homes Delivery Plan – Capital Delivery Plan
6. The Capital Programme Outturn

The Vice-Chair thanked the Chief Executive of Wolverhampton Homes for the report to the Panel and asked for his thanks to be passed onto the team. He commented that one of the documents referred to every Wolverhampton Homes resident being required to receive at least one visit over a twelve month period by either a Wolverhampton Homes Officer or a contractor. He asked how this was being achieved, what the process was for making the visits and the progress in meeting this target to date. The Chief Executive of Wolverhampton Homes responded that in subsequent years they had managed to make a visit to every property. The last 18 months had been difficult because of the Covid pandemic. He could however assure Members that all Wolverhampton Homes residents classed as vulnerable had been contacted or visited during the pandemic. A survey was also being sent to Wolverhampton Homes residents with the help of the Council's Strategy Team.

The Vice-Chair commented on the point of maintenance of estates, that there was a meeting planned with the Council's estate team on the issue of fly tipping. He asked if the meeting date been confirmed and if not, if this could be a recommendation for the Director of City Housing and Environment to take up with the estates team. The Chief Executive of Wolverhampton Homes responded that there had been a huge increase in the amount of fly tipping incidents, this was in common with other authorities. There was a dedicated team at Wolverhampton Homes whose sole focus was on dealing with fly tipping. He described this situation as a sad one, as they were having to divert resources to dealing with fly tipping across the City. They were working collaboratively with the Council teams to clear up fly tipping as soon as possible. There was now a scheme to clear up walkways which were overgrown or needed improved lighting, this formed part of the collaboration with the Council. Meetings were always taking place with the Council's estate teams and had increased during the pandemic.

The Vice-Chair asked about the locations of fly tipping in the City and if there were any common patterns. The Chief Executive of Wolverhampton Homes responded that it was mixed. Derelict land were the prone sites. Wolverhampton Homes owned a number of derelict parcels of land, which were often subject to fly tipping.

The Chair asked if cameras could be placed in some of the hotspots to act as a deterrent to fly tipping in the area. The Chief Executive of Wolverhampton Homes responded that they had not put up any cameras. He was aware that the Council had put some up in some areas. It was not just fly tipping which had increased, there had also been an increase in vermin during the pandemic.

The Chair asked about Wolverhampton Homes policy towards asbestos. The Chief Executive of Wolverhampton Homes responded that Wolverhampton Homes had a compliance register of which asbestos formed one of the big six areas. The compliance register's six areas were fire, asbestos, legionnaires, gas, lifts and electricity. They therefore placed a high priority on managing and maintaining asbestos. Wolverhampton Homes housing stock was very varied and much of it was built in an era when asbestos was commonly used. As a Landlord they had a legal duty to manage asbestos.

The Chair referred to the Grenfell Tower tragedy and asked for confirmation that there was no Grenfell like cladding on any of the residential buildings owned by Wolverhampton Homes. The Chief Executive of Wolverhampton Homes confirmed that there was no Grenfell like cladding on any of the Wolverhampton Homes High rise flats. The Council's Fire Safety Group had completed considerable work on the matter of fire safety at Wolverhampton Homes. Due to this there was now a programme of works to put sprinklers in all the Wolverhampton Homes managed residential tower blocks, some blocks already had them installed.

A Member of the Panel, referred to Appendix 2 of the report – Performance Data, Quarter 4. He congratulated Wolverhampton Homes staff on some of the excellent figures, considering the Covid-19 pandemic. It was clear that Wolverhampton Homes staff had operated at a very high standard during a difficult time. He provided a summary of the work of the Council's Fire Safety Scrutiny Group which had been setup following the Grenfell Tower tragedy. The Group had made 26 recommendations on aspects of fire safety. His view was that Wolverhampton Homes was at the forefront nationally in responding to the need to improve fire safety. Four other authorities in the West Midlands were following a similar path and he was in discussions with a further two.

The Panel Member remarked that one of the first major steps the fire group had recommended was to ensure that none of the residential tower blocks had flammable cladding. The Fire Safety Scrutiny Group had also recommended that sprinklers should be fitted in all high-rise blocks. Wolverhampton Homes had agreed to the fitting of sprinklers in the high rise blocks they managed. Another recommendation had been for staff to receive additional training. Very importantly, hard wired fire detection systems had also been recommended in the residential tower blocks. In his capacity as the Mayor of Wolverhampton he had recently visited some flats to work on a new evacuation policy and it had worked very well. He asked when the fire safety improvement plan for all Wolverhampton Homes managed high rise in the City was expected to be concluded, this included automatic detection fire systems

and sprinklers. In addition, he asked when this was completed would Wolverhampton Homes be looking to improve fire safety in low rise residential blocks. High rise blocks were defined as those above 18 metres in height, which was about six floors. He expressed the importance of improving the low rise blocks once the high rise had been finished.

The Chief Executive of Wolverhampton Homes responded that he could not give the exact detail of when the improvement works would be completed on the high rise blocks. The programme had been curtailed during the Covid pandemic because of the restrictions and the impact on obtaining materials. There had been a huge increase in prices of materials citing that 20-30% increase in prices was not uncommon. They therefore had to be extremely cautious from a commercial perspective on how they managed the programme going forward. He could however assure Panel Members that the programme would be completed within a given period of time. He would happily report back to the Scrutiny Panel when they had more details to share. There was currently no programme planned for low rise managed Wolverhampton residential blocks. The Infrastructure Programme however, which was taking place for all the tower blocks was going to go through all the flat estate areas to ensure fire safety compartmentalisation.

The Panel Member commented that the completion of the high rise residential blocks had been planned for 2024. He acknowledged the reasons for the slippage to the schedule.

A Panel Member thanked the Chief Executive of Wolverhampton Homes for responding to her reports of fly tipping and acting promptly to resolve the issue. She asked about whether Wolverhampton Homes notified residents about the amount of fly tipping that had been cleaned up. The Chief Executive of Wolverhampton Homes responded that they probably didn't communicate enough about the clean up works completed because they were so focused on the initial clean up. He acknowledged that a campaign in the future detailing the costs of clean up would probably be worthwhile.

A Panel Member asked about benchmarking and whether anything in particular from this exercise had come to light during the pandemic. The Chief Executive of Wolverhampton Homes responded that they used the national benchmarking club, called Housemark. The 25 suite of indicators as referred to in the appendix of the report were the one's which they used to compare with other authorities. They were comparing very favourably on a number of them. They had done exceptionally well with residents paying their rent during Covid. It was true that it had been one of Wolverhampton Homes better years for receipt of rents, which was hard to fathom given the enormity of the pandemic. There had been no evictions in the year, and it was a credit to all of Wolverhampton Homes customers that they had been able to pay their rent. A survey would be soon despatched to Wolverhampton Homes residents asking them how they would like to see the services operating into the future.

The Chief Executive of Wolverhampton Homes commented that the one area of major concern to him was empty properties, but this would be improved in the future. Many organisations during the pandemic stopped receiving repair requests or tenant enquiries and only took emergency calls. Wolverhampton Homes continued as if they were operating as normal. He was pleased to say that there was now only a

backlog of about 500, having at one point gone up to 3000 during the sequence of Covid-19 lockdowns.

A Member of the Panel asked about the performance data relating to telephone contact metrics. He highlighted that the data pointed to them being below the standards they had set for themselves. He thought from a commercial perspective they were quite low standards. He asked for some more details about the phone system and customers ability to be able to get through to the organisation. The Chief Executive of Wolverhampton Homes responded that this was an area of concern for him. In the past they had tried to encourage residents to go digital and report issues online. A survey they had conducted in August of last year had shown customers preferred contact preference was by telephone. He had previously hoped that by reducing the call handlers it would encourage people to use online services, but this had not proved to be correct. During the Covid period they had taken approximately another 11,000 calls than normal but had not increased the staff answering the calls. If the new survey confirmed that contact by telephone was still the preferred preference, then he assured the Panel that they would increase the call handling staff.

5 **Housing Allocations Policy - Update on roll out of new policy**

The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy gave a presentation providing an update on the roll out of the new Housing Allocations Policy. A copy of the presentation is attached to the signed minutes.

The Chair asked if there was any help for someone applying for a residency, if their first language was not English. The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy confirmed that help would be provided through the use of translation services. In the first instance they would be asked if there was a family member or a support worker who could assist them. There was software on the website which could translate text, in addition to specific translation services the Council could access.

A Member of the Panel complimented the team on the training for which Councillors had received on the new Allocation Policy and application process. He asked about telephone enquiries and what contingency there was for if the service was overwhelmed with phone calls. The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy responded that Wolverhampton Homes had provided additional staff for the process. An additional eight Members of staff were helping to process the applications and would be available on the telephone.

A Panel Member asked how many people were classed as rough sleepers in the City. The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy confirmed that there were currently four.

6 **Housing Strategy - Update on Delivery of Current Priorities**

The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy gave a presentation providing an update on the current priorities within the Housing Strategy. A copy of the presentation is attached to the signed minutes.

The Chair on behalf of the Panel thanked the Service Manager for an interesting and comprehensive presentation.

A Panel Member complimented the Service Manager on some excellent work detailed within the presentation. He asked what measures were being taken to ensure that rough sleeping did not increase following the tremendous efforts to reduce the number during the pandemic and when additional funding made available during the pandemic was reduced. He also referred to the extensive work the Council undertook with partners on ensuring safe and healthy homes. The West Midlands Fire Service were very keen to strengthen links and relationships with partners. The Fire Service were able to conduct Safe and Well visits on vulnerable people's homes. He asked how the Council were working with the Fire Service to help protect people in their homes.

The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy responded that the Council had a Homelessness Prevention Strategy. They had also adopted a Temporary Accommodation Action Plan. This not only looked at the supply of temporary accommodation but also how homelessness could be prevented in the first instance. As part of this action plan they were also looking at the support which was provided to people who were either at risk of homelessness or who were homeless. The highest reason for people in Wolverhampton becoming homeless was the end of private sector tenancies. The second highest reason was related to domestic abuse. They were very active in their work with landlords to try and prevent someone becoming homeless. The team in Wolverhampton Homes that provided housing support was being reviewed and what was proposed for the service in the future would provide greater support before someone had to go into temporary accommodation and further beyond if they did. They were always looking at where improvements could be made and applying for further funding into the future.

The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy stated that she would ensure the Private Sector Housing Team and the Wolverhampton Homes Team, who did outreach into the private sector, were fully aware of the Fire Service's ability to carry out Safe and Well visits. The Panel Member commented that data sharing between organisations was often an obstacle that needed to be overcome. He cited a good example where a Council and the Fire Service had worked well together. This was a Council who wrote to every household who had a bin for medical waste offering them a Safe and Well visit by the Fire Service. In this particular area fires had been reduced by 25%. Engagement with the Fire Service was important to ensure excellent partnership prevention work.

The Vice-Chair asked about the impact of the Rent with Confidence Scheme to date. The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy responded that the Rent with Confidence Scheme had gone through some changes. It had existed in the Council as a programme for approximately four years. The scheme had been reviewed around 18 months ago, this was because they had not had many landlords come forward to be part of the system. They had successfully applied for some funding for the program. They had managed to appoint a new person to manage the new scheme which moved away from individual property ratings. The new scheme was very much at the early stages of launch. They were also looking to start a new landlord forum in the near future, which would probably meet virtually initially. The website would also be launched soon, for which she offered to provide a link, when it was ready.

The Vice-Chair commented that in the private sector housing rented market it was hard to know of the conditions some people were having to live in. He hoped the Rent with Confidence scheme supporting the tenant and landlord, would help the situation. He asked about the environmental impact of building high quality homes and the effect on climate change. He asked if the homes were being built in an environmentally friendly way, if there was a careful choice of materials and the practices on building sites, such as recycling, waste and removal. In addition he asked if the Council were exploring with the private or social sector about building homes in Wolverhampton. Land and capacity were clearly issues.

The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy responded that there was considerable crossover in the points the Vice-Chair had raised, crossing over housing, economics, procurement and employment and skills. On the quality of homes, a considerable amount came down to the planning and building requirements. Within the new Council housing that was built, they built to the standards required but also looked to surpass those standards. They did consider modern methods of construction and passive house (construction concept) development. They were always looking to see how they could make them more future proof and also to improve the existing housing stock and making it more carbon neutral in the future. There were obviously some difficulties in terms of costs and what was aspired. Standards were however definitely increasing. They were always in conversations with procurement about making the best use of local supply chains.

The Vice Chair asked about the Right to Buy Scheme. The deadline for the income generated from Right to Buy had been extended from 3 years to 5 years. He asked how this income was being spent and if the Council was building enough homes with the income. He asked if any income had been lost because the original three year deadline had been exceeded. The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy responded that they used the funding at the moment through the Affordable Housing and Conversion Programme and primarily they bought back former right to buy properties. They did use some of the funds for new builds, but not a great deal. They didn't send any of the money back and also spent it well before the original three year deadline. They were always keen to purchase ground floor flats and four bedroom plus properties or large three bedroom properties that could be made into four bedrooms. They normally purchased about 20-30 places a year. If a property that had been purchased on the Right to Buy scheme, if it was sold within five years, the Council had the right to make an offer to buy the property first. It wasn't an absolute right to buy, but the right to make a first offer.

The Vice-Chair asked about the actions the Council were taking to resolve damp issues within properties and to resolve issues with pests and vermin. The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy responded that the new manager of private sector housing at the Council was very passionate about resolving mold and damp issues. They were working with the University to pro-actively see what actions could be taken in the private housing stock and using enforcement powers.

The Chief Executive of Wolverhampton Homes responded that he had instructed the staff at Wolverhampton Homes to report back any mold or vermin / pest issues that they saw so remedial action could be taken. They had also gone back over every complaint or enquiry about damp and mold in the last twelve months. For any repetitive enquiries they had made a pledge to visit each home to check on the

issues. He was keen to do some research on the matter in homes and was keen to explore the ventilation options available in properties, such as passive ventilation. He suggested that damp and mold could be an area for scrutiny to review in the future.

A Panel Member thanked the team for their work helping people into temporary accommodation and for treating them with care and respect.

A Panel Member asked if there could be an update on any programme to replace roofs in Wolverhampton Homes managed properties and in particular those suffering with damp and poor ventilation. There was one particular household he was aware of that was in particular need. The Chief Executive of Wolverhampton Homes asked for the Panel Member to pass on the details of the particular case. They were going to be conducting some research on one of the homes to see what works could be done in the future.

A Panel Member referred to a Wolverhampton Homes managed property that had been empty for four years due to a defect. She asked if there were many in this situation. The Chief Executive of Wolverhampton Homes responded by asking the Panel Member to pass on the details of the property so he could look into the matter further. There were not many properties in this situation within their housing stock.

7 **Work Programme**

Resolved: That the future work programme for the Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel be agreed.

The Chair on behalf of all the Panel thanked Members and Officers for their contributions.

The meeting closed at 7:42pm.