

Climate Change, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 28 September 2023

Attendance

Members of the Climate Change, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Mary Bateman
Cllr Greg Brackenridge
Cllr Wendy Dalton (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Sally Green
Cllr Stephanie Haynes
Cllr Jeszemma Howl
Cllr Linda Leach
Cllr Barbara McGarrity QN
Cllr Andrew McNeil
Cllr Rohit Mistry
Cllr Anwen Muston (Chair)
Cllr John Reynolds

In Attendance

Representatives from TfWM

Alex Greatholder	Principal Policy and Strategy Officer
David Harris	Transport Strategy and Place Manager

Representatives from Wolverhampton Homes

Julie Haydon	Director - Corporate Services
Ian Gardner	Director of Property Services
Simon Bamfield	Head of Assets and Stock Investment

Employees

Marianne Page	Head of Strategic Transport
Earl Piggott-Smith	Scrutiny Officer
John Roseblade	Director of Resident Services

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 **Welcome and Introduction**
The Acting Chair Cllr Wendy Dalton welcomed everyone to the meeting and advised it was also being live streamed to the press and public. The Acting Chair advised the panel that Chair Cllr Muston had been delayed.

2 **Meeting procedures to be followed**

Cllr Dalton explained the process to be followed during the meeting for asking questions.

3 **Apologies**

The following apologies were received for the meeting:

Cllr Steve Evans, Cabinet Member for City Housing

4 **Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest recorded.

5 **Minutes of the previous meeting (27.6.23)**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 27 June 2023 be approved as a correct record.

6 **West Midlands Local Transport Plan Status - Reimagining transport in the West Midlands**

The Acting Chair invited Alex Greatholder, Principal Policy and Strategy Officer (TfWM) to present the report. The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer advised the panel that David Harris, Transport Strategy and Place Manager, would also be contributing to the presentation.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer advised that the presentation was an update to a report presented to the panel on 3 March 2023 which focused on the Core Strategy in the West Midlands Local Transport Plan (LTP). The LTP sets out what needs to change to achieve a rapid and sustainable shift to more sustainable forms of transport and accessibility across the region.

The LTP Core Strategy places a greater emphasis on acting alongside long-term planning, while also considering the impact on the citizens across the West Midlands region.

The presentation today would cover the overall implementation plan for the LTP and progress on developing four area strategies and key linked work since the Core Strategy was agreed in 2022-2023 and the Government Green Paper was published.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer gave a brief outline of the key principals which have informed the development of the LTP, and how it links to the strategic priorities in the Our City: Our Plan and the 5 Motives for Change document.

There is a statutory requirement to publish a LTP which ensures that the transport needs of Wolverhampton citizens are represented and to support applications to Government for funding for the local transport initiatives.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer advised the panel that the aim of the LTP is to focus on investing in improving accessibility to help people thrive without a car.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer referenced a map of the region showing jobs accessible within 45 mins without a car compared to people with a car, highlighting the number of people who do not have access to a car.

It was reported that between a quarter and a third of households in Wolverhampton have no car at all and other households that have a car but the use of it shared.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer commented on lower levels of car ownership among women, ethnic minorities, and young people. The LTP is aimed at providing investment in alternative transport options to the car for these specific groups who do have this option.

A panel member commented on the colours used in the maps and suggested they should be changed to reflect public understanding where 'green' which is generally understood to be positive rather than 'red' which is negative and help avoid any confusion about the strategy.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer accepted the point and agreed to make the change to avoid possible confusion.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer commented on the aims of the LTP, and core principles and the elements outlined in the inclusive growth diagram which refers to the '5 Motives for Change', for example, sustaining economic success.

These broad goals selected, or 'Motives for Change' have been further refined to three Primary Transport Outcomes to provide a way of assessing progress and impact of the changes.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer commented that the three primary outcomes are improving accessibility, reducing traffic, and electrifying transport to help address the external impacts of transport.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer commented that if these things are being done then this will show that the strategy is on the right track to achieving the priorities in the Our City Our Plan for achieving inclusive growth. The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer gave further details about the plans for improving accessibility between those citizens who do have access to a car and those citizens who don't.

The current work is focused on developing high-level principles and area strategy guidance which will inform the area strategies for each of the authorities across the West Midlands. The guidance will consider the local characteristics of a different places and communities and what actions will be effective.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer commented on the need for the area strategies to be resilient to the level of uncertainty affecting the future of transport, for example, lower or higher levels of transport funding.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer advised the panel that a transport user hierarchy model has been developed to help inform the assessment of the impact of changes in the policy on the lives of different groups. The need to change behaviours without compromising what people can access was highlighted.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer commented on plans to tackle the effects of traffic such as air and noise pollution and road safety for other users. There is an acceptance that electrifying transport, shifting to zero emission vehicles (ZEV) is not going to achieve the objectives in the LTP and that fast action will be needed to identify what can be done in short term to deliver the required level of behaviour change.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer commented on the need for a simultaneous action requiring investment in alternatives to the car, as well as managing demand for the car usage. The progress on reducing managing demand was considered to be limited.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer commented on work done on two future scenarios, where a balanced programme of transport policy initiatives is being delivered locally and nationally that achieves those aspiration levels of service that the public want to see in terms of improvement in connectivity, quality and frequency of services and the alternative where current pressures on public service provision continue.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer commented on the current transport priorities, for example, multi modal corridors, and the key local issues to be considered in relation to these priorities.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer commented on how the LTP is supporting Wolverhampton and consideration has been given to how resilient the proposals might respond to the different scenarios outlined earlier. The LTP document recognises that what might work in one local authority may not work in another area.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer commented on the next steps in the development of the LTP and the key dates to note. The analytical work and area strategy drafting work is expected to be completed in November 2023 and in January 2024 a report on engagement options will be presented to Strategic Transport Board (STB) to consider and approve.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer commented that further timescales for action were dependent on the publication of Government LTP Guidance, which is now expected to be published after the general election. There is relative confidence that the draft LTP will be aligned to government policy guidance when it is published.

The Implementation Plan for the LTP will not be published till after the Mayoral election in May 2024.

The panel were invited to comment on the report.

The Chair thanked the presenter for report and invited panel members to comment on the report.

A panel member acknowledged the complexity of the issue and commented on the risks of reducing car use and the impact of the policy if the expectation is that cars will be cleaner and suggested there is a need to consider a mix of vehicle use.

A panel member queried what consideration has been given in the strategy to impact of the development of new technology and alternative fuels such hydrogen in 20 – 30 years and wanted further details about the broader strategic thinking in the development of the LTP on these issues.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer agreed that the issue is complex which presents a challenge in communicating the ideas in the LTP and there was a need to consider how terms such as managing traffic demand will be perceived by the public.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer commented on the future issues and how this was considered following publication of the Green Paper in 2021 and the

acceptance of the different ways of transporting people. There is acceptance that the transition from one method of transport to another will be painful as it will involve change. The reduction in traffic is a core pillar of achieving inclusive growth and this links to work being done to improve accessibility, reduce traffic, and electrify transport. The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer commented on the importance of communication and the challenge in articulating the choices and the consequences of these decisions. The LTP does pick up on future changes in the green transport revolution and new innovations.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer commented on the how climate change declaration has affected the focus of thinking to act sooner rather than later to meet the objectives in the LTP.

A panel member welcomed the plan and highlighted the range of benefits of having a good coordinated public transport network supported by the long-term strategic investment in other European countries such as Spain, Portugal, Italy, France.

A panel member highlighted the issue of poor bus provision in terms of frequency and the cancellation of services to areas outside of Wolverhampton. The alternative public transport option would involve a longer travelling time compared the bus option.

A panel member welcomed the document which sets out the framework for the plan to achieve the goals but was concerned about the lack of detail in the report about how this would be done.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer apologised the lack of detail and responded that the detail content was not available when the document was drafted. However, the work on drafting the area strategy guidance is expected to be completed in November 2023 which will give more details.

A panel member queried if the decision to develop a Black Country LTP was a top-down decision and the highlighted the smaller areas covered by other local authorities which have their own individual plans for their area. The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer reassured that the panel that the service has been working with the local authorities across the region based on developing a Black Country Area Strategy guidance. There have ongoing conversations with colleagues in Wolverhampton, Walsall, Dudley, and Sandwell to pick up local issues.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer commented on the advantages of developing a Black Country plan based on the individual areas strategic plans, for example, sharing the challenge about the differences between the local authority areas and help support more collective thinking about the issues.

Marianne Page, Head of Strategic Transport, offered reassurance in response to the concerns made that Wolverhampton intends to develop its own Local Transport Plan which will provide an interpretation of the issues and how they will be addressed. The report will be shared with the panel at a future meeting.

A panel member acknowledged that the report was a high-level strategic document and supported the principals outlined but wanted further details about the financial costs to residents and the benefits of transport plans being considered to change the way people travel. The panel member also queried how current plans have

considered the recent impact nationally of public response to encourage a change in car usage such as the extension of ULEZ in London, and the national policy Government changes such as the delay in the timeline for proposed ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel cars from 2030 to 2035.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer welcomed the comments and advised the panel it is difficult to provide the level of detail required without information about the level of funding. The plan is based on the past resources and what is considered to be a plausible future in terms of the resources that will be available to help get back on track towards the climate change targets.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer commented on the work being done to interpret the proposed changes, specifically the delay in banning of the sale of diesel and petrol vehicles. However, the mandate for manufactures to stop producing vehicles has not changed.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer acknowledged the uncertainty created by the announcement and the effect on the case to be made by the region for funding to Government in the future and the possible impact on the views of the public.

A panel member welcomed priority to be given to people who either walk or use cycles in reference to the Transport for West Midlands Sustainable Transport User Hierarchy diagram. The panel member queried how peoples methods travel has changed since the pandemic and how this has been factored into the assumptions made about the future transport trends.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer commented that changes in behaviour in terms of home working and less commuting has affected thinking about the issue highlighted, for example the past focus on the commute as a key cause of traffic congestion at peak times. The development has led to a broader re-think about the reasons behind why people travel and the need to update current assumptions about transport models used to predict changes. The Principal Policy Officer added that there is acceptance of the need to think more about people's changing travel needs.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer highlighted the impact of the pandemic on public transport bus and rail usage, which has not recovered to the levels pre-pandemic, compared to road traffic which has been increasing. There was specific concern that bus use is about 80 to 90% of pre COVID levels which has occurred at a time of extra operating costs which has put the bus network under further financial pressure.

A panel expressed concern about the lowest priority being given in the Transport User Hierarchy to motor traffic and the impact of current parking restrictions on local business getting their goods delivered on the financial viability of businesses and the city centre if shoppers are encouraged not to use their cars.

There was also concern about the impact in the reduction in bus service provision on residents and local businesses.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer commented that the hierarchy diagram in the slide is intended to act as a guidance tool to help people to think about the impact of the suggested ideas on supporting behaviour changes and reducing the possible negative effects in the long term.

The Principal Policy and Strategy Officer reassured the panel that plan will also consider the impact on shoppers, businesses, and that the position of car users in the table does not mean that their needs will not be considered in the plan, but priority will be given to people who have less choice about their travel options.

The Principal Policy Officer and Strategy Officer commented that the reference to blue badge users is in recognition that the needs of disabled people and people with non-visible disabilities should be considered before other car users and to think about how people with a disability might be supported to use other forms of transport.

The panel thanked the presenters for the report.

Resolved:

1. The Principal Policy Officer and Strategy Officer to provide responses to queries from the panel about the Local Transport Plan in the next 10 days.
2. The panel comments on the West Midlands Local Transport Plan to be considered.

7

Wolverhampton Homes - Customer Engagement - briefing

The Chair invited Julie Haydon, Director - Corporate Services (Wolverhampton Homes), to present the report.

The Director commented that the presentation will provide an update on the development of the customer services offer that is being addressed in collaboration with the overall city approach and supports the delivery of the City of Wolverhampton Council's Resident Insight Strategy.

The Director commented on the major changes in housing regulations in response to Grenfell and the Awaab Ishak reviews and the publication of the Social Housing Green Paper (2018).

The Government published the Social Housing White Paper – Charter for Social Housing Residents (2020) which sets out the how it plans to ensure that residents feel safe, have a voice, live in good quality homes, and know how to raise complaints.

The Director commented that there is an ongoing commitment to review how services are delivered and to engage positively with customers while looking at identifying efficiencies and new ways of working in response to changes in customer demand.

The Director commented on the background to the development of the city's Resident Influence and Insight Strategy and progress to date. The strategy sets out a vision for resident engagement which aligns to the priorities of the current Housing Strategy "Better Homes for All" - in particular, the objective of a safe and healthy home.

The Director commented that although work is ongoing, the Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 has strengthened powers and all social housing providers must work with tenants and regularly consider ways to improve and tailor their approach to delivering landlord services including tenant engagement.

The Director highlighted that a key outcome from a recent survey there was a clear indication (some 70+%) that customers wanted to be able to contact the service by phone.

The Director commented on the link between housing provision and the core strategic aims of the Council and the added value that it brings to the City of Wolverhampton Council (CWC) and local communities. The range of services delivered by Wolverhampton Homes reflects the changes in the customer base and this has led to a greater understanding of the different needs which will help shape and improve the offer in the future.

The Director commented that in a survey carried out by CWC, it was highlighted that in general for all CWC services, residents felt there was not sufficient engagement. The CWC has highlighted this is a priority for action. In response to this CWC undertook a series of consultation events, online and in person events to discuss how services are provided across all managing agents.

The aim was to develop an agreed approach as part of an overarching strategy for managing agents to tenant and leaseholder engagement.

The Director commented that the feedback had noted a more joined up approach between CWC and the managing agents, highlighting the different policies, for example, grounds maintenance. The issue of ground maintenance contract arrangements had been identified by the Cabinet Member as an example, and there was support from Wolverhampton Homes, wherever possible, that a One City approach to delivering an improved customer service in adopted.

The Director gave details of different customer engagement activity and the work being done to improve communication and to better understand the diverse needs of customers.

The Director outlined details of the aims of the customer engagement strategy and specific actions linked to the key commitments to involve customers in decision making at Wolverhampton Homes. In addition, there has been other research done to consider the behaviours and needs of customers thinking about their individual needs for example in relation for example to the protected characteristics listed in the Equality Act 2010. The research work has provided valuable information that will help the service to better tailor its services to meet these individual needs rather than offering blanket provision of services to customers.

The Director commented the service is keen to continue to develop the current digital offer in terms of how customers contact Wolverhampton Homes and highlighted the benefits of speeding up processes for example, for reporting repairs online or using mobile technology. The benefit of this approach will see services for customers who prefer digital for that to be better, but also with the added benefit of releasing resource to support others who cannot or prefer not to use digital services and would want to speak to a representative of Wolverhampton Homes.

The Director commented on the findings from a tenant satisfaction survey in 2022-2023 which has formed some of the insight being used to drive changes in the service and gave examples of work done to improve levels of customer engagement.

The Director commented on the process for developing the customer contact strategy which is aimed at creating opportunities for ensuring the voice of more customers is heard and embracing customer involvement in decision making across the organisation. The aim will be to continue building up on existing work and reviewing how current resources are being used to respond the needs of customers.

The Director commented on the current work of Homes and Communities in providing a presence in the community with tenancy officers working in area.

The vision is to have the ability, where required, to see customers in the community – for those for example who may not be able to travel or who can't use digital methods to talk about issues. It should be noted that this does already happen. The Director commented on the work being done in collaboration with CWC to use community hub network sites or Councillor surgery sessions and the customer panels to involve customers in the co-production of policies using the expertise of Councillors to support this work.

There are specialist teams dedicated to offer face to face advice and support locally. The positive work of the Money Smart team (Wolverhampton Homes) over the past 12 months was highlighted as example of supporting customers. There are also two members of Wolverhampton Homes based at the Civic Centre who can offer face to face advice and support to customers. WH currently see around 90 enquiries a week with the vast majority related to issues to do with homelessness and lettings. The average wait time for customers in the Civic Centre is around nine minutes. There is a commitment to maintain the current level of resource and to consider providing surgery type events, similar to the CWC.

The Director commented on the performance of the service against KPI targets and highlighted the high levels of customer satisfaction scores when people speak to a member of the contact centre, while accepting the struggle to meet the KPI standards for answering customer calls. The Director commented on the ongoing plans to improve the situation, which has already seen a vast improvement with call waiting times being reduced, with additional staff being recruited.

The panel were invited to comment on the report.

A panel member queried plans for using libraries or community centres to provide local venues for customer in addition to existing offer from Community Hub sites. The Director advised the panel that there are discussions ongoing with the Council and other agencies about extending the offer to other venues. In addition, tenancy officers are already being used to provide access for customers wanting a face-to-face meeting.

The Director added that Wolverhampton Homes is investigating how, by investing in technology customers can call in and schedule a meeting at more convenient location across the City that better meet their needs.

A panel member queried the days that Wolverhampton Homes would have a representative at the Civic Centre.

The Director advised the panel the service is currently available daily between 10am and 3pm and the analysis of data about the types of enquiries will be used to help shape the service in the future.

A panel member shared concerns about the need to escalate issues to a senior manager in Wolverhampton Homes on behalf of residents rather getting them earlier resolved earlier with the tenancy officer. The importance of offering face-to-face contacts was highlighted, particularly for people who are vulnerable and are not comfortable contacting the service online or by telephone.

The value of tenants and residents' association groups was highlighted as a good way of communicating with tenants. A panel member wanted evidence to be presented to a future meeting showing the impact of the changes detailed in the presentation aimed at increasing customer engagement and satisfaction with the service.

The Director reassured the panel that the service is aware of those areas highlighted and that work is ongoing to address each of them. Work is ongoing in relation to association groups etc., and opportunities for tenants to be involved in various ways – not only Tenants and Residents Associations. The Director offered to attend future meetings of the panel to give regular updates on progress. The Director accepted that Councillors should not have to involve senior directors to get issues resolved on behalf of residents and that data analysis will help to improve the service and identify ward specific issues.

A panel member commented on long telephone waiting times and residents being disconnected without being able to report a housing issue, which has led to frustration about the situation. A panel member queried what advice given to residents on managing properties with damp.

The Director advised the panel that Wolverhampton Homes has recently appointed three Healthy Homes Advisors to support tenants with advice about managing damp in their home and proactively engaging with them on housing issues.

The Director commented that staffing levels in the customer contact centre has increased from 23 to 30 and the situation is being kept under constant review. There has been an improvement in reducing call waiting times and this has been made available in the Annual Report. The Director offered to share the latest results with the panel and advised that subject matter experts were available to deal with customer queries such as repairs. The repairs team is co-located with the contact centre staff. A high percentage of calls to the contact centre relate to property repairs.

A panel member commented about the lack of detail in the data on call waiting times and call abandonment rates which have been raised previously and expressed concern about the poor performance of the customer contact centre. The panel member queried the work being done to bring the necessary change in culture of the organisation and the measures being used to assess the effectiveness of the service.

The Director commented in response that the presentation set out a programme of work that is being undertaken that has seen significant improvements. This programme of work continues and focuses on reviewing how Wolverhampton Homes works and delivers its services.

A key part of the programme is the recent investment in customer services training for staff which has started in the customer contact centre. The training will then be rolled out across the service.

This work also sees the continual review of call waiting times, abandonment rates and the use of digital to support some of the transformation.

In response to the raft of new regulations there has been a programme of development for all managers to help improve the service. The Director added that there are monthly meetings with heads of service across to review the complaints and feedback from customers about the service and to ensure that learning from complaints for example is embedded into the business. The information is used to review current processes and redesign services where required.

The Director offered to provide statistics on call waiting times and abandonment rates for the customer contact centre to a future meeting. The Director commented that the findings from a customer services survey before the pandemic which reported that about around 73 per cent of customers wanted to be contacted by phone – but it is important that the phones are answered in a timely manner. Training and awareness raising with the team has been delivered to support improvements to the service.

The Director commented on the recruitment challenges and labour shortages that are current for the UK, and these of course challenge WH however, there is a regular programme of recruitment activity and adverts.

The Director commented on the improvement in reducing call waiting times. The average call wait time is now around 7 minutes compared to around 32 minutes for the same period last year.

The Director commented that call abandonment rate are monitored – and this can be increased on occasion, for example because of efforts to direct customer service calls to online support services to have their enquiry resolved, i.e., lettings and repairs.

A panel member queried the method used to engage with residents as part of the customer services survey. The Director advised the panel that face to face, telephone and online methods were used – these were based on industry norms and WH had seen a very good response to recent surveys. There was a higher response to the online survey.

A panel member expressed concern about the use of apps and online methods to consult and communicate with residents and highlighted the challenges to people who may be visually impaired and older people who still prefer face to face contact. There was also concern about the suitability of venues for engagement who may be unable to travel and queried how the views of this group would be collected.

The Director commented that there is a commitment from Wolverhampton Homes to increase the way employee resources are available in the community - to meet the needs of people who want face to face contact. Face to face contact is available now and is utilised.

The service will also be working with colleagues in the Housing Strategy team to share information and intelligence to help better understand the health concerns of customers. The Director offered to present details on the communication plan to a future meeting of the panel.

A panel member highlighted previous concerns about the reference to 'customers' in reports from Wolverhampton Homes and suggested that the term should be replaced with 'residents' to reflect the fundamental difference between it and companies with a commercial ethos. The importance of listening to the voice of residents was highlighted and this issue was also identified in the findings from the Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety: Hackitt review where concerns of residents about building safety were not properly acted upon.

It is recognised that for Wolverhampton Homes, there are customers of the service, and tenants, however, comments were noted from the panel member. Also work is underway to recruit the Customer Influence Panel that will develop the customer voice, in accordance with the City's strategy.

There was concern from the panel that the long call waiting times to customer services was resulting in more enquiries to local councillors who were able to contact senior key people at Wolverhampton Homes directly to get the issue resolved on behalf of the resident.

The Director assured the panel of the work underway to continue to reduce call waiting times.

A panel member wanted better liaison with local ward councillors in advance when tenancy officers are planning walk around the housing estates to provide the opportunity for them to attend to report issues of concern. A panel member suggested the use of interpreters would be helpful when meeting residents.

John Roseblade, Director of Resident Services, advised the panel that a report was presented to Scrutiny Board on proposed changes to the management relationship arrangements between the Council and Wolverhampton Homes. The Director commented on the improvements in the repairs housing maintenance and tenant satisfaction rates and how favourably Wolverhampton Homes compares nationally.

The Director, Corporate Services, thanked the panel for the comments on the report and presentation and acknowledged the comments made. The Director commented on the benefits of using technology and the plans of the city's digital strategy, and reassured the panel that the option for face-to face contact would continue and the service would continue to work with partners to make best use of local resources.

The Director noted the comment about notifying Cllrs about planned visits by tenancy officers and reaffirmed the commitment to ensure staff fully understand that the customer voice is key in developing services.

The Director added that this approach was being done with councillors and members of the Homes and Communities team.

The Chair thanked the presenter for the report.

Resolved

1. The panel agreed that a six-month progress report on the customer engagement strategy be presented to a future meeting.
2. The panel comments on the report and presentation to be noted and information requested shared when available.

8 **Wolverhampton Homes – Building and Asbestos Safety**

The Chair invited Ian Gardner, Director of Property Services, to present the report.

The Director thanked the Chair for giving the opportunity to brief the panel on building safety and offered to attend a future meeting to if there were any specific areas that panel members would like further information.

The Director highlighted the background to the Building Safety Act 2022 which was introduced following the Grenfell Enquiry, which seeks to address some historical issues with the application of building regulations and building control. The act also now provides some limited financial protection for leaseholders living in relevant buildings with defects, new safety management arrangements for higher risk buildings and new resident engagement requirements.

The Director commented on the creation of the Building Safety Regulator and the following national advisory committees and the implications for housing providers:

- Building Advisory
- Industry Competence
- Residents Panel

The new Building Safety Regulator and the committees will be providing further guidance that will need to be incorporated into current policies and procedures.

The Director commented on three new 'Gateways' within the Building Safety Act 2022 and gave examples of activity in each of the areas:

- Planning Permission
- Pre-Construction
- Completion

The Director commented on further changes to the Fire Safety Regulations which came into force on 23 January 2023. The regulations introduce new safety measures for buildings over 11 meters tall. The regulations also introduce additional requirements for sharing information with residents, monthly inspections, improved signage, and a specific requirement for inspecting flat entrance doors and communal fire doors.

The Director commented that Wolverhampton Homes and the Council has been very proactive since Grenfell in undertaking work to improve fire safety measures and delivering on the Council's commitment to installing fire sprinklers in the high-rise blocks, which remains a priority. The retrofitting of sprinklers in high rise buildings is not currently mandated however there is a strong commitment by the Council to do this work.

The Director commented on specific work to improve fire safety in communal areas and the entrances to flats, including annual inspections of flat entrance doors and quarterly inspections of fire doors in communal areas.

The Director commented that there is a rolling programme of work to improve the infrastructure of buildings, for example, replacing electrical wiring to reduce the risk of fire and to bring them up to date with modern standards. In addition, work is also being done at the same time to improve the look of the communal areas by making them brighter and cleaner to help people feel safer.

The Director commented on progress with the building safety enhancement programme and advised that the overall infrastructure programme will see 2,165 homes benefiting from building safety work and complete the sprinkler installation work by 2028.

The Director advised the panel of the investment over the past 12 months to build and develop the new internal Building Safety Team to help the service meet its duties arising from the Building Safety Act 2022 and other legislation and guidance. The Director outlined the independent role of the team and the Building Safety Manager who attends the Fire and Building Safety Committee and has also responsibility for the management and scrutiny of work done by contractors.

The role of the Building Safety Team is to also ensure Wolverhampton Homes takes a holistic approach in design specification and to oversee remedial actions identified in the fire risk assessments and to undertake person centred fire risk assessments in response to a fire incident.

The Building Safety Team is also responsible for arranging a range of building safety focused resident engagement events that Julie Haydon referred to earlier in the presentation customer engagement work. The Director commented that while the level engagement with customers has been good there is acceptance of the need for more work to increase attendance at some of the forum events and ensure all residents have a range of opportunities to be involved with the management of building safety issues affecting their home.

The Director advised panel about a targeted communications campaign to support the core objectives from the 2023 – 2024 WH Business, for example, ensuring WH complies with all relevant health and safety compliance requirements. The Director gave details of a fire safety campaign, which is supported by a website which includes BSL videos provided by West Midlands Fire Service (WMFS) and the service continually promote messages about fire safety as part of the community engagement work led by the Building Safety Team. An analysis of website traffic shows an increase of almost 300 per cent in traffic to the main Fire Safety page during the 13-week campaign period which was welcomed.

The Director added that colleagues from WMFS have worked directly with customers with hearing impairments and the service has promoted national safety campaigns such as National Sprinkler Week 2023. The Building Safety Team has received positive feedback from customers and have responded positively to concerns raised about building or fire safety issues, for example, pushchairs blocking stairways.

The Director commented on the importance of resident engagement in supporting the work of the Building Safety Team. Wolverhampton Homes is working with representatives of Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) on a national project involving landlords covering almost 500,000 homes. The aim of the project is to develop best practice for resident engagement.

The first meeting of the group was attended by Simon Bamfield, Head of Assets and Stock Investment and the work links to the wider customer engagement work of Wolverhampton Homes with people whose first language is not English.

The Director added that there are 80 different languages spoken across the City and 27 languages spoken in 44 high rise blocks and highlighted the importance of ensuring people are heard and communicated effectively

The Director also gave an update on work done to manage asbestos and the summary of Wolverhampton Homes achievements against the 'Big 6' measures outlined in the presentation - Gas, Electrical, Lifts, Water Hygiene, Asbestos and Fire safety.

The Director gave details of a new compliance management software system which will provide more timely and accurate reporting against targets and required standards. A specialist external third-party consultant has recently been appointed to review current Wolverhampton Homes systems and procedures to help identify any further improvements needed.

The panel were invited to comment and ask questions about the presentation.

The Chair queried if any of the buildings managed by Wolverhampton Homes were affected the issue of Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) concrete. The Director advised the panel that when the issue was recently reported in the press Wolverhampton Homes reviewed systems and its stock data.

The Director reassured the panel that there was no evidence of the use of RAAC in any of Wolverhampton Homes properties. The Director added that at a national meeting the issue of RAAC was discussed. The panel were reassured that Wolverhampton Homes is collaborating with other landlords and sharing information about the issue where this material has been identified. If another landlord identifies a particular build type where RAAC is suspected or the guidance changes, then this will trigger further investigations, but the current assessment is that the level of risk is very low in the Council's housing stock.

The Chair queried if information on fire safety published by WMFS is available on the website is also available people who want a paper copy. The Director reassured the panel that Wolverhampton Homes has written to residents with details about how to contact the Building Safety Team and accepts the engagement strategy is based on proactively engaging with residents using a range of methods, for example, notice boards, and community groups to get the message out.

A panel member wanted to record their praise to Wolverhampton Homes and commented that in role as Chair of West Midlands Fire Authority the feedback from fire safety officers is that Wolverhampton Homes is considered to set the gold standard locally and national for its performance on building safety. A panel member queried with reference to the installation of sprinklers if they would use hardwired fire detection systems, a recommendation of the Independent Review of Building Regulations and Fire Safety: Hackitt review.

Simon Bamfield - Head of Assets and Stock Investment, reassured the panel that this work has been done before the Council approved the installation of sprinklers. These blocks will however be completed retrospectively.

A panel member recommended WMFS website page on fire safety advice which can be translated into 150 languages be added to the Wolverhampton Homes fire safety website to promote it further.

A panel member commented on the engagement work referred to in the presentation and wanted reassurance that this would be more than giving information on fire safety and would be proper consultation with residents on proposals from Wolverhampton Homes.

The Head of Assets and Stock Investment reassured the panel that the consultation would be meaningful resident engagement in decision making process to help shape the work being done. The service acknowledged the importance of capturing local intelligence on building safety matter from residents and the service gets regular feedback on issue of concern.

John Roseblade, Director of Director of Resident Services, reassured the panel that building safety matters are essential work. The Director added that the Council has invested heavily to support this work and there were funds in the HRA budget which was sufficient to address any outstanding building safety issues. The Director reiterated the previous comment about the consistently strong performance of Wolverhampton Homes against the 'Big 6' measures.

The panel thanked the presenters for the report and presentation and congratulated the service on the performance.

Resolved:

1. The panel agreed to receive a progress report in September 2024 to update on building and asbestos safety performance as part of a wider Wolverhampton Homes report.

9 **Climate Change, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Panel - Draft Work Programme 2023-2024**

The Chair commented that the next meeting of the panel is scheduled for 19 October 2023 is an extra meeting to discuss the issue of climate change. The presentation will focus on the policies of the Council.

The Chair commented that an extra meeting has been planned for March 2024 for a report on Wolverhampton Homes communication and engagement strategy.

The Scrutiny Officer invited member comments on the draft programme. There was concern expressed about the number of items on the agenda for 16 November 2023.

The Scrutiny Officer suggested the item on fly tipping be considered as an item at the meeting on 19 October 2023 to help manage the work programme agenda.

The panel discussed the idea of inviting the Police and Crime Commissioner to a future meeting and agreed to enquire about this further.

Resolved:

1. The panel agreed to add the agenda item of fly tipping to the panel meeting on 19 October 2023.
2. The Scrutiny Officer to invite the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner to a future meeting of the panel.

3. The panel agreed to add an extra date to the work programme in March 2024 to consider a report on Wolverhampton Homes communication and engagement strategy.