

Resources and Equality Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 1 February 2024

Attendance

Members of the Resources and Equality Scrutiny Panel

Cllr John Reynolds (Chair)
Cllr Tersaim Singh
Cllr Ellis Turrell
Cllr Greg Brackenridge
Cllr Qaiser Azeem
Cllr Ciaran Brackenridge
Cllr Sohail Khan (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Lamina Lloyd
Cllr Alan Butt

In Attendance

Cllr Obada Ahmed

Employees

Richard Lawrence (Director of Regeneration)
Julia Nock (Deputy Director of Assets)
Stuart Rutherford (Head of Assets)
Heather Clarke (Head of External Funding and
Projects)
Lee Booker (Scrutiny Officer)

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 **Welcome and Introductions**
Members of the Panel were welcomed to the meeting.
- 2 **Meeting procedures to be followed**
Meeting procedures were explained to the Panel.
- 3 **Apologies and Substitutions**
Apologies were received from Cllr Russell.
- 4 **Declarations of interest**
There were no declarations of interest.

5 **Minutes of previous meeting**

The minutes from the meeting held on 7 December 2023 were approved as a true and correct record.

6 **Digital Wolves Strategy Update**

The Cabinet Member for Digital and Community Inclusion opened the presentation, Driven by Digital was a key plan for the City, and they had formed a digital Wolverhampton Partnership to deliver this.

The Head of External Funding and Digital Projects summarised the revised Digital Strategy adopted by the Council on 23rd March 2022 with aims to make Wolverhampton a gigabit and smart city, to ensure all residents had access to devices, connectivity and skills, and to grow the digital economy and talent pool. Progress on fixed infrastructure was: gigabit broadband connectivity increased from 2% in 2020 to 94.61% in 2023, full fibre broadband increased from 1% in 2020 to 72% in 2023, Wolverhampton had moved from lowest full fibre coverage in the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) to second highest. The roll out would include civil works on the highways as well as an increase in using existing ducts and overhead cables. Demand for mobile connectivity was increasing year on year with 21% of residents accessing the internet via smart phone. 60% of the City was covered with 5G network, the highest in the WMCA and one of the highest areas outside of London. They had a device lending scheme, set up in 2020, since then they had provided 3300 devices and supported over 7000 members to get online via 3 schemes. They provided this through 75 partners and they also had a device recycling scheme which provided donated devices to children. The Mayor had hosted a 100% digital wolves celebration event by 58 trusted departments and volunteers who worked to deliver the policy. They had developed technology and sensors to help supported living (such as sensors to monitor damp and mould), environmental sensors in bins and to track fly tippers, air quality monitoring systems and football counters in the City centre. Smart bins saw a 50% reduction in unnecessary labour time, as only bins which were full, triggered the sensor for a collection and bin change.

The Vice-Chair referred to page 33 and wanted to know what the time frame was for the quoted 223 residents which benefitted from the “digital bootcamp”.

The Head of External Funding and Digital said that she hadn't included in the report all of the training available, and had focused on high level bootcamp courses only. She said other courses supported starter level digital training. She said the training was over a 2 year period, she said the proportion of residents taking the training had doubled over 2 years for the higher level bootcamp training. The Trusted partner worked with those who were digitally disadvantaged.

The Vice-Chair requested that next time the report was brought to the Panel, for it to include figures of people the Council had directly helped gain access to the internet. He also wanted data for ward by ward mapping to be brought next time to show where the support was being provided to. The Head of External Funding and Digital said they had the information and could provide it after the meeting.

The Vice-Chair highlighted the levels of poverty in the City and wanted to know if the private companies taking up service provision for newer speed internet were offering competitive and fair rates that people with less money could afford, to avoid exclusion. He wanted to know what the Council could do to influence this.

The Head of External Funding and Digital said the Council offered social-tariffs for people who were on benefits. She said if a person could no longer afford their broadband connection, they could be moved onto social tariffs and the service provider had to do this automatically for them. She said they had been working with West Midlands 5G, who were developing a social tariff toolkit to be distributed by the Council's communications department to promote social tariffs in the near future.

The Councillor stated the social tariff information wasn't listed on the Council website. The Head of External Funding and Digital replied that they would ensure the social tariff information was on the website and that she would also speak to their contact on City Fibre to promote it better.

A Member of the Panel stated that he felt the City was still catching up with some of the big providers in regards to the services offered. He wanted to know how people could get affordable fibre who were not eligible for social tariff support. The Head of External Funding and Digital responded that encouraging competition between different providers was the best way to bring the prices down.

A Councillor asked what they were doing for people who were not tech confident and did not use the internet. The Head of External Funding and Digital stated that the reason they had trusted partners as part of their scheme was because they worked with and encouraged people who were not tech confident to get into using services.

A Councillor praised the efforts done by the Council to increase the higher speed network coverage across the City. She felt the Council needed to be promoting the successful work they had done more.

A Councillor stated he was supportive of the rollout and support provided. However, he also wanted to raise cybersecurity, as he felt this was fundamental to protecting people, he wanted to know what was being done in this area. The Chair added that he wanted to know if those who were being helped to get online for the first time and/or being provided devices when they previously did not have them, were being prepared with any cybersecurity to support to avoid phishing scams. The Head of External Funding and Digital replied that technology they were requiring would be specified to have cybersecurity systems built into them. She said they had discussed scams with their trusted partner network, as scams were becoming more prevalent. They were getting materials and training for people around security to deliver through partners.

The Chair asked if they had worked out the life time environmental impact of installing 5G networks and fibre networks compared to previous networks. The Head of External Funding and Digital said that 5G used less energy than previous networks. She said the opportunities came with the technologies which reduced the use of transport, reduced congestion, as well as the bin sensors reducing bin collections. This meant lower levels of carbon released into the air.

The Chair wanted to clarify if the bins were street bins or domestic bins. The Head of External Funding and Digital said the system was specific to street bins. She explained that full bins were prioritised for collection based off of the sensors information.

The Chair wanted to know if City centre broadband for business had been upgraded and improved, as businesses had reported issues in the past with connectivity. The Head of External Funding and Digital said it had been partially sorted. She said there were parts of the City which were now connected but other areas were still not, due to public realm works.

The Chair replied that it sounded like the issues were still unresolved. The Head of External Funding and Digital said she would speak to a colleague who had been dealing with the local full fibre project to get information for the Panel on which areas had been connected and which areas had not been connected.

The Director of Regeneration said it was crucial they futureproofed the City's digital infrastructure.

Resolved: An update from the team to come back to the Panel in 12 months on Digital Wolves Strategy.

The Deputy Director of Assets stated that the new Strategic Asset Plan would be launched at the end of the calendar year. The previous 5-year plan was coming to an end, the world had changed so they needed to develop a new plan for the future. She hoped the Panel would endorse the plans laid to them for the Strategy.

The Head of Assets stated that the Strategic Asset Plan included: An Asset Policy, an Asset Strategy and an Action Plan. 2018 to 2023 was coming to an end, and they would be initiating the 2024 – 2029 plan. The City Assets team were currently reviewing data on Council assets which would inform the new Strategic Asset Plan. They were currently weighing up where demands were from the public, which would inform how they used their assets for service provision. The Policy would support the plan by looking at regeneration or income generating options, how assets could be used to support local communities, ensure assets would meet demographic requirements, to support and assist families. They would be reviewing their data and placing the status of their assets on a financial horizon graph, which would indicate the health of City assets. The Head of Assets hoped this would be done by the summer of 2024. He stated that managing the data would be a challenge due to the size of assets being managed, the plan would enable them to locate losses and make savings, as well as understand future challenges and inform the Medium-Long Term Financial Strategy. The Strategic Asset plan was due to be completed in December 2024.

The Vice-Chair wanted to know how they would ensure best value for the Council in the management of assets, be they maintained with rent or sold off. He wanted to know what mechanisms would be in place to ensure those who were using Council assets to deliver services to the community were delivering value for money to the Council.

The Head of Assets stated they would be using a benchmarking system where assets were logged and community well being assessments were rated; these would be put up against costs to the Council. This would allow them to measure outcomes.

The Vice-Chair wanted to know if the Council knew which buildings they owned and were responsible for, citing issues in the past where it took months for the Council to find out if a building belonged to them. The Deputy Director stated they knew which assets they had done a community asset transfer on, but felt they could be better at sharing the information. They had a public asset mapping system. She stated she would share to the Panel a list of the assets they had transferred to the community until the date of the meeting using this system. She also stated she would look into how they could better share that information with Councillors in the future.

The Vice-Chair wanted them to implement a review process for high value assets which assessed whether their sale, transfer or other usage had been beneficial to the Council in the long run. The Head of Assets welcomed the suggestion and stated they were looking at improving their business case process.

A Councillor wanted to know what the Council's policy approach was to assets it owned outside of the City boundaries. The Head of Assets stated he was not aware of any assets owned outside of the City boundaries but stated pensions may have money generating assets outside of the City. He said he would speak to them and provide a list via email.

The Chair stated he thought the Council needed to look at the condition of schools in Wolverhampton. He said when they reviewed the plan, he wanted them to ensure it was to be done with a joined-up approach. He cited issues where different pieces of land next to each other were sold at different times and were developed on unevenly. He wanted to ensure a more coherent approach to land being sold off. The Chair wanted to know if this was the future approach. The Head of Assets confirmed that a joined-up approach was the future plan they were adopting.

A Councillor stated he felt they should approach open spaces and consider what they could be used for before locking them off as open spaces. The Head of Assets agreed and said the new

plan and data gathering would allow them to have better oversight of assets and they would then be able to bring them to Council for direction of useage.

A Member of the Panel said she was concerned community spaces or assets were going to be sold off for short term financial gain at the cost of the loss of spaces for the community in the future. She also wanted to know if Wolverhampton Homes had found more deeds, as she said they had lost a lot of them. The Head of Assets said he could not speak for Wolverhampton Homes and could not answer that query. He said in regard to community assets, his team provided recommendations but the decision was ultimately down the Council.

The Deputy Director of Assets said it was important to note that whilst assets were sold off, they were also investing in new assets too.

A Councillor stated safe and secure buildings were also a necessity. He said when the plan would be looked at, he wanted to ensure the plan took into account fire safety, materials to deter fire, inbuilt sprinklers etc.