

## 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 Jeszemma Howl  
Cllr Linda Leach  
Cllr Barbara McGarrity QN  
Cllr Andrew McNeil  
Cllr Anwen Muston (Chair)

### In Attendance

Craig John Collingswood	Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change
Julie Haydon	Director Corporate Services - Wolverhampton Homes
Shaun Aldis	Chief Executive - Wolverhampton Homes

### Employees

Perminder Balu	Head of Green Cities and Circular Economy
David Pattison	Chief Operating Officer
Earl Piggott-Smith	Scrutiny Officer
Martin Stevens	Scrutiny Team Leader

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## Part 1 – items open to the press and public

*Item No.*    *Title*

- Welcome and Introduction**  
Cllr Anwen Muston, Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting and advised it was also being live streamed to the press and public
- Apologies**  
Apologies were received from the following members of the panel:  
  
Cllr John Reynolds  
Cllr Rohit Mistry  
Cllr Stephanie Haynes
- Declarations of interest**  
There were no declarations of interest recorded.

4 **Minutes of the previous meeting (22 February 2024) - to follow**

5 **Wolverhampton Homes – Customer contact and access**

The Chair invited Julie Haydon, Director Corporate Services, to present the briefing and the presentation to the panel.

The Director advised the panel that the briefing would provide an update in relation to the Wolverhampton Homes customer contact and access arrangements for tenants, leaseholders, and residents/non-city residents who access its services.

The Director advised the panel that following an earlier report on improvements to customer communication service report presented in September 2023, it was agreed that an update on progress would be presented after six months.

The Director outlined the recommendations and key questions for the panel to consider at the end of the presentation.

The Director gave a summary of the specific areas of concern and challenge and the development of the improvement plan which is considered to be proportionate.

The Director highlighted examples of current and future planned improvements and key achievements and progress on the three areas of concern raised at the meeting in September 2023.

The Director commented that Wolverhampton Homes continues to work closely with colleagues in the Housing Strategy Team to ensure that the offer to customers is consistent. The service has a presence in person at the Civic Centre working alongside colleagues the Council's customer services team. The Director commented that the initiative has been successful and has had positive feedback from people who have used the service.

The Director advised the panel of progress made following the publication in 2023 of the Corporate Social Responsibility Strategy which gives all employees the opportunity to take two days a year to support local community activities, such as clearing gardens. In total 54 volunteers have volunteered for the first round. The Director commented on the success of initiatives such as 'Money Smart' which provide food bank referrals and hardship payments. In total 400 hardship payments have been made to date and 1400 referrals have been made in the last three months.

The Director outlined future planning to further support the change in employee culture and to improve the effectiveness of the service.

The Director invited panel members to comment on the briefing paper, linked appendixes and the presentation.

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

A panel member commented on the reference to efforts to encourage residents to use the Wolverhampton Homes app but had concerns about for residents who either do not have phones or struggle to get through on the telephone helpline.

The panel member shared an example of an elderly resident who contacted the Councillor because of her difficulties in trying to contact Wolverhampton Homes.

Shaun Aldis, Chief Executive, acknowledged the range of difficulties facing some tenants but suggested that the Councillor share details of the case and agreed to investigate to see what support can be offered. The Chief Executive acknowledged the concern about the promotion of the app to tenants but reported that 14,000 people had registered on the site at the end of 2023 and very surprised by the level of positive engagement from tenants. In addition, during the period 169,000 logins via the app have been recorded. The Chief Executive commented on the increase in the number of residents reporting their repairs using the app and to make property bids.

The Chief Executive commented on the success of the app in terms the numbers bidding for properties available to let. During four-week period 262 properties were available to let and 25,000 bids were submitted via the app. The Chief Executive added that while it shows how many people are making use of the technology it is also an indication of the acute shortage of rental properties in the City at a time when landlords are also withdrawing from the housing market.

A panel member asked for further details referenced in the report about the plans for developing the housing advice offer in conjunction with City of Wolverhampton Council and the different community venues being considered to deliver the service.

The Director advised the panel that Wolverhampton Homes are having regular conversations with colleagues in the Housing Strategy Team led by Jenny Lewington about ideas for delivering the project. In addition, housing colleague have also been out in the community talking to tenants about the best way forward. The Director commented that consideration will be given to the possible increase in costs and the extra resources needed to deliver the project. The current plan which is still under a review is to use the network of Family Hubs as venues.

The panel member welcomed the response but stressed the need to think about how to make residents aware of the scheme and not to rely on publishing information on the Wolverhampton Homes website to promote the service.

A panel member welcomed the report and improvements in the quality and timeliness of response from Wolverhampton Homes to queries and the positive change in the culture in the organisation based on the presentation and separate conversations with senior managers.

The panel member commented on the improvements in the KPI stats for call handling and queried the root cause of the reasons for the increase in calls to the customer services and suggested if the use of new technology was a factor behind the change.

The Director explained that Wolverhampton Homes follows the same approach as the Council contact centre in terms of recording times against KPIs and there have been discussions with the Housing Strategy Team about reviewing how statistics relating to call waiting times are calculated. The Director commented on the example of the customer services team dealing with a homelessness enquiry which could take 20 - 25 minutes. The customer feedback responses at the end of the calls to the contact centre were reported at being 92 per cent satisfaction with the service.

The Director accepted the need to reduce the waiting times, but the evidence suggests that customers are content to wait a short time because their issue is likely to be resolved, without them having to be referred to another department.

The Director advised that an external consultant has been brought to review the performance data and there is work being done to review staffing numbers at the contact centre. There are also discussions about bringing in subject matter experts to deal with repair queries rather than direct them to the customer contact centre, so that they then can deal with more general queries from tenants.

A panel member queried the reasons for the increase in call abandonment rates to the customer contact centre which has led to extra follow-up work for Councillors.

The Director advised the panel that the service has been working to reduce the call abandonment rates which are lower but still higher than is considered acceptable. The service is looking at mapping the customer journey to identify the points which lead to customers deciding to abandon their call. The analysis of the data from the app will be used to support this work and will be completed by the end of March 2024. The Director acknowledged concerns, which have been raised previously about the high call abandonment rate and reassured the panel that the service is continuing to work hard to improve the situation.

A panel member queried the percentage of the 17,328 calls received in January 2024 were new calls and which were calls from people chasing an old issue previously reported. The Director agreed to investigate and provide the information requested.

A panel member commented on the difficulties experienced by residents trying to get the Civic Centre and suggested housing officers could meet at local venues quarterly for them to talk about housing issues. The panel member commented on the value of face-to-face meetings and would like this increased and welcomed efforts by housing officers walking around the estates to talk to tenants.

The panel member welcomed the excellent work being done by Wolverhampton Homes to support residents who may be struggling financially and highlighted the befriending service as example of successful initiative.

The Director welcomed the positive feedback to the changes that Wolverhampton Homes have introduced and the meetings with Councillors will help inform the development of customer offer and the communication strategy. The Director suggested that a further report on progress be presented to a future meeting of the panel.

A panel member queried the added benefits to the organisation of recruiting the specialist advisor and wanted details of what they would be doing as part of plans for the customer contact centre redesign.

The Director advised the panel that the current customer offer was reviewed to consider how best Wolverhampton Homes can support tenants. The current model of having a tiered approach where most calls into the contact centre would be answered at the first point of contact. At the second-tier colleagues who have had extra training based in the contact centre would deal with the more complicated queries.

The reason for introducing the role of specialist adviser was to provide quicker answers to customers and avoid having to refer them to another department to deal with. The Director commented that all colleagues in the customer contact centre are also being upskilled to provide better support to customers in need of support.

A panel member referred to previous comments about the concerns of residents who are not digitally minded or have access to a phone when the service is promoting the use of the app and wanted an assurance that they would not be left behind and suggested that a priority list be introduced to identify people in need of extra support.

The Director reassured the panel that the approach outlined in the next steps section in respect of the use of new technology is based on knowledge of customers' needs which has helped inform the approach taken. The Director added that the app is being promoted as there are customers who prefer this method of communication. The rollout of new technology will help to release some resources which can support other customers.

The Director reassured the panel that following the pandemic the service contacted 3,500 of vulnerable customers and the list has been maintained and people supported to provide feedback on their experiences. The insights from the group have been used to inform the approach taken as outlined in the briefing paper. The Director commented that in response to the communication strategy a copy of the document has been included as an appendix. The service is looking at how Wolverhampton Homes can best meet the needs of all customers which includes people in vulnerable groups.

A panel member congratulated the Director on the huge improvements in performance of customer contact centre.

The member asked for a similar analysis of face-to-face services delivered at the other Wolverhampton Homes sites in addition to information about Civic Centre. The panel member expressed concern that due to long call waiting times to the contact centre that the public were contacting their local councillor to report the issue to them to follow up which is done by phone or email.

The panel member accepted that this was part of the role but was concerned that members of the public who may struggle using the technology will end up adding to their casework load and supported the option to continue offering the option of face-to-face contact with tenants. The panel member commented that was not sure that the public were aware of the option to have face-to-face meetings at the office in Wednesfield Housing Office.

The Director advised the panel the Wednesfield Housing office is primarily used by people experiencing domestic violence who contact the service asking for a face-to-face meeting. There are private rooms available at the office for confidential meetings.

The Director acknowledged concerns expressed about vulnerable people needing help and the promotion of new technology and the development of the digital communication. The Director commented that 14,000 people have subscribed and using the app. The Director reassured the panel of the commitment of Wolverhampton Homes to improving the service to customers and agreed to take on

the comments and suggestions from panel members, particularly about further supporting vulnerable customers.

A panel member asked for further details the redesign of the Community Development Service. The Director advised the panel that the Wolverhampton Homes has started to have conversations with Councillors about delivering a community service that is wanted by tenants. The approach has been not to design something that the service thinks is right and will be working through the Customer Improvement Panel to help develop this idea further.

A panel member expressed concern about reports of residents not getting call backs from the customer contact centre and then contacting their local councillor for help as a result. The panel member commented the role of the local councillor should not act as the 'middleman' and how this could negatively affect the relationship between Wolverhampton Homes and their customers. The panel member suggested that data collected on call back responses should be shared. The panel member welcomed the app and reported that people are using it, but there were some issues with not being able to get help from Wolverhampton Homes if they have a problem logging into the system and more support was needed.

A panel member added that there should be a dedicated IT team that can help residents with such issues rather than local councillors trying to fix the issue.

The Director agreed to get the information requested in the next issue of Councillor Update and offered her apologies.

The Director acknowledged that there can be frustration when an app does not work and commented that sometimes the system does not refresh but agreed to provide contact details for technical support if needed.

The Director added that the community development team have been trained to use the app and they can also provide technical support if needed.

A panel member queried the plan to engage residents and encourage them to attend community meetings and the Tenant and Resident Association and Leaseholder meetings.

The Director advised the panel that part of the communication strategy is getting customers heavily involved and commented on the work done through the Customer Involvement Panel to engage residents. However, there was an acceptance based on customer feedback that some people wanted to get involved in other ways.

The Director added the colleagues in the Community Development Team will be working alongside the Communications Team, with the support of a communication business partner to support increased tenant engagement.

The panel member queried how the approach would try to engage people with different language skills or who may need other support to get involved.

The Director reassured the panel that use is made of support services for people needing help and they will be giving opportunities to be involved in specific areas and this will be informed through the development of communication strategy, particularly the section on community involvement.

A panel member expressed concern about the difficulties experienced by some residents living in flats trying to recycle household items.

The Chief Executive acknowledged the challenge, and that the issue was due to the age of some of the properties which were never designed for recycling or to have the number of bins required. The Chief Executive added that Wolverhampton Homes is working with the City's waste services to promote recycling messages and to find a solution to the issue highlighted.

A panel member asked for more details about the Community Chest, and specifically the process for applying and criteria for awarding funds.

The Chief Executive advised the panel the Community Chest is part of the Corporate Social Strategy that was launched in 2022. The Chief Executive explained contracts with suppliers included a social value clause where a percentage of money was put back into the community hardship fund which the Council also supports financially.

The Chief Executive commented while the hardship fund has worked well in supporting customers across the City, particularly those who are facing hardship, changes are planned to review support for community groups. The Chief Executive gave examples of where the fund has been used to support community initiatives in Bilston and other wards of the City and to make it more visible.

A panel member queried the different methods used to communicate with residents and wanted further reassurance about how the needs of more vulnerable people will be met and specifically how people not using electronic methods will be signposted to the different support services being promoted.

The Chief Executive advised the panel that Wolverhampton Homes do various leaflet information drops to blocks of flats to promote future events and that work is being done to redesign the literature. The panel member queried how Wolverhampton Homes plan to reach people it is has not yet engaged with its communication methods.

The Chief Executive accepted that the service can always do better in terms of communication but commented on the huge postage costs of sending leaflets to tenants and that community events are used as an alternative to spread the word. The communication work is supported by the Housing Tenancy and Leasehold Officers when they visit a housing estate and through getting more people to register on the app to help reduce the volume of calls to the contact centre.

The Chief Executive referenced concerns from the panel about the length of telephone calls but added that the calls are often complex from people in difficult situations and the aim it to give them time to deal with the issue rather than attempt to end the conversation mid call. The Chief Executive added that the six extra staff have been recruited to the customer contact centre and it was estimated that for every 14 people recruited these costs an average extra £1 million. The Chief Executive reassured the panel that there is a dedicated outreach team that can visit vulnerable people across Wolverhampton in addition to support from housing tenancy officers.

A panel member thanked the presenters for the work being done by Wolverhampton Homes and welcomed the improved performance of the service.

The panel member asked for a list of Housing Tenancy Officers and any tenant newsletters where available.

The Chief Executive advised the panel that the link to Housing Tenancy Officers will be notified in the next Councillor update and regular tenant newsletters.

The Chief Executive thanked the panel member for the comments on the work that Housing Tenancy Officers do to support the community and said that the company is considering issuing Hi-Vis jackets with the Wolverhampton Homes logo in clear view, so that they are noticeable when they are working.

The Chair thanked the presenters for their report and presentation.

Resolved:

1. The panel agreed to note the progress and support Wolverhampton Homes Customer Contact and Access arrangements.
2. The panel agreed to note the improvements to customer communication plans and support Wolverhampton Homes Communication strategy.
3. The Director Corporate Services and Chief Executive to note the request for additional information and actions agreed.
4. The Director Corporate Services and Chief Executive to present a progress report against actions in September 2024.

## 6 **Development of 2041 Net Zero Strategy**

The Chair invited David Pattison, Chief Operating Officer, to introduce the report and presentation.

The Chief Operating Officer advised the panel that Cllr Craig Collingswood, Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change, would be making some introductory comments before Perminder Balu, Head of Green Cities & Circular Economy, present the detailed report.

The Cabinet Member commented that the purpose in attending the meeting was to give assurance about the importance that the Council places on the climate change agenda. The Cabinet Member reaffirmed the commitment to deliver the pledge to achieve Net Zero across all the Council's core activities by the end 2028.

The Cabinet Member commented that the Council made a climate change pledge at full Council in 2019 and since then there has been an approximate one-third reduction in the carbon footprint. The Cabinet Member commented on the key achievements of the Council to date and future plans for the next few years to build on the progress.

The Cabinet Member invited Head of Green Cities & Circular Economy to present the report.

The Head of Green Cities advised the panel that the presentation would give an update on the 2041 Net Zero Strategy Development, a summary of progress to date and plans for the next few months. The presentation would also set out plans for partnership working opportunities with external bodies.

A copy of the presentation is available.



The Head of Green Cities gave an analysis of the Wolverhampton carbon footprint as of 2021, and commented how Wolverhampton compares favourably with regional authorities across the West Midlands in terms of the reduction in carbon emissions per person and in absolute emission levels.

The Head of Green Cities can a summary of the draft list of 20 actions in development and how they link to core themes such as transport and cross cutting themes, such as the circular economy. The Head of Green Cities commented on the monitoring, reporting and governance arrangements, the key policy outcomes, and chart showing the key stages of the Whole City Approach to Net Zero.

The panel were invited to support the recommendation to endorse ongoing actions and way forward together with providing any additional recommendations as appropriate as outlined in the update of the Net Zero 2041 Strategy for the City.

The Chair invited the panel to comment on the report and presentation.

A panel member expressed concern that the panel were being asked to endorse a detailed action plan which lacks detail and highlighted the challenges to delivering the reductions in the carbon footprint for heavy transport as an example. The panel member was also concerned about the level of public support for the plans.

The Head of Green Cities commented that the plan is still at the development stage and work is being done on the detailed actions. The Head of Green Cities added that the reason for bringing the report to the panel was to provide an update on progress. In the next few weeks further details and costings will be done. The Head of Green Cities reassured the panel that the current information can be shared now if that would be helpful, and that work is being done on the details to support the actions in the strategy document.

The panel member suggested that it would not be possible to endorse the ongoing actions, which is the recommendation for the panel, without the additional information referred to.

The Chief Operating Officer accepted the point not to proceed in the response to the concerns from the panel member and proposed that the panel should instead consider endorsing only recommendation one as stated. The Chief Operating Officer reassured the panel that information and data on the actions will be available at the start of the planned wider stakeholder consultation. The Chief Operating Officer added that the Cabinet Member had already stated the willingness to bring the draft actions to the pane before they are presented to Council for approval. The Chief Operating Officer commented that the briefing paper sets out the direction of travel and the areas of focus. There is further work to be done to ensure that the actions are properly costed, and the implications fully considered before a further report which is timetabled to be completed by May 2024.

The purpose of bringing the report to the panel at this stage was to give reassurance about the progress of work in relation to the Net Zero 2041 Strategy document before the end of the current municipal year.

The Chief Operating Officer commented that progress has been delayed awaiting the details of the announcement of the Green Innovation Corridor referenced in the presentation which is expected to provide a boost to job creation in the city.

A panel member queried when grants would be available for the public to apply for help and plans for publicising information about the offer.

The Head of Green Cities advised the panel that there is a range of grants available to the public, and the Council works closely with community representatives to promote schemes and when the service is aware of community grants then details are posted on different social media sites. In addition, the service is also working with WMCA to be notified in advance of grants to retrofit homes. The Head of Green Cities added that the Council has successfully secured a grant of £500,000 to take forward a fuel poverty pilot scheme for 500 homes in the Graiseley ward which should be starting later in the year.

The panel member welcomed the response but queried plans to make residents who may not have internet access aware of any grants that might be available and if there was specific information on the Council website.

The Head of Green Cities agreed to check the information on the website about grant information and report back the findings to the panel.

The Chief Operating Officer added that there is information and advice on the Council website, including an easy guide for residents about the help available and how it can be accessed, highlighting the section on information about electric vehicle charging points. The Chief Operating Officer acknowledged the concern and agreed to review the information from public viewpoint and check what would be helpful.

The panel member suggested links should be added to the website to apply for grants and suggested that the Government should be lobbied for funding to support the planned actions aimed at achieving the net zero target goal.

The Chief Operating Officer commented that as regards the financing query there is an intention to lobby for Government funding effectively and to work collectively through the WMCA to make sure that the required resources and the facilities are available for residents and businesses in the region to be able to change and to move towards activities which are more climate friendly and sustainable. The Chief Operating Officer was keen for Wolverhampton to contribute to the national climate change objectives.

A panel member supported the idea of having a dedicated page on the Council website aimed at the public with links to the relevant information. The panel member highlighted concerns about the lack of detail in the report on evidence to support the actions and commented that it was difficult to support the recommendations.

The Head of Green Cities responded that the aim of the report and presentation was to give an update on progress and considers that the information gives a fair reflection of the current position in meeting the Net Zero target. The Head of Green Cities commented that as the strategy develops further this will translate into tangible things on the ground. The Head of Green Cities added that the presentation was limited to 10 minutes as requested by the Chair but reassured the panel that more details are available about what is being done across the City.

The Head of Green Cities commented that the Council is working with the communities in the development of the strategy and was willing to provide further

update to the panel or for the panel to be updated through the work of the Climate Change Advisory Group.

The Head of Green Cities updated the panel on progress of developing KPIs which will also be needed for external governance and explained that there is clear understanding that it will not be possible to move forward with the strategy actions without this information.

A panel member queried if there was a breakdown available that would give the carbon footprint assessment for the transport industry, the commercial and the public sector in Wolverhampton. The panel member supported the planting of trees and highlighted its contribution to offsetting carbon during the development of private sector buildings.

The Head of Green Cities advised the panel that the required information was not available but commented that carbon capture by trees is considered when calculating the impact of developments on the carbon footprint. The Head of Green Cities welcomed the suggestion and agreed to add details about the number of trees in different parts of the city and an analysis by tree species and their different levels of carbon absorption.

The Chief Operating Officer commented on the point raised about planning and private developers and referenced different policies and highlighted the importance of joining them up to support the targets for 2041. A report on the Local Plan will be presented to Council for approval.

The panel discussed different proposals for accepting or amending the draft recommendations as detailed in the report. The majority agreed to support all the recommendations as set out in the report.

The panel thanked the Chair for the collaborative approach taken to managing discussions during meetings and the selection of topics for scrutiny during the year.

Resolved:

1. The majority of the panel supported the following recommendations:
  - a) Note status update requested by the Panel Chair.
  - b) Endorse ongoing actions and way forward together with providing any additional recommendations as appropriate.
2. The Head of Green Cities & Circular Economy to note the actions agreed by the panel and to provide an update or information requested to a future meeting or when available.