

Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 24 September 2020

Attendance

Members of the Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Paul Appleby (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Mary Bateman
Cllr Philip Bateman MBE
Cllr Greg Brackenridge
Cllr Alan Butt
Cllr Jacqui Coogan
Cllr Bhupinder Gakhal
Cllr Keith Inston
Cllr Beverley Momenabadi
Cllr Mak Singh (Chair)

In Attendance

Cllr Steve Evans (Portfolio Holder for City Environment)

Employees

Martin Stevens (Scrutiny Officer) (Minutes)
Ross Cook (Director of City Environment)
Julia Cleary (Scrutiny and Systems Manager)
Earl Piggott-Smith (Scrutiny Officer)

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 **Apologies**
Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Christopher Haynes and Cllr Martin Waite.
- 2 **Declarations of interest**
There were no declarations of interest.
- 3 **Minutes of the previous meeting**
The minutes of the previous meeting held on 30 January 2020 were approved as a correct record.

4 Matters arising

The Vice Chair stated that at the last meeting of the Panel, there had been some recommendations made regarding the Housing Allocations Policy. The Panel had asked for further analysis on the implications of the removal of the Local Connection clause and feedback and analysis from the formal consultation process in respect to the proposed removal of the clause. He asked if the Director could bring this information to the next meeting of the Panel. The Director for City Environment stated that he was more than happy to circulate the requested information before the date of the next meeting and if there were any questions arising from this information, they could be answered at the next meeting of the Panel.

5 Update on the response to the Covid-19 Crisis and Plans for Recovery

The Director for City Environment gave a presentation on the Directorate's response to the Covid-19 crisis and the plans for recovery. He thanked all the staff and teams across the City Environment Directorate for their work during the pandemic. The key focus had been to maintain the frontline services. A major priority had been to ensure public and employee safety. Key checks and risk assessments taking into account all the relevant national guidance had been undertaken. They used their work they had completed on business continuity to consider which services could still continue. They had at one point closed the HWRCs (Household Waste and Recycling Centre) and markets and suspended bulky waste collections based on a wide range of considerations around Public Health and the safety of staff and residents.

The Director for City Environment commented that as part of the shielding programme they had identified the residents which needed extra support during the pandemic. On 23 March 2020 they had launched the "Stay Safe, Be Kind" hotline. This hotline was crucial for vulnerable residents and provided support such as for emergency food parcels, help with shopping and medication and debt advice. The Food Hub had been setup at Aldersley Leisure Village and was officially launched on 31 March 2020. Staff had been redeployed to work at the food hub from across different Council departments. Considerable thought had been given to the food parcels nutritional content to ensure residents could maintain a healthy diet during the pandemic. In total 1.2 million meals were delivered by the Food Hub to approximately 7,500 people who were shielding. They had also supported the City food banks and 800-1000 food parcels were now being delivered.

The Director for City Environment remarked that a crucial workstream had been supporting vulnerable homeless people. Within 72 hours a new hostel had been established within the City. Over 150 people had been supported, with 100 of those successfully supported into appropriate, safe and suitable accommodation. The hostel had been a good example of partnership working and considerable learning had been taken on board for future years.

The Director for City Environment stated that there had been 230,000 customer service contacts since the start of March. The entire contact centre staff of 103 employees had been working remotely. The phone call abandoned rate was at 5% which was far better than their target of 15%. The markets had begun reopening from the 9 May in a three phased approach. The crucial part of re-opening the markets had been to ensure that correct social distancing measures had been put in place. Occupancy and footfall to the markets was continuing to increase.

The Director for City Environment remarked that all general, recycling and green waste had continued throughout the pandemic. The passenger transport service had supported the crews to ensure the waste collection workers were kept safe, meaning they did not all have to travel together in the same cabin. The HWRCs had been closed but reopened on 11 May and 1 June. Positive feedback had been received on the traffic and site management of the site. He was pleased that the decision was taken to keep the parks open. Enforcement Officers had been on patrol to advise and reassure the public.

The Director for City Environment commented that it had been a very demanding and difficult time for the Bereavement Team. Initial restrictions on cemetery visiting times had been relaxed. Many services moved online, including death registrations. At one point there had been 1200 births awaiting registration, as the Government had not changed the rules on how a birth could be registered.

The Director for City Environment remarked that the Highways Team carried out significant work during the pandemic. The Smart LED programme had continued with over 2,500 streetlights upgraded to LED with smart sensors. They had successfully obtained funds from the emergency active travel fund. This had enabled them to reshape the City Centre and provide more space for people coming into the City Centre. Part of the money from this fund had been used to establish a new crossing to the Molineux football stadium on the ring road. The School transport service had continued during the lockdown period, with about 40% of children who would normally use the service continuing to do so during the timeframe. Everyone who needed to use the service had been able to do so.

The Director for City Environment stated that the City had been allocated £234,488 from an ERDF (European Regional Development Fund) to 'Reopen High Streets,' which had commenced on the 15 June. A team from across City Environment with support from partners had made alterations to shopping street layouts, introduced a one-way pedestrian system in the City Centre and worked with businesses to ensure they were Covid secure. This had included producing publicity material to advise shoppers and support retailers, providing infrastructure where needed, marshalling spaces once retailers opened and liaising with street traders. In the later part of the project, the team had also given out face coverings to the general public as the new rules were introduced in England. The team had also supported Central Mosque in their plans to reopen and supplied barriers to control access. When the hospitality industry was allowed to reopen in July, the team had supported them on plans for queueing and any other challenges.

The Director for City Environment remarked that they were thinking about how they could deliver frontline services differently moving into the future and as to what residents expected from those services. Licensing and Trading standards had been critical to ensure that people felt safe. They were continuing to work on markets. They were looking at the climate change commitments and how the pandemic had affected the outlook. Customer services might change in the future, as would the housing and homelessness services.

The Portfolio Holder for City Environment commented that it should not be underestimated the remarkable achievements of the Directorate over the last few months. The City needed to be reimagined in the Covid-19 era. He paid particularly tribute to the Food Hub, which had been remarkably successful.

The Chair thanked all the staff, volunteers and Councillors that were involved in the Council's response to the pandemic. Members of the Panel paid tribute to the work that had taken place. Members of the Panel gave particular praise to all the people that had worked at the Food Hub and commended the work of Colin Parr for his contribution in the management of the Food Hub. The Portfolio Holder and Director also added their personal thanks to Colin Parr and the whole Food Hub team. A Panel Member praised the staff of the waste collection service who were often working late into the evening collecting bins. When there had been problems with the service, they were pleased with how quickly the problems had been resolved. It was important to also remember that the pandemic was far from over and planning for the future needed to continue. A Panel Member paid tribute to Officers of the Senior Management Team who had helped resolve important health issues for some of his constituents during the pandemic.

A Member of the Panel asked about the work that had taken place with partners and if there would be a lessons learnt report in the future to ensure all the good work that had taken place during the pandemic was captured. The Director for City Environment stated that the Council had worked very effectively with partners on a number of projects, including helping the homeless. They had worked very closely with the Police and the BID (Business Improvement District) on the reopening of the City Centre. He agreed that lessons learnt was very important and they were trying to capture them. Part of capturing the lessons learnt was through the Scrutiny process. All formal decisions had been recorded. They were trying to learn from the new ways of working and build them into the new priorities moving forward.

A Member of the Panel asked if they were confident the waste service would have enough capacity if there was to be another lockdown. The Portfolio Holder responded that the safe opening of the HWRC had been important to help relieve pressure. He was proud that the garden waste collection service had continued, where some authorities had stopped this service. The staff had been very committed to keeping the service running and adhering to any new Government guidelines. Some staff had been redeployed from other Council departments to help keep the waste and recycling service operating efficiently. The Director for City Environment stated that the general missed bin rate was about 1%. The team had worked long hours to ensure bins were emptied. The waste and recycling team had received many compliments during the pandemic and he had recently received two personal emails from members of the public praising the service. The staff supporting the front-line services were also critical to the smooth operation of services and he was proud of their work.

The Director for City Environment commented that fly tipping statistically was at a similar level to the same time last year. People were however more minded to report fly tipping and expect it removed more quickly than before. They aimed to clear fly tipping incidents within 10 days.

6 **Connected City Presentation and Work Programme**

The Scrutiny and Systems Manager gave a presentation on "Connected City" and the Work Programme for the Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel. Scrutiny Board had met on the 14 July 2020 and had agreed a cross cutting Connectivity and Digital Theme for all the Scrutiny Panels for the remainder of the municipal year. For

all items added to the Work Programme, Scrutiny Board had requested that connectivity and digital considerations should form part of the discussion. The outcomes and recommendations from all Panels would then be reported to Scrutiny Board to unify into one comprehensive report based on a Connected City Theme. The report and any recommendations could then be submitted to Cabinet for consideration. Some good questions for the Panel to consider, she suggested were as follows: -

How do we use and engage connectivity and digital means to help support:

- The creation of vibrant highstreets
- Good and sustainable housing
- A well connected and sustainable transport system
- Our existing community assets (and to continue to progress them)
- Climate and environmental concerns and issues
- Becoming a digital and cultural hub for the West Midlands
- A vibrant and sustainable City that is fit for future generations.

When considering adding items to the work programme she felt it important to ask the following questions: -

- 1) Does it link to the agreed Connected City theme?
- 2) Is the issue in the public interest?
- 3) Can Scrutiny add value by looking at it?
- 4) Where is the evidence to support looking at this issue?
- 5) Can we evidence impact?
- 6) Is there a change to National Policy?
- 7) Does it affect citizens across the City?
- 8) Are there performance concerns?
- 9) Is it a safety issue?

The Vice Chair suggested air quality as an item for consideration for the Work Programme and specifically how that could be linked to the new LED light programme and other air monitoring digital devices to monitor the effectiveness of new measures on the environment.

A Member of the Panel commented that some people did not have adequate digital provision in their households. It was important to address these issues. Another Member of the Panel added that some people's digital skills had vastly improved during the course of the pandemic because they had been forced to adapt. This was clearly a positive step, it was however important to ensure the health and wellbeing of the citizens of Wolverhampton. The lack of social contact, increased screen time and more isolation was undoubtedly having an impact.

The Vice Chair suggested for the housing item planned for the next meeting, whether there was merit in addressing how people applied for housing online. The Director responded that access to housing services online could be included as part of a discussion document for the next meeting. He thought it was important to focus on digital and connectivity for the items moving forward into the municipal year. He agreed with Members comments that staff wellbeing was very important particularly given the likelihood of many Council staff being expected to work from home for the next six months. The Scrutiny and Systems Manager added that staff wellbeing was

being considered as part of an agenda item for the Our Council Scrutiny Panel the following week.

7 **Future Meeting Dates**

The future meeting dates of the Panel were confirmed as follows:-

26 November 2020 at 6pm

28 January 2021 at 6pm

25 March 2021 at 6pm

The Chair thanked Officers and Members for their contributions to the meeting.

The meeting closed at 7:22pm.