

Briefing Note

Title: Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel – Housing and Connectivity

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Intended Audience: Internal Partner organisation Public Confidential

1. Purpose or recommendation

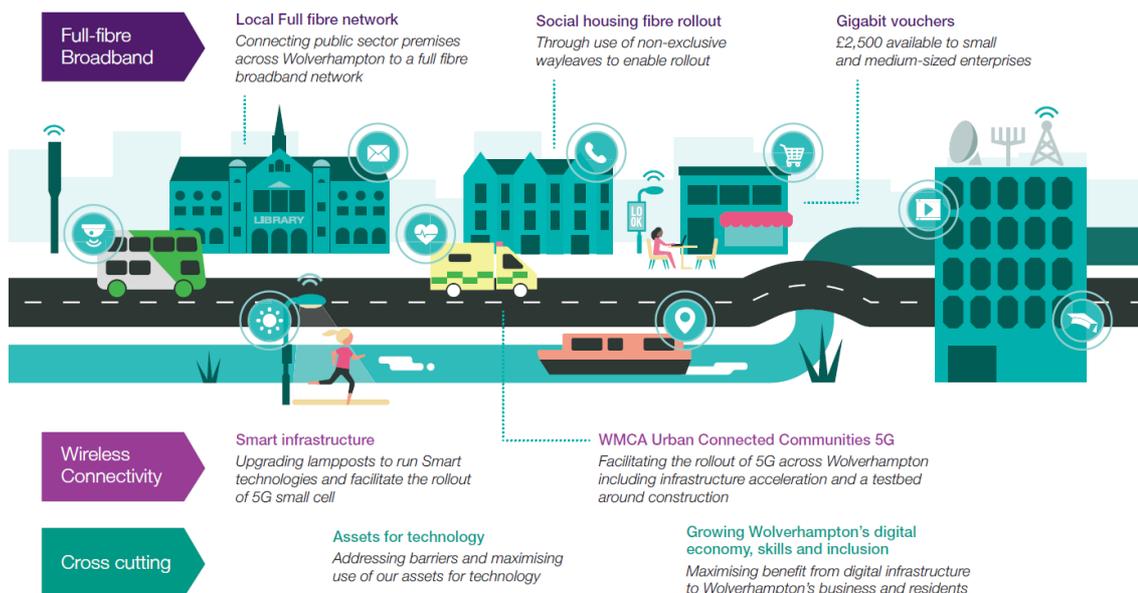
To outline key actions around housing and connectivity for the Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel.

2. Overview

This briefing note provides an overview of key actions around Housing and Connectivity for the Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel.

3. Background and context

In recognition of the importance of futureproofed Digital infrastructure as the backbone of a modern thriving economy driving productivity and spreading growth and in delivering effective and efficient public services, Wolverhampton's Digital Infrastructure Strategy was adopted in January 2020 centred around three themes:



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The Covid-19 crisis has accelerated the adoption of digital services by 2-5 years – including remote working, remote learning, telehealth, ecommerce and others – and is considered critical to level-up our economy to power economic and social recovery. This is fully recognised in the City of Wolverhampton’s ‘Relighting the City’ recovery commitment driven by digital cross-cutting priority.

Housing and Connected Cities

Delivery of key housing services; management of the Councils 22,000 homes, housing advice, homelessness and services provided by the Home Improvement Agency are delivered by the Councils arm’s length management organisation Wolverhampton Homes and the four tenant management organisations. The services are delivered in accordance with the management agreements and service level agreements between these organisations and the Council.

Homes in the City – applications for Council homes are assessed and processed in line with the Councils Housing Allocations Policy by Homes in the City (HiTC) hosted by Wolverhampton Homes. Housing applications have been made online since November 2009, with all applicants required to have an email address for registration since August 2019. Around 5,600 online housing applications are received per year. Support is provided to customers to set up an email address, including:

- step-by-step guides
- signposting to agencies who can provide face-to-face support
- referral to a support worker
- support from WH officers

Assistance to complete the online application form has been made available on the telephone, via a web chat or face-to-face at the three housing one-stop-shops across the City (Market St, Bilston, Wednesfield). Support is made available in the customers language via translation services and with support from the Refugee and Migrant Centre (RMC). During the national lockdown, with housing one-stop-shops closed, assistance was provided over the phone or using web chat. Additional guidance notes are available as people move through the HiTC application to ensure that the correct answers are given.

Council properties are advertised on the HiTC website and are also on the computer kiosks in the housing one-stop-shops. Bids for properties can be made online and via the kiosks in the housing one-stop-shops. In 2019, 96% of bids, on average 3,400 per week have been made online. There was a 17% increase in bids made online during 2019 compared to 2018.

HiTC recognises that not everybody has access to the internet or is comfortable or skilled at using a computer. If this is the case, the following advice and support is available:

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- Permission from the applicant can be provided for a friend or family member to make bids on the customers behalf.
- Support workers can assist applicants to apply & bid for homes online.
- Bids can be made by phone or face to face at one-stop-shops when they are open.

For any HiTC applicant that is unable to register an email address or bid independently and has no other support to assist them, assisted bidding is offered. Assisted bidding consists of officers placing bids for applicants based on the applicant's eligibility and preferences each week (depending on available homes).

For those applying with hearing or sight disabilities, and those whose first language is not English, the HiTC website is equipped with the 'Recite Me' accessibility tool which has functionality that can assist customers with numerous accessibility features including:

- Translation of the content of the website into multiple languages
- Read aloud functions including read aloud in multiple languages
- Changes to text sizes on the website for those with sight impairments

In addition to this any documents produced through the HiTC process, such as letters, can be translated at the customer's request. Interpreters are regularly used to assist in answering applicants' enquiries by phone and to support applicants through the sign-up processes (including BSL interpreters).

As part of the Allocations Policy review implementation project, the wording of all questions on the housing application will be reviewed to ensure they are as self-explanatory and as easy to read as possible, with increased guidance available on the online application. Wolverhampton Homes are also in the process of reviewing the content of the HiTC website.

Housing Repairs – typically 11-13% of housing repairs are reported online, approximately 500 per month, and demand for reporting repairs online is steadily growing. Online repair reported was switched off to safely manage access during the Covid-19 lockdown; tenants were able to report repairs by telephone and staff provided regular updates to customers.

Wolverhampton Homes is currently investing in its online services and building a new interactive repair reporting web page to enable customers to arrange new repairs with more accurate time allocations, to improve performance and customer satisfaction. In addition, customers will also be able to amend or cancel existing appointments online at their convenience. Subject to ongoing Government Covid-19 restrictions, the new online services are expected to be fully restored by April 2021.

The current target for online repairs reporting is 12% of all repairs. This target will be held for 2021/22 to assess take-up from the 'channel nudge' to online access away from telephones, with a revised target developed to be in place from April 2022.

Housing Options and Homelessness – The Housing Options and Homelessness service does not have a digital platform to enable the completion of a homeless application. People who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless can contact the service on the telephone (via Homes Direct, the ‘front door’ telephone service to Wolverhampton Homes), via email or prior to lockdown in the housing one-stop-shops. Partner agencies are also able to make referrals to the homelessness service on behalf of individuals or families they are in contact with.

Once the notification comes through to the homelessness email an inbox or via Homes Direct, the team contact customers and complete a homeless assessment with them verbally. This allows the service to provide a personal touch, at what can be a very difficult time in someone’s life. This approach enables staff to clarify information, ask any supplementary questions and get the fullest picture of someone’s housing circumstances., which may not be possible on an online form. The homelessness service then uses digital platforms to send customers a personal housing plan, housing application forms, information and to request documents.

Through lockdown, when it was not possible for customers to bring physical copies of documents into housing one-stop-shop to be copied/scanned, the service and its customers have increasingly used email and WhatsApp for these functions.

In the future there is a need to consider how these face-to-face services are reinstated, especially as it is largely an administrative function which needs to be provided face-to-face.

Customer satisfaction – early analysis from the customer satisfaction survey of 2000 Wolverhampton Homes tenants indicates that telephone contact is the preferred method of contact for 80% of tenants, followed by the website/webchat 10%, email 4% and social media 1%, text/SMS 1%, letter 1%. Interestingly only 2% of customers wish to contact Wolverhampton Homes face-to-face.

Whilst telephone contact may be the preferred contact method, many tenants are using the internet and online services for wider purposes. 51% of responded browse the internet, 47% use online banking, 46% send or receive emails, 46% use social media and 41% do online shopping. This suggests there is potential to grow online services and contact; creating further financial savings and time/staff efficiencies.

There are however tenants who do not use the internet; in both the 2017 and 2020 customer satisfaction survey, 27% of tenants surveyed said they did not use the internet. Of these 27%; 25% simply prefer not to access services online (compared to 42% in 2017), 25% don’t know how to use the internet (compared to 20% in the 2017 survey), 22% don’t have access to a computer or smartphone (compared to 18% in 2017), 8% cannot afford internet access and 4% have concerns about online security. This demonstrates a shift in this resident group: those who do not use the internet appear to do so less through choice

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and more because of a lack of knowledge or no access to a suitable device. For the customer who cannot or do not wish to use the internet and online services, alternative provision should be maintained and developed.

Next Steps – the Council is continuing to work with Wolverhampton Homes and the housing managing agents to plan for the delivery of services. The changes to service delivery necessitated by lockdown; the move to online services and away from face-to-face services need to be assessed; what worked, what did the customer like, as well as what didn't work.

Points for discussion:

- How and where do we reinstate face-to-face services; housing one-stop-shops, utilising Council receptions / customer services, libraries, community facilities?
- Can we create efficiencies by co-locating with other Council services / facilities to provide services?
- Are housing digital platforms (website, social media) fit for purpose, are they easy to understand and use, are they the right platforms?
- How do we increase digital connectivity within the social housing sector – access to devices, internet connection etc?

Supporting the rollout of Full Fibre:

Although the city already had good coverage of superfast (30MB) and ultrafast (100MB) broadband, our coverage of full fibre broadband (1GB) was very low at 1% impacting our ability to introduce smart technologies, restricting innovation in service delivery and impacting on the ability meet future demands for connectivity as highlighted by a 50% increase in demand each year.

The City secured £4.9 million from the Department of Cultural Media Digital and Sport for a Local Full Fibre Network connecting 170 public sector premises, including Wolverhampton Homes offices, to full fibre broadband. This will improve efficiency of service delivery and enable smart innovations.

The Council is supporting the commercial rollout of full fibre broadband by removing barriers to the rollout and entering into non-exclusive block wayleave agreements to support the rollout of full fibre broadband on housing estates.

The Council is keen to encourage full fibre or fibre to the premise (FTTP) infrastructure on most new developments, treating fibre broadband as the fourth utility. It is strongly advisable that the opportunity is made open to more than one infrastructure provider since it offers maximum choice for residents/tenants and minimises disruption caused by future rollouts. A toolkit has been developed for Planning to discuss with developers the need for full fibre to be considered for all new housing developments. A clause has been included in all future WV Living Procurements. A digital infrastructure evidence base and policy including full fibre and 5G has been included in the draft Black Country Core Strategy.

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Discussion point: what else can we be doing to ensure housing in Wolverhampton have access to futureproofed digital infrastructure and what innovations can we introduce to facilitate delivery of services and improve quality of life?

Digital Inclusion

Digital Divide has been highlighted as a particular issue during lockdown. Pre-COVID, 35,000 residents hadn't been online for three months and 59,000 didn't have all five basic digital skills (Digital Exclusion Heatmap), 44% of which were under 60. However, COVID has really highlighted the extent of the issue with 50% of adult education learners, 9 out of 10 residents on a basic skills course 60% of job seekers working with Wolves at Work and 25% on Impact targeting young people, lacking the devices and/or connectivity to get online during lockdown.

We are proactively exploring solutions to how we can support our residents to get online including proactively working with schools to maximise take up of Department for Education laptops targeting school children and encourage take-up of devices by Online centres for adults. In addition, we are introducing a device and connectivity lending scheme from libraries through a number of trusted partners across the city enabling residents to get online to access online learning, search and apply for jobs, access services and reduce isolation. We are also exploring a place-based approach to digital inclusion building on community assets including libraries, online centres and community venues to ensure residents have the devices, connectivity and skills to get online.

Discussion point: how else can we support our residents to become digitally included?