

# Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 26 November 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 Keith Inston

Cllr Mak Singh (Chair)

Cllr Martin Waite

### In Attendance

Cllr Steve Evans (Cabinet Member for City Environment)

Cllr Stephen Simkins (Cabinet Member for City Economy)

### Employees

Martin Stevens (Scrutiny Officer) (Minutes)

Ross Cook (Director for City Environment)

Alison Shannon (Chief Accountant)

Helen McGourlay (Finance Business Partner)

Jenny Lewington (Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy)

Heather Clark (Strategic Projects and Funding Manager)

Julia Cleary (Scrutiny and Systems Manager)

Earl Piggott-Smith (Scrutiny Officer)

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

*Item No.*     *Title*

- 1            **Apologies**  
Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Christopher Haynes, Cllr Beverley Momenabadi and Cllr Bhupinder Gakhal.

Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman sent her apologies in her capacity as the Cabinet Member for City Assets and Housing.

- 2            **Declarations of interest**  
There were no declarations of interest.

3 **Minutes of the previous meeting**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 24 September 2020 were confirmed as a correct record.

4 **Matters arising**

There were no matters arising from the minutes of the previous meeting.

5 **Draft Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2021-2022 to 2023-2024**

The Finance Business Partner introduced the report on the Draft Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2021-2022 to 2023-2024. They were asking the Scrutiny Panel to provide feedback on the Budget relevant to the Panel's remit and how it was aligned to the priorities of the Council. In addition, they were asking for feedback on the Draft Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2021-2022 to 2023-2024. The Panel's response would then be submitted to Scrutiny Board and then onward to Cabinet.

The Finance Business Partner commented that the Draft Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2021-2022 to 2023-2024 was appended to the main report. It was different this year as there was a focus on the response to Covid-19. It detailed the costs of Covid-19 for the year and the projected financial implications for the medium term, this was alongside the grants that had been received. It considered the next steps the Council would need to implement in order to address the financial pressures faced by the Council. The report also set out the "Relighting our City" agenda and explained the transition from the response to the recovery phase of the pandemic. There was an assumption in the report that the Council were expecting the Government to provide sufficient grant funding to cover the cost of Covid-19. The forecast deficit with this assumption for 2021-2022 was £4.5 million rising to over £19.6 million over the medium term. Savings to help fill this gap were currently being considered by Directorates. If grants were not received to meet the pressures of Covid-19, the deficit would be significantly more and could rise to £23.2 million in 2021-2022, increasing to over £40 million over the medium term.

The Finance Business Partner remarked that on the previous day the Spending Review had been announced in Parliament. There were some indications that the Council would receive additional funding to help cover the costs of Covid-19, but they were still assessing the implications of the announcement for the Budget moving forward.

The Director for City Environment presented a slide on the key strategies and priorities of the directorate. He made reference to the Climate Change Action Plan, the Council had adopted the Climate Change emergency proposals earlier in the year. They would be working on the action plan and bring updates to Cabinet and Council in the coming months. The Director referred to the Waste Transformation Programme, the Waste Service had been brought back in house over two years ago. This had resulted in a much improved service being delivered to Wolverhampton residents and in particular over the last 10-11 months. They would be addressing in the future how the Waste Service could become more integrated with Street Scene and street cleansing. This would link with the Street Scene and Open Space Action Plans. Environment and Commercial regulation meant they were able when necessary to enforce the law, when other measures had not been successful.

The Director for City Environment stated that they would be bringing forward the Highways Capital Programme report as part of the budget setting in March / April next year. This would focus on not only improving the network but also supporting other modes of transportation such as cycling and walking. It was important to ensure that the improvement programme was also aligned with the City Regeneration Portfolio, so the City could continue to develop. The Street Lighting LED Programme had commenced earlier in the year and would provide budget efficiencies, improve the lighting in the City and create safer places across the City. With reference to car parks and highways enforcements, he commented that the main focus in this area was in relation to keeping the City safe, rather than income generation.

The Director for City Environment referred to the Markets Strategy. Due to the Covid-19 restrictions it had been a particularly challenging year for the City's markets. He gave full credit to the Markets team who had ensured that when they had been allowed to reopen, that they did so in a safe way. He was keen to increase the offer of the Markets moving forward, they could also be a good introduction to people who wished to start a business. He referred to the City Events Programme which he saw as a key part of the "Relighting our City" agenda. When it is safe and appropriate, he hoped it would be a great boost to the City. The Creation Day weekend in May had already been announced and the City would be hosting the Commonwealth Games Time Trial in 2022.

The Director for City Environment commented that it had been a difficult time for WV Active due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The business plan for next year would look to grow the business and return the membership to levels it was before the Covid-19 pandemic. The Housing Strategy had been discussed previously at the Panel. It was now ever more important to ensure the Council had the right number of properties and that the access, standard and tenure were appropriate to modern day living.

The Cabinet Member for City Environment commented that it had been a difficult year. Regardless of the financial pressures of Covid-19, the Council would have received a reduced Government grant anyway, which it had since 2010. Sadly, during the Covid-19 pandemic the Council had lost a significant amount of income, he cited as examples the Market rents, income from WV Active Membership and car parks. He hoped the Government would reward the Council with additional funding to help cover the costs of the continued pandemic. Regardless of whether the funding was received, the Directorate's budget would have to be reduced and so they would have to do things differently in order to make savings.

The Cabinet Member for City Environment praised the Garden Waste Service, Wolverhampton had been one of the few Council's which had been able to continue the service during the pandemic. This was in spite of the fact that many Council staff had been forced to self-isolate or had even tested positive for Covid-19. As the service was inhouse they had been able to utilise staff from other areas to continue operating the service. The number of subscriptions for the Garden Waste Service had actually increased. This had brought welcome income into the Council.

The Cabinet Member for City Environment commented on the unique challenges moving forward. The City Centre was one area of focus and the City's other High Streets. They were determined to support businesses. With reference to WV Active,

he commented that they had been able to retain over 50% of their membership. They were looking to enhance the virtual WV Active offer. People were viewing these sessions all over the country and even in other countries in Europe. Other areas they were looking to change, were the replacement of fleet vehicles with electric one's, reconfiguring of depots and promoting the climate change agenda. He placed on record his sincere thanks to all Officers and staff across the Council who had been able to keep services running as normal as they could during the pandemic.

A Member of the Panel asked about the Capital Programme on Active Travel and the Environment strategy. £99,000 was listed in the report for the Active Travel Programme. He believed more investment was needed in the network to make Active Travel the priority in the transport infrastructure. He added that the Mayor of the West Midlands had promised £10 per head on cycling infrastructure when he was elected in 2017. This would equate to £2.5 million a year for the City of Wolverhampton. He did not believe this money had been received to the level promised.

The Cabinet Member for City Economy commented that a number of schemes relating to Active Travel had been put in place already in the City Centre. He agreed that more focus was needed on making a better environment for Active Travel and to making it safer. People needed to feel comfortable to encourage people to use other modes of transport. He did not however wish to ban the car, it was important to find the right balance. He did not believe the Mayor of the West Midlands would be able to reward any significant funding for Active Travel in Wolverhampton. He referred to some of the cycling routes throughout the City and hoped they could be further enhanced, such as a cycle route from the City Centre to the hospital. They were also considering participating in some electric cycle trials for staff.

The Director for City Environment commented that in addition to the Active Travel Programme funding listed in the report, there would be other investment in cycling through other capital programmes such as the Highways improvement Programme. They were awaiting to hear on whether some grant funding was going to be rewarded. Encouraging people to use other modes of transport was important and he hoped soon to announce a project with some local schools.

The Chair commented that he had requested the statistics from the WV Active Manager. They had been approaching 10,000 Members before the Pandemic which had reduced to about 65% before the start of the second national lockdown.

The Vice Chair asked if there could be a further breakdown of the expenditure and income listed in table 1 in the report in the future, which showed the service and revenue budget provision. He referred to Leisure Services and Parking, which Covid-19 had dramatically impacted and asked what considerations were taking place for the 2021-2022 budget because of the current volatility. He also asked what the total income was from the Garden Waste Service for the last twelve months. The Capital Programme had highlighted the, "Lighting up the City" as an area for expenditure, he asked if some examples could be provided. He also asked if the Panel could consider adding the issue of fleet procurement as part of the Scrutiny Work Programme.

The Director for City Environment responded that fees and charges were continuing to be reviewed, this would include car parks and markets. He would send the Councillor the details for the Garden Waste Service income over the last twelve months. On the “Lighting Up the City” programme the main focus had been on lighting up key buildings in the City Centre and he hoped to light up more buildings in the future throughout the City. On the transport presentation planned for the January Scrutiny panel meeting, the fleet procurement approach could be included as part of the item. The Finance Business Partner commented that more information on the expenditure and income listed in table 1 in the report, which showed the service and revenue budget provision, could be provided in reports for future years going forward.

The Cabinet Member for City Economy spoke on Planning and Libraries, which fell within the remit of the Panel and his Portfolio. He praised the Library service during the Pandemic. E-books had been particularly popular and provided an insight into reshaping the service going forward. He detailed the services the Libraries had provided and how they had been utilised. Social media posts had been particularly popular and a range of virtual and telephone services had been provided.

The Cabinet Member for City Economy referred to planning applications, which had actually increased during the pandemic. 16,000 planning applications had been received in 2020, which compared to 15,000 for last year. He was encouraged that the service had been able to continue throughout the pandemic. He had asked Officers to try and make the Planning Department cost neutral in the future. He praised all the staff within his portfolio for their excellent work during the course of the pandemic to date. The Chair echoed the Portfolio’s Holder’s compliments and gave praise to all Council staff for their work.

**Resolved:** That the Scrutiny Panel response on the Draft Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2021-2022 to 2023-2024 be finalised by the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Scrutiny Panel and forwarded to Scrutiny Board for consideration.

## 6 **Housing and Connectivity**

The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy introduced a presentation on the subject of Housing and Connectivity. The Council owned 22,000 residential properties across the City which were managed by Wolverhampton Homes and four tenant management organisations. Wolverhampton Homes were the largest management agent. Homes in the City had taken online applications forms for properties since 2009. Since 2019 applicants had needed to have an email address to use the system. A range of support was available to people applying for homes in the City. There were step-by-step guides and signposts to agencies who could provide face-to-face support. A total of 96% of property bids were made online. The number of online bids had increased by 17% from 2018-2019. There was a range of support available to customers who did not want to bid online. Support was available for people with sight and hearing disabilities. Language support was also available. A range of improvements were planned including addressing how easy it was for people to understand the application form and how people applied online.

The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy remarked that only 11-13% of housing tenants reported housing repairs online which was approximately 500 per month. Primarily housing repairs had been reported via the telephone. During the

first Covid-19 pandemic lockdown the online reporting function had been turned off. This was to ensure that the tenants were able to be spoken to over the telephone to determine if a repair was possible in lockdown, that there were operatives available and that no one in the household was exhibiting symptoms. The target for online repairs reporting to increase was a long-term one. The target for next year, 2021-2022 had been set at 12%. Wolverhampton Homes were continuing to invest in their online platforms and new interactive repairs reporting.

The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy commented that Housing Options and Homelessness was a statutory function of the Council, which was delegated to Wolverhampton Homes to deliver. Housing options and Homelessness had never had a digital platform, it was accessed via the telephone or face-face contact. During the lockdown the service had to change because they weren't able to deliver face-to-face services. It had very rapidly moved online. Documents had been submitted via email or via What's App. She had heard that this service had gone very well, but there would be a need to reinstate face-to-face services for some people in the future.

The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy stated that Wolverhampton Homes, every two years, conducted a Star Survey with a range of customer satisfaction questions. For last Summer there had been over 2000 responses to the survey. 80% of tenants had listed the telephone as their preferred method of contact with Wolverhampton Homes. 10% had favoured the website and web chat with 4% favouring social media. 51% of tenants did use the internet for a variety of purposes such as internet shopping or banking. This statistic indicated that there was potential to grow online services and contact, which long-term could create financial savings, time and staff efficiencies. It was interesting to note that 27% of tenants had said they did not use the internet at all. 25% simply preferred not to use online service, 22% did not have access to a computer or smartphone and 8% had said they couldn't afford internet access.

The Strategic Projects and Funding Manager stated that Wolverhampton's Digital Strategy had been adopted in January 2020 and it outlined the Council's approach for the rollout of full fibre broadband and also wireless connectivity. This was in recognition of the importance that a future-proofed digital infrastructure could have, to the City in terms of economic growth. This was also important for the "Relighting our City" recovery from the pandemic commitment. The strategy picked up the cross-cutting issues of growing Wolverhampton's digital economy and skills.

The Strategic Projects and Funding Manager presented a slide on supporting the rollout of Full Fibre Broadband. The Local Full Fibre Network had hit its 30% milestone for the rollout of full fibre to the Public Service Network. A commercial rollout had also been announced by the company. To increase the speed of the rollout, the number of gangs onsite had been increased. They had also introduced a number of measures to address resident and Councillor concerns including road sweepers. Block wayleave was being finalised to support rollout of full fibre in social housing, this process for rollout had been agreed with Wolverhampton Homes. For new builds, a full fibre toolkit for planners had been developed. A full fibre and 5G policy had been introduced into the draft Black Country Core Strategy. Links had also been established with WV Living to ensure all houses were connected to full fibre broadband.

The Strategic Projects and Funding Manager spoke on the subject of the Digital Divide. Pre-Covid-19, 35,000 residents of Wolverhampton had not been online for three months and 59,000 lacked all five basic skills (Digital Exclusion Heatmap), 44% of which were under 60. Covid had highlighted the extent of the issue with many residents unable to access online learning, employment support and low take-up of online support for vulnerable groups including issues around data poverty, unsuitability of devices as well as motivation and skills. Local intelligence had indicated that 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" (scheme targeting young people) lacked a device or connectivity to access online learning or support. A number of schools had reported that less than half of their pupils had a device and / or connectivity during lockdown to access online learning. A greater number reported that pupils lacked suitable devices or had restricted access due to sharing devices.

The Strategic Projects and Funding Manager remarked that they were piloting a Wolves Online device and connectivity loan scheme for a range of reasons such as applying for benefits, accessing online learning, reducing isolation and accessing support. They were also looking at a place based approach to digital inclusion informed by a digital exclusion map which showed the areas where residents were more prone to not being online. They were hoping to work with schools, libraries and community hubs to see if they could be encouraged to become Online Centres and exploring tools such as "reboot", a recycling scheme for devices. In addition, they had been proactively working with schools to maximise the take up of Department for Education laptops targeting school children, with 200 devices being lent to schools through Wolves Online, complemented by ward funds and BT Hotspot vouchers for connectivity. The Council were also exploring innovative means of getting people online including the use of personal budgets and links to telecare for connectivity as there were so many benefits of digital inclusion. She thought an important question for the Scrutiny Panel to consider was "How else can we support our residents to become digitally included?"

The Vice Chair commented that digital inclusion was a very important area. He asked how far the Council had come in relation to future-proofing digital services infrastructure. He also asked how the statement in the briefing note to the Panel, of Covid-19 accelerating the adoption of digital services by 2-5 years, had been calculated. With reference to housing repairs online reporting being switched off during the beginning of the pandemic, he asked how this had impacted on the overall numbers for the reporting of household repairs. With regard to developing the online platform for Wolverhampton Homes, he asked if tenants were being engaged for their input. On the matter of encouraging people to use online services, he asked what actions were being taken to do this and the obstacles reported by residents to using online services. He thought a further demographic breakdown on the 2000 residents who had completed the Star Survey would be useful. The briefing note had referred to smart technologies being held back before the introduction of full fibre broadband in the City. He asked if some examples could be given of the smart technologies which had been held back. He also asked how the figures cited on the digital divide in the presentation had been calculated. He asked if Wolverhampton Homes had any plans for subsidising access to Wi-Fi in high rise flats and other large developments. Potentially it could be subsidised from rent payments.

A Panel Member commented on the lack of digital devices in people's homes who had children that required them for schoolwork. He commended the use of Councillor Ward funds and other schemes being utilised for the provision of digital devices and hoped more devices could be provided in the future.

The Chair raised the important issue of raising people's awareness of the danger of scams in the digital world. He hoped that more information on how to avoid being scammed could be shared on the Council's social media platforms.

The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy offered to report back to the Panel the figures for how switching off the online household repairs reporting system had affected the overall number. The online platform for Homes in the City was part of an overall update for the Wolverhampton Homes website, which was addressing accessibility and compatibility with smart phones. Prior to lockdown there had been engagement with tenants through a range of methods including annual get-togethers, committees and other meetings. These were currently paused because of the pandemic but there was online engagement taking place. She would ask for further information on how they intended to gain feedback on improving and testing the new website. Wolverhampton Homes were in the early stages of updating the website and so she hoped some face-to-face consultation could take place next year. In relation to the question on the demographics of the Star Survey, she could confirm that it was sent out to the over 10,000 tenants who had an email address. It was sent out via email and then the demographics of the people who had responded were compared to the whole tenant population. They then targeted tenants in order to make sure the responses were weighted correctly. She was happy to provide the data to the Panel.

The Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy on the question of Wolverhampton Homes promoting access to Wi-Fi and devices, commented that she would look at the results of the last trial and provide a note to the Panel. They had looked at Wi-Fi as part of the service charge in the past but there were difficulties arising from the question of equity, as some people in a block would not wish to make use of the Wi-Fi or they already had their own arrangement. It was however worth looking at with Wolverhampton Homes again in the future.

The Strategic Projects and Funding Manager on the question of future-proofing the digital infrastructure responded that it was for about 20 years. The figure relating to accelerating the adoption of digital services of 2-5 years was from a report by PWC. The key to encourage more people to use online services, she regarded as being devices, skills and motivation. Lockdown had highlighted the issues relating to devices and connectivity. Smarter technology needed bigger band width and so to increase the number of these technologies in people's households, improved broadband was required. The data on the digital divide had been calculated using the data from the digital dashboard which gave information on the number of people who had not used the internet in the last 3 months and lacking digital skills. The data was being updated as lockdown had highlighted the problems with lack of devices and connectivity. In relation to scams, she commented that they were producing a digital Wolves website with the intention of collating resources relating to digital, this would include links to staying safe online.



- 7 **Work Programme for the Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel**  
The Scrutiny Officer spoke on the Work Programme for the Vibrant and Sustainable City Scrutiny Panel. He commented that the scrutiny theme for the year was how digital could be used to improve the lives of the residents of Wolverhampton. For each item scrutiny considered it was important to relate this theme to the item. For the next meeting of the Panel in January, the Panel had chosen to look at Transport in a connected City and feedback from the pilot on e-scooters by the WMCA. In March, the Panel had chosen to look at the environment in a connected City and to receive a statement from the Portfolio Holder, where questions could be asked to the Portfolio Holder about his portfolio.

The Scrutiny Officer stated that the Work Programme was a live document and could be adjusted as appropriate. The Chair and Vice-Chair were keen to hear from the Panel Members on any information they would like to be included for the January and March items.

A Panel Member spoke on the important issue of air quality and added that the carbon footprint of the Council would also be good to consider. The Director added that he would be happy to speak to the Panel Member to obtain more details about the information he was seeking on the carbon footprint for the March item on the environment.

The Vice Chair added that fleet procurement would be valuable to include for the item on Transport in January 2021.

- 8 **Future Meeting Dates**  
The future meeting dates of the Panel were confirmed as follows:-

28 January 2021 at 6pm

25 March 2021 at 6pm

The meeting closed at 7:20pm.