

Scrutiny Board

Minutes - 26 July 2022

Attendance

Members of the Scrutiny Board

Chair - Cllr Paul Sweet
Vice Chair - Cllr Ellis Turrell
Cllr Rita Potter
Cllr Wendy Thompson
Cllr Simon Bennett
Cllr Zee Russell
Cllr Barbara McGarrity QN
Cllr Clare Simm - acting as substitute for Cllr Susan Roberts

In Attendance

Cllr Stephen Simkins - Deputy Leader for the Council

Employees

Claire Nye	Director of Finance/Section 151 Officer
Charlotte Johns	Director of Strategy
Alison Shannon	Chief Accountant
Lamour Gayle	Head of Customer Engagement
Julia Cleary	Scrutiny and Systems Manager

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

- 1 Apologies for absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Philip Bateman MBE, Cllr Val Evans, Cllr Susan Roberts MBE, Cllr Louise Miles, Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman and Cllr Udey Singh. The Chair wished the Panel Members and Finance Cabinet Member who were not able to attend, due to illness, a speedy recovery.
- 2 Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest.
- 3 Blue Badge Update 2022**

Councillor Simkins, Deputy Leader of the Council introduced the report on Blue Badges. He remarked that Blue Badges were for the most vulnerable in the community and it needed to be looked at on a constant basis to see how the Council could increase its performance. There were issues with communications, and this would be addressed in detail by Officers. The Deputy Leader was happy to answer any questions posed and was pleased that special meetings could be held, which proved that Scrutiny worked. He hoped the Panel would make some recommendations and moving forward could see how effective they had been.

The Director of Strategy stated at the last Scrutiny Board there had been feedback from the Board about the Blue Badge process. The Director of Strategy undertook an action to do some further work and bring forward a future item on the performance around the Blue Badge service. Within the agenda pack there was a Briefing Note which set out the performance of the Blue Badge service.

The Head of Customer Engagement spoke on the Performance Report for the last financial year for Blue Badges giving a snapshot. For the period 2021 – 2022 the Council processed 4,676 applications, dealt with 10,401 calls and were able to answer 10,216 of those calls which equated to an abandonment rate of 1.8% for the service. The average wait time for the period was 51 seconds.

The performance from 2019 to quarter one of the financial year was highlighted. For the period 2019 – 2020 the Council processed 4,209 applications and the average processing time for those applications was 8 weeks. For 2020 – 2021 3,376 applications were processed which was slightly reduced due to the pandemic. The Department for Transport eased some of the rules around Blue Badges, they put an additional 6 months on for people whose Badges had expired and you saw in the following year application had gone back up. The Badges that weren't applied for during that period contributed to the increase for 2021 – 2022 and the average processing time was 9 weeks. For quarter one the processing time was 5 weeks but that could fluctuate throughout the year dependent on how many applications were received during that time. There was a reliance on applicants providing sufficient evidence in the form of identification, making sure everything asked for was submitted. When they have not submitted the right information it would impact on the average processing time.

The Head of Customer Engagement reiterated the Deputy Leader's Comments, explaining the Council delivered a good service for Blue Badges. It was not perfect but the Council's performance in comparison to neighbouring authorities was good. The Council followed Government guidance on applications, a decision on applications was made within 12 weeks. The Council were averaging the last financial year at 9 weeks, which included Badges being posted out. It took 7 – 10 days for a Badge to be ordered once a decision had been made. Some Local Authorities processing time did not always include Badge delivery, several authorities also started their processing time from the point they received all the information they had requested. The Council wanted to continue to improve the service that it delivered, making it a slicker journey for all.

The Head of Customer Engagement explained one of the things that they wanted to trial was additional resources within the team and to trial having an Occupational Therapist Assistant (OTA) within the Blue Badges Department. The Occupational Therapist (OT) sat within Adult Social Care. Customer Services process the applications to the point where they needed a space or mobility assessment, it then went over to the OT. The OT had a day per week where they considered the Blue Badge applications. The assessments would be done daily and not once per week. The additional resource would enable them to see if that would impact on the customer journey and if that made the time slicker. They could share some additional knowledge with the Customer Service Officers who undertook the initial administrative function.

The Head of Customer Engagement commented that they had made improvements to the website because of feedback from Scrutiny and from customers. They had placed a video on the website explaining how people could apply and what they needed to submit. They wanted to do a time and motion study of each type of application. It was very difficult to say how long an application which met the criteria automatically would take to process and how long an application that was a desk-based assessment would take. They wanted to set some Key Performance Indicators (KPI). The Service Development Team was working with the Blue Badges Team to look at processing time and how many Badges they generated to set some meaningful targets for staff. The KPIs would be published once in place. There wasn't a benchmarking marking group regionally or nationally for Blue Badges, the Council had reached out to neighbouring authorities to setup a group. They wanted to look at how they were processing their Badges to see if there was any learning for them and to benchmark performance.

The Head of Customer Engagement confirmed that the system used was Northgate, the contract was up for renewal in January. They had gone out to the digital marketplace to look at other systems. They wanted to have a system that enabled the customer to track their applications online, instead of them having to phone in to ask what was happening. The current system didn't auto-generate letters, for example, when customers were asked for more information, this added to the timescale as it was a manual process. They wanted a system which generated letters automatically.

The Head of Customer Engagement stated they had surgeries in Bilston and Wednesfield. They selected these areas as this was where the highest concentration of Blue Badge applications came from, but it changed on a year-to-year basis. If someone applied for a Blue Badge this year the Badge would last for 3 years, that did not mean in 3 years' time that person would be in the same position. Their condition could have deteriorated, it was very difficult to forecast the number of Blue Badge applicants. The Council worked with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to look at the number of residents that were on Personal Independence Payment (PIP) that had enough points to generate an automatic application to help better predict the number of applications they would receive each year. She was happy to provide a further update in the future to see how their latest improvements had impacted on the processes and to see if Members wanted to make any further recommendations.

The Deputy Leader stated that the Council needed to ensure the system was demand led. He was quite proud of the way the Blue Badge service was delivered. They were well within the processing timescales.

The Deputy Leader asked the Head of Customer Engagement to explain how complex it could be getting the right information at the right time especially from doctors. He suggested that the Council might need to be more specific on the forms or on the website about what was needed. This was because every single case was individual and those needs had to be catered for.

The Head of Customer Engagement stated that decisions were taken within 12 weeks. In the last financial year the average was 9 weeks for the decision and the delivery of the Badge. There were things that impacted on processing, not just supporting information but the customers themselves. Whether the application form

was online or paper, it outlined what you needed for identification. They regularly had incidents where people were sending in their original bus passes as a form of identification. They then had to contact the customer to let them know it was not valid and wait for them to send the valid information in. When it went to desk-based assessments or OT they followed the guidelines set by the Department for Transport. If a customer said they had a certain condition or they had medication, then the OT had to assess whether that condition or medication impacted their mobility. They asked for additional supporting information from a GP or a consultant, some GP's and consultants were efficient, and some were much slower. There had been a couple of cases where the 12-week timescale had been exceeded. They were when they were waiting for additional information from consultants and GPs. It was very difficult to control that, the team chased the GP's and consultants where there was outstanding information. They liaised with the customers, but it was a difficult process.

A Board Member stated there were still members of the public who for whatever reason wouldn't apply for a Blue Badge. He had a brother-in-law that was registered blind who would not be able to apply online or fill out the Blue Badge form. He supported the idea of the Blue Badge surgeries, he thought they could make a big difference to people that couldn't fill out the application or go online.

A Board Member stated that they had a resident in Springdale who had applied for a Blue Badge in April, and he had not yet received one, which affected his standard of life because he did not go out. The Board Member had put this through as a customer service problem but had not yet had a response.

The Deputy Leader responded that if there were any individual cases the normal service was to report it to the service area, they would get back to you straight away. There was the separate Councillor contact unit, which Councillors used. When there were individual cases that weren't dealt with appropriately, it was important to learn lessons from them for the future.

There were a lot of external factors that could delay the process, from the quarterly performance the Council were 5-7 weeks ahead of the Government's recommendations. In the pandemic there was a 10 week wait which was still 2 weeks less than what the Government had recommended, who had put it back to 6 months. If there were any individual cases that Councillors were concerned about, these could be raised with Officers.

A Board Member spoke on the overall system, some people did not have access to a computer, particularly the elderly. They relied on the telephone they were aware of a resident who had been waiting an hour and a half for their call to be answered.

The Head of Customer Engagement responded that she would be interested in the details of the case mentioned because the Blue Badge line for customer services had the shortest wait time and it was a dedicated phone line. If somebody has been waiting an hour and a half she could investigate and give an explanation.

A Board Member raised a concern that a few residents had received a phone call asking for the £10 fee and it sounded like it was coming from a call centre. Her own mother had put the phone down thinking it was a scam, she had been present at the time and was of the same view.

The Head of Customer Engagement stated that customers, had the option to pay online at the point of application, but not everybody wanted to do that. They would then have to call them and ask them to make payment. Where they had legitimate concerns, they gave them the Councils contact number, which they could also find on the Council's website and asked them to phone back.

The Head of Customer Service commented on how they were continuing to promote and increase surgeries. They were looking to find a suitable venue in Tettenhall. The library had been considered but there were not enough private areas for people to complete their application with a staff member. There were surgeries at the Civic Centre, Bilston and Wednesfield.

The Vice Chair commented that it was an interesting area, and an important part of the Council's work. He wanted to clarify a point raised by the Deputy Leader. The 12-week timescale that he referred to regarding the Government guidelines was not a target to meet it was a hard stop, meaning no application should take longer than 12 weeks. The fact that that the Council was processing applications on average under 12 weeks was clearly good and it would be alarming if the Council came close to the 12-week hard stop. The report referred to the fact that Birmingham had a 4 – 6-week average processing time and they outsourced their service. They asked if the Council had ever looked at outsourcing, which could incur savings and also relieve pressure on customer service staff, who were having to solely work on the Blue Badge phone line. He thought that having a surgery in Tettenhall would be good for the Council as the area had an older population on average. The Vice Chair suggested the institute in Tettenhall Wood, which was a Council owned building with capacity.

The Head of Customer Engagement remarked that they had looked at the costs of outsourcing. Birmingham outsourced all their Blue Badges to the point of mobility. They had looked at Birmingham's processing times in comparison to their own, considering Birmingham's larger population, if they tested the additional resources within customer services they could reduce the processing time to the same as Birmingham's. To outsource year 1 was circa £90,000 and increased yearly. Trialling the additional resources model in the team initially was the first step, however, they would not discount the outsourcing option, but wanted to see what could be done in-house first.

The Director of Strategy assured the Scrutiny Board that they would continue to look at all options to ensure the Council delivered value for money and an appropriate service to customers. She referred to the Head of Customer Engagement's point about a regional benchmarking group. The team had discovered the different methodologies that had been used to count the processing time. This included a stop the clock function whereby if they needed to ask the customer for further information, they stopped the clock. This did not happen at Wolverhampton. The benchmarking group was not intended to be just be about sharing data but about understanding how the process worked and appropriate value for money information.

The Deputy Leader commented that he believed outsourcing was against the principles of the Wolverhampton Pound policies, he wanted to keep resources in the City. There were some complications with the telephone systems but there was a

dedicated phone line for Blue Badges. The service needed to be championed as they were dealing with complex issues and people who needed assistance with their mobility. He thought engaging with the deaf and blind community to obtain their thoughts on how the service could be improved was a good idea. He agreed a Blue Badge surgery in Tettenhall would be beneficial. A Board Member commented that outsourcing the Blue Badge service was not necessarily against the Wolverhampton Pound principles as it could be outsourced to a business within the City.

A Board Member raised an issue about renewal applications where Wolverhampton City Council felt additional information was required but the applicant felt their needs had not changed. The service had made some important reforms which should be recognised. Change was important in order to be ready for an aging population.

The Director of Strategy agreed that the Council needed to continue to improve the Blue Badge Service. There was opportunity with the regional benchmarking group to widen the net of the West Midlands definition. The Team could explore with other Local Authorities how to improve performance. The performance did show that the dip in applications in the Covid year had meant an uptake. They would monitor those trends, look at PIP payments to try to predict demand to make sure they were putting the resources in the right part of the system, to ensure they were supporting the most vulnerable people.

A Board Member asked how long the Council had used the Northgate system. They expressed reservations about the limits of the system. The Head of Customer Engagement responded they did not have an exact date for how long they have been using Northgate. Looking at data from the last 4 years the system did not have the functionality to carry out everything they wanted. There were two systems that had been identified that seemed to have the functionality they desired. Northgate had the Council requirements in a plan, but they had not been able to give a timescale for completion. Two systems were booked in for a demo in the coming weeks. There were quite a few other authorities who used Northgate with some using excel spreadsheets.

The Deputy Leader asked whether the criteria for the Consultants letters were set out by the Department for Transport. If the Council were adhering to their criteria some further information could be provided by Officers. Comments made by Board Members could help shape some of the contract provisions. They could also look at the Council's procurement system to see if they could find an internal provider within the City, thereby contributing to the Wolverhampton Pound. They could also look to bring in extra OT's, by developing them and liaising with adult services especially social workers.

The Head of Customer Engagement remarked that the promotion of Blue Badges was the key. They were working with Wolverhampton Homes who had got stands and were regularly out in the community. They were trying to co-locate with other services to facilitate pop up sessions. When attending Scrutiny Board on the last occasion, there had been a suggestion from a Board Member regarding promotion at GP surgeries. Applicants had given positive feedback regarding the implementation of this idea. Moving forward their work would be centred around having a better system and more community-based services.

The Chair commented that the Blue Badge Service seemed to be a good functioning service, with issues like any other considering the level of input. They asked for a report to the Panel once the tendering process had been completed and within the next six months. The Chair and Board Members thanked the Officers for the presentation.

4 **Performance and Budget Outturn 2021-2022**

The Director of Finance confirmed that the Outturn Report was presented to Cabinet in June, it brought together the performance and financial position for the Council until the end of March. The Council had strengthened links last year between performance and budget to ensure they were robustly monitoring delivery of Council priorities under pinned by the budget. This was the last report before the Relight our Council Performance and the Our Council Plan Performance framework that had started earlier in the year. The report revealed that 18 out of 29 indicators showed an improvement, a further 10 indicators was showing similar performance and one indicator saw a decrease in performance during the last 12 months.

The Director of Finance stated that the report noted areas where the Council needed to invest to improve performance, such as the £3 million that was put into Wolves at Work to help youth employment in the City. The appendix to the report had considerable detail regarding the budget. Some areas saw improved financial positions at the end of the year and other areas where there were merging pressures. Overall there was an underspend of approximately £2 million and they had been able to protect a lot of the Council reserves as well as part of the Outturn position. It was however still subject to the external audit which had started in the previous week and these numbers would be validated as part of that process. The level of reserve had been reviewed as part of the of the year end process and would go through the Scrutiny process, as normal, through the Resources and Equalities Scrutiny Panel. Council tax and business rates were better than they had forecasted last year, although collection rates were still below pre-pandemic levels. They were working to understand what this meant for the income during the year and what it might mean for future years.

The Director of Finance commented that they were mindful of the high cost of living which could affect residents' ability to pay Council tax and the impact of inflation on businesses. The Housing Revenue account had seen a reduction in the level of rent collected last year. They had seen a reduction in expenditure and so overall the revenue account had still come in within budget. The general fund continued to be monitored throughout the year and would refresh the long-term monitoring planning. The schools' budget was managed by them, but the work of the Council was to make sure that their budgets were being managed well for the education of the children in the City. They used the financial and performance data from last year to inform in year forecasting to understand what it might mean and how the budgets were linked to the delivery of performance.

An update on the in-year monitoring would be taken to Cabinet which would be the quarter one position, with further reports going through in the Autumn. When looking at last year and in year there were risks and uncertainty. The level of Government funding for next year in particular, the changes in adult social care, the fair cost of care in child reform, high levels of inflation and the cost of living.

The Vice Chair asked a question about the reserves. The general fund remained at £13.7 million, approximately 5% of this year's net budget. They asked if they envisaged having to use any of those general funds to meet the budget. He asked for the total figure of the earmarked reserves. The pressures mentioned on parking services as it related to income levels, had not returned to pre-pandemic levels. There were no variants in the appendix and the Vice Chair asked how this adds up? It was a concern to see that the restrictions were lifted in 2021 – 2022 but the income was still below pre-pandemic levels. Another point under the communications and external relations budget, is city events. There was a 50% overspend on city events, which equated to £221,000 extra into the budget, comments stated it was due to establishing the new events in the city. At Scrutiny Board last year the Vice Chair had asked about City events and for a breakdown of the costs involved. The Scrutiny Board wanted to see a breakdown of costs for each event.

The Director of Finance responded to each question starting with the general fund reserves at 5% which was best practice. This would continue to be reviewed as part of the budgeting around costs. They did not intend or anticipate having to use the reserves during the year or next year, but there was a lot of risks and uncertainty. In Parking services they did see about a £1 million continued reduction in income. It had been funded by the COVID grants which was why you couldn't see the variants in the appendix. They had seen some improvements since, but they did not think they were back to pre-pandemic levels. They were monitoring it carefully to consider what was a reasonable budget or income level for next year's budget. They could bring forward the financial information on the breakdown of events.

The Chief Accountant remarked that earmarked reserves were at £56 million with a further £56 million held with those that held the criteria for legal reasons or accounting treatments. For example, reserves were held because of conditions held on grants or licencing which meant you could only spend on specific activity.

A Board Member asked about the 25% reduction in rough sleepers in the year. They questioned if some of the rough sleepers slipped back into sleeping rough and asked about the challenges to keep them housed

The Director of Finance stated she could look into the matter and report back on the question. There were financial implications, helping rough sleepers' did take up significant financial resources. The Deputy Leader added that the Council policy during the pandemic was to house everyone and to have no one on the streets, which continued with the associated costs. Temporary housing would be a priority as soon as Government resources were allocated. The Director of Strategy suggested that an update on rough sleepers could be taken to the Residents, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Panel.

A Board Member mentioned the high unemployment detailed in the report that Wolverhampton had suffered for 30 years. They asked when they could see further monitoring reports on the unemployment figures. Wolves at Work and the Black Country Impact were receiving Government money. They asked if there would be a report on how the money was being spent and its impact. In the general fund the adult services budget was extremely high again with considerable amounts of Government money coming in. Many County areas were finding that the adult care budget could be a concern to them. They asked if there was any concern about the adult social care budget at Wolverhampton and how well it was being monitored.

The Deputy Leader stated that the performance of Wolves at Work should be scrutinised. The Council were going above and beyond the statutory requirement by providing a career service. They were active in the communities matching jobs to citizens. Even in the most affluent areas the unemployment rate was higher than the national average. A report could come before the appropriate Scrutiny Panel. It should be celebrated that any job taken by a citizen of Wolverhampton contributed to the Wolverhampton Pound, which made it circular. Adult Care Services was not just a problem for Wolverhampton. Every Local Authority across the country, where health spending did not match social care, was a major concern. It could only be resolved by legislation from Government. He said it could be possible to get additional funding from the Government but even that would not necessarily be enough. Wolverhampton was working with partners and the DWP to get the best jobs for Wolverhampton.

The Director of Finance responded regarding the size of the budget and the risks associated with adult social care. The Council had built in over £9 million of growth into the budget to recognise the demand and the increase in cost. The budget was now £81 million in the current financial year which was monitored very carefully. The Council had a specific reserve to manage adult social care pressures and demands. The Fair Cost of Care and charging reforms came in next year. They were working with providers to work out what Fair Cost for Care might mean and working with other Local Authorities to inform the budget requirements going forward. They needed to understand to what extent the money set aside by Government would go to the fund. They knew that they had an envelope and the National Insurance increases that had been introduced went towards the fund. They needed to establish whether there was sufficient funding. It had been flagged as a specific risk in the most recent budget report.

A Board Member highlighted a section of the report detailing school budgets. There were 5 schools that had a balance of over 50% of their income for around 5 years and the Local Authority could be open to a challenge from the Department for Education. They asked what the Council did to encourage the schools to utilise the rest of their budget. As there was a table for schools with deficit balances, they asked if there was a table for schools that had got surpluses as well.

The Director of Finance stated that it was very important that schools managed their budgets well, that they did not get into a deficit position or hold onto money they could be spending on children in the City. Officers monitored the position for each school to see the whole picture for the school, as often what was happening with their finances was not always indicative of what was going on in schools. They needed to look at school performance alongside the funding. There were mechanisms for the Council to work with schools who had a deficit position who had to provide a plan. Schools in surplus were monitored as well, they could keep a reasonable amount of the surplus to manage risks. The Schools forum was made up of representatives from different types of schools as well as colleagues from the Council attending meetings to support. There was a Board set up that could call in schools with surpluses that they thought were unreasonable and to demonstrate if they had got specific risks they were managing or plans on how they intended to use the surplus. This was particularly important if it had been held onto for multiple years. If they were not satisfied as a collective, they had a mechanism to call the money back and that had been done in previous years, to put the money back into

the school improvement budget. There was not a balance table for surpluses but this information could be added moving forward.

The Deputy Leader stated how positive Scrutiny was and thanked the Officers who supported him. The Chair and Board Members thanked the Officers for their report.