

Residents, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 29 September 2022

Attendance

Members of the Residents, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Mary Bateman
Cllr Philip Bateman MBE
Cllr Greg Brackenridge
Cllr Adam Collinge
Cllr Christopher Haynes (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Carol Hyatt
Cllr Barbara McGarrity QN (Chair)
Cllr Andrew McNeil
Cllr Zee Russell
Cllr Gillian Wildman

In Attendance

Cllr Simon Bennett
Cllr Rita Potter
Cllr Susan Roberts MBE
Cllr Ellis Turrell
Cllr Wendy Thompson
Cllr Paul Sweet

Witnesses

Supt Simon Inglis (West Midlands Police)
Ian Gardner (Director of Property Services at Wolverhampton)
Simon Bamfield (Head of Assets and Stock Investment) – Wolverhampton Homes

Employees

Martin Stevens DL (Senior Governance Manager)
John Roseblade (Temporary Director of City Housing and Environment)
Hannah Pawley (Head of Communities)
Karen Beasley (Interim Service Manager – Housing Strategy and Policy)
Julia Cleary (Scrutiny and Systems Manager)
Kimberly Dawson (Scrutiny Officer)

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 **Apologies**
Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Dehar and Cllr Dr Hardacre.

2 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

3 Minutes of the previous meeting

Resolved: That the minutes of the Residents, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Panel held on 14 July 2022 be confirmed as a correct record.

4 Community Safety

The Chair advised that Scrutiny Board Members had been invited to attend for the item on Community Safety. She could see that some members of Scrutiny Board were in attendance and she would use her discretion as Chair to allow them to take part in the discussion.

The Head of Communities advised that there would be two areas of particular focus in the presentation, serious youth violence and violence against women and girls.

Superintendent Inglis from West Midlands Police began by defining the term, serious youth violence. Serious youth violence in itself was not defined as a specific crime. The Home Office did use a definition of serious youth violence, which was then interpreted at a local level. Serious youth violence was defined as: -

- Assault with injury (s.47 & s.20)
- Assault with intent to cause Serious Harm (or attempted) (s.18)
- Assault with injury – administering poison
- Assault Police
- Racially or religiously aggravated assault

Serious Youth Violence statistics were based on the age of the victim rather than the perpetrator. People under the age of 25 were included in the statistics. Robbery was not included in the data for serious youth violence, but that could be defined as a form of serious youth violence. When considering the number of serious youth violence offences from 1 April 2022 Wolverhampton was doing quite well compared to other areas within the West Midlands Police Force region. He presented a slide showing the statistics for serious youth violence in Wolverhampton and the robbery data.

The Superintendent commented that that there had been an issue with robbery at Wolverhampton bus station. There had been a significant rise in robbery data in April of this year. Robbery and anti-social behaviour had been prevalent when large groups of young people had been congregating at the bus station, particularly between 4pm and 7pm. Following investigations, they had identified 12 perpetrators carrying out crime at the bus station, there had been reports that the number was as high as 100, but this was not what they had uncovered. Some arrests took place with several people requiring attendance at Court, others had attended the Divert programme. Cameras were installed in the bus station and there were increased patrols, which included plain clothes Offices. Key work had taken place to identify the perpetrators. Some of the perpetrators had been given orders not to attend the bus station.

The Head of Communities presented a slide which detailed the universal, secondary, tertiary and strategic activity taking place to try and prevent serious youth crime. The Superintendent spoke on the Divert Programme.

The Head of Communities stated that once a young person had been identified as needing support, she was confident there was a wide range of support available. However, the support available was not always communicated amongst professionals, parents and communities. She wanted to focus on how to raise awareness of the signs and indicators of young people needing support, so more people could be identified and helped at an earlier point. She wanted an emphasis on communities and places of worship and wider partners so the message about youth violence could be spread. A new communications plan was being developed in relation to youth violence and the focus was on universal provision in how they worked with schools, headteachers and wider community groups to support people earlier.

A Member of the Panel asked about the holiday provision, he believed that it was uneven across the City and the central provision was too far for people living in the north-east of the City. He referred to the pre-apprenticeship scheme which was run by local businesses which had been very successful in addressing youth violence in the community. He asked whether the youth crime and robbery figures would have been flat, if not for the incidences at the bus station.

The Head of Communities responded that there had been more widespread holiday activities than the previous Summer and they would continue to build on this foundation. Inevitably there had been some areas which had more activities. There was now a physical map which showed where all the activities were taking place. Where they could see there was less in certain areas they were looking to target providers to encourage them to organise activity. The Superintendent showed a slide with the latest crime data. There had been 13 consecutive weeks of reduced robbery. The crime at the bus station had impacted on the data and since the problem there had been resolved the data was improving. Had there not been the problem at the station, the data would have flat lined or even reduced.

A Member of the Panel asked how children who had been suspended or expelled from school would be reached. The Head of Communities acknowledged that the children who were not at School were often the most at risk of being drawn into youth violence. They did try and use advocates when children were out of school to try and have conversations. It was definitely an area of focus moving forward. Before children were expelled from a School it had to be raised with a multi-agency Panel to ensure everything had been done to try and keep the child at the School.

A Member of the Panel asked if West Midlands Police were satisfied with the information that was passed to the Local Authority, which included to Councillors and Officers. He was not satisfied with the communications between the Police and Councillors. His second question related to the Wolverhampton Safer Partnership, he was unhappy with the information that was placed on the website, as it was often out of date. He expressed a concern that Members of the Public were contacting him directly rather than the Police, as they had been unable to contact the Police or did not trust them.

The Superintendent agreed that communication was at the heart of trust and confidence within communities. He concurred that more time could be spent on communicating the outputs of Police Work in the City. Following a meeting held earlier in the week he had since tasked his Chief Inspector to ensure that each neighbourhood Sargeant provided a certain level of information at every single PACT (Partners and Communities Together) meeting. In addition, he had asked for a monthly bulletin to be distributed to Councillors, which would contain clear and accurate information. Police UK was a Government led website which was not run by West Midlands Police. The data was on the website up to July, the August data was missing, the September data was not yet displayed as the month had not been completed. They were always happy to listen to improvements that could be made.

A Councillor raised the problem of illegal drug use in the City, which could trigger serious violence. She emphasised the importance of addressing the issue of illegal drugs. The Superintendent responded that drug use did plague communities. A Serious crime and Exploitation Hub had been setup last year which was showing good results. Drugs and drug trafficking was a serious national problem.

A Member of the Panel commented that a lot of young people would not engage in activities put on by professional services. A remedy was needed for the problem. She commented on the high turnover of Sergeants, which meant that the trust and communication which was built up with the local Sergeant had to be rebuilt when a new one replaced them.

The Superintendent responded that he had stayed in Wolverhampton for three years, the longest he had stayed in any position in the Police during his career. This showed the importance that the Force were putting on local Policing and building relationships. Some people were staying for sustained periods in local Policing. He did recognise that some were promoted and moved on to other roles. He hadn't moved any of the Sergeants in Wolverhampton in the two and a half years in his role, with the exception of those that had been promoted. He wanted to give his local Sergeants support and resources to encourage them to stay in the local role.

A Member of the Panel referred to exploitation and early grooming within the community. Local Policing was key to preventing younger people from getting into trouble. He added the problems of communication and access with the Police should be raised with the relevant Cabinet Member to provide a response to Councillors on how this would be co-ordinated moving forward.

The Head of Communities stated that a needs assessment looked at all the factors associated with youth crime, such as school attendance and adverse childhood experiences. These needed to take place not just in places in the City where crime was most prevalent as some people travelled to that area to commit the crime. A needs assessment ensured that the services were in the right place at the right level.

A Councillor stated that he had serious concerns about crime in the City as did the residents he represented. Every day he was seeing reports regarding car crime on social media. Graffiti was also a problem and it had taken months for some to be removed from an area in his Ward. Drug dealing was an issue. Homes being used as cannabis farms was a common occurrence. The local Sargeant did not attend their local PACT meeting, giving the reason that she had faith in her PCSOs to

attend the meetings. The public wanted to meet the Sargeant and the Police Constables at PACT meetings. They were trying to set up a public meeting in the Ward to address the concerns that people had about crime. He added that since December 2019, there had been 1000 extra Police Officers recruited but he was yet to see any effect of this in Wolverhampton. He asked how the Superintendent saw the role of PCSOs in community safety and in particular youth violence.

The Superintendent asked the Councillor to pass on the details of the Sargeant who had said they would not attend PACT meetings and he would be happy to address the situation. It was his view that PCSOs had an integral role to play in local Policing. They were there to engage, obtain intelligence and inform.

The Superintendent presented a slide on domestic abuse. There was an increase in Police calls regarding domestic violence during the Covid-19 restrictions. Coercive and controlling behaviour was now included as part of the definition for domestic violence. This was one of the reasons why the data showed an increase in incidents. How the force recorded the data had also changed, multiple incidents reported by the same person were included as individual incidents rather than just one.

The Head of Communities commented that there was activity taking place at a strategic, primary, secondary and tertiary level. Domestic violence was an under reported crime, it was true that sometimes people requested help from a specialist domestic abuse agency, rather than report abuse to the Police. They tried to ensure these services were available for victims as well as intervention services for perpetrators. They wanted victims to come forward earlier and receive support, so the harm of the abuse could be mitigated for the victim and their wider family.

The Superintendent stated that in November there was a survey being sent out, the purpose of which was to try and understand how safe women and girls felt in the City. He asked for Councillors to support him in sharing the survey as widely as possible. He said he would be happy to share the data and outputs from the survey with the Scrutiny Panel in the future.

A Member of the Panel asked if the Police would be sharing the survey with different faith groups via their places of worship. The Superintendent responded that he had only recently had a meeting where representatives from multiple faith groups were in attendance. They were seeking to further build relationships. The Superintendent stated he would be happy to attend the Scrutiny Panel more regularly as he saw the value in the process.

5 **Energy Efficiency of Housing Stock and Fuel Poverty**

The Temporary Director for City Housing and Transport introduced a presentation on the energy efficiency of the housing stock and fuel poverty. It was a most timely presentation given the national situation and the costs of energy rising. The interim Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy commented that in 2015 the Paris Climate Agreement agreed to cut carbon emissions to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Centigrade. The UK had committed to becoming net zero by 2050 and to reduce the nations carbon on 1990 levels by 78% by 2035. The West Midlands Combined Authority had committed the West Midlands to be net zero by 2041. In 2019, Wolverhampton Council had declared a Climate emergency. Around 35% of

the City's carbon footprint was produced from domestic buildings though electricity and heating. The Council's: Our City: Our Plan supported the climate agenda in the delivery of good homes in well-connected neighbourhoods and healthy, inclusive communities. The Housing Strategy 2019-2014 also committed to delivering, "Better Homes for all".

The Interim Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy stated there were national issues impacting local affairs. There were rocketing energy prices, inflation at a 14 year high and households choosing whether to "eat or heat". To address the current cost of living crisis, the Council had launched the Financial Well-being Strategy. This was a multi-agency approach with a long-term vision to support households in need. As part of workstream 2, "Tackling Food and Fuel Poverty" there was an objective to tackle inequalities by reducing the number of residents in fuel poverty by tackling the causes and helping to meet the needs of people in crisis.

The interim Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy stated that there were 112,202 homes in Wolverhampton. 21,816 were owned by the Local Authority, 6,765 by a private registered provider and 83,621 were in the private sector. She presented a table showing at Ward level the deprivation score, the % of fuel poor households, gross/net annual income levels, stock tenure and the numbers of EPC ratings D to G. There were a number of households in Wolverhampton which had low EPC (Energy Performance Certificates) ratings. In Wolverhampton there were 24,845 households which were classed as poor fuel.

The Interim Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy presented information on what the Council was doing to support people living in privately owned properties. The Private Sector Team worked proactively to improve the quality of privately rented homes. This allowed them to live in a safe and healthy environment and addressed hazards such as damp and mould. The Council worked with the minimum "fitness" standards defined by the Housing and Safety Rating System. The Home Improvement Service delivered grants/loans for essential repairs and maintenance, including energy efficient works for owner occupied properties. Disabled Facilities Grant were offered to support any private property with adaptations to meet the needs of the disabled occupied, including new heating systems if required.

The Interim Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy referred to the Local Authority Delivery Phase 3 (LAD3) where up to £1.364M was being funded to support low-income households heated by mains gas in Blakenhall Ward. Homes Upgrade Grant Phase 1 (HUG1) was funding up to £456,500 to support low-income households which did not have gas fuelled heating in Blakenhall Ward. The Energy Company Obligation (ECO) 4 – BEIS grants for energy suppliers to deliver energy efficiency and heating measure to low income and vulnerable households was running until March 2026.

The Head of Assets and Stock Investment for Wolverhampton Homes presented a slide detailing the 21,816 homes owned by the Council. The information was as follows: -

High Rise (6+ Storey) – 36 Tower Blocks and 11 Deck Access Blocks

Medium Rise (3-5 Storey) – 402 Blocks

Low Rise (1-2 Storey) – 1528 Blocks

Houses – 10,868

Bungalows – 1,013

98% of the stock was built between 1920 and the early 1980s. The buildings built in the 1960s and 1970s were very poor on energy efficiency. Completed improvements to the Council owned stock included the Community Energy Saving Programme (CESP), the Carbon Emissions Reduction Target (CERT) and more recently the Energy Company Obligation (ECO). External wall insulation had been fitted to 2,000 traditional solid wall properties, which often raised the energy profile of the property to a level D or C. Cavity wall insulation had been installed in around 11,250 properties and loft insulation to approximately 14,750. More recently external wall insulation had been installed with new windows (A++ rated) and roofs and walkway insulated to 511 deck-access properties as part of the Heath Town Regeneration Programme.

The Head of Assets and Stock Investment for Wolverhampton Homes stated that current programmes included works on City wide high-rise properties, which included fire safety enhancements and improvements to thermal performance. This included new windows, external wall insulation and new heating. This was the second phase of the regeneration of the Heath Town estate which incorporated 8 tower blocks over the next three years, improving 511 properties. The boiler/heating replacement programme benefited around 800 properties per year. Further improvements to high rise properties on the Vauxhalls, Boscobel and Chetton Green estate would be taking place over the next four or five years.

The Head of Assets and Stock Investment for Wolverhampton Homes commented that over 900 non traditional properties would be improved from April 2023 to March 2025. Attention would then be focused on solid wall and partial solid wall properties. Nearly 2,000 of these still had to have insulation fitted. Some of these flats, such as those at Merridale Court, Princess Court and Queen's Court architecturally presented specific challenges. Work had also commenced on a medium-rise improvement programme and finally there would be a low rise improvement programme.

The Head of Assets and Stock Investment for Wolverhampton Homes remarked that New Park Village would see the replacement of around 200 homes with high quality, thermal efficient new homes. There was also going to be the replacement of 120 poor thermal performing non-traditional properties (Tarrans) across three wards. In Heath Town, 400 properties were being built to the latest standards in energy performance following the demolition of the shopping precinct and two blocks of maisonettes (34 units). Wolverhampton Homes had been carrying out some small site developments, since 2015 an additional 133 homes had been delivered on 32 small in-fill sites across the City.

The Head of Assets and Stock Investment for Wolverhampton Homes stated that the drive to deliver retrofit solutions to decarbonise the social housing stock would cost hundreds of millions of pounds. Some elements, such as introducing more energy efficient heating solutions or windows could be incorporated without significant implications for the capital budgets, although there would be an increased revenue

liability to maintain increasingly complex heating systems. Major enhancements to the fabric of the buildings would create a significant pressure on the available resources. This was because improvements of this nature were not included in the HRA Self Financing settlement. Some of the increased burden could be mitigated by grants and robust asset management such as SHDF (Social Housing Decarbonisation Funding). Robust asset management would be needed to divest the unsustainable stock.

The Head of Assets and Stock Investment for Wolverhampton Homes remarked that work was ongoing to deliver new strategies to continue to support existing commitments to ensure Wulfrunians lived longer and healthier lives. There were draft strategies currently on Carbon Reduction 2022-2024, the Asset Management Strategy 2022-2026 and Fuel Poverty (Housing).

The Temporary Director for City Housing and Transport stated that there were two questions they wanted panel feedback on. These were as follows: -

1. Is the Panel happy to support the existing programmes and proposed schemes to address poor energy performing homes both in the social and private housing Sector?
2. Can the Panel advise on any innovative methods of engagement with eligible households in order to promote any future grant funding opportunities?

A Panel Member referred to the Chetton Green Estate. There was a need to educate existing residents on the equipment they currently had installed, particularly in the three tower blocks, as it would be some years until all the improvement works had been completed. It was clear that some residents did not understand how the storage heaters worked. He asked if an education programme of support could be implemented on how to use the equipment and to utilise any Government support that was available to mitigate the current financial issues.

The Head of Assets and Stock Investment for Wolverhampton Homes responded that there was a member in his team who provided energy advice, particularly on the operation of storage heaters. She completed visits 2-3 days every week throughout the year. He could certainly ask her to contact residents on the Chetton Green Estate to provide advice.

A Panel Member asked about a resident who was in private accommodation whose windows were really poor. The lady was struggling financially. She asked if there was any help she could receive to have her windows improved. The Interim Service Manager for Housing Strategy and Policy responded that it would depend on the lady's circumstances and if she had any vulnerabilities. If the Member was to pass on the details of the lady they could look into the possibilities which could possibly include the home improvement service if she did have any vulnerabilities. There was also a caretaking scheme which potentially could be utilised.

A Panel Member stated that he felt there was a lesson to be learnt on how the Council Tax rebate scheme was handled. It had only been given to those that had applied via the correct systems and were eligible, rather than rolled out to everyone who was eligible. Community engagement was essential, Officers needed to be out in the community giving advice and information. He also raised the matter of

equitability. When large scale improvement works were taking place in some places but not others, how could this be explained to residents who believed their rent was contributing to projects for which they had no direct benefit.

The Head of Assets and Stock Investment for Wolverhampton Homes responded that he could provide a breakdown of the expenditure on improvement works by Ward level. He recognised that Heath Town had received a large share of funds for improvement works. Heath Town had however received very little funding in the thirty years before this time. Life cycles of properties had to be taken into account and so a long term view was required.

A Member referred to the importance of talking to lease holders and informing Councillors early on about initiatives taking place. She also raised the importance of using formal stationary on letters, so people were less likely to be concerned it was a scam letter. Information had been sent recently which was not on official paper. The Head of Assets and Stock Investment for Wolverhampton Homes assured the Member that he would prevent this from happening again.

The Vice-Chair raised the importance of good communications, as people were acutely aware of the prevalence of scams and were less trusting. There was a risk that people would miss out on grants available such as insulation if they thought they were scams. The Temporary Director for City Housing and Transport agreed with the comment. He added that flyers often were ignored and there was no substitute for reaching communities in person.

A Panel Member raised the idea of adding information to Council Tax information that was sent out. A schedule of grants available could be put in with the Council Tax information. She added that Council representatives could attend PACT meetings to talk about grants that were available to improve homes.

A Panel Member referred to Safe and Well Visits on people's homes carried out by the Fire Service. He asked if the Council could work in partnership with the Fire Service to give out information on the improvement works that were available to them. He suggested that Officers could have a separate meeting with a representative from the Fire Service to discuss a potential initiative. Data sharing had been an issue in the past, but he suggested the Council could send information to vulnerable residents on behalf of the Fire Service.

He asked if Wolverhampton Homes were using the most fire retardant rated materials in their improvement and construction works, as per the recommendation of the Council's Fire Safety Scrutiny Working Group.

The Head of Assets and Stock Investment for Wolverhampton Homes stated that he had positive news in that a data sharing agreement with the Fire Service was on the verge of being agreed. On the point of safe and well visits, he wanted the Fire Service to report back to Wolverhampton Homes what they had done and if any further remedial works were required by them. This was partly why there had been a delay in finalising the data sharing agreement. He thought giving them an additional leaflet could be done. Wolverhampton Homes were opting for non-flammable materials rather than fire retardant and so were going even further than the Scrutiny recommendation. The expectation was that this would be rolled out to low rise

properties as well as the high rise. A considerable amount of work was taking place on systems to ensure the golden thread of data.

A Member of the Panel commented that engaging with Councillors to help spread the work about grants available to residents was critical. Councillors knocking on doors were more likely to be recognised and therefore trusted when talking to residents about improvement works available. The places of warmth hubs being launched soon were the locations to spread the word about what the Council could do to help people improve their properties.

6 **Scrutiny Work Programme**

A Panel Member asked if the item on Trees could be moved to an earlier date. The Chair stated she would consider the request.

The Chair extended a vote of thanks to the Scrutiny and Systems Manager who was leaving the authority. The Panel gave a round of applause in recognition of her work for the authority.

7 **Date of Next Meeting**

The date of the next meeting of the Residents, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Panel was reported as Thursday, 17 November 2022.

The meeting ended at 8:23pm.