

Scrutiny Board

Minutes - 24 January 2023

Attendance

Members of the Scrutiny Board

Cllr Paul Sweet (Chair)
Cllr Philip Bateman MBE
Cllr Val Evans
Cllr Rita Potter
Cllr Wendy Thompson
Cllr Simon Bennett
Cllr Zee Russell
Cllr Ellis Turrell (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Barbara McGarrity QN
Cllr Louise Miles
Cllr Udey Singh
Cllr Dr Paul John Birch J.P. (Substituting for Cllr Sweetman)
Cllr Rashpal Kaur

In Attendance

Cllr Stephen Simkins (Deputy Leader / Cabinet Member for Inclusive City Economy)
Cllr Obaida Ahmed (Cabinet for Resources and Digital City)

Employees

Martin Stevens DL (Scrutiny Team Leader)
Claire Nye (Director of Finance)
John Roseblade (Director for City Housing and Environment)
Marianne Page (Service Manager – Transport Strategy)
Ruth Taylor (Service Lead for Placemaking in City Housing and Environment)
Laura Noonan (Electoral Services and Scrutiny Manager)
Earl Piggott-Smith (Scrutiny Officer)

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 **Apologies for absence**
Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman and Cllr Susan Roberts MBE.
- Cllr Paul Birch, JP BEM was officialy substituting for Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman.
- Cllr Rashpal Kaur was officially substituting for Cllr Susan Roberts MBE.

2 Declarations of interest

Cllr Zee Russell, Cllr Rita Potter and Cllr Barbara McGarrity all declared an interest under item 3, Housing Revenue Account Business Plan 2023-2024 including rent and service charges, as Members of the Wolverhampton Homes Board.

3 Housing Revenue Account Business Plan 2023-2024 including rent and service charges

The Cabinet Member for Resources and Digital City presented the report on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan 2023-2024 including rent and service charges. The Council appreciated the difficult times people were living in and the report recognised that fact. The plan enabled the Local Authority to meet their housing requirements and the needs of tenants.

The Director of Finance remarked that the report set out the HRA budget for next financial year and the longer-term business case. There had been an error in one of the appendices which was circulated with the original report. A revised appendix had been issued. She stated that the financial modelling underpinning the budget proposals was based on a set of key assumptions. Inflation was one of the key factors. Increasing inflation had put pressures on the revenue and capital costs. The report outlined the inflation levels assumed over the medium term. The assumptions would need to be kept under review in light of the economic climate.

The Director of Finance commented that the HRA took into account potential right to buy sales and the purchase of new build of properties to offset the reductions. The Council were forecasting an overall decline of housing numbers over the next five years. This in turn had an impact on rental income. The HRA Capital Programme relied on borrowing to fund the investments and therefore interest forecasts were another key element of the financial assumptions. The report set out the forecast over the medium term but these would have to be kept under review. Interest rates had increased over the last twelve months.

The Director of Finance remarked that the expenditure budgets had been formed by advice and information through Housing Strategy colleagues and from Wolverhampton Homes. The plan sought to ensure that the Council had sufficient resources for revenue, such as repairs and maintenance. The levels of reserves had been reviewed in light of the risks facing the HRA. It was her advice that the £7 million in reserves was adequate at the current time. Having taken into account the business requirements, the proposal was to increase rates by 7%. The report outlined the background to the cap on the rents and the consultation the Government undertook which led to a rent cap being imposed of 7%. It was recognised that in light of the increased costs in living that tenants could struggle to pay additional rent. There was a proposal in the report to set aside a funding pot to provide support during the next financial year, which would be kept under review.

The Director of Housing and Environment commented that the Council did have an ageing stock of social housing. The HRA paid for refurbishments, repairs of voids, improvements, de-carbonisation and energy efficiency, the replacement programme for non-traditional housing and new build programmes. Even with that investment there was still an estimated overall reduction in housing stock.

The Vice-Chair commented that almost a quarter of all homes in the City were managed by Wolverhampton Homes. He stressed the difficult times people were living in. Council Tax rates and Social Housing rates were increasing by the maximum possible allowed. He was of the view that had the Government not imposed a cap on social housing rate increases, that rents would have increased by a higher amount. The increase would impact on thousands of residents living in Wolverhampton. He commented that this was a choice of the Council and it did not need to take this particular course of action. Referring to capital expenditure, in his own Ward, he was not certain where this was being spent. He had been trying for several months to have some new garage doors installed at some of the garage sites. Some of the garages did not have any doors on them.

The Vice-Chair commented that he felt that there had been a disproportionate amount of investment on the East of the City, compared to the West. He felt the investment should be spread across the City in all Wards, with every Wolverhampton Homes tenant having value for money from the rents they paid.

A Panel Member stated that the Council were combatting a 11.1% inflation rate at the present time against a back drop of an inflation rate of 9.2% over the last few months. Over the last twenty years the average inflation rate had been 2.7% in Britain.

Members discussed the cost of living, the rising rates of inflation, the importance of maintaining investment in the Social Housing in the City and the needs of other residents in different types of housing.

The Cabinet Member for Inclusive City Economy spoke on the packages of support that would be available to vulnerable residents. It was important that residents which were struggling contacted the Council to ensure the Council could help them where possible.

The Cabinet Member for Digital Resources and Digital City commented that the Council had no choice other than to increase the rents due to the rising costs of inflation. A support fund was available for residents which would be reviewed as time progressed.

A Panel Member quoted statistics comparing housing rents to other Councils in England.

The Chair spoke on the challenges in Social Housing with regards to maintenance and investment.

Resolved: That the report be noted.

4

City Centre Public Realm Improvements Programme

The Service Lead for Placemaking in City Housing and Environment introduced the presentation on the City Centre Public Realm Improvements Programme, a copy of the presentation is attached to the signed minutes.

She gave information on the background of the programme. The Service Manager for Transport Strategy displayed a map showing the three phases. Phase 2 was yet to commence. An image showing the City Centre Destination Plan was displayed.

An image showing the Public Realm and Transport Links was displayed. There was a central spine of cycle facilities in all of the Public Realm improvement areas. There were also new bus stops and upgraded bus stops to enhance the public transport experience. A slide was displayed showing the significant increase in new taxi bays and taxi ranks.

The Service Lead for Placemaking in City Housing and Environment described the outputs the Council wished to achieve as follows: -

- Improve links between the City Centre and new and future developments (Interchange, high street, Civic Halls, box space, City Centre West).
- Improve street scene, high quality finishes, green spaces.
- Provide secure pedestrian areas, reduce traffic, air quality.
- Connect existing and new cycle links.
- Support local businesses, create new event spaces.

The original end date for Phase 1, Victoria Street was February 2023. Phase 1 would be substantially completed by February 2023. The events area at Bell Street would be completed by March 2023. The hostile vehicles bollards would be finished by March 2023. The original end date for Phase 3, The Halls, was October 2022. The area in front of the Civic Halls and North Street was substantially complete in December 2022. Red Lion Street, Corporation Street and additional works in Mitre Fold were due to be completed in March 2023. The hostile vehicle bollards would be finished by March 2023.

The Service Lead for Placemaking in City Housing and Environment presented a slide on Eurovia: Social Value (2021-2022). They had provided a dedicated Social Value and Communications Manager. She presented a CGI picture showing the concept of Phase 2. £3 million of funding had been secured from the Town's Fund. The plan was to submit a £9.5m City Region Sustainable Transport bid business case in March 2023. Extensive engagement had been undertaken and led by City of Wolverhampton Council. The first stage engagement had concluded in December. Over 200 businesses and 150 residences engaged as well as key stakeholders and interest groups. 284 responses had been received with the majority in favour of the proposals. Phase 2 was likely to be less invasive than phases 1 and 3. The infrastructure and traffic movement was already in place.

The Service Lead for Placemaking in City Housing and Environment stated that business support would be integral to the Phase 2 works. The Temporary Traffic Regulation Order ran out in June 2023. A detailed design would begin in April 2023. The Member Reference Group in September had endorsed the engagement plan. In February, Cabinet would be receiving a report on the outcomes of the concept design engagement.

A Panel Member asked if any compensation would be awarded to the businesses on Victoria Street, who had seen a reduced foot fall in the area. The Director of City Housing and Environment responded that they were looking at what support could be offered to businesses who could show a demonstrable loss during the works. The

Council had engaged the services of some business advisors and they were currently reviewing the process. A payment had been made to a number of businesses who had shown loss during the initial phase of the support package.

A Panel Member asked for the figure of the initial budget for all three phases and the expected end budget. They asked for further details on the engagement process that had taken place and whether there had been any mention of a hardship fund for businesses affected. He asked what was going to be put in place for businesses which clearly could show they'd been impacted. Their third question related to ensuring that the Council did not have similar legal issues to what they had faced with the contractor who had carried out works at the Civic Halls. Their final question was on the £9.5 bid which was intended to be submitted in March. He asked what was the plan for if this bid failed and how confident they were of finding alternative funding should the bid not be successful.

The Service Lead for Placemaking in City Housing and Environment responded that there had been no budget attached to the initial delivery plan of the Public Realm works. The plan had set out the intentions for the programme. On Phases 1 and 3 there had been significant engagement over a period of three years. Face to face engagement had taken place with all the businesses in the Phase 1 and Phase 3 areas. When the country entered lockdown, due to Covid-19, they had only be able to communicate with them by email. As soon as they were able to legally engage with face-to-face communications with businesses following an easing of the Covid restrictions, they did so. Through Eurovia they also had a Public Liaison Manager who and a Project Manager who were on site each day.

The Director for City Housing and Environment made it clear that there was no legal requirement to provide compensation to businesses for Highway works, it was different to utility works. The Council were however looking at what support could be made available to businesses where it was deemed right and proper. The project was very different to the Civic Halls and they had a high degree of confidence they would remain with budget.

A Member of the Panel asked about day-to-day issues for repairing walkways in the City. She was particularly concerned about the disabled area around the outside of the art gallery and asked for it to be inspected. She also had specific questions about squares of tarmac near to the new paving in the City Centre, which seemed unsightly. The Director for Housing and Environment responded that there were a series of inspections which took place which would pick up any dangerous defects in the walkway. They were inspected on a monthly cycle. Reasonable and proportionate work would take place in Lichfield street until the Phase 2 works commenced. The new Public Realm areas were protected for five years from planned utility company works, other than those classed as an emergency. They were required to make the area good following works. Before Christmas, the businesses had requested that works stop in order to allow them to attract more customers. This meant some areas were blacked over with tarmac to keep them safe in the interim. The cycle areas would eventually be coloured green. Some areas that were currently tarmac would have blocked paving.

A Panel Member asked for reassurance that the paving used for the Public Realm works would not have to be replaced on a regular basis. He made reference to the cycle lane on Queen's Square showed in the map. He was concerned that taxis

were parking in cycle lanes in the City Centre during the middle of the day. He asked what enforcement would take place. With reference to the Box Park, he asked what would happen if events were not well attended.

The Director for City Housing and Environment responded that the new paving was of a higher specification to what had been used previously such as that on Dudley Street. The paving was laid on a concrete bed. If Taxis were parking in cycling lanes, it would be enforced, if there were enforceable restrictions. The events space would provide extra space for businesses to have tables and chairs outside. The events team were working on a programme of events to increase footfall. The market was strong for an events space.

A Member gave a view that Brexit had caused the City to suffer due to no longer being eligible for European funding.

The Cabinet Member for Inclusive City Economy suggested that the Box Park could be added to the future Scrutiny Work Programme. He was excited about what it could bring to the City.

A Panel Member raised the importance of an effective communications plan for the City and the importance of timing. He suggested this could be added to the work programme for Scrutiny Board in the future. The Service Manager for Transport Strategy remarked that she would be able to send the current Communications Plan for the Phase 2 Works of the Public Realm.

The Vice-Chair raised concerns that the views of residents and businesses had not been taken into account enough during the Public Realm Works. He also raised concerns about some of the changes that had been made to public transport, such as the bus stop not being directly outside the entrance to the Art Gallery. He raised a query about the Phase 2 plans, which showed a cycle lane going down the middle of the pedestrianised area in Victoria Street. He asked if the access to the Civic Centre underground car park would be available off North Street, which at the present time people had to access via Wulfrunian Street. He questioned whether any Phase 2 work was required on Lichfield Street. He expressed a view that the works that had taken place on Salop Street made the street look emptier.

The Service Manager for Transport Strategy responded that the design for the cycle route on Victoria Street were in keeping with other cycle route designs in the City, where pedestrians had been able to co-exist successfully with cyclists. Active travel had increased as a result. She was confident that the wider footways would allow all the activities to take place. The access to the North Street entrance of the underground Civic Centre car park would be maintained, unless there were events taking place requiring access restrictions.

Members expressed views about the current state of some of the streets in Wolverhampton including how they had changed over time. Concerns were raised about the number of, to let properties in and around the City Centre.

A Panel Member expressed concern about the location of some of the bollards in the public realm areas. Some businesses had told her that they were not having the communications with the Council which they desired. She was worried about the

overall health of the business sector. She felt communication with them was vitally important going forward and appropriate support.

The Director of City Housing and Environment gave an assurance he would look into the placement of the bollards. He also gave an assurance that they would engage with individual businesses, especially those which felt they needed more communication.

The Cabinet Member for Inclusive City Economy gave an assurance he was happy to receive suggestions for helping to manage the changes in the City Centre.

There was a discussion about St Peter's Church and their requirements. Officers gave an assurance that they were in regular communication with them.

A Panel Member referenced the example of Birmingham Council who had invested in a Hotel for the City. He suggested the Magistrates Court in Wolverhampton could be converted into a four-star hotel.

Members expressed views of the importance of Scrutiny in the decision making process.

Resolved: That the report on the City Centre Public Realm Improvements Programme be noted.

5 **Scrutiny Work programme**

A Panel Member asked for the Communications Plan for the City to be included on an agenda for a future meeting.

6 **Date of Next Meeting**

The date of the next scheduled Scrutiny Board was confirmed as Tuesday, 7 February 2023 at 6pm.