

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Communities and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Board (4)
held at 10.00 am on Thursday, 8 December 2022

Present:

Members: Councillor L Bigham (Chair)
Councillor S Agboola
Councillor R Bailey
Councillor J Gardiner
Councillor M Heaven
Councillor A Hopkins
Councillor R Singh
Councillor R Thay

Other Members: Councillor D Welsh, Cabinet Member for Housing and Communities

Employees (by Directorate):

Adult Services and Housing: P Fahy (Director), J Crawshaw

Law and Governance: S Bennett, V Castree

Streetscene and Regulatory Services: A Walster (Director), D Blackburn, D Butler, A Chowns, M Yates

Apologies: Councillors G Hayre, G Lloyd

Public Business

20. Declarations of Interest

There were no disclosable pecuniary interests.

In relation to Minute 24 below relating to "Householder Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) Public Consultation", it was noted that Councillor R Bailey and J Gardiner are members of Planning Committee.

21. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting held on 6 October, 2022 were agreed and signed as a true record.

In response to a question regarding ensuring that action is taken following consideration by the Scrutiny Board, It was noted that all Recommendations made by the Board were captured on a Recommendations Tracker report and that often, items were added to the Work Programme and reconsidered by the Board after a period of time to receive a progress update.

22. **Housing and Homelessness Services Update**

The Scrutiny Board considered a Briefing Note of the Director of Adults Services and Housing which provided a detailed update on the progress of the Housing and Homelessness Service, together with the key initiatives that have been implemented during the previous 12 months.

The Briefing Note indicated that the Council approved its Housing and Homelessness Strategy (2019-2024) in March 2019 which is the core Strategy that drives the service forward. The Strategy has four key areas of focus:

- Preventing homelessness
- Supporting homeless households
- Support for people and communities
- Improving existing homes
- Housing development

The Strategy Action plan is currently being refreshed to demonstrate progress against actions and to ensure it reflects the current housing priorities in the city. The Housing and Homelessness Service has undergone a significant transformation over the previous three and a half years with a number of initiatives/projects being worked on which have:

- Reduced the financial burden on the Authority whilst providing better quality temporary accommodation options.
- Increased the number of households where homelessness is prevented or relieved and therefore decreasing the number of households in temporary accommodation.
- Increased the number of properties available to households in exceptional housing need that are either at social/affordable rents or at the Local Housing Allowance rates if in the private rented sector.

A table in the Briefing Note set out in detail a number of projects/improvements that have been implemented over the previous 2 years and the progress that these have achieved.

The Briefing Note also detailed work undertaken with Registered Providers and other organisations/landlords in the City to ensure that there are appropriate levels of accommodation built in the City to meet the needs of residents.

The service has seen an increase in the number of families presenting as homeless throughout 2022 and anticipate this will continue into and through 2023. It is also anticipated that there will be an increase in the number of single people presenting as homeless and an increase in rough sleepers. These increases are largely driven by the following factors;

- With the likelihood of a recession and the cost-of-living issues it is anticipated that more households will struggle financially to meet their housing costs, whether this is rented or mortgage payments.

- Other factors include a buoyant private rented sector and an increase in Domestic Abuse presentations
- During previous financial downturns there has been an adverse impact on young people living at home who are evicted by their parents/guardians due to pressures on the family.
- The service has a number of actions in place to support the mitigation of these risks as identified earlier in the report based on prevention, effective temporary accommodation where required, and move on.

The Scrutiny Board made comments asked questions and sought assurances on a number of issues including:-

- The operation of the new IT system
- How the service is benchmarked
- Operation of the new contracts
- The work undertaken by the Partnership Forum
- New housing projects taking place in Wyken ward (It was noted that Wyken ward Councillors will be kept informed of developments in this matter)
- The Homefinder Allocations Scheme including pressures, particularly in relation to larger homes; bandings and how these operate; transparency in relation to how housing is allocated; and the 12 month review of the Scheme
- Maintenance of properties including those brought by the Council for housing provision; inspection of properties to ensure they are fit for purpose, including checks regarding damp and mould; and how complaints regarding this are dealt with. (In light of recent national events, it was noted that officers would be undertaking refresher training in this regard in the New Year)
- Enforcement undertaken in relation to properties, including via the HIMO licensing scheme
- Information regarding rough sleepers in the City, including information from the annual rough sleeper count and wellbeing and mental health support offered
- Work being undertaken in relation to empty properties in the City and powers available to Local Authorities to deal with this. It was noted that empty properties would be considered in detail by the Scrutiny Board later in the Municipal Year as part of their Work Programme
- How the One Coventry approach is applied to the Housing and Homelessness service as a whole
- Information in relation to an increase in Domestic Abuse presentations
- Advice available for residents who are struggling to pay their mortgages
- The new strategy of converting garages in certain areas into houses and the rationale behind this
- Issues associated with under occupancy of properties

The Scrutiny Board acknowledged all of the excellent hard work being undertaken in relation to this work and asked that their appreciation be forwarded to the Team.

RESOLVED:-

- 1) That the contents of the Briefing Note will be noted and welcomed**
- 2) That the Scrutiny Board be provided with information in relation to the increase in Domestic Abuse presentations**
- 3) That officers be requested to review the Council's website to ensure that there is clarity of information for residents with mortgages who are at risk of defaulting and being homeless.**
- 4) That the 12 month review of the implementation of the Homefinder Allocations Scheme be added to the Scrutiny Board's Work Programme**

23. Greenspaces

The Scrutiny Board considered a Briefing Note of the Director of Streetscene and Regulatory Services which provided a detailed indication of the levels of usage and steps taken to encourage usage of greenspaces and parks in the City.

The Briefing Note indicated that there is now increasing tangible evidence which demonstrates how the city's greenspaces including all of the parks, recreation grounds, playing fields, children's playgrounds, ornamental gardens, golf courses, and woodlands directly contribute to people's health and wellbeing. In addition to the health benefits, they help create thriving communities providing significant opportunities to develop and enhance the social, recreational, environmental, educational and economic wellbeing of our community.

The City Council adopted its second Green Space Strategy in 2019. The Strategy initially identified 747 individual areas of greenspace covering an area of 2002 hectares. It was recognised that many of these sites were small and offered little amenity value. The Strategy therefore focussed on individual sites greater than 0.1 hectares of which there are 650 individual sites covering 635 hectares. These varied greatly in size with the largest including Coombe Park covering 202 hectares and the War Memorial Park which approximately 48.5 hectares.

Two thirds of green space across the city, some 430 sites have no restrictions on public access with almost all the remainder having at least some limited public access. The sites with restricted access typically included sports clubs, allotments and school grounds. The Briefing Note indicated that it is important to recognise that greenspace can take many forms including less obvious forms such as cemeteries which also provide opportunities for quiet recreation.

Consultation in developing the Green Space Strategy found that the main reasons given for visiting parks and open spaces was for the fresh air, to walk and jog and to enjoy peace, quietness and relaxation. It also included seeking and being close to nature and wildlife and providing somewhere for children to play including dedicated play areas. A number of barriers were also cited. These included perceptions of antisocial behaviour, and generally not feeling safe; dog fouling,

poor quality or lack of facilities and some concerns around clashes with cycling and vehicles in parks.

The Briefing Note outlined:-

- The significant increase in the use of the greenspaces in the City during the Covid-19 pandemic which placed a huge strain on the infrastructure of the parks and impacted on the wear and tear of infrastructure, including play equipment
- The likelihood that the current cost of living crisis will mean that parks will be extensively used in 2023 and will continue to suffer from increased levels of wear and tear for the indefinite future
- Maintenance of the parks and green open spaces. It was noted that the maintenance budget was reduced by £1m in 2016, which has led to a significant reduction in basic infrastructural maintenance
- Toilet provision in parks, including work undertaken with the Equalities and Diversity Team to provide modular toilet facilities accessible for people with severe and multiple disabilities where personal care can also be accommodated
- Catering facilities in parks
- Paths and access, including the cost of constructing and maintaining footpaths
- Seating provision, including a “memorial seat” sponsorship scheme
- Lighting, particularly along footpath networks
- Signage and information boards
- Biodiversity provided by greenspaces
- Staff presence in parks, including the work of the Parks Services’ Rangers Team, who play a vital role in the maintenance and management of many of the parks in the City, especially in terms of public engagement
- Dog control, including the number of Fixed Penalty Notices (12) issues for dog offences in parks and prosecutions (2) in the last 3 years

The Scrutiny Board made comments and asked questions on a number of issues including:-

- The use of Section 106 monies to improve greenspaces in new developments
- The valuable work undertaken by the Park Rangers
- The costs associated with providing CCTV in parks
- Dog littering prosecutions
- Notices erected under Section 6 of the West Midlands Country Council Act 1980 (which is now redundant) and which prohibit ball games on smaller pieces of land
- Work being undertaken on Sowe Valley footpaths
- Work undertaken to prevent anti-social behaviour in parks, including bull dog rallies
- Biodiversity being provided by the City’s greenspaces, including wild flower planting on the central reservations of the A45
- The valuable work being undertaken by the Friends of the Parks groups in the City

- Commercial activity, which provides 50% of the Parks budget, and grant funding

The Scrutiny Board placed on record their appreciation and support for the valuable work undertaken by the Park Ranger service, recognising the impact on engaging and involving the local community and volunteers in their parks and green spaces, which is particularly important for on-going sustainability in a time of limited resource.

RESOLVED:-

- 1) That the contents of the Briefing Note and the steps undertaken to improve access to parks and greenspaces be noted and welcomed
- 2) That a letter be sent to the Park Ranger Team expressing the Scrutiny Board's thanks and appreciation for all of the work undertaken
- 3) That information regarding the number of dog fouling prosecutions be circulated to the Scrutiny Board

24. Householder Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) Public Consultation

The Scrutiny Board considered a Briefing Note of the Director of Streetscene and Regulatory Services which sought the Scrutiny Board's representations to the draft Householder Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) which is currently out for consultation. A copy of the draft SPD was appended to the report.

The draft SPD sets out guidance to applicants seeking to extend or alter their properties and comprehensively updates the current guidance that dates to 2013, promoting high quality design throughout.

There is a seven week consultation process after which responses will be analysed and, where appropriate, the SPD amended accordingly before submission to Cabinet for final adoption. The Cabinet report will include a statement setting out the details of the consultation, a summary of the main issues raised and how they have been addressed.

The Scrutiny Board made a number of comments in relation to the draft SPD:-

- Drafting amendments in relation to Para 4.19 and Figure 8
- A suggestion to include reference to the acceptable use of a garden/outbuilding as a home office in Principle 7
- A suggestion to redraft Appendix 1 – Justification Statement to use plain English and/or to include a glossary of more “technical” terms

RESOLVED that:-

- 1) The draft Householder Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document be noted

2) That the comments outlined above be considered as representations as part of the consultation process

25. Work Programme and Outstanding Issues - 2022/23

The Scrutiny Board noted their Work Programme for 2022/23.

26. Any Other Items of Urgent Public Business

There were no other items of urgent public business.

(Meeting closed at 1.00pm)