

Meeting of: Scrutiny Board (Environment, Housing and Communities)

Date: 28 May 2020

Subject: Working Group – Covid-19 response and recovery

Attendance

Board Members:

Additional Attendees:

Cllr B Anderson (Chair)	Cllr M Rafique, Executive Member for Environment & Active Lifestyles
Cllr M Harland	Neil Evans, Director Resources & Housing
Cllr A Gabriel	James Rogers, Director Communities & Environment
Cllr A Khan	John Woolmer, Deputy Chief Officer (Waste Management)
Cllr P Grahame	Rebecca Atherton, Principal Scrutiny Advisor
Cllr T Smith	
Cllr P Gruen	
Cllr N Sharpe	Apologies: J Akhtar, K Brooks, D Collins, D Coupar
Cllr A Blackburn	
Cllr J Bentley	
Cllr M Dobson	

1. This was the second Environment, Housing and communities Scrutiny Board meeting to be held remotely. It was a private working group session rather than a public meeting.
2. The purpose of this meeting was to provide Members with an overview of relevant key actions and decisions that have been taken by the Council as part of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. In the Board's pre-meet Cllr Anderson confirmed that he had not been required to authorise any decisions in line with urgency arrangements. He also outlined draft work programme items for public sessions in June and July, and noted a request for the Board to be updated on the impact of the pandemic on policing in the city.
4. Cllr Anderson welcomed participants to the Board and invited Neil Evans to brief the Board on decisions within his remit during the period following the last working Group on 13 May.
5. Neil provided an update to the Board on the reestablishment of some services that were reduced in the initial phase of the pandemic response. He highlighted a need to deal with the backlog of around 30,000 outstanding non-emergency repairs, which could not be carried out in recent weeks, and informed the Board that it would be a priority to bring 685 voids back into use.

6. It was noted that 7,000 essential repairs have been carried out during the lock down period, which equates to around 60% of the normal rate of such repairs. Some concern was expressed about a drop in demand for urgent repairs potentially reflecting an anxiety on the part of some tenants to progress such issues during the pandemic.
7. Neil confirmed officers are working with Trade Unions to ensure work can be carried out safely in tenant properties. He acknowledged that some tasks may take longer to resume if social distancing cannot be practiced. He informed the Board that external work has restarted in some areas including roofing, communal areas of multi-storey buildings and as part of the ongoing sprinkler programme.
8. The Board asked for clarity about the planned return of staff to local housing offices and the reduction in capacity due to staff being required to self-isolate.
9. Members were informed that the Council is still following national advice in encouraging staff to continue to work at home if they are able to do so, in order to reduce pressure on public transport and office accommodation. However, Neil noted that the council is anticipating more members of staff returning in the coming weeks - from around 5% to 10% - either because they cannot perform their role as effectively at home or for reasons of well-being. The Board noted the outcome of the recent staff well-being survey.
10. Work is being undertaken to ensure staff are able to return to work safely and that social distancing can be practiced. Staff need to inform managers where they are planning to return so that necessary cleaning can take place.
11. The Board welcomed the flexibility and commitment of staff who have been re-deployed as part of the Council's response to coronavirus. However, members also acknowledged the challenge of returning those members of staff to their substantive roles without causing disruption to key frontline services such as emergency food distribution and refuse.
12. The Board was informed that around 1000 members of staff are isolating, primarily due to shielding requirements rather than being symptomatic of Covid. It was noted that the reduction in capacity has not been felt consistently across services, with some areas having a higher proportion of staff members with pre-existing conditions that require them to be shielded.
13. An update was provided with regard to the installation of district heating in Lincoln Green. Neil Evans noted that work to lay out the spine of the network has been continuing throughout the recent restrictive period and, with less city centre traffic to contend with, the work has progressed more quickly than would otherwise have been anticipated. He confirmed that work to connect multi-storey buildings would resume in the first instance in communal areas. However, he noted that work to progress connections in individual homes would have to be done sensitively and in line with government advice about Covid-19.

14. James Rogers provided an update on the re-opening of Household Waste and Recycling Centres, noting the important role of re-deployed staff in supporting the service. He also reiterated the recently publicised changes to restrictions on services in chapels and crematoria. He confirmed policies would remain under review as lockdown restrictions are eased.
15. John Woolmer provided further updates in relation to brown bin collections, refuse services and composting.
16. James outlined the ongoing work to resolve the challenges of ensuring social distancing in outdoor spaces such as parks and updated members on plans for a phased re-opening of outdoor attractions.
17. The Board was informed that significant work has been carried out to ensure rough sleepers are effectively supported. The recent reduction in the numbers of people sleeping rough was welcomed but it was noted that there is still a cohort of individuals who are, for a complex number of reasons, not in emergency accommodation.
18. Members received an update on support for victims of domestic abuse, the role of environmental health officers in responding to reported breaches of covid-related restrictions and the work of volunteers in the city. The Board were informed of particular challenges around the registration of births and updated about procedures for the registering of deaths by telephone.
19. Further information was requested about work to support victims of domestic abuse given a rise in incidents during the lockdown period and the Board discussed the response of city partners to breaches of covid-restrictions, particularly where large groups of people come together.
20. The Board discussed the potential response to spikes in the 'R rate' in instances of local outbreaks and questioned whether government funding would be available to support the required response. In response James Rogers noted that the Council is awaiting further guidance particularly in relation to the recently announced 'track and trace' system, which will be public health led.
21. Members of the Board request a written update on the housing service.
22. The next Board meeting will take place on **18 June 10.30am – 11.30am**. This will be a public session.