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SCRUTINY BOARD (ENVIRONMENT, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES)

THURSDAY, 12TH OCTOBER, 2023

PRESENT: Councillor S Golton in the Chair

Councillors P Stables, B Anderson,
J Akhtar, P Grahame, A Maloney,
A McCluskey, A Rontree, A Khan,
N Harrington, D Cohen and R Jones

38 Appeals Against Refusal of Inspection of Documents

There were no appeals.

39 Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

There were no exemptions.

40 Late Items

There were no late items.

41 Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

42 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

Apologies were received from the following Scrutiny Board members: Cllr S Seary (Cllr Cohen attended as a substitute), Cllr J Tudor (Cllr R Jones attended as a substitute), Cllr A Hannan

Apologies were also received from Cllr J Lennox (Executive Member).

43 Minutes - 14 September 2023

The minutes of the meeting of 14 September were approved as a correct record.

44 Matters Arising

Further to minute 34, the Chair confirmed he had written to Alison Lowe (Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime) to highlight member comments regarding the Mayor's Safer Communities Fund.

Cllr Golton had followed up on the question of whether community committees could apply for funding for local projects via the Mayor's Safer Communities Fund under current arrangements.

He had further asked for a response to the question raised by members regarding a potential future role for community committees in assisting with the assessment of applications to this fund to ensure the distribution of funds reflects community priorities.

45 Plans for Community Parks

The item began with a video summarising research by the University of Leeds, on behalf of West Yorkshire Combined Authority, about how to make women and girls feel safer in parks.

Those in attendance for this item were:

- Cllr Mohammed Rafique (Executive Member)
- James Rogers (Director Communities, Housing and Environment)
- Polly Cook (Chief Officer, Climate, Energy and Green Spaces)
- Emma Trickett (Parks Technical Manager)
- Geoff Turnbull (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager)
- Dr Anna Barker (Associate Professor in Criminal Justice & Criminology, University of Leeds)
- Helen Forman (Urban Design Manager, WYCA)

In reference to the guidance produced in response to the research by the University of Leeds, Helen Forman noted that 10 principles have been developed under 3 themes:

- Eyes on the park: reflecting that the presence of others makes women and girls feel safer.
- Awareness: addressing design issues in parks that can make women and girls feel more secure.
- Inclusion: considering the importance of belonging, bringing a diverse range of women and girls into the parks and designing spaces with their input.

The guidance includes case studies of good practice that show how the principles might be applied in practice. Helen welcomed the fact that the guidance has already been incorporated into Leeds City Council's access audits and 'plans on a page.'

Helen acknowledged that changes to design and management of parks are only part of the solution, and that societal change will also be required to ensure the women and girls feel safe in these spaces. She noted that plans on page are a useful tool to ensure that these issues are considered and that they provide an opportunity for women and girls to input into the design of these spaces.

Polly Cook reminded the Scrutiny Board that the 2022 Parks and Green Spaces Strategy included a recommendation that a 'Plan on a Page' should be produced for each of the city's community parks. Each plan will be produced in consultation with members and local communities and will set out a vision for each of those spaces, including addressing issues of accessibility and safety.

Emma Trickett provided an update on progress towards developing plans on a page for community parks and carrying out accessibility audits. She highlighted that a plan will be developed for all 65 community parks. Each document will show the current park on one page and the future vision on the opposite page – this is intended to be a simple and accessible format.

Emma confirmed that each plan will be based on extensive consultation with local people. She noted that 13 plans have been developed as part of the process of bidding for Levelling Up funding in several wards and 4 more consultations are underway.

Some concerns were raised in relation to the consultation process for the 13 plans developed as part of a bid for Levelling Up funding. Officers confirmed that consultation had to be delivered within a tight timescale to meet the funding application deadlines and therefore was not as extensive as the service would have liked. Future consultations will follow the process set out in the report.

'Access for all' is a priority in the Leeds Parks and Green Spaces Strategy, which aims to ensure parks and greenspaces are accessible for everyone who wants to use them. To achieve this the Council has committed to develop and undertake an access audit of all city and community parts within the lifetime of the strategy.

Geoff Turnbull confirmed that the service has taken a robust approach to the accessibility audits. He confirmed he is confident in the process from an equalities perspective and will continue to support the service to deliver the audits.

Scrutiny members sought to clarify what is deemed a 'community park.' Officers confirmed that there are different, historical definitions of greenspaces in the city – including city parks, community parks and recreation grounds.

The Chief Officer agreed to circulate the definitions of the different classifications of greenspace, noting that members could discuss any concerns about definitions relating to greenspace in their wards with the team.

The Scrutiny Board sought clarification about who would have responsibility for carrying out the accessibility audits and the timescales for doing so.

Information was provided about designated active travel routes, which enable cyclists to travel through certain parks.

Members requested that guidance about improving the safety of women and girls in parks is shared with Parish and Town councils to inform the development of green spaces for which they have responsibility. Officers also confirmed that they would be happy to share their methodology for developing plans on a page with Parish and Town Councils and/or other stakeholders but noted that resource restrictions prevent the service from extending its current planned activity to parks that are not directly controlled by the Council.

Members welcomed the costing of each plan on a page and acknowledged that funds are not in place to deliver all the desired works immediately.

The Scrutiny Board was informed that city parks that have a Green Flag Award have separate management plans in place to ensure those destination parks continue to meet the required standards. Such parks include Golden Acre Park, Otley Chevin Forest Park and Roundhay Park.

Members sought to clarify how CIL monies might be used to fund some of the work reflected in the plans on a page for parks. It was noted that Parish and Town councils will be the future recipients of CIL funding and there may be opportunity to work in partnership to use some of that money to improve local greenspaces.

It was further recommended that members raise the issue of CIL funding within the upcoming community committee review.

Cllr Rafique reassured the Board that all plans will involve detailed consultation with communities and local ward members. He noted that alongside CIL monies, some communities have already delivered change through local fundraising.

The need for expectation management was explored, with members noting that the plans contain both short- and long-term ambitions for local green spaces.

Emma Trickett set out the consultation process that will be used for each plan on a page. She confirmed the consultation documents will be shared online and that there will also be opportunities for in person consultation.

Members highlighted the need to ensure that plans on a page are also aligned with the neighbourhood development plans produced through neighbourhood forums.

Concern was raised that the introduction of charging could push people to park in places outside of designated car parks, which could undermine efforts to improve safety and accessibility for women and girls.

The Chief Officer noted that a consultation has been launched in relation to the potential introduction of parking charges at some parks. It is the intention that funding raised through any such charges would be directed to improve

the quality of parks. It was confirmed that there would be no charge introduced for disabled parking.

Members requested that consideration be given to how currently restricted S106 monies could be used in future to improve pocket parks.

Dr Barker provided an overview of the methodology used in the research conducted by the University of Leeds. She noted the importance of recognising the diversity of needs and interests amongst women, while also responding to the factors that are common across all groups.

Dr Barker highlighted work undertaken with women's centres in West Yorkshire, facilitated by WYCA, which enabled researchers to engage with women who do not use parks currently as well as those that do. Evidence was gathered through a combination of focus groups and individual interviews.

The Board queried at what stage of planning an equality impact assessment would be conducted and asked how that process would capture lived experience.

Members queried how an equality impact assessment might be updated in response to the experience of users – for example, if concerns about accessibility are raised following action to 'rewild' an area to increase biodiversity. Members also questioned whether recommendations regarding the maintenance of natural features would be part of an equality impact assessment.

Geoff Turnbull noted that consultation and engagement would provide an evidence base that may inform the development of a plan. However, a formal equality impact assessment would only be conducted when funding is established and the associated decision making processes initiated.

Members explored the issue of lighting in parks, with concern raised about the shadows created along very brightly lit pathways.

Helen Forman responded by acknowledging the difficulty of identifying lighting solutions that create gradients of light rather than stark contrasts. She also noted lighting is often a very expensive solution to safety concerns and a priority that creates tension with priorities around encouraging biodiversity. It is hard to make generalisations at a national level but where there is an 'anchor' such as a station linked to a greenspace lighting is regarded as especially important.

Reflecting upon the importance of the presence of others in a park to create a perception of safety for women, members explored the challenges of staffing in the current financial climate. Concern was also expressed about recommendations that staff should be available to supervise wheelchair friendly play equipment in parks given the limited resources within the parks service.

The Scrutiny Board explored the tension between enabling access to parks for mobility vehicles while also trying to create barriers for people using electric vehicles as part of anti-social behaviour. Officers confirmed that chicanes are recommended in most instances to deter anti-social behaviour but where there is a more significant problem more robust solutions may need to be explored.

The Scrutiny Board expressed thanks to the staff working to improve parks and greenspaces, and to Dr Barker and Helen Forman for taking the time to contribute to the debate.

The Chair proposed that the Board would produce a statement of its conclusions and recommendations having reflected on the discussion at the meeting.

RESOLVED:

That the Scrutiny Board (Environment, Housing and Communities) produces a summary of its conclusions and recommendations having considered the report and reflected upon member discussion.

46 Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy

In June 2023 the Scrutiny Board received an update on homelessness prevention activity as part of regular performance monitoring.

During this update members asked for more information about the development of a new five-year Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy, which followed the completion of a Homelessness Review in January 2023. It was confirmed that the new strategy would be presented to the Scrutiny Board for information to inform future consideration by members of KPIs included within regular performance monitoring data.

The Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2023 - 2028 was approved by the Executive Board in July 2023.

The following officers were in attendance for this item:

- James Rogers (Director, Communities, Housing and Environment)
- Gerard Tinsdale (Chief Officer Housing)
- Kerrie Murray (Head of Homelessness)

The Chair noted that Cllr J Lennox (Executive Member for Housing) had asked that her apologies be recorded in relation to this item.

Kerrie Murray introduced the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy, highlighting that this is a legal requirement for the Council. The Council must publish a strategy informed by a homeless review in the district at least every five years.

The Strategy has been designed in consultation with the Homelessness Prevention Forum to capture the views of the wider sector and those with lived experiences.

Kerrie set out the four overarching ambitions of the strategy: universal prevention, targeted prevention, intervention and recovery through strong city partnership working, and a shared and integrated approach to building on our offer of Housing Options.

An update was provided in relation to a new single partnership assessment form to prevent people who are experiencing trauma from having to repeat their experiences to different organisations.

The Board was informed that the strategy includes a commitment to expand the Landlord Letting scheme and to increase engagement with landlords in Leeds.

Members noted the strong focus on prevention within the strategy and the ambition to minimise the use of temporary accommodation.

Members of the Scrutiny Board welcomed the strategy and the performance of the team, noting there has been national recognition for the Leeds approach.

The Scrutiny Board expressed concern about overall pressures on housing supply in Leeds, including within the private rented sector.

Specific concern was raised about a limited supply of permanent facilities for members of gypsy and traveller communities, and the impact of temporary sites on local communities. Board members sought clarification about the number of potential permanent sites identified for development as part of the site allocations process, along with the cost of clearing temporary sites.

Gerard Tinsdale noted that the Council had been unsuccessful in a recent bid to secure funding to develop an additional permanent site for members of the gypsy and traveller community. He acknowledged the need in the city but also highlighted the financial challenge of delivering further provision. He noted the different needs of gypsy and traveller groups with some people requiring permanent facilities, and others in need of temporary facilities as they pass through the city.

Further information was requested about those most at risk of homelessness and groups where there is a likelihood of under-reporting. Kerrie confirmed that there appears to be underreporting within the LGBTQ+ community, particularly amongst young people. Action had been taken to raise awareness of housing options with young people within the LGBTQ+ community and additional staff training has taken place.

Further information was requested in relation to the potential over representation of veterans within the number of people presenting as homeless. The Head of Homelessness noted that she will confirm this information outside of the meeting.

Members requested more information about accessing help for rough sleepers in their communities and noted particular concern from residents in multi-storey blocks where rough sleepers are found.

It was confirmed that the Council's outreach offer has been extended to support rough sleepers found during evenings and weekends. The Council works with partners to ensure those individuals can receive wrap around care, potentially including health-based services to address challenges with drugs and alcohol, as well as accommodation.

Members noted the rise in demand for temporary accommodation and queried whether plans to demolish several high-rise buildings in the city would further reduce the supply of accommodation for single households.

The Chief Officer for Housing acknowledged that removing 360 units will increase the pressure on housing services. He reassured members that the allocation policy is currently being reviewed to ensure the focus of allocation is on the needs of the most vulnerable citizens.

He noted that the Council has an obligation to ensure people are living in decent standards and does not have the funding to deliver the extensive changes required to improve the standard of these blocks. He informed the Board that the ultimate ambition is to replace these blocks with higher quality housing but that will take several years.

The Director also highlighted the broader context of investment being delivered as part of the housing growth strategy, which includes social and affordable housing and one-bedroom properties.

Further information was requested in relation to accommodation for those with struggling with addiction. The Head of Homelessness updated the Board on accommodation purchased with funding through the Rough Sleepers Accommodation Programme (RSAP) for individuals who may require immediate wrap around support.

Members welcomed the inclusion of costs within the report and received clarity about performance in relation to other core cities.

RESOLVED:

Members noted and commented upon the contents of the report.

47 Work Schedule

Members noted the draft 2023/24 work programme.

The Executive Board minutes from the meeting of 20 September were also included at **Appendix 2** for reference.

RESOLVED:

Members noted the draft 2023/24 work schedule.

48 Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next public meeting of the Scrutiny Board will take place on **7 December 2023 at 10.30am**. There will be a pre-meeting for all board members at **10.00am**.

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