

SCRUTINY BOARD (ENVIRONMENT, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES)

THURSDAY, 15TH OCTOBER, 2020

PRESENT: Councillor B Anderson in the Chair

Councillors J Akhtar, J Bentley,
A Blackburn, D Collins, A Gabriel,
P Grahame, A Khan, P Gruen, M Harland,
K Brooks and T Smith

31 Appeals Against Refusal of Inspection of Documents

There were no appeals.

32 Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

There were no exempt items.

33 Late Items

There were no late items.

34 Declaration of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

There were no declarations of disclosable pecuniary interests.

35 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

Apologies were received from Councillor N Sharpe.

36 Minutes - 24 September 2020

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the previous meeting held 24th September 2020, be approved as an accurate record.

37 Nitrous Oxide Mis-Use

Further to the minutes of the previous meeting held 9th July 2020, the report of the Chief Officer (Safer Leeds) provided Members with an update on issues associated with nitrous oxide mis-use in Leeds, in light of a referral to the Board from Councillor Matthew Robinson.

The following were in attendance for this item:

- Councillor M Robinson, Referrer
- Councillor D Coupar, Executive Member for Communities
- Paul Money, Chief Officer (Safer Leeds)
- Harvinder Saimbhi, Head of Operational Delivery

The Chief Officer (Safer Leeds) introduced the report, and highlighted the following key points:

- The number of complaints related to nitrous oxide has increased, although it was difficult to determine whether visible usage was due to the temporary closures of events and events;
- Although there is no definitive evidence of the extent to which nitrous oxide mis-use causes long-term damage, it is understood to be possible for an individual to become psychologically dependent upon it;
- Common trends in reporting had typically involved males in vehicles and there had been previous issues with unauthorised gatherings;
- The number of complaints has been higher in inner city wards;
- There are police remedies available to address the unlawful supply and production of nitrous oxide. Local Authorities can use anti-social behaviour legislation including PSPOs and other court orders;
- Trading Standards are not currently aware of Leeds based businesses retailing nitrous oxide or laughing gas capsules to members of the public;
- There has been a significant number of reports from the street cleansing teams regarding littering of canisters;
- The Leeds Drug and Alcohol Social Marketing Group have collaborated with the council to run a harm reduction campaign on recreational drug and alcohol use.

In conclusion, the Chief Officer (Safer Leeds) considered nitrous oxide as being less harmful than other controlled drugs and no adverse effects resulting from individuals becoming dependent on the sole usage of the substance have been evidenced. Moving forward, it was identified there were options in terms of a review of the legislation and opportunities for government to work with the industry and retailers to better understand and disrupt supply chains. Additionally, it was acknowledged that this matter was a significant issue for local communities and addressing the issue should continue within a wider public health setting and the use of enforcement through legislation.

Councillor Robinson welcomed the ongoing multi-agency approach being taken to counter the various concerns emerging from nitrous oxide mis-use within local communities. Cllr Robinson recognised the need for this to continue moving forward particularly in regards to reporting. It was emphasised that support for parents was needed to engage children.

In responding to Member's questions, the following had been discussed:

- Trading Standards have not identified businesses undertaking unlawful activity in Leeds. Details of any community intelligence would be welcomed outside of the meeting.
- The use of nitrous oxide was considered a pathway to use of more significant and harmful drugs in some instances. It was confirmed that a conversation need to be undertaken Public Health regarding the risks associated with the substance.

- To consider the impacts on local communities from an anti-social behaviour perspective. The Chief Officer (Safer Leeds) confirmed local partnership arrangements and resources were available to deal with the issues.

Whilst acknowledging the wider remit of work to be undertaken with colleagues in Public Health, the Chair proposed that the Board receive an update report in 12 months, as well as sharing the report with the Chair of the Scrutiny Board (Adults and Health & Active Lifestyles) in relation to issues on health impacts. This approach was endorsed by Board members.

RESOLVED –

- a) That the contents of the report be noted
- b) That further consideration of this matter be added to the Successor Board's work programme and that an update report be received in 12 months.

38 Budget Consultation

The report of the Head of Democratic Services provided Members with details of the latest revenue budget update for 2021/22 and budget savings proposals, as considered by the Executive Board at its meeting on 24 September 2020.

The following were in attendance for this item:

- Councillor Coupar, Executive Member for Communities
- James Rogers, Director Environment and Communities
- Neil Evans, Director Resources and Housing
- Kevin Mulvaney, Head of Finance (Resources and Housing)
- Michael Everitt, Head of Finance (Environment and Communities)

Members were informed of the following points:

- The budget gap for 2020/21 stands at £118.8m of which £59.7m is due to pressures identified prior to the impact of COVID19 with the balance of £59.1m resulting in ongoing financial impact of COVID19;
- £32.3m of savings had been identified through the Financial Challenge Programme of which £24.2m related to Business as Usual and £8.2m related to Service Review measures. In respect of the Board's remit the Resources and Housing Directorate had identified £5.01m of Business as Usual savings and £6.33m that related to service reviews that would require further consultation;
- It was noted that more savings would be brought to the Executive Board meetings in October and November. There was a need to save around £80m for 2021-2022;
- Housing general fund – Housing Options / Homelessness remain sensitive priorities;
- Housing revenue account - due to the ring-fenced nature of the account monies cannot be used to subsidise the general fund. Proposals to be implemented include increasing rents as per formula

(CPI+1%), Service Charges inflationary uplift and closing the gap on Sheltered Charge for Self-Payers.

- Reduction in staffing budgets and expenditure;
- The Communities and Environment Directorate has identified £2.8m of savings.

In responding to a question regarding the councils position and flexibilities around the budget balance, the Director of Resources and Housing explained that discussions are ongoing regarding the gap faced in 2021 and it was estimated there would be a gap of £50m beyond the receipt of a grant from the government. It was noted that discussions are ongoing to reach an agreement with the government to capitalise £50m and borrow the sum of money over a period of time. It was noted that this model of borrowing would be in line with financial flexibilities already available to central Government and would be secured at a time of historically low interest rates. Further discussions are taking place in relation to the settlement figure for 2021, confirmation of which is anticipated in late December.

In response to concerns regarding reduced staffing in contact centres, the Director of Communities and Environment explained that this proposal would be a long term initiative as the demand on services reduced and more information became accessible digitally to residents.

RESOLVED – To note the contents of the report.

39 Housing Activity Update

Further to the minutes of the meeting held Thursday 18th June regarding the city's response to coronavirus, the report of the Chief Officer Housing provides Members with an update on Housing Leeds' response to the COVID-19 pandemic and remobilisation.

The following were in attendance for this item:

- Neil Evans, Director Resources and Housing
- Adam Crampton, Head of Property Management
- Gerard Tinsdale, Head of Housing (Resources and Housing)
- John Gittos, Chair Tenants' Scrutiny Board

The Head of Housing introduced the report, and highlighted the following key points:

- Following the UK Government introducing restrictions on 23rd March 2020, Housing Leeds responded quickly to ensure measures were put in place to safeguard residents, employees and partners, whilst maintaining an essential service delivery;
- Responsive Repairs – 47, 982 repairs had been carried out since 23rd March 2020, with 2,768 being completed weekly;
- Work has been ongoing to complete the backlog of 'non-essential' repairs with the number standing at 18,852. It was expected this would be back to pre-covid levels following the return of Annual Home Visits;
- Gas Compliance 99.32% with 228 properties overdue;

- 6,000 compliance inspections had been completed since 23rd March 2020;
- Investment Programme – there are currently 20 projects actively delivering improvements projects to resident's homes and across the wider HRA estate;
- Rent Collection – during April arrears increased by £590k and the first four weeks of lockdown saw a spike of 1498 Universal Credit Claims. Next steps include serving notices and pre-court activity in accordance with national guidance;
- Housing teams continued throughout lockdown to carry out essential tenancy management activity remotely;
- Leeds Housing Options continued to support vulnerable homelessness customers with emergency accommodation, via hotels which peaked at over 230 units during the pandemic. It was confirmed that 60 hotels rooms are still being occupied and bids have been submitted to the government to help rough sleeping and homelessness;
- Private Rented Sector Regulation – 2,800 outstanding selective licensing fees to be paid;
- Housing Leeds have been working closely with colleagues in Public Health to support and plan for further outbreaks.

In responding to Members' comments, the following had been confirmed:

- Issues in relation to food distribution debts were dealt with by another directorate. However, it was confirmed that tenants would receive help with their debts in relation to an affordable payment method, whilst still being able to remain in their home.
- Void properties are aimed to be let within 28 days. The waiting list has approximately 26 thousand people and of that 25% of those are considered an urgent housing need.

The Chair of Tenants' Scrutiny Board provided a brief update to Members in relation to a new inquiry being undertaken by the Tenants' Scrutiny Board regarding tenant engagement. Members were informed the review included:

- Wider tenant engagement insight and how the service engaged in using the feedback;
- The design, policy and decision making of tenant engagement;
- Housing Advisory Panels – Reviewing service support with wider communities;
- Strategic Tenant Influence – tenant engagement with the view of the White Paper the government will be producing by the end of the year.

The Executive Member for Communities thanked the Board for their support and assistance for the housing teams across all wards during a challenging time. Officers were also thanked in responding to issues and providing support to tenants.

RESOLVED – To note the contents of the report.

40 Work Schedule

The Head of Democratic Services submitted a report that invited Members to consider the Board's Work Schedule for the remainder of the current municipal year. Copies of the Board's draft work schedule were appended to the report, as well as the remote minutes of the Executive Board meeting held Thursday 24th September 2020.

The Principle Scrutiny Adviser introduced the report and highlighted that arrangements had been made to hold a remote working group meeting scheduled for 16th November 2020, to discuss budget saving proposals.

RESOLVED – That the work schedule for the remainder of the municipal year be noted.

41 Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next public meeting of the Board will take place on 12 November 2020 at 10.30am (there will be a pre-meeting for all Board members at 10am)

(The meeting concluded at 12:15)