

Bristol City Council

Minutes of the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Commission



26 January 2017 at 2.00 pm

Members Present:-

Councillors: Anthony Negus (Chair), Carole Johnson (Vice-Chair), Lesley Alexander, Martin Fodor, Margaret Hickman, Matt Melias, Jo Sergeant and Mhairi Threlfall

Officers in Attendance:-

Gemma Dando, Alison Comley (Strategic Director - Neighbourhoods), Steven Barrett (Service Director Landlord Services), Patsy Mellor (Service Director Citizen Services), Mark Wakefield (Service Manager - Performance & Infrastructure), Romaine de Fonseca (Policy Advisor), Jeremy Livitt, Andrew Mallin (Directorate Leadership Team Support Manager), Nicky Debbage, Robin Poole and Penny Germon

Apologies for Absence: Councillor Steve Jones (Lesley Alexander substituting) and Councillor Jon Wellington.

1. Welcome, Introductions and Safety Information

All parties present introduced themselves.

2. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence for this meeting (listed above) were noted.

3. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest declared

4. Minutes of the Previous Meeting and Rolling Action Sheet

Agenda Item 4(a) Minutes of the meeting held on 25th November 2016.

Resolved – that the minutes of the above meeting be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.



Action: Jeremy Livitt

Agenda Item 4(b) – Rolling Action Sheet

Councillor Threlfall stated that she was glad to see the action taken in respect of glyphosate-free weed treatment.

5. Public Forum

Members noted the following Public Forum statement for this meeting:

Julie Boston – Bristol City Council Service Points (Referred from People Scrutiny Commission on Monday 23rd January 2017).

Members were requested to re-consider this cut. It was noted that a statement on this issue had been submitted to OSM and would also be considered at Cabinet.

6. Chair's Business

The Chair stated that he had no issues he wished to raise.

7. Neighbourhood Partnerships - The Future

Penny Germon gave a presentation on the above and made the following points:

- (1) The total budget for NPs was £1.1 Million;
- (2) Principles for future service provision were to ensure appropriate community action and to help to contribute to mayoral priorities through the corporate plan;
- (3) The current structures were very intensive and top down bottom up;
- (4) There were 2 extremes of neighbourhood service delivery – the first ensured empowered citizens through a structure with strong community links and which operated flexibly and requested help from Bristol City Council when required. The structures provided a shared vision which solved problems and provided no barriers for participation. At the other extreme, there was a top down serve led approach which was not resilient, problem solving or participative. In this structure, activists were unsupported and there was competition for resources;
- (5) In order to support an empowered structure, support was required for community development work, information flow and exchange and business planning and governance. A resource was needed to provide support for using existing sources of funding such as CIL. Section 106 and to provide a budget for this;



- (6) A locality conference was scheduled for 4th February 2017. An overview for this event would be sent out next week. This would encourage a conversation for this issue and consider various options;
- (7) Whilst some people held the view that the existing NP structure provided a good basis to consider options for 2017/18, in other areas the current structure did not work as well as required and an alternative needed to be considered;
- (8) The new structure needed to be co-designed by the people, the community and the Council;
- (9) Resources needed to be focused on those areas that most needed it and ensuring that the skill and expertise to support future arrangements were in place.

Councillors made the following points and officers responded as appropriate:

Asset Mapping

More information was required on how the arrangements for asset mapping would take place to explain how these would work. Officers agreed that there was a need to consider the energy and resource required for this and put in place arrangements to deliver. The approach could not be top down but needed to come from voluntary and community groups.

Current Arrangements

The structure for delivery was already in place through Neighbourhood Partnerships. The presentation did not properly recognise what they currently do ie footpath repairs, work in parks etc

Added Community Value

Usually, where funding was obtained through the voluntary and community sector, a complex calculation was provided to assess the added value that the community provided in arrangements such as this. It was surprising that this wasn't included in this calculation. The Council needed to recognise the shared communication routes. In the case of the Bishopston Cotham Redland Neighbourhood Partnership, existing groups wanted to continue to operate in the future. If no support at all was provided for them, they would become disengaged from the process. It was a great concern for the future if no match funding could be provided for these organisations since other resources would not be unlocked;

A Realistic Approach and Lessons From Other Local Authorities

The Council needed to be honest with communities about the approach that was being adopted. Bristol needed to learn lessons from the approaches taken elsewhere from other local authorities which had already faced draconian cuts, such as Liverpool. Officers stated that there was some information available on this in relation to core cities and the south west which was being continuously updated. More information on this would be available at 4th February 2017 event which would look at further examples of how resources could be obtained and how Bristol City Council could support the process. Officers confirmed that the pie chart showing £1.1 Million did not include the cost of development.



Pie Chart – More Detail

Further information on the situation contained in the pie chart on the current situation would be helpful.

Access for New Groups

Further information was required on the ways in which new groups would access new ways of working.

Future Funding

There were serious concerns about how the small grants fund would be funded.

Inequality

More detail was required in terms of assets to enable the council to address the issue of inequality across the city. Some areas of the city were disadvantaged but nevertheless asset rich and this needed to be taken into account.

Savings and An Apparently Doctrinal Approach

The document appeared to be talking down to Councillors and seemed to be taking an approach based on saving money and a doctrinal approach to neighbourhood working which could put at risk some of the good work being carried out across the city. In order to avoid enclaves of separate work developing across the city, the role of Bristol City Council was important in providing legitimacy for local groups. Officers denied that the approach was talking down to Councillors but was developing a conceptual approach for the future.

Achieving Savings

In response to a question concerning whether or not the proposed changes would meet the £500,000 to be removed from the budget, officers stated that, whilst this was not yet clear, a further report would be considered at 24th February 2017 Scrutiny Commission meeting to provide a further update on this, including the estimated social, environmental and financial impact of any proposals.

Governance

Any remaining funding would still require a system of governance. If Neighbourhood Partnerships did not exist, would the budget be given directly to Councillors or alternatively would any replacement funding regime operate on different boundaries?



Future Arrangements for Distribution of Funding

It was noted that Section 106 funding could not be re-allocated outside of a particular geographic area and that, whilst some CIL funding would be available locally, 85% would be distributed across the whole city. There would also be significantly less funding available.

Action:

- (1) that officers send to Councillors information on work carried out in core cities and in the south west in other local authorities relating to devolved funding arrangements;**
- (2) that a more detailed breakdown of information be provided to Councillors concerning the pie chart contained in the presentation;**
- (3) that it is noted that a further update report will be provided at the next meeting on 24th February 2017 concerning this issue and which will provide a social, environmental and financial assessment of what has been achieved through the existing NP structures and how much will the proposed cut cost.**

Gemma Dando/Penny Germon

8. Housing Revenue Account Business Plan

Nicky Debbage gave a presentation on the above issue and made the following points:

- (1) The HRA is a ring-fenced separate account. The proposals for 2017/18 budget will be done in the context of a Business Plan;
- (2) The Government policy in respect of subsidy was noted;
- (3) 15% of budget savings were required. Since there were no rising balances, there was a need to address this issue. Rent levels needed to be controlled by Government as a mechanism for achieving more from less. If costs were carried through from previous years, this provided maximum flexibility;
- (4) Bristol City Council operated as a landlord since 90% of funding was derived from rents. The Council needed to find ways to manage existing homes, build new homes, meet the costs of unrecoverable debts and ensure appropriate rent levels were maintained;
- (5) The average rent level was now at £80 for the city's properties and since this comprised 90% of income, some re-thinking was required by the Council in respect of areas such as voids. Under current arrangements, the average sale of properties was £56,000 once the sale had been applied and match funding was set at 70%;
- (6) Whilst the Council did lose income from bad debts, it did not write off very much – approximately 2.5% on an annual basis. The level of debt remained fairly steady at £12 Million per year
- (7) The current focus was on repair and investment. Information was being gathered from stocks – existing tower blocks were 50 to 60 years old;
- (8) The income had decreased, whilst the expenditure had increased between 2016/17 and 2017/18 with current reserves set at £0.5 Million. Whilst the Business Plan was balanced for 16 years, there would then be a gap in unfunded capital stock which would require funding.



Councillors asked the following questions and officers replied as appropriate:

Renting

Whilst the renting of garages was one area where the Council could obtain revenue, the rent formula was set by Government in respect of garages, parking spaces and shops. Officers were in the process of examining their assets to see if there were ways that they could operate with some of them in a more commercial way.

Empty Homes

In response to a Councillor's question concerning the need to reduce the number of empty homes, officers confirmed that there were targets which had been set by Councillor Paul Smith (Cabinet Member for Homes). However, it was pointed out that many of the Council's clients were vulnerable individuals and the Council frequently found them in a poor state. As a result, officers were considering ways in which the inspection regime could be improved to address this. Paul Smith confirmed the importance of proactive estate management and stated that there was a target to reduce the number of empty properties from 550 to 250 and reduce the turnaround time from 49 days to 20 days – some initial success had already been achieved in this area.

Communication

In response to Councillors' questions concerning the need for improved communication to Ward Councillors concerning issues of empty properties in their wards, officers explained that there would remain difficulties with temporary accommodation since frequently Council House property owners were waiting for offers on other properties elsewhere. In addition, Paul Smith pointed out that this problem was exacerbated by the fact that the Council's rent was one third of the average private sector rent which was reaching the point of being unsustainable and aggravating this problem.

Emergency Accommodation

Whilst it was acknowledged that emergency accommodation was a cost, this was a General Fund cost not in the HRA.

Re-Lets

Councillors applauded the saving of £484 a month from re-lets by changing the way in which these were dealt with.



Alternative Methods of Funding

Officers confirmed that 30% came from right to buy receipts and 70% from rents. Almost every possible method which had been used in the past to fund the HRA had now been closed off. Officers were considering some possibilities, such as cross tenure developments but these were limited due to upfront costs. In addition, officers had confirmed that legal advice had been received to confirm that the use of private housing for sale to ensure development was acceptable.

Paul Smith confirmed that one of the reasons for the forthcoming Cabinet report to set up the Housing Company was to address this issue so that it could be directly managed through the HRA.

Members thanked officers for providing a very cogent and helpful report.

Resolved – that officers provide members with information on the meaning of the acronyms contained in the report.

Action: Nicky Debbage

9. Voluntary and Community Sector

Alison Comley introduced this report and representatives of VOSCUR (Wendy Stephenson and Mark Hubbard) made the following points:

- (1) At a recent Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Planning event, the Mayor had asked the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Commission to discuss how to maintain a thriving voluntary and community sector within the city.
- (2) In view of the forthcoming massive changes in the environment in which community organisations were operating, it was clear that Local Authorities will increasingly be relying on volunteers to support them;
- (3) A recent analysis had shown that 60% of Local Authorities were using reserves to maintain service levels, to collaborate and also approximately half were considering the possible use of social enterprises;
- (4) At the suggestion of the Mayor a strategy was being developed for the Voluntary and Community sector in Bristol;
- (5) The sector worked across the city in many different areas and was very diverse;
- (6) It was important to emphasise that volunteering was not a free service. Even when volunteers themselves were unpaid, there was always a cost involved in the work that they carried out;
- (7) Work with volunteers needed a structure to operate – for example, the Calais Support Group operating through social media and work through social action and the Transformation Fund;
- (8) Whilst organisations such as the Volunteer Bureau had had their funding withdrawn, this body had an infrastructure role which was different to VOSCUR;
- (9) The relationship of VOSCUR with Councils was primarily concerning funding. Any suppliers would be subject to Scrutiny in terms of governance, health and safety, equalities, safeguarding and financial management.



Councillors made the following points and officers/VOSCUR responded as appropriate:

Volunteering

During the library review, the Council had been flirting with the use of volunteers and the need to replace paid staff with unpaid volunteers. However, it was acknowledged that a body was still required to manage these arrangements.

Co-ordination

There remained a lack of co-ordination between groups – for example, there were 4 or 5 Calais groups who were not co-ordinating.

Data and the Use of VOSCUR's Grant

It would be useful for VOSCUR to consider how they can use the grant they receive to respond to needs. VOSCUR confirmed that they were considering how they could share data with the Council as a means of arranging early intervention as required.

Legal Scrutiny

Future arrangements would require appropriate legal scrutiny in terms of data protection and Health and Safety. For example, Bristol City Council did not currently operate a stand alone policy in relation to staffing at libraries but, if this were to change, the role of volunteers would need to be considered as the Council would still become liable.

10 Supermarkets Dealing with Waste - Update On the Current Position

Alison Comley gave a verbal presentation on the above issue and made the following points:

- (1) A comprehensive piece of work dealing with waste had been carried out by officers as a result of the work carried out by the Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Commission in 2016/17;
- (2) Issues relating to supermarkets had been referred to the core waste group which was co-ordinated through Sheffield and had been dealt with by Pam Jones, who was no longer working with at the Council. However, this was an ad-hoc meeting and there had been no discussion yet concerning the issue of supermarket waste;
- (3) The Directorate was attempting to identify someone who could attend this group. In the meantime, the issue of the Council's Zero Waste Strategy might be appropriate to deal with through the Waste Action Group which would take place in early February 2017.

The Chair expressed great concern at the very limited progress on this issue. He had understood that the issue of supermarket waste had been considered at the Core Cities Group and was being considered by



them as part of a national supermarket strategy. He pointed out that a recommendation had been made to the previous Mayor to progress this issue further with the 8 main supermarket chains but no action had been taken. It was important to maintain the pressure to ensure that this issue was taken up at a national level.

Councillors made the following points:

- (1) This action should have been taken. Co-operative action was required between Bristol City Council and the new Waste Company;
- (2) This issue needed to be solved at a national level. Frequently, it was difficult to identify which individual in a supermarket chain had responsibility for dealing with such issues

Resolved:

- (1) That the Mayor be requested to take action to open up a conversation with the 8 leading supermarkets in respect of food waste, packaging and distribution
- (2) That the matter is progressed through the Waste Action Group.

Action:

- (1) **Romayne De Fonseca**
- (2) **Alison Comley**

11 Quarterly Financial Report - Period 6 (to the end of September 2016)

Alison Comley introduced this report and confirmed that the Directorate was under budget and delivering savings.

Councillors made the following points and officers responded as appropriate:

Public Health

Officers confirmed that there had been 2% Government in-year cuts last financial year with a further cut this year. They stated that there were reserves in Public Health to address this.

Procurement and Capital Programme

There had been some delay in procurement and the Capital Programme.

Voluntary Severance

The voluntary severance cost was a one-off cumulative saving which was included in the budget but paid corporately.



Capital Receipts

If the Directorate was not doing as well as anticipated in this area, this must either be because there were less properties being presented for sale than anticipated or because it was not delivering on the previously estimated level of income. If the latter was the case, officers should consider whether alternatives could be considered ie developing land for other purposes such as housing.

Income Generation

The Neighbourhoods Directorate needed to consider increased ways of generating income. Officers pointed out that most income was obtained through Cemeteries and Crematoria. However, the Council faced significant challenges. Officers confirmed that work was taking place on the development of an offer to take to other Local Authorities to see if certain services could be shared, such as Trading Standards and in house enforcement.

12 Quarter 2 Performance Report

Mark Wakefield introduced this report and made the following points:

- (1) The performance targets had been re-ordered around the Corporate Strategy themes to make them more helpful for use;
- (2) There were 34 new targets, of which 18 were on or above target and 16 were below target. In addition, 19 had improved since last year with only 8 having worsened;
- (3) Major headlines were as follows: Business Rates were above target, sleeping rough targets had worsened, community development targets were positive, leisure centre statistics had gone up whilst recycling statistics had gone down, breast feeding and smoking targets were positive, housing delivery targets were more positive than negative, waste targets faced significant challenges whilst customer services and housing solutions were a mixture of positive and negative.

Councillors made the following comments and officers responded as follows:

Food Inspection

This was on an upward trajectory but still way behind the target. Officers confirmed that due to increased investment this had improved. It was noted that the Food Standards Agency was considering ways that the Local Authority were dealing with this issue including an increased on-line approach.

Members were advised that Nick Carter had suggested that a permit to trade could be set up for new businesses to meet the costs of the inspection of each business which was reflective of its size and make it self-funding. In view of the growth of small businesses, many of which the Local Authorities were not aware of, he proposed setting up a pilot for this in 2017.

The Chair asked for his thanks to be passed on to Nick Carter for his work on this initiative.



Sleeping Rough

Following a member's question, officers explained how the numbers of sleeping rough were counted.

Neighbourhood Partnerships

The target concerning the level of engagement with the Neighbourhood Partnership process would need to be replaced if the proposed changes to the NP structure were carried out.

13 Update on Citizen Services

Patsy Mellor gave a presentation on this issue and made the following points:

- (1) Details of service design improvements were provided including increased digital offering for certain high demand areas. There was a commitment to £1.5 Million savings if a digitally enhanced front end to services was achieved;
- (2) Other key areas had not been delivered – for example, end to end digital services (tracking had still not been developed), CRM and knowledge management (Phase 1 only had been developed), as well as Contact Centre Telephony which had been delayed from 2015 and would now start in 2017;
- (3) A very simple repair could be ordered online and there was a facility to send photos if required. In addition, a birth or death could be registered and a move to another property or online direct debit payment could be made for a Council Tax payment. However, most services were still not end to end.

Councillors made the following points and officers responded as appropriate:

Resources

In view of the difficulties in rolling out the programme, more resources should be put into projects as required. Officers confirmed that there had been issues with ICT and the supply side which had caused problems.

Customer Service Points

In view of the closure of CSP's outside the centre, an alternative model was required to ensure services were provided. In relation to libraries, an individual was required to help in Neighbourhoods areas to address any problems. In addition, some individuals would not be able to reach CSP's at all if they did not have access to a car and could not afford a bus.

Officers confirmed that telephone, e-mail and internet contact would be provided wherever possible to ensure people could reach the contact centre. Whilst there had been some difficulties recruiting staff over the past year (there had been 17 vacancies), these had now been resolved and the situation should improve. In addition, officers had a very active presence on social media and provided up to date advice about the situation concerning CSP's.



14 Work Programme

Members noted the Work Programme.

The Chair noted that there was a need to populate this for the remainder of the Municipal Year and stated that this would be discussed at the forthcoming Planning Meeting for the February 2017 Scrutiny Commission.

15 Date of Next Meeting

Members noted that the next meeting would be held at 10am on Friday 24th February 2017 in the Writing Room, City Hall, College Green, Bristol.

Meeting ended at 5.00 pm

CHAIR _____

