

Minutes of the Scrutiny Overview Committee held in the Council Chamber at Walsall Council House

Thursday, 14 March 2024 at 6.00p.m.

Committee Members present: Councillor J Murray (Chair)
Councillor A Nawaz (Vice-Chair)
Councillor P Bott
Councillor M Follows
Councillor A Hicken
Councillor N Latham
Councillor K Sears
Councillor G Singh-Sohal

Portfolio Holder present: Councillor Bird – Leader of the Council
Councillor Andrew – Deputy Leader and Regeneration
Councillor Ferguson – Internal Services

Officers present: Judith Greenhalgh – Executive Director of Resources and Transformation
Philippa Venables – Director of Regeneration and Economy
Nadia Inglis – Interim Director of Public Health
Elise Hopkins – Director of Customer Engagement
Alison Ives – Head of Planning and Building Control
Helen Dudson – Elections Service Manager
Matt Powis – Senior Democratic Services Officer

Other attendees: Gary Fulford – Group Chief Executive - Walsall Housing Group
Fay Shanahan – Corporate Director of Operations and IT – Walsall Housing Group
Kul Bains – Chief Executive – WATMOS (Virtual)
Sue Sargeant – Executive Director of Housing – WATMOS (Virtual)

60. Apologies

An apology was received from Councillor Hussain.

61. Substitutions

There were no substitutions.

62. **Declarations of Interest and Party Whip**

There were no declarations of interest or party whip.

63. **Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)**

There were no items to consider in private session.

64. **Minutes**

A copy of the minutes of the meeting held on the 6 February 2024 was submitted [annexed].

Resolved

That, the minutes of the meeting held on 6 February 2024, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

65. **Social Housing – Invitation to social landlords**

The Chair welcomed representatives from the Walsall Housing Group (WHG) and WATMOS. He requested both providers to provide the Committee with an update on their current work including partnership works and existing and future developments.

The Group Chief Executive of Walsall Housing Group and the Corporate Director of Operations and IT were present, and the following points were raised:

- WHG had invested over £50m to improve its housing stock in 2022/23.
- 182 homes in Walsall were built by WHG during the period 2023/2024.
- Since 2013, WHG had completed and built over 1500 homes in Walsall and represented an investment of over £300m to the Borough.
- Planning performance agreement had been agreed with the Council to speed up planning permission in the Borough to deliver more homes.
- There was a commitment for strong tenancy sustainment with a pledge to not evict anyone into homelessness.
- WHG had created over £49m in social value projects such as securing future employment opportunities.
- WHG became the first housing provider to become a sustainable housing provider by an accredited body.
- There were a number of legislative and regulatory changes affecting the industry. Changes would likely impact on the finances on many housing providers across the country.
- Supply and demand of housing was an issue not unique to WHG.

- Costs of living and the cost of supplies such as building materials remained an issue for the sector.
- Decarbonisation of existing stock was a priority for the organisation.

The Chief Executive of WATMOS and the Director of Housing were then invited to present, and the following points were raised:

- There were over 1000 properties across 21 tower blocks in the Borough that had received retrofitting investment.
- WATMOS had received £7.9m through grant funding working with the Council through the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund.
- WATMOS had received the West Midlands Efficiency Award in 2023 and shortlisted for landlord of the year at Inside Housing Awards.
- Over 80% of the residents were satisfied with WATMOS.
- The Group had many active tenant groups which enabled greater community collaboration to utilise the right services at the right time.
- 16 units had been secured in Willenhall and work had progressed.
- Like WHG, there were concerns about the number of legislative and regulatory changes affecting the industry.
- Government funding, policies and further action on regeneration projects within the social housing sector were required in order to move the industry forward.

At this point, the Chair adjourned the meeting at 6:16p.m for Members observing Ramadan. The meeting was reconvened at 6:26p.m.

The principal points from the ensuing discussion are outlined as follows:

- Under 7000 residents were on the Council's waiting list. However, there was 1500 on the waiting list for WHG housing.
- 1000 WHG homes were in the pipeline for development over the coming years.
- Quality of housebuilding was a priority for WHG. It was noted that WHG had set a maximum limit of two defects per home which mirrored industry standards.
- 20 evictions had occurred over the past year. However, it was noted that 10 were listed as abandonments, 5 were antisocial behaviour and 5 were net arrears.
- Mediation between tenants would only be proposed if it was deemed that an amicable agreement could be reached with the individuals concerned.
- WHG customer service channels by phone reached an average of 900 calls per day and were answered within 8 minutes. However, there were known peak times, which exceeded aforementioned times.
- 90% of complaints raised with WHG were answered on time and in accordance with the Ombudsman Code of Practice.
- Partnership working was important for WHG and WATMOS. It was noted that all social landlords regularly communicated with each other.
- WHG spent over £500k a year clearing fly tipping in the Borough. Regular partnership work was carried out to identify and clear any fly tipping. The Director of Customer Engagement noted it was possible for future

- partnership working with WHG to be carried out to improve the Council's digital fly tipping reporting mapping system.
- A Member sought clarification on the number of WHG homes which were thermowrapped. In response, it was noted that WHG had actively worked with the Council to decarbonise the housing stock, however, the number of thermowrapped homes would be circulated to the Committee in writing.
 - There was a view that community skip days were successful.
 - WATMOS confirmed that Sandbank Towers had been thermowrapped and new windows had been installed as well as other retrofitting. Over £6m had been spent on Sandbank.
 - A Member sought clarification on the number of reported instances of mould and damp. In response, it was confirmed that a response would be provided in writing. In this respect, WATMOS confirmed that a home condition survey would be carried out across its housing stock and further information on the number of homes affected by mould and damp would be available in late 2024.

There was a request for other social landlords such as the Longhurst Group to be invited to a future meeting of the Committee. The Senior Democratic Services Officer confirmed that this request would be added onto the work programme.

Resolved:

That, the social housing landlords be commended and further cooperation between the Council and social landlords be carried out in future.

66. Electoral Services – Impact of new legislation

The Elections Services Manager gave an overview of the impact and implementation of the second tranche of the Elections Act 2022 ahead of the May 2024 Elections. [Annexed]

The introduction of the Elections Act 2022, led to a number of key changes such as the implementation of voter identification and changes relating to accessibility at polling stations. The Committee noted that ahead of the Election in May 2024, the following changes were being implemented in accordance with the Act:

- Since October 2023, online absent voter applications (OAVA) allowed electors to apply for a postal or proxy vote via GOV.UK with the requirement for electors to provide a national insurance number. It was noted that paper absent voter applications were still available to use.
- Postal vote handling restrictions were introduced in January 2024, which apply restrictions on political campaigners handling postal votes and require individuals to complete a declaration form when hand delivering postal votes. Secrecy requirements were extended to postal and proxy votes.

- In January 2024, the 15-year limit on British citizens living overseas being able to vote was abolished. Therefore, overseas electors would be eligible to vote in UK Parliamentary General Elections subject to the required documentary evidence for their original qualifying address.

It was highlighted that the Elections team had been proactive in communicating changes with electors, prospective candidates and agents. This included reminders about the requirement for voter identification for the elections in May 2024.

A question and answer session took place and following on, the principal point from the ensuing discussion:

- A Member sought clarification on the number of overseas electors on the electoral register. In response, the Elections Manager confirmed that this figure would be provided to the Committee in writing.
- Evidence of former residency was required with overseas electors when applying to vote in the UK Parliamentary Election.
- The Council together with the Electoral Commission was regularly advertising the requirement for ID when voting including how to obtain a Voter Authority Certificate (VAC).
- The Council had arranged for Voter ID advertisement on bin waggons for the upcoming elections in May 2024 as this was successful in previous elections.
- New advertisements had been placed in the resident magazines and the Council had seen an uptake in register to vote applications as a result.
- The Council's website was regularly updated as the deadline for VAC application on 25 April 2024.
- Elections team was working with Walsall Connected team to administer VACs and collaboration had been successful.
- It was noted that in the Council's Tax booklet including information on how to obtain identification ahead of the elections in May 2024.
- There was a standard approach for postal vote verification in accordance with the Electoral Commissions guidance.

Resolved:

That, the second tranche of the Elections Act 2022 legislation, the responsibilities of the Returning Officer, Electoral Registration Officer and the actions being taken to deliver associated responsibilities be noted.

67. Section 106 Monitoring

The Head of Planning and Building Control introduced the Section 106 (S106) monitoring report. [Annexed]

A breakdown of S106 contributions and agreements by ward was provided and the process for securing S106 agreements was explained. It was noted that regular performance reports were presented to Planning Committee.

It was highlighted that as of February 2024, £4.5m of contributions had been transferred to the service areas. Over £3.5m had been expended and allocated to date which resulted in a balance of £709k left unallocated.

A concern was raised in respect of outstanding S106 monies for Darlaston including projects planned and uncompleted works. It was noted a response would be provided in writing from the Healthy Spaces Team.

A Member requested that a regular future report be presented on the topic which included representatives from Planning and Healthy Spaces teams.

Resolved:

- 1. The infrastructure funding secured through S106 planning obligations during the financial period up to February 2024 including details of committed/spent funding and infrastructure secured be noted.**
- 2. The approved procedure for securing necessary infrastructure through S106 planning obligations and the role of members in the process be noted.**

68. Scrutiny Chair Feedback

The Chair invited each Scrutiny Committee Chair to present their feedback since the last meeting of the Committee.

69. Housing Standards Working Group – Terms of Reference

The Senior Democratic Services Officer outlined the report which requested the Committee to consider the terms of reference of the Housing Standards Working Group.

It was noted that the Group had conducted regular meetings since January 2024 and it was expected that the final report would be presented to the Committee on 18th April 2024.

The Leader of the Council highlighted the issue of fly tipping in the Borough. There was a suggestion that more could be done with social housing landlords and subsequently charged for the Council clearing up any instances of fly tipping.

Resolved:

That, the Housing Standards Working Group Terms of Reference be approved.

57. Areas of focus – 2023/24

The Committee noted the proposed areas of focus for the remaining meetings of the municipal year. [Annexed]

A Member requested that a future report be received on the Council's use of Section 215 powers and exploring any such methods to enhance existing partnership to tackle fly tipping.

A Member suggested that a report be received on the Darlaston Town Funding.

Resolved:

- 1. That, the areas of focus for 2023-24 and forward plans be noted.**
- 2. That, a future report be received on the Council's use of Section 215 powers and exploring any such methods to enhance existing partnership to tackle fly tipping.**
- 3. That, a future report be received on the Darlaston Town Funding at the Economy and Environment OSC.**

58. Recommendations Tracker

The Committee received the tracker of recommendations from previous meetings, including progress made and outstanding items. [Annexed].

In respect of the action regarding the WMCA Annual Report, the Executive Director of Resources and Transformation confirmed that work had commenced with Democratic Services on this issue.

Resolved:

That the recommendation tracker be noted.

59. Date of next meeting

It was noted that the date of the meeting would be 18 April 2024.

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 7.50p.m.

Signed:

Date: