

STRONGER COMMUNITIES AND NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES SCRUTINY BOARD - 16 March 2021

STRONGER COMMUNITIES & NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES SCRUTINY BOARD

16 MARCH 2021 (VIRTUAL MEETING)

MINUTES

Present: Councillor R Grinsell (Chairman); Councillors S Ashraf MBE, J Butler, C Buxton-Sait, J Fairburn, P Hogarth MBE, Mrs A Mackenzie, M Parker and M Wilson.

Apologies:

Councillor J Tildesley – Cabinet Member (Leisure, Tourism & Sport).

Report authors/witnesses in attendance:

Mrs Alison McGrory (Assistant Director – Communities & Partnerships).

Alan Brown (Assistant Director – Highways & Environment).

Martyn Sargeant – (Head of Customer & Library Services).

Nick Garnett (Senior Public Health Manager - Leisure).

External Witnesses in attendance:

None.

Cabinet Members in attendance by invitation:

Councillor Mrs A Rolf – Cabinet Member (Stronger & Safer Communities).

Councillor K Hawkins – Cabinet Member (Environment & Highways).

Other Elected Members in attendance by invitation:

None.

1. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations on interest.

2. QUESTIONS AND DEPUTATIONS

There were no questions or deputations.

3. MINUTES

The Minutes of the last (virtual) meeting held on 20 January 2021, was submitted for review and approval.

RESOLVED

That the Minutes from the meeting held on 20 January 2021, be agreed as a correct record.

4. BEREAVEMENT SERVICES STRATEGY UPDATE

In attendance: Mrs Alison McGrory (Assistant Director – Communities & Partnerships); Martyn Sargeant – (Head of Customer & Library Services); and Councillor Mrs A Rolf – Cabinet Member (Stronger & Safer Communities).

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To Board received a detailed update from the Council's Head of Customer & Library Services on a number of key areas of work in relation to the Council's current Bereavement Services Strategy (2019-29) together with the provision of (and demand for) services within Solihull.

As a result of the report, the following questions and observations were noted:

- Eco-friendly funerals – were there any specific plans for Solihull? Officers highlighted the emerging technologies to support this aspect of the Service. These would be included within the continual development of the Service's business plan as possibilities for the future and in longer-term strategies to ensure funeral preference trends could be met.
- Woodland burials – what was our approach to this type of funeral and how might it contribute to new tree planting? Officers reported that Solihull had a woodland burial site (within private ownership) located near to the Borough boundary with Coventry and this was a popular funeral choice. Officers envisaged this funeral type to remain popular and future land availability was an important consideration in strategic planning over the longer-term. Members highlighted the importance of planning for alternative funeral provision, especially woodland burials, whereby new tree or shrub planting could be associated with a lasting memorial.
- Robin Hood Crematorium – would recent upgrades be used as a benchmark for future upgrades to Woodlands Crematorium? Officers advised that the buildings and facilities at each location had variations which meant that each site would be considered on its own merits. New technologies for funerals was continual, therefore, future upgrades and layout revisions to Woodlands Crematorium would be planned around the best use of new technology and the individual constraints and considerations of that particular site at the time of upgrade.
- Communication and information – Members acknowledged that funeral planning was a sensitive topic and welcomed initiatives that increased funeral choice and publicised the availability of those services. It was suggested that such initiatives should aim to encourage families to talk about funeral provision at an early stage and consider the environmental funeral choices available to them. Officers advised of recent work undertaken by the Competition Market Authority (CMA), their recent report on the openness of the funeral market and some new requirements that would be taking effect over the next 12 months, or so, regarding the availability of funeral information together with the introduction of a low-cost funeral choice.
- Competition Market Authority (CMA) - Members asked what progress had been made towards the implementation of the CMA recommendations? Officers advised that the recommendations made towards the provision of information and pricing was more of an issue for the funeral directors themselves and less of an issue for the local authority. Options for low-cost funerals were currently being considered and it was envisaged that a proposal would be forthcoming by the end of the year for consideration. Members welcomed the CMA recommendations and ensuing work streams.
- Greek Orthodox & Muslim burials – Members asked what capacity was being planned for funeral provision for these communities in our longer-term strategies and how we were addressing the challenges posed by water-logged ground for future land allocation? Officers reported that the future provision of burial space would look to cater for the whole community regardless of religion. Ongoing considerations at Widney Manor Cemetery was also reported regarding land availability and remediation works for water-logged ground on part of the site preventing its future use. The report also highlighted that further option papers would be presented to this scrutiny board in respect of Woodlands and Widney Manor Cemeteries in due course.

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- Widney Manor Cemetery – Members highlighted a current issue which involved the use of a gazebo by a mourning family and requested further information. Officers advised that the issue was currently being sensitively investigated.
- Funeral provision for residents living within neighbouring authorities – Members sought further information as to why residents living outside the Borough chose to use Solihull's provision. Officers advised of a number of scenarios which attributed to this.

Councillor Mrs A Rolf – Cabinet Member (Stronger & Safer Communities) reiterated some of the considerations for the future upgrade of Woodlands Cemetery together with the content and recommendations of the Competitions Market Authority report, particularly the openness of pricing and funeral planning by families at an early stage; together with the importance of a future, low-cost, funeral option.

In conclusion, the Board welcomed the report and the ongoing work within the service area. Members also congratulated officers for the service provision maintained during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, particularly new ways of working such as virtual funeral services.

RESOLVED

That, subject to the comments and views recorded in the preamble above, the Board **UNANIMOUSLY** made the following **RECOMMENDATIONS** to the **Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Safer & Stronger Communities**:

That, subject to the preamble above, the Board:

- (i) Endorses the work being undertaken to secure future service provision for the residents of Solihull and surrounding areas; and
- (ii) Welcomes the opportunity to consider future reports in respect of options for future service provision at Woodlands and Widney Manor Cemeteries in due course.

5. CABINET PORTFOLIO HOLDER UPDATE - KEY ACHIEVEMENTS FOR 2020/21 AND PRIORITIES FOR 2021/22

In attendance: Councillor Mrs A Rolf – Cabinet Member (Stronger & Safer Communities); Councillor K Hawkins – Cabinet Member (Environment & Highways); Mrs Alison McGrory (Assistant Director – Communities & Partnerships); Alan Brown (Assistant Director – Highways & Environment) and Nick Garnett (Senior Public Health Manager - Leisure).

The Board considered three detailed briefings regarding the delivery and progress of the Cabinet Portfolio key priorities for 2020/21 together with the Portfolio priorities for 2021/22 and potential future topics of scrutiny interest for the coming years work plan.

Councillors Mrs Rolf and Hawkins attended the meeting and presented their reports and answered questions. The update for Councillor Tildesley's Cabinet Portfolio was presented on his behalf by Mrs Alison McGrory and Mr Nick Garnett.

Having received the Portfolio presentations which highlighted a number of key points for each briefing paper, the following questions and observations were noted for each Portfolio:

Stronger & Safer Communities

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- Face-to-face customer service offer – Members welcomed that this would remain and highlighted the value of face-to-face customer service. The report highlighted that the future offer would be kept under review for those residents that needed this service the most and to meet potential changing trends in customer contact patterns arising from the pandemic. The recent launch of the new Council website was also highlighted which served as a strengthened platform for future digital services.
- Library Services – Members perception was that library buildings were important community hubs and they were looking forward to their reopening. Officers were asked for further comments regarding the future use of those building and the effect of the increased digital offer. Officers advised of the ongoing work to support future customer service offer – as a result of the pandemic, there had been a huge shift towards digital Council services and the self-serve offer was an aspect of customer services that the Council was keen to strengthen further across all services, including libraries. The report highlighted that further work was needed to review how library buildings were being used.
- Community action and volunteering – the Board highlighted the increases in volunteering during the pandemic. Examples of initiatives within the Smith's Wood Ward were given. Further information was also requested regarding funding from grant sources, particularly in the longer term, to support future work. Officers advised of some recent funding allocations (circa £200k) and the imposed timescales for its use. Officers were pleased to report that most of the allocation had now been spent and was supporting community activity. An additional fund of £200k was to be made available from 1 April 2021 to support community recovery from the pandemic. Reassurances were also given that work was ongoing to secure all additional available grant funding for community groups.
- ASB and noise nuisance issues - Members sought additional information on the proposed future work with Solihull Community Housing to better address ASB and noise nuisance issues across Solihull. Officers were asked if, as part of that work, conditions such as autism were being taken into account - residents with autism were often more sensitive to noise. Officers advised that this worked stemmed from a review of all of the Council's statutory functions. This work would review which aspects of ASB would be investigated by either the Council or SCH whilst maintaining a seamless public-facing service. Officers undertook to include the points raised regarding autism in that ongoing work.
- Stronger alignment between the Community Development Team and Health, Education, Police and VCS – the Board asked if a new coordination body would be set up to progress this? Officers advised that the existing partnership relationships would be improved upon as part of the ongoing review of the Solihull Partnership and the associate localities framework which depicted how partners worked together on the ground.
- Commonwealth Games 2022 – Members asked how we intended to maximise opportunities? Officers advised that the Games presented many opportunities to put Solihull on the map. Those opportunities included tourism, employment, volunteering/work experience and a sense of pride within communities and something for residents to look forward to.

Environment & Highways

- Parking Displacement Programme – Members highlighted the suggestion to have this scrutinised in detail by a Task and Finish Group in 2021/22. A perception was given that such a review would aid future solutions to some of Solihull's densely populated residential areas with high numbers of car ownership ahead of longer-term green solutions and stronger public transport

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links coming forward. In considering the Programme, Councillor K Hawkins – Cabinet Member (Environment & Highways) highlighted that the financial implications of the Programme would need to be considered alongside other related work streams such as traffic regulation orders and traffic calming schemes and what financial impact any future changes to the Programme may have. In contrast, Members also highlighted the ambitions within the Council Plan to invest in cycling & walking and to improve public transport. Members considered it important to focus on longer-term future changes in behaviour – i.e. to have less reliance on car use or ownership. Members also considered it important not to jeopardise future budgets for traffic regulation orders/traffic calming schemes in any future work pertaining to parking displacement. A further example was given by Members that parking displacement was always assessed, in consultation with ward councillors, on a site-by-site basis when new traffic regulation orders were being proposed to mitigate any negative effect of new restrictions. Officers confirmed that this was the case. Finally, the Chairman clarified with Officers that the timing of a potential Task & Finish Group would need to take account of the timeframe for the work undertaken by the 2022 Budget Strategy Group.

- New Depot/HWRC – Members highlighted that the report stated that a timely decision on where the new depot/HWRC was going to be (and how the development of the new site was going to be funded and managed) had a target date for completion 2025. The Board requested a further update and was advised by Councillor K Hawkins – Cabinet Member (Environment & Highways) that no decision had been made on a new site for this facility and all options were still being considered. Cllr Hawkins also reiterated the intentions of the Council's Local Plan Review as considered by Council in November 2020. Officers stated that, having regard to all of the considerations for the development of a new facility, 2025 was the target date for completion at the very earliest. The Council had a statutory obligation to provide a facility – the current facility had a lease until 2031 in its current form although it was now at its operational capacity limits. In conclusion, Officers reiterated that all options were still very much under consideration and that no decisions had been made at this time to either relocate to a new site or remain at the current location with associated redevelopment.
- Deposit Return Schemes – Members requested that the Council should look to introduce/participate in this scheme as soon as possible given the perception that this would greatly contribute to a reduction in littering. Councillor K Hawkins – Cabinet Member (Environment & Highways) advised that further guidance was still awaited. Additionally, advice was still awaited as to what funding was available for any future changes to kerbside collection services.
- Tranche 2 Cycle Routes – Officers were asked for a progress update on the consultation for this major project and were advised that the consultation exercise was still live and there had been, to date, an excellent response. Very positive feedback had been received and decisions, as to its implementation, would be taken in due course.
- Zero-Carbon agenda – Members requested some specific examples of future innovation and changes in processes and procedures to enable the Council to achieve its zero-carbon agenda. Councillor K Hawkins – Cabinet Member (Environment & Highways) and Officers highlighted moving to zero-carbon energy tariffs; using low carbon road surfacing materials such as half-warm asphalt; LED street lighting replacements; sustainable vehicle fleets; and “AI” road network intelligence which had other benefits over and above the zero-carbon agenda. Members also highlighted the green-agenda work being undertaken within Solihull such as air quality, EV infrastructure, heat networks

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and WMCA investment on electric buses which would also directly benefit Solihull.

- Amey being taken over by Urbaser Ltd – Officers were asked if there were any immediate concerns at the forthcoming change of contractor. The Board was advised that Amey was withdrawing from the provision of environmental services. Officers perceived that the six-month lead-in was sufficient to ensure everything was in place; contract and service delivery staff would transfer to the new contractor and it was envisaged that business continuity would be seamless from a resident's perspective.

Leisure, Tourism & Sport

- Active Streets Programme – the Chairman recalled the success of this scheme and sought views as to its future use again. Officers highlighted from the report the intention to re-galvanise the leisure & physical activity offer on a phased basis and this included an opportunity to work with the VCS to widen the “Active Communities Programme” and pick up on the inactive populations hit hardest by the pandemic. Members were appraised of the ongoing work to support that initiative which was funded through Sport England. Members also asked if the 2021 Census results would be taken into account in the future roll-out of the Active Communities Programme and Officers confirmed that it would be.
- Decline in physical activity – Members highlighted that the pandemic had seen the number of adults being active fall by 7% and the number of inactive people rise by the same percentage. Officers were asked for additional information as to the sample size and origins of the data to support the claims arising from that survey. Officers advised that this was a national survey that had been undertaken by Sport England and the sample sizes and origins could be provided outside of the meeting if required.
- Commonwealth Games 2022 – Officers were asked how Opposition Group Members would be able to be more involved in the Games delivery. Officers explained that Lee Marsham (Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games Government Relations Manager) had previously extended an invitation to all Members to answer their individual questions and attend any meetings he was required to. Officers also took updates to the Leisure, Tourism & Sport Portfolio as new information became available. In conclusion, Officers gave reassurances that lots of activity was going on behind the scenes at this point in time; however, more details would begin to be announced by Birmingham 2022 very soon regarding ways to get involved. The Chairman also drew attention to Birmingham 2022 attending Council meetings on two previous occasions and this scrutiny board in November last year to provide information and take questions.

RESOLVED

That, subject to the comments and views recorded in the preamble above, the Board **UNANIMOUSLY**:

- (i) Welcomes the reported updates from the Cabinet Portfolio Holders; and
- (ii) Notes the suggested items for potential scrutiny interest from each Portfolio for 2021/22.

(The meeting concluded at 7.50pm)