

Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board

Thursday 9 July 2020 at 5.45pm

Present: Councillor Moore (Chair)
Councillors Akhter, Bawa, Edwards, M Gill, M Y Hussain, S Jones and Sandars.

Officers: Alison Knight (Executive Director – Neighbourhoods) and Alan Caddick (Director – Housing and Communities).

9/20 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Bostan and Padda and Mr J Cash.

10/20 **Matter of Urgency**

There were no additional items of business to consider as matters of urgency.

11/20 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interests declared at the meeting.

12/20 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 27 February 2020 were agreed as a correct record.



COVID-19 Reset and Recovery - Neighbourhoods

The Board received a presentation from the Director – Housing and Communities on the response by the Neighbourhoods directorate to the COVID-19 pandemic and the move to the reset and recovery phase that was currently underway.

It was reported that the Council had established a Reset and Recovery Board that was meeting weekly. This Board was where plans to restart services would be signed off, but only after a specific process had been followed which included risk assessments, engagement and consultation with Trade Unions, Public Health, Health and Safety, Facilities Management, Human Resources and Communications.

Within the Neighbourhoods directorate a range of services had already restarted or increased their activities. These included:-

- Grounds Maintenance – 3-phase approach to the restart of services;
- Housing Repairs – increase in activities which would enable non-urgent repairs to be completed;
- CCTV and Concierge Services – night shifts had now been reintroduced, bringing this back to full service;
- Sandwell Valley Phase 1 – recommencement of services and increase in activities from Monday 13th July;
- Parks – inspections of all play areas prior to potential reopening;
- Allotments Service;
- Urban Forestry – restart of full services.

Other services that were in the planning stages included:-

- Estate Services and Caretaking – restart and increase in activities – this was planned to be presented to the Reset and Recovery Board for approval on 16th July;
- Lightwoods House;
- Sandwell Valley Phase 2;
- Libraries and Museums – phased reintroduction being considered;
- Leisure Centres – work on-going with Sandwell Leisure Trust and Places Leisure.

It was noted that important services within the Neighbourhoods directorate had continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. This included the continued operation of the Locals resulting in over 1000 contacts per week with tenants, either by telephone or over the internet.

A key area had been around Homelessness, with significant work undertaken to engage with rough sleepers. The Board noted that out of 27 out of 34 known rough sleepers in Sandwell had been accommodated, with the remainder reported to be living with family or friends.

Following comments and questions from members of the Board, the following responses were made, and issues highlighted:-

- Meetings with Town Chairs had continued during the pandemic using online methods.
- Whilst landlords were not currently able to apply for repossession orders due to COVID-19 legislation, it was possible that there could be an increase in such orders once the ban was lifted. The Council was engaging with private landlords and hoped to eradicate homelessness as much as possible.
- There was not yet a target date to reopen Local offices. It was reiterated that the public did not have to pay Council Tax or other bills at these offices but could instead use online methods or via PayPoint locations.
- There was not currently any enforcement action being taken in relation to rent or Council Tax areas however it was important to remember that these bills would need to be paid, however the Council would seek to engage people in a sympathetic way over arrears.
- Grass cutting was being phased in; the first phase included communal areas in places with elderly people, sports pitches and schools. The next phase included wider open spaces, followed by verges, islands and banks. It was reported that the Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board was intending to conduct an inquiry day into re-wilding which could impact on grass cutting in some areas.
- Consultants had been brought in to assist the Council to work with its leisure facility operators as part of the reopening of those facilities whilst taking into account requirements around social distancing. This consultancy had been supported by Sport England.

The Board placed on records its thanks to officers for continuing their work during difficult circumstances, including the support for the emergency food and care parcels which had operated from Tipton Sports Academy.

Resolved that an update on the Council's activities around homelessness be brought to an October meeting of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board.

Meeting ended at 6.28pm