

Minutes of Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Board

**25 February 2021 at 5:45pm
Online Virtual Meeting**

Present: Councillor Moore (Chair)
Councillors Bostan, Bawa, Edwards, M Gill and Sandars.

Officers: Alan Caddick (Director of Housing and Communities);
Dawn Winter (Service Manager);
Neil Cox (Director of Business Strategy and Change);
Liz Nembhard (Operations Manager);
Nicola Plant (Service Manager).

6/21 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor S Jones

7/21 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 January 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

8/21 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interests made at the meeting.



9/21 **Additional Item of Business**

There were no additional items of business to be considered at the meeting.

10/21 **Trading Standards Update**

The Director of Business Strategy and Transformation introduced the item highlighting that the previous twelve months had been very challenging for Trading Standards when the behaviour and conduct of businesses was under more scrutiny than ever before. The Director was proud of the way the Trading Standards team's had adapted and of their response to the pandemic.

The Service manager presented an overview of the service's responsibilities and background of the team's approach to information and data gathering was provided.

It was outlined that there were two key impacts for the Trading Standards team throughout their pandemic response – reduced operational capacity and the need for the team's skills and services as part of the council's wider COVID response.

It was explained that since March 2020 the Trading Standards team had worked with Environmental Health, Licensing and Environmental Protection teams and Public Health to co-ordinate the enforcement, compliance and education response and to deliver the council's COVID response for businesses. Throughout this period redirection of activity had been managed to ensure essential and high priority work continued.

The Operations Manager provided a breakdown of the activity since April 2020. It was explained that 1300 complaints and concerns had been received, relating to business restriction, price gauging, PPE, cancellations of goods/services and scams. The team had also provided support and guidance to the council businesses, public and partners on COVID restrictions legislation and had issued safe working to 257 high risk businesses and direct guidance to 98 businesses. Officers explained that the team had been working with the Police on supported joint enforcement



activity and has issued 4 Directions (legal letters), 7 Prohibition Notices and 3 Fixed Penalty Notices to the value of £4000. Trading Standards had a range of powers to use but did try to go out and educate businesses, because enforcement was the last resort.

The Board was informed of the usual activity of the Trading Standards team aside from their COVID response activity. This included 328 civil advice referrals, case work on prosecution cases, forfeiture orders, sampling project on allergens, guidance on Brexit and scams. It was explained that the Trading Standards team worked alongside Action Fraud, Friends Against Scams and provided key messaging for social media posts on scams.

The Board noted the planned activity for the team for 2021-22, in line with business priorities which were aligned to corporate plan, there were key areas to focus on, a continued response to COVID, and where the team had not been as proactive as they would have liked, due to the pandemic to make sure they were a priority. This work included work alongside HMRC on Illegal Tobacco/Age Restricted Sales, responding to legislation as it occurs following the UK's exit from the European Union, planning enforcement activity for the 2022 Commonwealth Games as well as the teams continued COVID Response work.

From the comments and questions raised by members of the Scrutiny Board, the following responses were made, and issues highlighted: -

- The Trading Standards team were able to keep on top of citizen referrals through the pandemic and had a sizeable resource compared to other service areas. The impact of business closures and approach to risk management meant that the team had to reprioritise some of their usual work. Operationally, areas such as test purchasing had become more reactive throughout the pandemic. With eased restrictions and lowered transmission levels in the coming months appropriate work would continue.
- In relation to the Commonwealth Games – The team would work on and around the aquatics centre in line with



legislation to focus on trademarks, advertising and merchandise to establish ensured economic benefits for the area.

- Service area had good working relationships with the Police throughout the pandemic and regularly shared intelligence. Joint operations were in place before the pandemic and would continue beyond COVID related activity.
- Trading Standards had worked with businesses providing advice and guidance on lawful operations during pandemic, the team would continue to work with businesses as lockdown eased.
- Action against illegal scrap metal collectors had continued. The team worked closely with regional partners and the police on this enforcement and would provide further information to this scrutiny board on the theft of catalytic convertors across the borough.

Agreed that the Director – Business Strategy and Change provide information to members of the Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board on the theft of catalytic convertors across the borough.

11/21

Library and Archive Services Update

The Scrutiny Board received a presentation on the impact of COVID-19 on the Council's Library and Archive services. It was explained that Libraries were recognised as an essential service throughout the pandemic, with library workers considered Key Workers. The Director of Housing and Communities provided background on the impact of the pandemic on Library and Archive services.

The Service Manager advised that the report outlined an increase in digital membership and borrowing since 23rd March 2020, with a greater demand in service for eBooks and new services, this had declined since physical books were allowed to be borrowed. Digital exclusion across Sandwell was noted. Library and Archive Services provided a blended offer of services to residents which included both digital and physical borrowing. The Board noted that



only 10% of library services were offered and that staff had low morale and motivation as they were not able to deliver normal levels of support to residents on the front line.

The Board noted that four libraries were currently in operation - Central – West Bromwich, Wednesbury, Smethwick and Glebefields – Tipton, they were open with reduced opening hours and staff worked on a rota basis. These libraries provided order and collect service, grab and go service and provided access to computers for essential use. 'Essential use' had not been defined and was not being policed, it was explained that for some residents who were suffering with isolation or mental health issues, use of computers and interaction was deemed essential. The Service was continuing to provide online story times, craft activities and entertainers during school holidays. The Home Library service operated a contactless service for vulnerable users.

The Board notes that given the recent Government announcement, the service was planning a phased reopening from 12 April 2021. However, officers were waiting for further information and government guidance.

The Board noted that this phased return would include the reopening of 13 outlying libraries, restarting the Mobile library, focus on the Transforming Local Services programme, reopening Blackheath Library and the relocation of Oldbury Library from Jack Judge House to Oldbury Council House. It was explained to the Board that the digital access strategy would be reviewed, feasibility for a new Archive Centre would be explored and a bid would be put forward for the Towns Fund and West Bromwich regeneration activity to create a service delivery hub utilising the Central Library and Town Hall Assets.

From the comments and questions raised by members of the Scrutiny Board, the following responses were made, and issues highlighted: -

- Due to legal obligations and British legislation on storing Archives, Smethwick Library basement was not a suitable



location to store public records. Sandwell rented space on a short-term basis in Dudley Archive Hub to store public records. Overflow archives were stored in West Bromwich Town Hall basement. A feasibility study on Archive Centres was underway by the National Archive Centre. The service would consider this study when looking at future options for Sandwell Archive Hubs. Not only were conditions i.e. temperature and humidity, a factor, accessibility for residents was also important. The Library and Archive Service were working with external consultants and a report had been drafted on potential sites and costing for an Archive Hub, once finalised the report would be shared across the council.

- Should closure occur again, long term planning was difficult to determine but the service would ensure availability for local people and a continued approach to creative events and online offerings. The library had adhered to guidelines and considered the wider landscape throughout the pandemic, they had followed the council's reset and recovery approach, consulted with public health and worked with unions and members and would do this in future in the event of a national lockdown. Given the increased public awareness and understanding of safety measures, the library service would take a more measured approach to closures in this situation.
- The library's Facebook page would continue to do online events and would consider sharing their online offerings with the Council's communications team to promote on social media.
- Relocation of Oldbury Library from Jack Judge House to Oldbury Council House would contribute to the council's One Stop Shop initiative to provide a range of services for residents in the council house and make better use of space in Jack Judge House. The library was expected to be in the main building in an area that was previously home to the council's planning service. Costs of the relocation were not available to share during the meeting. Costs and plans would be shared with members of this scrutiny board on the relocation of Oldbury Library.



Agreed: -

- That the Director of Housing and Communities circulate information, including original plans and drawings, to members of this scrutiny board on the financial implications and decision-making process of moving Council Library Services from Jack Judge House to Oldbury Council House.
- That the Director of Housing and Communities provide information on the future planning and COVID recovery of the Library and Archive Services to a future meeting of this scrutiny board.
- That the Director of Housing and Communities provide a report to a future meeting of this scrutiny board on the feasibility study of the Archive Centres.

Meeting ended at 7:07pm

Click [here](#) to watch a recording of the meeting

Contact: democratic_services@sandwell.gov.uk

