

## **Pre-Scrutiny questions and answers on reports being considered on the Overview & Scrutiny Agenda 19 April 2023**

### **6. Noise Nuisance Investigations (Noise Policy & six-month review and service area performance in respect of all forms of nuisance)**

(Report author(s): Lorna Hudson – Environmental Health and Licensing Manager)

Question(s) from Councillor Cullinan:

Thank you for this comprehensive update. It is very good to see the different aspects of Noise problems in our district been given working group attention.

1. Can I ask for clarification on how someone without access to internet and online information will be able to use this service? The service asks a resident to upload a Noise Diary which may be too complex or impossible for some.

Response:

This is referred to in the Noise Policy.

Chapter 12.2 highlights the avenues that members of the public can use to make contact (online, writing (letter or email), in person, by telephone or via another officer).

The Individual needs of our customers are assessed on a case-by-case basis, if uploading was too complex or impossible for some etc, logs can be posted out and back to us.

Noise Diaries also have the information pre-printed on them, where to send them to, if not being sent electronically.

2. How might the problems of our residents dealing with noise from student parties improve? Have you seen any positive results so far?

Response:

The Student Housing Enforcement Officer post has recently received approval to be made permanent, this resource has numerous positivity's, and will ensure our residents will continue to be supported when dealing with problem students.

See section 1.14 of the O&S report - There is an update re the officer working group which covers HMOs and students.

See also 1.23 of the O&S report and table 2 – and 1.25 - Complaints to EP about student noise has reduced.

3. Have you evaluated the limited 'out of hours' service to date? How many hours have been needed in the last 6 months?

Response:

I would not consider the new services as a limited service, bearing in mind there is now a 24/7 noise app available, officers still have the option to install noise monitoring equipment into people's homes, and officers now have much more freedom to arrange out of hours noise visits over the entire week and at any time of the day or night (previously the reactive out of hours service was ran only on a Fridays and Saturday and only when at least two officers were available).

Over the last 6 months, no issues have been identified with the alternative service delivery.

However, officers are aware winter is a relatively slower time for complaints about noise (windows tend to be closed, darker nights, less outside activities etc), it is the next 6 months that will be more informative on how the alternative services is working.

That said officers have been engaged in out of hours visits, I am unable to specifically advise how many hours they have worked at this short notice, it is anticipated hours worked out of hours will increase in line with demand over the coming months.

4. How might the university improve their own proactiveness around properties with Warwick University students, do you feel their input is adequate?

Response:

Please refer to section 1.14 of the O&S report – at the point of writing the report two meetings held, with the University of Warwick.

These meetings have included a wide range of issues, and the handling of cases and complaints between organisations has been a key feature and will be the focus of future meetings.

Furthermore, the University and the relevant officer working group are currently reviewing the University's processes to further develop the aim of a joined-up process for dealing with noise and other issues attributed to students.

In the meantime, members of the public can log complaints with the University direct, or via the Council, but either way problem premises will be picked up at the partnership working groups.

The University also has a named first point of contact for residents and other people in the local community, please refer to their website.

[Complaints about student residents in the local community \(warwick.ac.uk\)](#)

As far as I am aware officers are satisfied with the input from the University currently.

Question(s) from Councillor Milton:

Thanks for the Noise Nuisance Report for O&S. I've got a few questions that it would be good to get your help on. In some cases, it may be useful to provide some additional data to the committee before Wednesday evening when we meet.

1. thanks for providing the data on the number of noise complaints received. Are you also able to provide the data for the number of cases that have resulted in action being taken (e.g., an initial letter being sent)? I'm interested to see how this has been impacted by the reduction in complaints.

Response:

This is a very good question, unfortunately I am unable to provide the requested data at this short notice but will share it with our system support team that pull out the data from the database and include it as something to consider at the officer meetings. In general terms I expect the number of initial warning letters sent out to have dropped quite significantly. This is because very standard warning letters were sent in almost every case under the old process, however under the new process warning letters sent, are now much more informed and focused and relate to what the noise is, how often and when it happens.

2. 1.27 states the avg number of days to complete an investigation is 73 days. Do we have any data about how other councils perform and how do we compare? Does this timeline meet residents' expectations.

Response:

I raised this question at a partnership meeting on Monday with officers from Nuneaton and Rugby, officers were unable to provide a definitive number of days, but anecdotally did not feel 12 weeks (84days) to be unusual.

Both these authorities are also reviewing their noise investigation procedures.

WDC Managers are also reviewing this KPI, there can be wide deviation and variability on this as a final number of days, if for example we needed to take a matter to court and we are then at the mercy of when a case can be heard by the magistrates.

Arguably what is of more importance for our residents, if I can draw your attention to the flow chart in the Noise Policy, Appendix Two - Investigation Process (none housing) Flow Chart, there you will note target times and target timeframes for the different stages of an investigation.

3. 1.38 it seems that there are some changes underway in how we work with the local police teams which is good. Do we have any examples yet of how these have improved outcomes for residents?

Response:

The police are currently revising their Anti-Social Behaviour Policy, WDC has been consulted and will contribute and feedback as appropriate and on behalf of residents.

## **7. Work Programme Update – Digital Strategy**

(Report author(s): David Elkington – Head of Customer and Digital Services)

Question(s) from Councillor Syson:

Thank you for this comprehensive update.

Please would you tell me if any work is being done on reviewing and improving the accessibility of our webpages and forms, particularly for the visually impaired?

I note that if I click on Accessibility at the top of each page the first thing I get is 5 lines of text telling me there is an accessibility statement, and only then when I scroll down am I given the option to change things that might help plus advice. Can I read the page in Narrator or NVDA?

Response to Councillor Syson's questions:

Thank you for your email. That is a really interesting question and the short answer is that we are working to improve accessibility, good efforts are being made, but there is always more that can be done.

Whilst there isn't a screen reader built directly into the website, it is built to work with screen reading technology such as NVDA, JAWS, and the built in options for Windows, iOS and Android.

For example:

- there are hidden 'skip to content' links on every page.
- headings are tagged in the HTML and nested for easier browsing/skipping.
- All images have alternative text.
- New documents are published as HTML web pages where possible.
- The tab button is tested to scroll through the navigation and sections of the website.
- Text is written in Plain English, cutting out jargon and long paragraphs (although there are instances of this still on the website)

There is also a lot of ongoing work that takes place improve and review our accessibility:

- Accessibility review every 2 years by an external company, next one due early 2024.
- Annual 'Plain English' review
- Ongoing scanning software that highlights accessibility issues with the site

Accessibility requirements are also baked into ICT application development processes and procurement processes for new systems with a public facing site.

The accessibility standard of our website is actually really good.

In the latest Silktide accessibility ratings (which is the most commonly accepted comparison of accessibility for Local Government websites) Warwick District Council is 13<sup>th</sup> nationally. These ratings do of course vary month by month as the score is derived from a sample of pages, but we are consistently within the top 10%.

<https://index.silktide.com/category/council-uk/april-2023>

<https://index.silktide.com/website/warwick-district-council/january-2023>

The website has also been reviewed by the Government Digital Service in 2022 and whilst this was not a full audit, it did aim to highlight any major accessibility issues with the site. The review only picked up a few issues, mainly with the implementation of our cookie banner, which were all quickly fixed.

Matt Pearce (our Website Manager) and his team take great care and pride in the accessibility of the site and any new content that goes on it. They highlight the importance to our web authors and colleagues in the Comms, Design and ICT teams, as well as those within the service areas. They have guidance on our Intranet specifically for accessibility and all new starters get a mandatory website accessibility awareness pop up/quiz as part of their induction. This is important to highlight as consistently maintaining a high standard takes a lot of effort; many authorities with far greater resource than us have tried and fallen short in doing this.

We are of course aware that despite all of this effort, improvements can still be made, and we do intend to deal with these things soon. Unfortunately, we've dealt with the 99.9% of low hanging fruit and are now addressing more challenging issues. For example, some requirements for the highest AAA rating won't be achievable without an overhaul of the websites design. We also need to remain vigilant of developments that affect accessibility on our waste forms, which are serviced by Stratford District Council from their website.

Our current website is actually due a refresh and earlier in the year I had a starter discussion with Matt about this. We were also considering how we could improve the e-form experience and this would include moving as far away from static PDF forms as possible. We would also ensure that whatever our new website design looks like, it has the capability of meeting accessibility standards entirely at the highest level.

I should also give credit to Matt and his team for the huge and continuous effort they put into building and maintaining the standards on our website. Without their tremendous efforts, the standards we achieve simply wouldn't happen.