

MINUTES of the meeting of General Overview & Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Shire Hall, St. Peter's Square, Hereford, HR1 2HX on Tuesday 21 July 2015 at 10.00 am

Present: Councillor WLS Bowen (Chairman)
Councillor MJK Cooper (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors: J Hardwick, DG Harlow, EPJ Harvey, JF Johnson, MT McEvilly, FM Norman, AJW Powers, NE Shaw, LC Tawn and SD Williams

Co-opted members: Mr P Burbidge, Mrs A Fisher, Mr RJ Fuller and Mr P Sell

In attendance: Councillors H Bramer (Cabinet Member, Contract and Assets), BA Durkin (in his capacity as chairman of the task and finish group on development management), and GJ Powell (Cabinet Member, Economy and Corporate Services).

Officers: G Hughes (Director of Economy, Communities and Corporate), L Knight (Head of Additional Needs), B Norman (Assistant Director, Governance), M Willimont (Head of Development Management and Environmental Health), and K Vigus (Waste Disposal Team Leader)

In his introductory remarks, the Chairman welcomed Mrs A Fisher and Mr RJ Fuller to their first meeting as Parent Governor Representatives, for the primary and secondary sectors respectively.

11. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillors JM Bartlett, CA Gandy and A Warmington. Apologies had also been received from Councillors JG Lester (Cabinet Member, Young People and Children's Wellbeing) and PD Price (Cabinet Member, Infrastructure).

12. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Councillor FM Norman substituted for Councillor JM Bartlett; Councillor MT McEvilly substituted for Councillor CA Gandy; and Councillor LC Tawn substituted for Councillor A Warmington.

13. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

14. MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting were received.

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 10 June 2015 be approved as a correct record.

15. SUGGESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

It was reported that a suggestion had been received from Mr. Peter McKay in relation to Highway Dedication Codes and Deregulation Bill provisions and safeguards; details about the suggestion and a related question to Council were included in a supplement to the agenda.

The Chairman thanked Mr. McKay for his interest and suggestion. It was requested that committee members be provided with a briefing note on public rights of way, the definitive map and other matters raised by Mr. McKay. In addition, the Chairman said that arrangements were being made for a member seminar/workshop on transportation issues where these matters could be explored.

16. QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC

No questions had been received.

17. EXECUTIVE RESPONSE TO COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS ON SCHOOL EXAMINATION PERFORMANCE

The Chairman reminded members that a report had been considered on school examination performance at the committee meeting on 10 March 2015 ([minute 63](#) refers) and a number of recommendations made. The Executive response to those recommendations was detailed within Appendix 1 to this item.

The discussion centred on the following recommendation that had not been accepted:

Recommendation 1: That officers reprise the actions within the Herefordshire Food Strategy in the context of food provision and education in schools and that the committee be updated with the current position in terms of the delivery of those actions.

A committee member questioned whether the Food Strategy was still a live document and, whilst acknowledging the autonomy of schools, whether further thought should be given to the authority's approach.

The Head of Additional Needs advised that the authority took the issue seriously, particularly in terms of nutrition, but responsibility for schools meals was delegated to individual schools.

Mr. Sell said that the discussion at the 10 March 2015 meeting had focussed on promoting the use of locally sourced produce but noted that this could not be imposed on schools. Nevertheless, many schools did use local suppliers, adding that some schools involved pupils in the preparation of food as an educational activity.

The Chairman requested that a briefing note be prepared on the Food Strategy, with input from children's wellbeing and public health directorates.

A committee member noted the strong causal link between nutrition, the ability of pupils to pay attention in class and examination performance. As the Food Strategy had linkages to schools, it was suggested that an indication was needed about the direction of travel at a strategic level.

Noting the wording in the response that 'there are recent examples of schools changing suppliers to achieve best value', a committee member said that schools should be encouraged to achieve best value in the broadest sense rather than just being price focussed. The Assistant Director Governance confirmed that price was only one aspect of best value.

Mr. Burbidge said that he was aware of one school that had recently replaced an underperforming supplier and, in appointing a new caterer, had focused on quality and service. He added that locally sourced produce should be promoted wherever possible but there was a need to give freedom to caterers to use their best judgement.

Mr. Knight commented that the attractiveness of the food offer to pupils needed to be factored into the way in which schools approached the issue.

The Chairman welcomed the update provided on looked after children activities.

RESOLVED: That

(a) the Executive response be noted; and

(b) a briefing note be prepared on the Herefordshire Food Strategy and its linkages to schools.

18. EXECUTIVE RESPONSE TO THE TASK AND FINISH GROUP REPORT ON DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT (PLANNING)

The report of the task and finish group on development management (planning) had been considered at the committee meeting on 10 June 2015 ([minute 9](#) refers). The Chairman drew attention to the draft Executive response to the group's recommendations detailed within Appendix A to this item.

Invited to express his views on the response, the group chairman noted that the majority of the recommendations had been accepted, demonstrating that the work had been worthwhile. However, he considered that clarification was needed on five of the recommendations that had been partially accepted.

Recommendation 2: Downloadable and/or online editable applications be developed for all planning related application forms to encourage electronic applications.

The group chairman said that the recommendation was not about duplicating systems, it was about enhancing the existing planning portal.

A committee member commented on the need to explore the use of file compression software, as many service users found it difficult to download large images, particularly in areas with slow internet connectivity.

In response, the Head of Development Management and Environmental Health (subsequently 'head of service') reassured the committee that officers would endeavour to improve upon the planning portal in conjunction with Hoople Ltd, the council's IT support provider.

Recommendation 3: That provision of a facility for subscription service to a given planning application giving updates is developed - this would enhance the service and reduce phone calls and planning officer time.

The group chairman said that the intention behind the recommendation was to provide alerts to interested parties about significant developments with planning applications.

The head of service said that, whilst many people followed the progress of planning applications closely, better ways of notifying applicants electronically would be considered. It was noted that, with up to 4,000 applications received a year, the service needed to be mindful of the way in which it deployed resources.

Recommendation 5: Alternative means of managing the planning committee work schedule be explored to ensure that efficient and consistent planning decisions are made.

The group chairman said that the issue was about the workload and duration of Planning Committee meetings, rather than about member training.

The head of service commented on the need for consistent and robust decisions and acknowledged the importance of the democratic decision making process. In terms of Planning Committee arrangements, it was noted that all day committee meetings had been split into morning and afternoon committee sessions, thereby providing greater flexibility in terms of substitutions. Apart from occasional additional meetings, it was not considered that the committee could meet more frequently than every three weeks given the cycle of report preparation, publication, site visits, and meetings.

A committee member commented that consistency also had to apply to officer advice, as he considered that there had been some recent examples where the degree of weight given to emerging Core Strategy policies had been interpreted differently.

Recommendation 11: That employees' well-being in terms of stress management should be monitored as part of the annual appraisal process.

The group chairman said that the recommendation should have highlighted the need for day to day management of employee wellbeing, not just through the annual appraisal process. The Chairman of the committee noted that increases in workload could place additional pressures on staff which could impact on the individuals concerned and the service provided.

The head of service emphasised his commitment to staff and recognised that there could be a lag phase between upturns in the numbers of planning applications received and the recruitment of additional staff to manage that workload. He commented on how managers sought to identify concerns and support staff; reference was made to health and wellbeing days that had been undertaken during the year.

Comments were made by committee members about the impact of sickness absences on other staff and departmental efficiency. The head of service explained some of the considerations and actions that were taken in response to both short term and long term sickness absences. He also outlined how, in such circumstances, the work of specialist officers was typically redistributed or temporary resources utilised.

Recommendation 25: That ward members be notified in all matters of planning applications to ward boundaries.

The group chairman emphasised the need for ward members to be at least as well informed as the parish councils in their areas.

The head of service said that, although it would be too resource intensive to communicate about every application, officers would notify members of all major or significant applications in adjacent wards. He encouraged members to contact managers if the dialogue with planning officers could be improved.

A committee member commented on the potential impact of developments on adjacent wards, particularly in market towns.

Returning to recommendation 23, a committee member noted that planning was one of the most visible service areas to the public and had clear statutory obligations.

Therefore, assurance was sought that proper risk analysis had been undertaken to ensure that planning activity was resourced properly given the potential legal implications and reputational damage that could arise if the service could not fulfil its functions.

In response, the head of service gave an overview of the income and expenditure of development control during 2014/15. He also advised members that the managers met weekly to monitor performance and, in doing so, could also gauge workloads if too high for a particular officer.

In response to a comment by a committee member about the need for proactive planning enforcement, the Chairman noted that planning enforcement had improved in both approach and outcomes in recent times. The head of service reported that the authority now had five planning enforcement officers (four full-time equivalent posts) and said that there was closer working between planning enforcement and environmental health teams. He advised that it would require significant further investment to investigate the delivery of every planning condition, so there had to be an expedient approach based on the professional acumen of officers and on the information received from the public. The need to publicise enforcement activity where appropriate to enhance public trust was acknowledged.

The group chairman commended planning and enforcement officers for their hard work, often under considerable pressure.

In response to a question from a committee member about income and how it was treated, the Director of Economy, Communities and Corporate said that the committee could be assured that budgets were managed appropriately, supported by quality accounting and audit processes. He said that a briefing note was in preparation and would be circulated to committee members about the distribution of resources to planning and associated services. In response to further comments, the Director said that the authority would continue to look at the range of needs but ring-fencing income to the planning service could not be guaranteed; he added that this could limit flexibility in terms of the resources available in less active periods.

RESOLVED: That

- (a) the draft Executive response be noted; and**
- (b) a briefing note on progress with the response be provided within six months.**

19. UPDATE ON WASTE PERFORMANCE (Verbal Report)

The Chairman said that, mindful of performance information reported to Cabinet on [10 June 2015](#), it would be helpful for the committee to receive an update on the Waste Management Service and the Waste Disposal Team Leader (subsequently 'team leader') was invited to give a presentation.

The principal points of the presentation (*in italics*) and discussion are provided below.

Waste Collection New Service

1. *In November 2014 the council commenced an alternate weekly refuse and recycling collection service (AWC)*
2. *Green wheeled bin for recycling and a black bin for general rubbish collected fortnightly on alternate weeks*

3. *Introduced to save £0.5 million per year, reduce general rubbish and increase recycling*

Performance Improvement

4. *Average monthly general waste: prior to AWC 3,838 tonnes; after AWC 3,545 tonnes; difference - 293 tonnes*
5. *Average monthly kerbside recycling: prior to AWC 1430 tonnes; after AWC 1,551 tonnes; difference + 121 tonnes*
6. *Dry recycling %: prior to AWC 28.26%; after AWC 33.60%; difference + 5.34%*
7. *Estimated recycling and composting rate: prior to AWC 40%; after AWC 42%; difference + 2% (estimated)*

Summary

8. *Move to Alternate Weekly Collection has done what we wanted it to do: save £0.5 million per annum; reduced amount of general (residual) waste; and increased recycling*

The team leader said that, although data was only available for a six month period, the performance indicators were encouraging and demonstrated that lower levels of general waste were being collected and higher levels of recycling were being achieved, from already good levels compared to other areas. It was noted that this had offset recent changes to the treatment of wood waste.

The team leader responded to a number of questions from committee members:

- i. It was likely that AWC had reduced the amount of trade waste entering the system and that households were reusing, donating and composting more materials than before. The Chairman noted that the simplicity of the AWC arrangements made recycling easier to achieve than in some other areas of the country, where residents had to separate materials themselves.
- ii. From discussions with street cleansing and enforcement personnel and evidence from tonnage records, it did not appear that AWC had resulted in a discernible increase in levels of fly-tipping to date.
- iii. A main focus for the service in the current year was on communal properties, in terms of containment options and improving levels of recycling.
- iv. All waste was weighed, so the authority could have confidence in the data collected.
- v. Leaflets to explain AWC arrangements were available in the principal languages spoken in Herefordshire.
- vi. Members were invited to contact the service about opportunities to improve collection arrangements for residents locally.
- vii. There was an ongoing programme for bin swap requests and replacements for damaged units. It was noted that black sacks would continue to be a feature for some residents, particularly for flats and communal developments.

- viii. Bags of rubbish left by the side of public litter bins were regularly inspected to determine the origin of the contents and were followed up appropriately by community protection team.
- ix. It was acknowledged that some people did not compost due to concerns about vermin but excellent advice could be obtained from volunteer master composters and residents could purchase subsidised compost bins and waste digesters.
- x. It was confirmed that the capital cost of the black bins had been paid off as a consequence of the savings accruing from reduced levels of waste.
- xi. AWC meant that single compartment vehicles were more efficient to run currently but, with the current contract ending in 2023 and emerging changes to waste legislation and regulations, the council would need to consider how the waste management service would be provided in the next couple of years.

The Cabinet Member, Contracts and Assets wished to record his thanks to the team leader and the rest of the team for their hard work, particularly for their efforts to resolve residents' issues face-to-face.

Energy from Waste (EfW) Update

9. *Our shared 200,000 tonnes per annum EfW due to be operational in Spring 2017*
10. *Will produce more than 16MW of electricity for the National Grid (enough for all households in Hereford city)*
11. *Time lapse video available to view on www.severnwaste.com*

The Cabinet Member, Contracts and Assets commented on the progress that was being made with EfW infrastructure and confirmed that the facility was on schedule to start testing in Autumn 2016 and become operational in Spring 2017. The Chairman suggested that members might wish to take the opportunity to visit the EfW in due course.

Future Work

12. *Garden waste collection service: seasonal collection (March to October?); opt in service and chargeable to residents; and fortnightly collection from a wheeled bin (brown?)*
13. *Will only be considered if we can recover cost of service from users*

In response to questions, the team leader commented:

- Unlike some authorities, there was no provision for the chargeable collection of Christmas trees currently.
- Too much useful food was being wasted, at significant costs to household budgets and in terms of landfill disposal charges. Waste prevention was being encouraged through the 'Love Food Hate Waste' campaign.
- The potential for a chargeable garden waste collection service was being assessed. A committee member suggested Ledbury as a pilot area given its proximity to the green waste composting facility in Dymock.

- Provision was being made at household recycling centres for residents to donate items for re-use by charities at their various outlets in Herefordshire. It was requested that ward members be kept informed about developments so that they could help publicise reuse initiatives locally.
- The www.letswasteless.com website provided lots of information to residents in Herefordshire and Worcestershire, e.g. advice about real nappies.
- An overview was provided on some of the waste containment and collection measures being explored with residents and traders in Hereford city centre to minimise problems associated with litter and seagulls.
- It was noted that, whilst it could not be automatically sorted and recycled, black plastic had some benefits in terms of food preservation but it was hoped that it would be replaced by alternative materials eventually.

A committee member commented that water authorities were not obliged to plan for investment in waste plants and sewage treatment works to take account of business needs. It was considered that, as a county with large agriculture and production sectors, there was a need for a strategic lead to be taken on how the issues were dealt with. The Director for Economy, Communities and Corporate acknowledged that further work was required in consultation with the water authorities and local employers to ensure the adequate provision of waste and sewage services for businesses in Herefordshire.

The Chairman suggested that all councillors could benefit from a seminar / workshop on waste management issues.

RESOLVED: That the update be noted.

20. WORK PROGRAMME

A draft work programme was submitted for consideration. The Chairman drew attention to the following:

1. It was recommended that the September 2015 meeting be moved back to provide additional time for the task and finish group on the smallholdings estate to engage with tenants and stakeholders and to prepare its report.
2. To inform any future activity on football provision and on Hereford racecourse, it was envisaged that reports would be received in January 2016 on Edgar Street Athletic Ground and on property matters.
3. Arrangements were being made for an all member transportation workshop.
4. The work programme would be adjusted to reflect the other matters identified during the meeting.

A committee member commented on: the potential of the Understanding Herefordshire report to inform future, independent work programming; and the need to review the committee's topic selection criteria to ensure that issues were gathered and assessed on their merits rather than being filtered in the linear way suggested by the flow diagram and to reassess the meaning and approach to the 'Will scrutiny involvement be duplicating some other work?' box.

RESOLVED: That

- (a) the draft work programme, as amended, be noted; and**

(b) the meeting scheduled for Tuesday 8 September 2015 be moved to Wednesday 30 September 2015 at 10.00 am.

21. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Wednesday 30 September 2015 at 10.00 am

The meeting ended at 12.30 pm

CHAIRMAN