

MINUTES of the meeting of Environment Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, Brockington, 35 Hafod Road, Hereford on Monday, 5th December, 2005 at 10.00 a.m.

Present: Councillor J.H.R. Goodwin (Chairman)
Councillor W.L.S. Bowen (Vice Chairman)

Councillors: P.J. Dauncey, J.G.S. Guthrie, T.W. Hunt, R. Mills and Ms. G.A. Powell

In attendance: Councillors A.C.R. Chappell, P.J. Edwards (Cabinet Member - Environment), J. Stone, D.B. Wilcox (Cabinet Member - Highways and Transportation) and R.M. Wilson

38. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors K.G. Grumbley and J.B. Williams.

39. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

Councillor R. Mills substituted for Councillor K.G. Grumbley.

40. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

41. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 24th October, 2005 be approved and signed by the Chairman.

42. SUGGESTIONS FROM MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC ON ISSUES FOR FUTURE SCRUTINY

No suggestions were received.

43. GEM PERFORMANCE 2005/06 : HALF YEAR REPORT

The Committee reviewed the Council's environmental management/ISO 14001 system over 2005/06 to the half year to ensure that it continued to be suitable, adequate and effective and delivered improvement in environmental performance.

The Director of Environment and the Sustainability Officer reported upon the Council's Good Environmental Management (GEM) System, details of which were contained in the agenda report. The annexes to the report gave more detailed information on GEM audits; improvements in environmental performance and against GEM objectives – including progressing actions in the Carbon Management Plan (Annexe 2); the continuing suitability of GEM; concerns of relevant interested parties and/or new environmental issues, and a range of other GEM issues.

While scrutinising the GEM report the following principal points were noted:

- The Committee was pleased to note the number of schools registered on the EcoSchool scheme. On questioning the time taken in setting up the collection of recycled materials from schools, particularly paper, the Head of Environmental Health and Trading Standards reported that they were working with partners on this issue. However, this was dependent upon the collection contractors.
- Questioned on the extent to which recycled paper was used in the Council and in schools the Sustainability Officer reported that while the exact extent was unknown this could be ascertained. She further reported that the Council were working with West Mercia Supplies, the main supplier to the Council and Schools, on obtaining and supplying recycled products of a suitable quality and at a competitive price. She was however, aware that cheaper non-recycled paper was available from the supplier.
- The Council is committed to extending its certification to ISO 14001. An additional number of Council Services were nearly ready to join up to the certification and the Council was on course to meet its July 2006 target.
- Discussions were ongoing with power supply companies concerning the installation of 'smart' meters to monitor in near real time the use of energy.
- Following changes to the GEM system, further training for existing GEM auditors to equip them to undertake service and system audits will take place in February 2006.
- The Committee was pleased to note the significant decrease in staff car mileage, possibly due to the 'Twoshare' scheme and office relocations. There had also been a significant increase in staff cycle mileage – up 118% which may be due to an increase in cycle mileage payments.
- While there were still Health and Safety and financial issues to overcome, plans were progressing in relation to the landfill gas generator scheme (electricity from gas) at the Stretton Sugwas landfill site.
- In view of the changes to the Commons Act, currently going through Parliament, the Committee requested that a report be presented on the implications of the changes, which were believed to be considerable for local authorities.
- A degree of concern was raised in the report by the implications of the potential lack of maintenance to roadside trees in the ownership of private landowners. The Committee noted that while Highway Inspectors inspected and maintained roadside trees, private landowners, concerned about the safety implications of their trees overhanging highways and footways may be inclined to fell the trees. The Committee agreed that while an increase in public awareness was needed in relation to their landowner responsibilities, there was also a risk that healthy trees could be needlessly felled.
- While the findings of the Staff Opinion Survey 2004 showed the number of respondents aware of GEM was up to 79%, only 16% of respondents felt the authority was taking sufficient steps to reduce the environmental impact of their area of work. The Sustainability Officer responded that this may be due to the staff underestimating the range of initiatives the Council was involved in.
- Work was underway to set up a pilot Invest-to-Save fund within WMS which could develop into an Energy Services Company (ESCO). Once established this would then permit partner Councils to use the service to realise carbon savings and both energy and financial efficiencies for reinvestment in future schemes, thereby benefiting the Council and schools.
- The term 'Trapeze', mentioned in Annexe 2, was defined as being a computer package which, essentially, allowed the Education and Social Care Services transport to be co-ordinated along with public transport wherever

appropriate. This was one element of a Local Transport Plan initiative.

- In relation to the Fuel Poverty Strategy, the Committee noted that the process of implementing the Strategy, formerly dealt with in Housing, had been halted until the current staff vacancy could be filled. The Committee also noted that Adult Community Services now administered the strategy.
- The Committee noted work was underway to develop the Low and Medium Cost Measures set out in Annexe 2, but requested that further information be included in a future report on the various measures involved.

RESOLVED:

That

- a) the position set out in the GEM half year report be noted;**
- b) a report on the implications of the changes to the Commons Act be reported to a future meeting; and**
- c) further information on the various measures indicated at Low Cost Measures and Medium Cost Measures in Annex 2 to the report be detailed in a future report.**

44. DEVELOPMENT CONTROL PERFORMANCE

The Committee considered progress made against the Government's BV109 targets for 2005/06 and any outstanding actions in order to achieve the targets.

The agenda report included details of the Government targets for Development Control; the current position in terms of the out-turn figures for the last three years; comparison with other authorities and discussed a number of future actions to improve the services. The Development Control Improvement Action Plan was appended to the report at Appendix 1.

The Director of Environment and the Head of Planning Services reported that while a number of measures had been taken in response to concerns about the performance of the Development Control Service, unfortunately the Service had now been included within ODPM consultation proposals, along with seventy other authorities, for designation as Planning Standards Authorities for 2006/07. A number of factors had contributed to this situation principally loss of staff, recruitment difficulties and MVM (computer software) issues. The Head of Planning Services highlighted that the designation by the ODPM was based on old data measured up to June 2005, which he considered did not fairly reflect the current performance which by early 2006 would exceed national targets. This issue would be taken up with the ODPM.

The Head of Planning Services further reported that in light of the recent upturn in performance he was optimistic that the targets for BV109b and c (minor applications and other applications determined in under 8 weeks respectively) would be met during early 2006/7 when taken as a whole. The more problematic BV109a (Major planning applications) typically required section 106 agreements and were more complex to deal with in all respects. However, the indications were that the target for this element of BVPI109 would also be met by mid 2006.

He also highlighted that, while a number of staff vacancies had been filled, the Development Control team still had some key vacancies. The remaining officers still had an average of almost 200 cases per officer, significantly in excess of the 150 cases per officer nationally recognised by the ODPM as a suitable figure for efficient and effective operation.

Questioned on the recruitment process the Committee were informed that recruitment issues across the Council as a whole were being reviewed on a corporate basis. There were, however, national shortages of Development Control

staff with consequent recruitment and retention difficulties.

The Cabinet Member (Environment) acknowledged that the Council needed to be alert to recruitment issues and thanked the staff in the Development Control Team for their efforts to meet the targets.

The Head of Planning Services further commented on some of the activities set out in the Development Control Action Plan and in particular some of the issues associated with the electronic delivery of services.

RESOLVED That the progress reported in achieving the Government's BV109 targets for 2005/6 be noted.

45. ENVIRONMENT REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING

The Committee was advised of the latest budget monitoring position for the Environment programme area revenue budgets for the period to 31st October 2005.

The Director of Environment and the Director of Resources representative reported that the total environment Budget for 2005/06 remained as reported to the previous meeting namely £24,093,980. A detailed budget monitoring report was appended to the report. In overall terms the Environment Budgets were expected to come in on budget but this may be because of additional income from car parking and planning. Some reallocation of resources may therefore be necessary.

During the course of scrutinising the monitoring report the Committee were informed that currently there were a number of issues concerning Travellers Sites namely that a number were closed awaiting improvement or sale and relocation. The management of sites was further complicated by the lack of clear guidance by the ODPM concerning 'Housing Need' and the 'Establishment of Need' requirement in the Housing Investment Programme. The Committee also noted that a number of finance streams for public transport (rural) schemes formerly supported by the Countryside Agency were being withdrawn. Advantage West Midlands (AWM) had picked up some of the funding to finance the support staff for current schemes but had not been forthcoming with revenue funding streams to further support a number of schemes due to end.

RESOLVED: That the Environment Revenue Budget report for the period to 31st October 2005 be noted.

46. COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2006/7

The Committee considered its work programme for 2006/07.

The Chairman reported that the current work programme expired following the March 2006 meeting and following discussion with the Vice-Chairman and the Director of Environment proposed the draft programme at Appendix 1 to the report for consideration.

The Committee debated the current position in relation to Trunk Road issues, particularly in relation to the A49 and A465 issues discussed with the Highways Agency at the Environment Scrutiny Committee on 28th February 2005. The Cabinet Member (Highways and Transportation) and Director of Environment reported that meetings were being held with the Highways Agency to progress matters and recommended waiting to see what outcomes could be achieved. Both Members of the Committee and those Members whose Wards contained the A49 would be kept informed of progress. The Chairman stated that he was aware of the

Committee's feeling on this issue and would keep the question of a further scrutiny meeting with the Highways Agency under review.

The Director of Environment commented that discussions concerning Waste Management were ongoing. However, he intended to update all Council Members on this issue at an appropriate time.

RESOLVED: That the work programme at appendix 1 to the report be approved and recommended to the Strategic Monitoring Committee.

The meeting ended at 11.44 a.m.

CHAIRMAN