

MINUTES of the meeting of Environment Scrutiny Committee held at The Council Chamber, Brockington, 35 Hafod Road, Hereford on Monday, 5th June, 2006 at 10.00 a.m.

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

Councillors: P.J. Dauncey, K.G. Grumbley, J.G.S. Guthrie, T.W. Hunt,
Ms. G.A. Powell, Miss F. Short and J.B. Williams

In attendance: Councillors: P.J. Edwards (Cabinet Member - Environment),
Mrs. J.P. French, T.M. James, J. Stone, D.B. Wilcox (Cabinet Member -
Highways and Transportation) and R.M. Wilson

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

No apologies were received.

2. NAMED SUBSTITUTES

There were no named substitutes.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That subject to indicating Councillor Ms G.A. Powell as being in attendance the minutes of the meeting held 27th March, 2006 be approved and signed by the Chairman.

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

No suggestions were received from members of the public.

6. PRESENTATION BY CABINET MEMBER (ENVIRONMENT)

The Committee received a presentation by the Cabinet Member (Environment).

A report had been prepared by the Cabinet Member (Environment) outlining the issues affecting the Environment Programme area and highlighting some of the specific challenges for 2006/07.

In presenting his report the Cabinet Member highlighted in particular:

- The central theme of his report endorsed the Council's corporate approach to management via Annual Operating Plans and Services Delivery Plans.
- Encouraging collective comment had resulted from the Comprehensive

Performance Assessment Team during their visit. He had demonstrated best practice to them by reference to the scrutiny review of the polytunnel Code of practice.

- Best Value performance indicator outcomes for April 2005 to March 2006 indicate steady progress which now needed to be consolidated and continued with.
- In addition to the successes on agenda pages 13 and 14 the directorate had made progress with land acquisition and detail proposals for the new Hereford Crematorium and the extension to the Hereford Cemetery. Work was continuing concerning public safety relating to unstable memorial stones.
- Contractors were progressing works to the Grafton Travellers Site.
- Responsibility under the Licensing Act 2003 had been successfully assumed with very few appeals emerging during the year.

The Committee noted the report by the Cabinet Member. The following is an outline of the questions and responses or comments made during the ensuing questioning of the Cabinet Member:

- Questioned on the use of grant income to support kerb side collection the Cabinet Member reported that 2 additional collection vehicles had been acquired using grant income enabling the collection area to be extended. While 60% of the County was covered, he emphasised that a balance had to be struck between the cost of collection and the resultant benefits. Various waste disposal methods in the joint counties, for example via the Estech plant, were not part of the PFI Contract.
- If the PFI Waste Contract failed then the contract contained provisions to send waste to landfill, however, alternative methods of disposal would need to be looked at. He was unable to comment in detail on the proposed disposal plant for Madley as this was subject to a planning application, possibly in July 2006.
- The Director reported that the PFI Waste Contract was still subject to complex and sensitive negotiations. A report would be presented to Cabinet and Members would be kept briefed. The PFI contract was being monitored by central government.
- Questioned on the power to enforce cleanliness issues (dog fouling, litter) the Cabinet Member commented that, rather than devolve the issue to the Parish Councils, he wished to see closer partnership working with the police possibly via Community Support Officers, who would be better placed to undertake enforcement in a consistent manner. In a rural county the cost had to be balanced against the effectiveness of the services provided. He also commented that Environmental Health officers were receiving training to enforce these new powers.
- While the Lifescapes project had ended in September 2005 the Council's Conservation – Management & Support section were working closely with English Nature, Herefordshire Nature Trust etc, to further develop the work through the Mapping Opportunities for Habitat and Landscape (MOHL) resources.
- While the number of Trading Standards prosecutions seemed low, when compared to consumer and business complaints, it was noted that prosecutions were dealt with under a statutory process with the service having a good track record of successful prosecutions.
- The Cabinet Member reported that while the Public Conveniences Best Value Review Improvement Plan set out a programme of renewal, resiting or disposal, the programme had been varied according to circumstances e.g. facilities had been renewed as part of the Leominster bus station refurbishment scheme. While the directorate budget had been reduced he

was keen to see the programme progress.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for his report and responding to the Committee's questioning.

7. PRESENTATION BY CABINET MEMBER (HIGHWAYS AND TRANSPORTATION)

The Committee received a presentation by the Cabinet Member (Highways and Transportation).

A report and presentation had been prepared by the Cabinet Member (Highways and Transportation) outlining the issues affecting the Highways and Transportation Programme area and highlighting some of the specific challenges for 2006/07.

In presenting his report the Cabinet Member highlighted in particular:

- The Comprehensive Performance Assessment Team had made positive comments about the Council's Local Transport Plan; the Directorate's work to encourage cycling; its liaison with the Highways Agency to reduce accidents on the A49 and its work on the low-floor bus project.
- The Council and Herefordshire MIND received national recognition after a transport scheme aimed at helping people in isolated communities was short listed for an award.
- While some unavoidable disruption had been experienced, improvements to the City centre were progressing or completed.
- Improvements had been made to the cycle network and he highlighted the new cycle way along Roman Road.
- A major challenge would be to improve the condition of the roads. He highlighted that the government calculated financial allocation per head of population rather than on kilometres of road, which naturally disadvantaged rural counties. Other challenges would be to cut road casualties even further and to promote sustainable transport that served all the people of the County.
- He clarified in relation to agenda page 25 that the target was to reduce to less than 134 the number of people killed or seriously injured on the County's roads (averaging out to not more than 129 over the next three years) and to ensure that not more than 17 children are killed or seriously injured on our roads.

The Committee noted the report and presentation by the Cabinet Member. The following is an outline of the questions and responses or comments made during the ensuing questioning of the Cabinet Member:

- While the Council were ready to start with the Ross-on-Wye flood alleviation scheme it had been put on hold due to problems with DEFRA funding. The Council were also working with the Environment Agency to get the best flood alleviation scheme for Belmont.
- Director level meetings continued to be held with the Highways Agency concerning safety on the A49. While some progress had been made, with a number of additional safety measures being installed at Ashton and other proposals being programmed (date yet to be announced), he would be keeping up the pressure for further and quicker action by the Agency.
- Questioned on aspects of train travel, and in particular trains unrepentantly terminating in Ledbury, the Cabinet Member confirmed that he had been in correspondence with Central Trains who indicated that the situation had been remedied in the new timetable. However, he was aware that the Central Trains franchise expired in December 2006.

- Having emphasised the employment and environmental aspects, a further bid for the Rotherwas Access Road had been submitted. The bid had been graded a Priority 1 scheme by the region's government Agencies, however, the outcome of the bid was still awaited from central government.
- Subject to contractual issues the park and ride scheme was progressing. The Committee suggested that local businesses/service providers be kept informed of the scheme in view of the limited parking facilities at some premises.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for his report and presentation and for his response to the Committee's questioning.

8. GOOD ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT (GEM) PERFORMANCE 2005/06: ANNUAL REPORT

The Committee reviewed the Council's environmental performance, particularly in relation to Good Environmental Management (GEM) and ISO 14001, during 2005/06 to ensure that it continued to improve overall.

The Director of Environment reported that the GEM Annual Report summarised the Council's performance against internal objectives over the year and new developments. He highlighted progress with the Carbon Management Action Plan (CMAP) and that good environmental interest was being achieved in schools. The Council were progressing towards the corporate biodiversity target of increasing the percentage of council owned land without a nature conservation designation managed for biodiversity.

The Sustainability Manager highlighted key points from the GEM Annual Report, performance in relation to the GEM targets for 2005/06 and the proposed programme for 2006/07, based on the Corporate Plan, and the in-house elements of the Environment Strategy.

On scrutinising the report the following principal points were noted:

- Reasonably reliable data was now being collected in relation to electricity usage, however, water usage monitoring was problematical due to the inaccessibility of some water meters.
- Comment was made concerning possible conflict between not cutting hedges under the government Single Farm Payment Scheme and visibility under road safety.
- Over the coming years an increased commitment would be made towards improving air quality particularly in relation to vehicle pollution. The lead would be taken by the Environmental Health officers who monitor, and where necessary, produce specific action plans.
- Property Services were working with West Mercia Supplies to continue sourcing 100% renewable electricity.
- That positive progress was being made in relation to householder energy efficiency, which may be attributed to the fact that the County had some older style housing for which grant assistance may be available.

RESOLVED: That the GEM performance 2005/06: Annual Report be noted.

9. BIOFUELS BRIEFING

The Committee were informed about the rapidly developing biofuels industry and

how it related to aspects of Planning, Environmental Health and Trading Standards, the Council's commitment to reduce carbon dioxide emissions through the Carbon Management Action Plan and the recently adopted Herefordshire Partnership Climate Change Strategy.

The Sustainability Manager reported that the use of biofuels was growing because they reduce carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions by replacing fossil fuels. Biofuels were produced from crops and did not increase CO₂ emissions because the carbon dioxide released when they were burnt was re-absorbed by the following year's crop. Her report briefly outlined the background to its use; local developments; the regulatory considerations, including Waste Management Licensing and planning considerations; set out a number of potential benefits and commented on the regional dimension.

During the course of debate the following principal points were noted:

- While the Regional Energy Strategy for the West Midlands (2004) set a stretching regional target of 5% renewable generation by 2010 (compared to a national target of 10%) and 10% by 2020, only 1% had been achieved by 2005. The sharp rise in the cost of fossil fuels may create an improved market for other fuels (e.g. wood).
- Local micro-generation could be considered, particularly in view of the alleged high loss of electricity between generator and end user.
- Following improvements in biomass boiler systems and knowledge gained from its use at Weobley School other schools will be visited during the summer to investigate possible energy improvements.
- It was suggested that with the increased use of crops as biomass, the use of genetically modified (GM) crops may appear again on the national agenda.
- The Committee suggested that the Cabinet Member (Environment) ensure that suitably skilled officers are included in any pre-planning discussion with potential business developers to ensure that biofuel options are considered at an early stage of any planning application discussions.
- To facilitate at a later stage a wider debate on power generation in or around the County, the Committee requested a similar briefing paper on the possible use of hydro generation systems.

RESOLVED: That the biofuels briefing report be noted and a further briefing paper on hydro generation systems be produced for discussion at a future meeting.

10. ENVIRONMENT CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2006/07

The Committee was informed of the latest position with regard to the Environment Capital Programme for 2005/06 and 2006/07.

The Director of Environment and the Director of Resources' representative reported that work on the 2005/06 outturn continued, however, spending on Local Transport Plan (LTP) schemes was expected to be close to the forecast amount. Spending on non-LTP schemes, largely funded by Prudential Borrowing was expected to be £740,000 less than forecast, which will be carried forward to 2006/07.

The total Capital Programme for 2006/07 showed £12,554,434. which had largely been based on the LTP. Appendix 1 to the report gave details of individual schemes.

The Committee noted that a bid under the Cycle Demonstration Towns Project had

been unsuccessful.

RESOLVED: That the Environment Capital Programme 2006/07 report be noted.

11. ENVIRONMENT REVENUE BUDGET 2006/2007 AND OUTTURN FOR 2005/2006

The Committee was informed of the latest position with regard to the Environment Budget for 2006/07 following formal approval of the Council's budget.

The Director of Environment and the Director of Resources representative reported that work was continuing to complete the final outturn but an underspending of around £800,000 was expected of which approximately £400,000 would be carried forward into 2006/07. The underspending was largely on Planning due to staff savings, additional building control and development fee income and Planning Development Grant income. The Director reported that following concern about an overspend on winter maintenance, tight control had been imposed on expenditure and this had led to a larger than expected underspend.

The Council approved a 2006/07 budget of £25,754,000 for the Environment Programme area. In addition to the effects of inflation a number of adjustments, both budget additions and expected efficiency savings, were detailed in the report.

RESOLVED: That the Environment Revenue Budget 2006/07 and Outturn 2005/06 report be noted

12. BEST VALUE REVIEWS - IMPLEMENTATION OF IMPROVEMENT PLANS

The Committee was updated on the remaining actions and the exceptions to the programmed progress in the improvement plans resulting from the reviews of Commercial Enforcement, Development Control and Public conveniences.

The Director of Environment reported that major elements of the improvement plans had been completed. Other elements would be closely supervised or monitored via the Integrated Performance Management report.

RESOLVED: that the report on the Best Value Reviews- Implementation of Improvement Plans be noted.

The meeting ended at 12.23 p.m.

CHAIRMAN