

MINUTES of the meeting of Environment Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Brockington on Friday, 26th September, 2003 at 10.30 a.m.

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

Councillors: P.J. Dauncey, Mrs. A.E. Gray, K.G. Grumbley, T.W. Hunt, R. Mills and J.B. Williams

In attendance: Councillors J.W. Edwards, P.J. Edwards, P.E. Harling and Mrs. M.D. Lloyd-Hayes.

17. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors B.F. Ashton and G. W. Davis.

18. NAMED SUBSTITUTES (IF ANY)

Councillor J. B. Williams substituted for Councillor G.W. Davis.

19. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

20. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That subject to recording that apologies were received from Councillor P. J. Dauncey the minutes of the meeting held on 13th June, 2003 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

21. HUMAN RESOURCES

The Committee received a report on the sickness absence and other matters for the Environment Directorate.

The Personnel Manager, Well-being, reported upon the absence statistics for the Directorate, which covered the financial period 16th August 2002 to 15th August 2003. The report indicated the number of people in each division and the full time equivalent (FTE) together with the FTE days lost for each division and the average days lost per FTE. The report also contained reasons for sickness absence and a breakdown of accidents by division.

The Committee scrutinised the statistics and noted a high degree of stress related absence, particularly in the planning division. The Head of Planning Services reported that while a combination of covering for staff vacancies and the drive to increase performance may have had an effect, the high degree of stress related absence primarily related to long-term absence of 2 members of staff.

The Committee also noted that a flexible working hours scheme was available on request to officers in the Directorate.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

22. CAPITAL BUDGET MONITORING

The Committee were advised on the progress of the 2003/04 Capital Programme for Environment Areas within the overall context of the Herefordshire Council Capital Programme.

The Director of Environment reported that good progress was being made with the programme and highlighted that in many cases major expenditure incurred towards the end of the financial year when schemes or contracts were nearing completion.

The Assistant County Treasurer reported that since the report to the June 2003 meeting, changes to the funding had been made to include an increased call on the Capital Receipts reserve of £195,000 and an adjustment of £250,000 regarding the funding of the Low Floor Bus pilot. Changes to the scheme totals were indicated in the report. The Capital Programme for 2003/04, shown in Appendix 1 to the report, totalled £10,500,941.

In the course of scrutinising the programme the following principal points were noted:

- In relation to the Ross-on-Wye flood alleviation scheme the Head of Engineering and Transportation reported that, if successful, the scheme would be part funded by grant from DEFRA. However, it was a complex funding mechanism, which involved the Council incurring costs in preparing the detailed designs to DEFRA's criteria. It was hoped that Dwr Cymru Welsh Water would respond to the Council's concern about the use of Combined Sewer Overflows in the Town although this matter could not be directly incorporated into the proposed Flood Alleviation Scheme.
- In response to a question on 'forecast spending' and increases in future years, the Committee noted that it was a 5-year capital programme and in principle finance did not carry forward. However, the Directorate did undertake half yearly and yearly reviews of the programme.
- That the Bye St conveniences in Ledbury had been completed. However, the out of hours availability was questioned.
- In relation to the apparent low level of spend to date on Capitalised Footways, the Committee were informed that this reflected the programme of highway maintenance, where footways were less weather critical. Also the contract for footway maintenance had not yet been awarded due to the transfer of services to Herefordshire Jarvis Services.
- While no budget appeared for Quiet Lanes, a consultancy report had been received on 2 possible schemes and a report would be submitted to the Cabinet Member (Highways and Transportation) for consideration. The Head of Engineering and Transportation stressed that schemes were likely to cost significantly more than any available funding from the Countryside Agency.
- That expenditure for a number of schemes e.g. Safer Routes to Schools, was shown under various funding headings.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

23. ENVIRONMENT REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING

The Committee were advised of the position of the Environment Programme Area budgets for the period to 31st July, 2003 and were informed of variations against budget at this stage in the year.

The Director of Environment reported that the budget for 2003/04 was £22,098,000 plus a carry forward of £220,000 from 2002/3. Some of the carry forward had been allocated to Decriminalised Parking (£10,000) and Licensing (£10,000) but the largest proportion (£200,000) had been allocated to road maintenance to reflect the priority given to the service and the additional allocation given for this purpose in 2003/4.

The Assistant County Treasurer reported that spending was anticipated to be in line with the present budget. He highlighted that there were three main pressure areas. The Travellers services budget had been overspent in 2002/03. The Waste Collection contract was expected to be overspent because of the recent contract indexing, although this was being offset by improved Trade Waste Income. Car parking, excluding decriminalised parking, was expected to overspend due to the ongoing cost of non-domestic rates. Management action, including possibly virements from other services, would be necessary to contain these pressures.

In the course of discussion the following principal points were made:

- Income from travellers sites had been reduced in the main due to a number of sites being closed following vandalism.
- The Director of Environment commented that the Waste Management strategy was now coming to fruition. A seminar on Waste Management issues would be organised in the next month for Members of the Council. In relation to dog waste, the Committee were informed that there was no specific finance for more dog waste bins. However, it was hoped to tackle this problem as part of the street scene initiative.
- In relation to the New Roads & Street Works Act (NRSWA) it was noted that arrangements were working reasonably well with other agencies to avoid unnecessary street works. The Council was reasonably effective in recovering fines for unreasonably prolonged works on the highway. Plans were progressing to make information on expected road works available on the Internet.
- The Director of Environment briefly updated the Committee in relation to the programme of maintenance to Public Conveniences and commented that the conveniences at Leominster bus station development would be the same style as those at Bye Street, Ledbury.

RESOLVED: That subject to the above comments the Revenue Budget Monitoring report for 2003/04 be noted.

24. BEST VALUE REVIEWS - IMPLEMENTATION OF IMPROVEMENT PLANS

The Committee received a report on the exceptions of the programmed progress on the actions in the improvement plans resulting from the reviews of Development Control, Public Rights of Way, Highway Maintenance and Public Conveniences.

The Director of Environment reported that the exceptions to the programmed actions

had been listed in appendix 1 to the report.

During discussion of the exceptions report the following principal comments were made:

- In relation to Development Control the Head of Planning Services reported that difficulty was being experienced in benchmarking against other authorities as each had different methods of calculating the cost of planning per head of population. While Herefordshire had been fortunate to receive the Planning Delivery Grant, this grant would have the effect of pushing up the cost of services per head of population in Herefordshire.
- In response to questions on Public Rights of Way (PROW) concerning clearing the backlog of Modification Orders inherited from Hereford and Worcester County Council; the level of accessibility to footpaths in the County and the potential implications of the CROW Act, the Committee noted that a draft Strategy on the future delivery of the service was expected to be circulated for consultation. The Committee debated various issues connected with PROW including income derived from tourists using the footpath system. The Committee considered its role in the development of the draft strategy and what type of approach might prove the most constructive.
- In relation to the production of a synopsis of standards in Highways Maintenance the Committee noted that examples had been obtained of publicity issued by other authorities. Having regard to these it was now intended to publish the Herefordshire standards in a leaflet format by the end of 2003.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted and the draft strategy for the future delivery of the Public Rights of Way Service be circulated to members of the Committee prior to a full report being presented to the Committee in November 2003.

25. BEST VALUE REVIEW OF COMMERCIAL ENFORCEMENT - PROGRESS REPORT

The Committee were invited to consider the progress of the Commercial Enforcement Review.

It was reported that the Commercial Enforcement Review Team had concluded that Markets and Fairs did not easily sit within the rest of the services under review and suggested that relevant aspects of Markets and Fairs - the street trading function - be considered as part of the proposed in-depth scrutiny review of property. The report also outlined both the position regarding Street Trading within the review and the need to collect more up to date data. A situation report outlining Commercial Enforcement and the issues it faced was attached to the report at appendix 1.

RESOLVED: That the revised scope of the review of Commercial Enforcement, detailed in the report, be agreed.

26. MONITORING OF 2003/2004 PERFORMANCE INDICATORS - APRIL 2003 TO JULY 2003

Members were updated on progress made by the Environment Directorate for the four months April to July 2003 towards achieving all of the performance indicators/targets which appear in the Council's Performance Plan.

The report of exceptions to the targeted performance was attached to the report at appendix 1.

The Committee debated the performance figures in relation to household waste and composting and noted that future targets would be extremely challenging. It was also noted that it was too early for the effects of kerbside collection to appear in the out-turn figures. The Director briefly reported upon the Waste Contract in relation to Herefordshire and Worcestershire.

RESOLVED: That subject to the comments above the report be noted.

The meeting ended at 12.27 p.m.

CHAIRMAN

