

MINUTES of the meeting of Environment Scrutiny Committee held at Brockington, 35 Hafod Rd, Hereford on Friday, 21st November, 2003 at 10.30 a.m.

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

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

In attendance: Councillors P.J. Edwards (Cabinet Member - Environment),
P.E. Harling and R.M. Wilson (Cabinet Member – Highways and
Transportation).

31. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillor B.F. Ashton.

32. NAMED SUBSTITUTES (IF ANY)

Councillor Mrs. P.A. Andrews substituted for Councillor B.F. Ashton.

33. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

34. MINUTES

The Committee received the minutes of meetings held 26th September, 2003 and 21st October, 2003.

Referring to the minutes of 21st October, the Chairman reported that he had recently received an invitation from the Cabinet Member (Highways and Transportation) for the Committee to undertake a full review of the car parking strategy and he sought the views of the Committee.

The Committee agreed that a Car Parking Strategy Review Panel be formed and that a scoping statement and timetable be produced for consideration at the next meeting. The Committee considered that the Panel should comprise members from both City and Rural areas.

The Chairman invited the Cabinet Member (Highways and Transportation) to give a brief update on the position concerning the revised car parking charges. The Cabinet Member reported upon a number of meetings with Town and Parish Councils. The Chairman reminded Councillors of the importance of communicating important issues with Town and Parish Councils.

RESOLVED:

That

- (a) **subject to recording that apologies were received from Councillor R.M. Wilson (Cabinet Member), at the meeting held on 26th September, the minutes of the meetings held on 26th**

September and 21st October 2003 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman; and

- (b) the Committee accept the invitation by the Cabinet Member (Highways and Transportation) to undertake a full review of the car parking strategy and the Director of Environment produce a scoping statement and timetable for consideration at the next meeting.**

35. HUMAN RESOURCES

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

The Personnel Manager, Well-being, reported upon the absence statistics for the Directorate, which covered the financial period 1st November 2002 to 31st October 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. He commented that overall the Council was still showing a remarkably low number of accidents.

The Committee scrutinised the statistics and noted that the number of accidents and stress related incidents had reduced; training was being planned for front line staff in dealing with physical abuse/assault situations and that regular meetings were taking place between personnel and managers to discuss issues.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

36. 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 Assistant County Treasurer reported that the total Capital Programme for 2003/04, shown in Appendix 1 to the report, totalled £10,719,941. This was an increase of £219,000 from the original budget due to the receipt of a capital grant from WyeSMoves, to fund bus purchases, which would be spent in the financial year. The committed budget for the capitalised assessment and strength of bridges exceeded the original budget by £283,000. The budget from other schemes would be decreased in order to fund this commitment in the next round of capital monitoring. The capital receipt reserve position had become overdrawn by £60,000 as funding relating to the Ross Flood Alleviation scheme had not been approved as expected.

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

- Ross-on-Wye Flood Alleviation - The Head of Engineering and Transportation confirmed that discussions on this scheme were continuing with DEFRA and partner agencies and project funding may be approved in the New Year.
- That traffic calming schemes and Safer Routes to Schools schemes were progressing in accordance with agreed criteria.

- The Director of Environment reported that a number of budgets indicated either a nil or very low spend. This could be due to a number of factors e.g. the contract was unable to progress or that the contract payments were not expected until late in the financial year.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

37. REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING

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

The Assistant County Treasurer reported that generally spending was in line with the budget. However, some budget pressures had been identified and these were described in the report. A budgetary analysis was attached at Appendix 1.

The Committee noted the position outlined by the Director regarding staff vacancies in Building Control. He commented that this seemed to be a national problem and a number of initiatives on a national and local level were being considered.

The Head of Planning Services briefly updated the Committee concerning the functionality of the MVM system. He commented that consideration was being given to the major issue concerning the amount of historical data required to be captured. The upgrading of desktop equipment would need to be addressed. Consideration also needed to be given to the linking of information to the e.gov programme.

RESOLVED: That the Revenue Budget Monitoring report be noted.

38. 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 Conveniences, Public Rights of Way and Highway Maintenance.

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:

- Development Control - In relation to the cost of planning per head of population it was reported that the figures would be compiled once the October time sheets had been processed.
- Public Conveniences - It was reported that a capital bid for the refurbishment programme had been submitted to the Council's Budget Working Panel. The refurbishment of the conveniences at the Bus Station, Leominster were progressing as part of the Bus Station improvement contract.
- Highway Maintenance – the synopsis leaflet of standards in highway maintenance, including basic information on winter gritting, graffiti and street cleansing, was very close to being published.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

39. MONITORING OF 2003/2004 PERFORMANCE INDICATORS - APRIL 2003 TO SEPTEMBER 2003

Members were updated on progress made by the Environment Directorate for the six months April to September 2003 towards achieving all of the performance indicators/targets appearing 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 and noted that regarding penalty charge notices, all except one staffing post had now been filled and the performance had improved.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

40. HEREFORDSHIRE PLAN AMBITIONS - PROGRESS TO DATE

The Committee received a report on progress towards the ambitions of "protecting and improving Herefordshire's distinctive environment" and "developing an integrated transport system for Herefordshire" and were invited to identify how the Council's work might be integrated more effectively with the Herefordshire Plan.

The Director outlined the background to the Plan and emphasised that the work of the Directorate impinged directly or indirectly on many of the ambitions in the Plan, but in particular the two relating to the environment and transport.

In respect to protecting and improving Herefordshire's distinctive environment he reported that an environmental strategy had been produced and an action plan was drawn up annually. The Directorate's activities in relation to this Ambition Group were detailed in the report. Two important issues concerning the Directorate's involvement with the Group were the level of staff resources able to be committed to both meetings of the groups and then perusing actions and projects arising from their Action Plan. The second was making financial resources available to contribute to such actions and projects.

The Committee noted the achievements in relation to the ambitions in the plan, which were also detailed in the report. In response to questions concerning progress to the Rotherwas Access Road and Roman Road schemes, the Head of Engineering and Transportation reported that both schemes had received planning consent and were, subject to government funding, continuing in accordance with expectations.

The Director of Environment reported that half yearly reports would be made to Committee on the Directorate's input to the ambitions in the Plan.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

41. SIX MONTH REPORT ON KERBSIDE COLLECTION OF RECYCLABLE MATERIALS

The Committee received a progress report on the kerbside collection of recyclable materials scheme during the first six months of operation.

The Director of Environment reported that the scheme was based on a bag collection. Seven of the twenty-four rounds in the County were designated for the scheme and involved 50% of properties which were concentrated in the urban areas to provide the greatest return for the lowest outlay. One semi-rural round had been

included incorporating Credenhill. Ross-on-Wye was already served by a popular kerbside scheme operated by a charitable organisation.

The Head of Environmental Health and Trading Standards highlighted the performance to date which needed to be viewed with some caution due to the implementation periods. However, he acknowledged there were variances in the participation rate, with some areas being as low as 15%.

The Committee questioned whether any enforcement methods were available and were informed that Local Authorities across the Country were looking at the issue.

They noted that while higher participation rates were achieved in areas with schemes using rigid containers, the capital costs involved in implementing such schemes were high.

The recycling scheme at Ross-on-Wye were looking to expand and a 'blue box' collection system may be considered if this could be supported by grant funding.

The Director reported that these various issues would need to be looked at before the next contract period.

RESOLVED: That the six-month report on kerbside collections of recyclable materials be noted.

42. REVIEW OF THE PARISH COUNCIL MINOR HIGHWAY MAINTENANCE SCHEME (THE LENGTHSMAN SCHEME)

The Committee were invited to consider the performance of the Parish Council Highway Maintenance Scheme and options for its future development.

The Director of Environment outlined the present 'Lengthsman' scheme, as being to devolve specified minor highway maintenance duties to Parish Councils. As a result of the successful pilot scheme the scheme now needed to be reviewed and a number of considerations were detailed in the report.

The Head of Engineering and Transportation reported that from comparisons with other authorities, Herefordshire funding appeared to be far in excess of comparable schemes. A full list of participating parishes and parish groups was attached to the report at Appendix 1. Details of the 38 councils participating in amenity grass cutting were detailed in Appendix 2.

He reported that discussions with participating parishes and the Herefordshire Association of Local Councils (HALC) had indicated strong support for the scheme to continue. However, if it were to continue the Council needed to consider how best to promote the local 'ownership' of highway maintenance which had proved so effective at raising standards without disproportionate delegation of budgets in ways which might adversely affect the standards of maintenance to non-participating parish councils. In 2003/04 the total cost to the Council was estimated to be £144,450 of which £50,000 had been provided through the one off LPSA pump-priming grant. To maintain the scheme at the current level the £50,000 would need to be replaced from the revenue budget.

A package of measures for the future of the scheme were described in the report, including the possibility of eventually 'capping' funding to parishes. Parishes would be expected to be in a position to precept for the balance or find alternative sources of funding. Further discussions on the suggestions would be undertaken with HALC prior to adoption.

The Committee noted the benefits of local prioritisation of works; the method of payment and monitoring of the works; that to save on administration costs, small parishes could share resources to minimise administration costs and that this partnership between the Council and Parish Councils was working well.

In response to the suggestion that from 2006/07 an indexed linked cost adjustment be applied each year based on the Council's revenue budget variation for highway maintenance, the Committee questioned whether, in view of the effect on budgets, the indexing should be brought forward one year.

RESOLVED: That the Cabinet Member (Highways and Transportation) be advised that the Committee expressed general agreement with the proposals presented in the report for the future development of the scheme.

43. GEM PERFORMANCE

The Committee were invited to consider GEM (Good Environmental Management) Performance issues and developments for the first 6 months of 2003/4.

The Environmental Sustainability Officer reported that a full year surveillance visit to audit the Council's continued adherence to the standards required by ISO 14001 had been undertaken in July. As a result a number of Corrective Action Requests or observations had been made and these specific points would be addressed locally or tackled corporately as appropriate. A summary of progress in relation to the first half of 2003/4 GEM objectives was attached to the report at appendix 1. A half-year report on GEM targets due for completion by October was attached at appendix 2. She reported that during the year the profile of several issues had increased which affected the work of more than one directorate and these were detailed in the report. It was likely that these would feature in the GEM programme for 2004/5. Good GEM links had been established between the Council and the Herefordshire Plan.

The Committee noted that due to the vacancy in the post of Procurement Officer, problems may occur in relation to ensuring that goods and services supplied to the Council complied with environmental standards. It was also noted that following the acquisition of an appropriate software programme, progress was being made to co-ordinate energy management data from the many sites throughout the Council.

In relation to Genetic Modification (GM) the Committee noted that the Cabinet Member (Environment) would be invited to consider whether to review the Council's current position, which did not support the growing of GM commercial crops in the County.

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

44. A STRATEGY FOR THE PUBLIC RIGHTS OF WAY SERVICE IN HEREFORDSHIRE - CONSULTATION

The Committee considered the draft strategy for the Public Rights of Way (PROW) Service.

The Director briefly reported upon the work of the services and expressed some concern regarding the resources available to the service particularly in view of the backlog of work and the implications of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

The Public Rights of Way Manager gave a short presentation on the work of the

PROW Service outlining various current and future issues concerning the budget; maintenance and enforcement; changes and improvements; publicity and promotion and environmental management of the network. He reported that the Best Value Improvement Plan for the service identified the need for the adoption of a comprehensive strategy to guide the future development of the services. A summary of the draft strategy had been attached to the report at Appendix 1. A full copy of the strategy had been previously sent to Committee Members. He further reported that consultation on the strategy would be undertaken with the Local Access Forum for Herefordshire, as the appropriate statutory body.

The Committee appreciated the complex matters involved, particularly in relation to the backlog of diversion and modification orders, many of which dated back to Herefordshire and Worcestershire County Council. In an effort to further understand the issues it was suggested that a seminar for all Members be arranged. The Director of Environment reported that a bid had been made to the Budget working party for resources to start to prioritise and tackle the backlog.

The Committee discussed issues concerning maintenance responsibilities, particularly to stiles and the use by 4x4 vehicles of unclassified roads.

The Committee briefly discussed the draft strategy. In relation to the diagram of the current organisation at 1.4.1 it was suggested that it be augmented by an indication of the proposed organisation.

RESOLVED:**That**

- (a) the draft strategy be noted and Members invited to relay any issues of concern directly to the Cabinet Member (Highways and Transportation) by the end of December 2003;**
- (b) that the Director of Environment arrange a seminar in early 2004 for all Members concerning the work of the PROW section and issues it faced in the future.**

The meeting ended at 1.27 p.m.

CHAIRMAN

