

MINUTES of the meeting of Environment Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, Brockington on Friday, 23rd January, 2004 at 10.00 a.m.

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

Councillors: 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 Mrs. P.A. Andrews, J.W. Edwards, P.J. Edwards, D.J. Fleet, P.E. Harling and R.M. Wilson

45. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies had been submitted on behalf of Councillor B.F. Ashton who subsequently was able to join the meeting, after its commencement, as an observer.

46. NAMED SUBSTITUTES (IF ANY)

Councillor D.J. Fleet substituted for Councillor B.F. Ashton.

47. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

48. MINUTES

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held 21st November, 2003 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

49. HUMAN RESOURCES

The Committee received a report on 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 period 1st December 2002 to 30th November 2003.

The Committee scrutinised the statistics and requested that future reports indicate when exceptional circumstances occurred, i.e. long-term sickness, which may distort the figures.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted and future reports indicate exceptional circumstances affecting the statistics.

50. ENVIRONMENT REVENUE BUDGET MONITORING

The Committee were advised of the position for the Environment Programme area revenue budgets for the period to 30th November 2003 and were informed of variations against budget at this stage of the year.

The Director of Environment reported that the projected outturn for the year was £22,043,000 which was a net underspend of £105,000, virtually all of which related to the Planning Section which had received a Planning Development Grant of £320,000 during the year. He also reported that due to a recent court judgement on new street works charges, income received was now expected to be some £70,000 below budget. The budget monitoring report was attached at Appendix 1.

The Assistant County Treasurer reported that the overall budget for 2003/04 was £22,148,000 as notified to the last meeting which included the carry forward of £220,000 from 2002/03 plus an additional budget transfer of £50,000 in respect of shopmobility.

The Committee debated current workloads, terms and conditions of employment, staff retention and staff training in the Planning Section and noted that efforts were being made to fill a number of current staff vacancies. However, as in a number of professions, recruitment was difficult and the outcome of Job Evaluation would not be known for some time. It was noted that similar issues applied in Environmental Health and Trading Standards.

The Director commented upon the current position regarding Job Evaluation and the possibility of addressing market pressures on staff recruitment.

RESOLVED: that subject to noting the issues concerning staff recruitment and retention the Revenue Budget Monitoring report be noted.

51. CAPITAL BUDGET MONITORING

The Committee were advised of the progress of the 2003/4 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 shown at Appendix 1 to the report was £10,822,9421 which indicated an additional £103,000 for "Completing the Jigsaw" for extra public transport in rural areas. He corrected the report in that the total spent at 31st November was £5.298 million (49%) and at the end of December 2003, 6.1 million had been spent. He emphasised that care needed to be taken to ensure that the programme was fully spent and that no conditional resources were lost, as the flexibility to carry amounts forward into 2004/5 was very limited.

In the course of scrutinising the Capital Programme the Committee noted that in relation to rural footway improvements a number of intended schemes e.g. the scheme at Bodenham, had been rescheduled to next year's programme due to problems with land acquisitions. Other, smaller, quicker schemes had been substituted to maximise the use of available finance.

The Committee noted that a proportion of the initial expenditure for the Ross Flood Alleviation scheme was still expected to be received. Following an environmental study, a planning application was expected to be made in spring 2004. A full scheme would then be presented to DEFRA for their 2005/6 programme. It was noted that if the Alleviation scheme was accepted in the DEFRA programme, the Council would still have to fund a percentage of the scheme.

The Committee debated issues concerning the Urban Bus Challenge and the WyeSMoves community scheme. It was noted that a number of complex provision initiatives were being suggested by government and that the crosscutting Best Value review of transportation was looking at bus provision and scheduling. In response to

questions regarding the usage of subsidised bus routes, the Committee requested a report be presented to include issues relating to the receipt of feedback, monitoring and value for money. In relation to WyeSMoves the Committee noted a differing opinion in the passenger take up numbers, an issue that would be looked at as part of a forthcoming review of the service.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted and a full position report on subsidised bus routes be presented to a future meeting.

52. BEST VALUE REVIEWS - IMPLEMENTATION OF IMPROVEMENT PLANS

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

Exceptions to the programmed actions in the various improvement plans and an assessment of the current potential of the service were detailed in Appendix 1 to the report.

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

- Development Control - The Head of Planning Services updated the Committee on Development Control IT action and reported that computer hardware and software would soon be updated facilitating further improvements to the service. An example of the service integration was the use of the GIS system to assist in tracking the Legionnaires outbreak. Difficulty was being experienced in assessing outsourced Development Control functions as no other similar authorities had so far outsourced these functions, chiefly due to issues concerning democratic involvement in the planning system. The production of a revised Highway Design Guide was imminent.
- Public Rights of Way – A PROW seminar for all members had been scheduled for 25th February, 2004. Concerning the digitising of map information the Head of Engineering and Transportation reported that work was proceeding and historical information would be transferred as necessary.

RESOLVED: that the report be noted.

53. MONITORING OF 2003/2004 PERFORMANCE INDICATORS - APRIL 2003 TO NOVEMBER 2003

Members were updated on progress made by the Environment Directorate for the eight months April to November 2003 towards achieving all of the performance indicators / targets which appeared 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 the following principal points:

- BV82b – following a recommendation on a national television gardening programme the sales of compost from recycled material had, for the time being, increased dramatically.

- BV199 – following the transfer of service to Herefordshire Jarvis Services and changes to monitoring standards, training for carrying out inspections of local street and environment cleanliness had been completed by HJS staff.
- While it was desirable from a traffic management point of view that the number of penalty charge notices issued target should be zero, a realistic target had been used to monitor performance. This target also recognised the cost of the Service.
- BV109a – The Head of Planning Services emphasised that other elements of this Best Value Target were being met. However, he reported that the current shortfall in performance (53% against the target of 60%) related to a small number of major commercial and industrial applications, which by their nature, were more complex and therefore took longer to determine. There was also an issue over the length of time the statutory agencies took to respond to enquiries from the Planning Service. He commented that the method of dealing with major applications was under review.

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

54. REVIEW OF PARKING STRATEGY

The Committee were invited to agree the terms of reference and membership of a review group to review the county-wide car parking strategy.

The Committee debated the terms of reference and questioned the inclusion of the wording suggesting that a net financial contribution to the Engineering and Transportation budget be no less than the existing level. Following further debate it was agreed that it was for the review group to review the whole policy, taking into account its implications on services and budgets, and make its recommendations in the final report. It would then be for the Cabinet Member (Highways and Transportation) to respond to the report.

The Committee agreed that a small group be formed and that it be representative of the different areas of the County.

RESOLVED:

That

- (a) the terms of reference for the Parking Strategy Review Group, as set out in the report, be accepted;**
- (b) the Parking Strategy Review Group comprise of the Chairman, Councillor J.H.R. Goodwin, Councillor J.W. Newman, (Hereford) Councillor K.G. Grumbley (North West), Councillor B.F. Ashton (East) and Councillor Mrs A.E. Gray (South).**
- (c) the review of the Countywide Parking Strategy be completed by October 2004.**

55. HIGHWAY MAINTENANCE

The Committee considered the performance of the Highway Maintenance Service since the completion of the Best Value Inspection Review in 2002.

The Director of Environment reported that in 2002 the Audit Commission had undertaken a Best Value Inspection of the Council's Highway Maintenance Service.

At that time the service was rated fair with uncertain prospects of improvement. A number of recommendations arising from the inspection were detailed in the report. He reported that substantial progress had been made in addressing the identified weaknesses.

The Head of Engineering and Transportation reported that the key measure of progress was the condition of the County's highways. The LPSA target was to achieve a 3% reduction by 2005 in the amount of non-principal road network exceeding national intervention "thresholds". He highlighted that monitoring had been disrupted by changes in the national methodology for undertaking surveys since the target had been set. Therefore it was very difficult to compare performance over the period. However, the performance figures, whilst they needed to be viewed with considerable caution at this stage, did appear to confirm that the condition of the county's non-principal road network was improving, as required to achieve the LPSA target. He outlined the current maintenance strategy and consequent budget implications.

The Committee noted that the government had rejected the Council's Local Transport Plan (LTP) bid for exceptional maintenance funding towards the Roman Road Improvement Scheme. As a result some of the maintenance budget would be diverted to resourcing this scheme in 2004/5 and 2005/6 with resultant constraints for highway maintenance in those years.

Responding to a question regarding the possible declassification of certain trunk roads, the Head of Engineering and Transportation reported that a sum had been negotiated for the maintenance responsibility of the A40 (Ross/Gloucester) to transfer to the Council but no date had been agreed for the transfer. The proposal for detrunking the A465 (Hereford/Abergavenny) had not progressed.

RESOLVED: That the report be noted.

56. ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORK PROGRAMME 2004/5

The Committee considered the work programme for the Committee.

The Director of Environment presented a proposed work programme for the period to the end of March 2005, which indicated the anticipated date when reports would be considered by the Committee.

He reported upon a complaint concerning Polytunnels, which had been considered by the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman had indicated that he would consider a review of the Council's current arrangements as satisfactory settlement of the complaint. The Director therefore recommended that a review of the Code of Practice for the use of Polytunnels in Herefordshire be undertaken as soon as possible and referred to a supplementary report, which had been circulated to the Committee, proposing the establishment of a working group and the terms of reference for the review.

The issue cut across Environment and Social and Economic Development areas of responsibility and the Committee noted that the Director had already obtained the agreement of the Chairman of the Strategic Monitoring Committee that this Committee would take the lead in this review.

The Committee debated the terms of reference and membership of the review group and agreed that the review should include planning and economic representation.

Members commented that a more proactive stance should be taken to the review of

policy issues. Having considered the work programme the following further amendments were proposed:

- a full position report on subsidised bus routes be presented to a future meeting;
- a brief update report on progress of the Parking Strategy Review Group be presented to each meeting with the review to be completed by October 2004.
- Subject to any major exceptions the Human Resources report be presented to alternate meetings;
- On the basis that it was very early in the financial year, the Capital and Revenue budget monitoring reports be deleted from the June 2004 meeting;

RESOLVED:

That

- (a) **subject to the above amendments the work programme be approved and recommended to Strategic Monitoring Committee;**
- (b) **the terms of reference as set out in the report for the Polytunnel Review Working Group be approved;**
- (c) **the membership of the Polytunnel Review Working Group to comprise of Councillors T.W. Hunt as Chairman of the Group, W.L.S. Bowen, G.W. Davis, J.W. Edwards, the Chairmen of the three Area Planning Sub-Committees together with a request that a member of the Social and Economic Development Scrutiny Committee be nominated by the Chairman of that Committee; and**
- (d) **the review of the Code of Practice for the use of Polytunnels in Herefordshire be completed and reported to the April 2004 Committee.**

The meeting ended at 11.35 a.m.

CHAIRMAN