

Environment Select Committee

MINUTES OF THE ENVIRONMENT SELECT COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 19 SEPTEMBER 2023 AT KENNET ROOM - COUNTY HALL, BYTHESEA ROAD, TROWBRIDGE, BA14 8JN.

Present:

Cllr Jerry Kunkler (Chairman), Cllr Bob Jones MBE (Vice-Chairman), Cllr Tony Jackson, Cllr Mel Jacob, Cllr Dr Brian Mathew, Cllr Ian McLennan, Cllr Dr Nick Murry, Cllr Tom Rounds, Cllr Tony Trotman, Cllr Iain Wallis and Cllr Stuart Wheeler

Also Present:

Cllr Nick Botterill, Cllr Paul Oatway (Virtual), Cllr Horace Prickett, Cllr Tamara Reay, Cllr Jonathon Seed (Virtual), Cllr Caroline Thomas (Virtual), Cllr Christopher Williams, Cllr Graham Wright (Virtual)

48 **Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from:

- Councillor Charles McGrath
- Councillor Derek Walters

49 **Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The minutes for the previous meeting held on 25 July 2023 were considered. Following which, it was:

Resolved:

The Committee approved and signed the minutes of the previous meeting held on 25 July 2023 as a true and correct record.

50 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

51 **Chairman's Announcements**

There were no Chairman's announcements.

52 **Public Participation**

There were no questions or statements submitted by Councillor or members of the public.

53 **Highways Term Maintenance Contract - Interim Update**

Councillor Caroline Thomas, Cabinet Member for Transport, Streetscene, and Flooding, alongside Samantha Howell, Director of Highways and Transport, Dave Thomas, Head of Highways Assets & Commissioning, Chris Clark, Head of Local Highways, and Adrian Hampton, Head of Highway Operations, updated the Committee on the Highways Term Maintenance Contract.

It was noted that the report included an update on the Parish Stewards Scheme which commenced on 1 April 2023 with the new contractor, Milestone. Members were informed that the Milestone contract was for a period of 5 years, with an opportunity to extend for a further 5 years subject to the key performance indicators (KPIs) as detailed in the report. National and industry wide challenges were highlighted including limited resources, recruitment difficulties, the cost-of-living crisis, and harsh weather climates deteriorating road conditions at a faster pace than anticipated. Officers were commended for their agility in responding to those challenges alongside the commencement of the new contract with Milestone.

During the discussion, points included:

- Progress on the development of a cloud-based system for Parish Stewards and Parish Council's to record and manage workloads as part of monitoring and improving Parish Steward operations. It was noted that Somerset Council had implemented the system in collaboration with Milestone and although Wiltshire weren't as far along into process, officers were welcoming Milestone's experience in the area and Members were reassured that there was a clear intention to work with Milestone to achieve this.
- Members were informed that officers could pull Parish Steward information off their internal systems to monitor the services being recorded and provided.
- Members cited inconsistencies in the Parish Steward services across the County and officers acknowledged that although the Parish Stewards could be considered ambassadors of Wiltshire Council and held in high regard within their local communities, both officers and Milestone were, at times, slow to respond during the mobilisation period which caused some discontinuity of services. Despite this, officers reassured Members that service consistency and ensuring that interventions were targeted in the right way were a focus. Furthermore, officers were working closely with Milestone on improving communications regarding the Forward Work Program.

- Officers highlighted the rigorous contract management program in place and noted that regular dialogue was had with Parish Councils to gain feedback.
- Officers noted that Wiltshire Council was an evidence led authority and therefore it was essential that data was retrieved, analysed, and understood to help inform decisions and action plans.
- The national shortages in materials were highlighted and it was noted that it was a reflection of the market and officers appreciated that there would be some delays to planned works being completed. However, officers noted that contractors were working hard to resolve those issues.
- Officers explained that given the scale of the network in Wiltshire, certain programs, or specialist activities such as carriageway resurfacing or landscaping, would be conducted by a number of sub-contractors and delivery partners alongside Milestone across the Highways Service.
- Gully clearing and emptying was raised, and Members praised the use of the Karbontech system to update the positions of gullies and record cleanings but highlighted that there were still a number of gullies yet to be cleared and given the proximity to the wet season, Members were concerned as to the surface water flooding implications. Officers acknowledged that a lot of the historic information on the system was not geographically correct and therefore, the Karbontech system would help to rectify these errors. Furthermore, coming into the wet season would mean that officers would be more reactive to any issues, and it was confirmed that the Council were seeking to recruit further gully clearing officers to provide a better service and meet emptying requirements as part of their in-house program.
- Officers noted that as part of their Winter Resilience Program, they were planning for both a wetter and colder winter and therefore, they were focussing on agile resource deployment to undertake preventative work as much as reactive in order to protect and maintain road conditions.
- The inclusion of more sustainable measures into contracts was raised and officers confirmed that the Council's carbon reduction objectives were built into all contracts across the directorate. During the tender submission, contractors were required to demonstrate how these objectives would be addressed which would then form part of their subsequent KPIs.
- Officers noted that it was not feasible to be entirely reliant on electric vehicles (EVs) at present, and therefore more sustainable alternative fuels were being considered to help meet the Council's objectives. As such, officers highlighted that Milestone had implemented the change from diesel to Hydronated Vegetable Oil (HVO) fuel for their plant and vehicles. It was then explained that if Wiltshire Council was to make the same change, it would incur an approximate 20% increase in costs and would also require changes to the fleet vehicles themselves by enlarging the tank sections to allow for the use of HVO fuel.

- Officers reaffirmed that the full reasons for the move from Ringway to Milestone was detailed in a report submitted to Cabinet in October 2022, however officers gave some examples, namely, value for money, service provision, outcomes, and additional requirements such as climate change objectives and social value. It was further confirmed that the procurement process was in line with all requirements.
- Officers confirmed that they were happy to provide further details as to the specific KPIs that formed part of the contract with Milestone, including those around carbon reduction.
- Officers confirmed that the Parish Stewards had been redeployed earlier in 2023 to support pothole repairs.
- Finally, officers thanked Members for feedback and requested that Councillors highlighted any specific local issues to officers who could then address them on a case-by-case basis.

At the conclusion of the discussion, it was:

Resolved:

- a) The Committee noted the contents of the report and the progress being made to establish the new working arrangements with the Milestone Term Maintenance Contract.**
- b) The Committee requested a report on the completion of the first year of the Milestone contract to include key performance indicators including carbon reduction, savings, and outcomes targets.**
- c) The Committee requested an update on the progress with gully clearing in the new year.**

54 **Council's Approach to Tackling Potholes**

Councillor Caroline Thomas, Cabinet Member for Transport, Streetscene, and Flooding, alongside Samantha Howell, Director of Highways and Transport, Dave Thomas, Head of Highways Assets & Commissioning, Chris Clark, Head of Local Highways, and Adrian Hampton, Head of Highway Operations, updated the Committee on Wiltshire Council's approach to tackling potholes.

The significant challenges faced from a weather and resourcing perspective were reiterated and it was stressed that officers had experienced an unprecedented rise in the number of potholes reported. In January 2023 there were over 4,000 potholes reports compared to historic numbers of approximately 700-900. The two ways of identifying potholes were detailed, one of which being the MyWilts app, with officers acknowledging that there was a

level of dissatisfaction with the functionality of the platform. As such, Members were encouraged to continue providing feedback in tandem with continued engagement with the public to help inform any necessary improvements to the app. It was confirmed that Milestone were using their own pothole repairing machine known as the Dragon Patcher, but officers were also exploring other machinery such as JCB Pothole Pro. Dedicated additional investment for pothole repairs had been received and so officers were continuing to review these different repair methodologies and emphasised to Members that no one single approach was an appropriate solution to deliver the desired outcomes. As such, officers were working alongside delivery partners in assessing innovative approaches to achieve these objectives.

During the discussion, points included:

- Issues with MyWilts were raised and Members highlighted the difficulties that members of the public were experiencing when using the app. It was additionally noted that the app would record a case as closed before any repairs had been made and therefore, Members suggested that further signposting or details needed to be provided on information such as the requirements for a defect to receive interventions and how the inspection process worked. Officers informed Members that they were anticipating an update on the progress made in improving the functionality of the platform and confirmed that the team were working hard to integrate MyWilts with the Highway Asset Management System to achieve a higher level of connectivity with and for contractors. Furthermore, officers were committed to addressing the feedback received and were continuing with a communications strategy aimed at helping residents to better understand the process. It was confirmed that alongside proactive inspections of the network, any reported potholes through the app were then inspected by an officer who measured the defect and would ultimately decide on any interventions required and the priority of that defect.
- Members requested that an officer responsible for MyWilts attend a future meeting to present an update on the progress to date.
- JCB Pothole Pro was raised, and it was noted that the machine was too wide to use on the narrower roads across the network. Officers reiterated that no one single methodology would be suitable for Wiltshire, however trials were ongoing, and all approaches were being considered.
- It was confirmed that a number of vehicles were fitted with an automated detection system that recorded the network while driving and allowed officers to compare previous footage and flag new defects. Furthermore, the operative driving the vehicle also had the ability to manually flag defects. Officers were seeking to roll this system out to the wider fleet in the future but noted that further understanding on the full functionality of the system and how best to make use of the data was needed before initiating any further launches.

- Officers highlighted that the additional investment received would allow officers to undertake further preventative measures for more durable repairs to reduce repeat visits and provide the opportunity to explore more sustainable material systems such as reusing tarmac.
- Officers noted that sustainable travel, encouraging alternative modes of transport, and the safety of these active travel routes were a priority, but due to the extensive geography of Wiltshire there were times in which carriageway reinstatement and repairing potholes were more difficult, particularly in the more rural areas of the County.
- Members queried the lack of a Freight Management Plan and noted that road conditions were deteriorating more rapidly due to the increased size of vehicles and road usage in recent years. It was noted that the Local Transport Plan 4, associated with the Wiltshire Council Local Plan, would include a Freight Management Strategy. Furthermore, there was a Freight Management Strategy as part of the Strategic Transport Body which was a collection of Local Authorities that represented the South-West; however, it was confirmed that this would be reviewed and made as robust as possible.

At the conclusion of the discussion, it was:

Resolved:

- a) The Committee noted the contents of the report and the progress and methodologies being pursued to address pothole repairs.**
- b) The Committee requested an update on the development of the MyWilts pothole reporting functionality early in the new year.**
- c) The Committee requested a further update on tackling potholes in September 2024.**

55 **Streetscene and Grounds Maintenance Contract Update**

Councillor Caroline Thomas, Cabinet Member for Transport, Streetscene, and Flooding, alongside Samantha Howell, Director of Highways and Transport, Dave Thomas, Head of Highways Assets & Commissioning, Chris Clark, Head of Local Highways, and Adrian Hampton, Head of Highway Operations, updated the Committee on the Streetscene and Grounds Maintenance contract.

It was explained that the Streetscene and Grounds Maintenance contract operated by Idverde was outcome based, which was a different approach from the past, and was driven by data collection and analysis to inform decisions. Furthermore, it allowed for officers to identify savings through service delegations and a more seasonal and proportional approach to the work undertaken. As a cost saving measure, officers had made the decision to align

with statutory requirements, thus leading to a decreased service delivery in some areas. The importance of having the right infrastructure that was fit for purpose within Wiltshire Council depots was also highlighted.

During the discussion, points included:

- It was highlighted that some areas were experiencing a less frequent service for grass cutting than in the past and that there was a breakdown in communications between Idverde and the public on this topic. Officers noted that the contract was still in the mobilisation period and therefore the level of service expected may be slightly less than as stipulated in the contract. However, the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and annual scoring were reflected within the contract, and these would be reviewed regularly, particularly when considering the opportunity to extend the contract.
- It was noted that the maintenance of rural verges were not the responsibility of Idverde, but instead formed part of the Highways Term Maintenance contract and therefore, Milestone. Officers acknowledged that these verges could provide more opportunities for increasing biodiversity within the County but highlighted that this could lead to concerns over obstruction of highways and visibility across the network.
- Officers explained that they were focusing on biodiversity management and utilising different levels of grass cutting based on the needs of a specific area. However, the challenges of converting urban areas into more biodiverse areas were raised and it was noted that it often led to concerns from members of the public. Yet, officers further noted that additional funding had been received to invest within their communications strategy, and therefore officers were focussing on more targeted and informative communications to those affected residents. Furthermore, it was noted that although Idverde predominantly maintained urban areas, they were contractually obliged to identify a further 5% of land per year to convert to biodiverse areas, thus providing officers with a larger area to review.
- The differences between Wiltshire Council and Town and Parish Council contracts were raised, and it was noted that although the Council maintained a marginal level of control, the majority of the responsibility for managing those contracts lay with the Town and Parish Councils themselves.
- Members were informed that officers worked on a mapping system and that this was monitored and updated through on-site inspections and trackers that formed part of the vehicles within the fleet.
- Finally, officers emphasised that consistency of service across Wiltshire was a priority and encouraged Members and other local stakeholders to highlight any areas of concern for officers to address.

At the conclusion of the discussion, it was:

Resolved:

- a) **The Committee noted the Streetscene and Grounds Maintenance update.**
- b) **The Committee requested an update report in 12 months' time.**

56 **Public Transport Review and Passenger Transport Service Update and Future Developments**

Councillor Caroline Thomas, Cabinet Member for Transport, Streetscene, and Flooding, alongside Samantha Howell, Director of Highways and Transport, Dave Thomas, Head of Highways Assets & Commissioning, Chris Clark, Head of Local Highways, Adrian Hampton, Head of Highway Operations, and Jason Salter, Head of Service Passenger Transport, updated the Committee on the Public Transport Review, passenger transport services, and future developments.

The financial pressures facing the public transport industry were emphasised alongside other strains such as resources and recruitment, the cost-of-living crisis, and fuel price increases; as such, it was a tough and uncertain environment. Despite this, officers reported good working relationships with stakeholders, including bus companies, through the Enhanced Partnership (EP) program as part of the Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP), which helped to resolve issues and develop innovative approaches to help meet national and local objectives. The Local Transport Plan 4 was raised, and it was noted that a draft policy had been penned and officers were in the process of seeking input from residents and providers on any improvements. Finally, the successful launch of Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) Project was highlighted, and officers were commended for their hard work navigating the aforementioned challenging environment.

During the discussion, points included:

- It was noted that the impact of the national £2 fare cap was difficult to assess, however Stagecoach had estimated that it had resulted in an approximate 4-5% increase in patronage. Although the figure seemed low, it was explained that the bus industry ran on narrow margins, therefore it could be considered a relatively significant increase. However, the fare cap was due to rise to £2.50 from 1 November 2023 for 12 months, therefore, in conjunction with the oncoming winter months, officers expected these numbers to plateau.
- It was noted that over recent years, there had been a significant injection of funds into public transport and therefore, officers noted that they had more tools available to help improve patronage moving forward. Furthermore, the BSIP and EP required providers to sign up to a legally binding contract, allowing for Wiltshire Council to have greater influence

and opportunities to make improvements for the travelling public in collaboration with these companies.

- The reliance on private vehicles and changes in travel behaviours post-Covid was highlighted as a difficult challenge to overcome.
- The ease of movement between different modes of transport was raised and officers noted the joint work being undertaken with Great Western Railway to improve integration between bus and rail services. Furthermore, officers were focusing on the better provision of infrastructure such as secure bike parking, noted as being fundamental to the Public Transport Network Review.
- The frequency of buses was noted as a barrier for passengers and Members were concerned that this would impact on the Council's high street regeneration projects. Officers highlighted issues with the European supply chain and driver shortages across the network which had significantly impacted on the ability to continue certain routes to their previous timetable.
- The DRT Project was commended, and Members queried whether it had the scope to include taxis to help support and complement Wiltshire Council's public transport offer. Officers noted that there was an opportunity to facilitate this, however they highlighted the significant demand for the SEND school transport service and the vulnerability of the private taxi market which was struggling with driver shortages. Thus, although officers acknowledged that they were open to exploring alternative modes of travel within the DRT project, their priority was to ensure that any ventures were commercially sustainable for the long term.
- It was confirmed that officers were seeking to expand the DRT Project into further rural areas across the County and the additional investment received from central Government would allow officers to explore these opportunities.
- Car sharing schemes utilised in other Local Authorities were raised, and it was noted that although officers' experience was limited on the topic, they were looking to expand their knowledge by fostering better communications with adjacent Local Authorities to help develop more robust business cases focussing on long term viability.
- The reliability of services and the implications for commuters and other passengers were noted and Members asked what functions were in place to alert passengers of delays and cancellations. Officers noted that they were focusing on service resilience and ensuring consistency of service irrespective of urban or rural regions. As such, large investments had been made in modernising bus related infrastructures such as bus stops, to provide passengers with real-time service information. Furthermore, it was noted that all of the major bus operators were likely to have developed apps for customers to use for this information.
- Members noted that as part of the Local Plan, there were considerable housing developments being built across the County and therefore asked

if the public transport infrastructure needed for these developments had been accounted for. Officers noted that there were clear tests in place to achieve Section 106 contributions which would go back into public transport schemes; for example, were the plans proportionate and related to the development. As such, officers were in the process of securing Section 106 funding where appropriate, and looking to ensure that services were being introduced at the right time into developments.

- It was confirmed that the move to more electric vehicles and the necessary development of subsequent charging infrastructures was a priority for officers, in line with the Council's net-zero carbon emission objectives. Through the EP, officers were ensuring a stable position before moving forward in terms of any infrastructure changes while keeping in mind challenges with grid capacity.

Resolved:

a) The Committee noted the update on public transport in Wiltshire, including the progress being made on the review of the Public Transport Policy.

b) The Committee requested a further update in 12 months' time.

57 **Planning Peer Review Report**

Councillor Nick Botterill, Cabinet Member for Finance, Development Management, and Strategic Planning, alongside Samantha Howell, Director of Highways and Transport, Nic Thomas, Director of Planning, and Pharvis Khansari, Corporate Director – Place, updated the Committee on the Planning Peer Review Report.

It was noted that although the recent years post-Covid had been a relatively difficult time in the Planning Department, it also gave officers the chance to undertake an extensive review of the Council's planning system. As Wiltshire Council could be considered the third largest planning authority in the Country, it was important that the system was as effective and efficient as possible. As such, peer reviews were highlighted as being one of the best methods of independent scrutiny, the result of which had identified areas for improvement that had been grouped into 18 recommendations.

During the discussion, points included:

- Officers stated that they were striving to be one of the best performing councils from a planning perspective and as such, they secured a set of very experienced panel members to undertake such a detailed review. It was highlighted that officers viewed the resulting report in a positive light as it set clear benchmarks for taking the service forward.

- Members highlighted the backlog of application decisions to be made, resourcing issues within the Planning Team, and the number of appeals being submitted, all of which leading to increased pressure on existing staff and their workloads.
- It was noted that the review had highlighted a number of inconsistencies across the service, many of which being significant for the Council, therefore officers were seeking to implement as many of the recommendations as possible.
- It was confirmed that the recommendations would be dealt with as a transformation project over the next 1-2 years, overseen by a Transformation Board, and with dedicated resources to help pave the way for lasting improvements in terms of governance arrangements, planning processes, structures and staffing to deliver a greater level of customer service. It was explained that one of the first tasks for officers to complete would be to pull all the information into a work program which would allow officers to create a timetable based on each recommendation's complexity. As such, it was noted that immediate action had already been taken with regard to officer decision making and the transparency of checks and balances when assessing decisions.
- It was acknowledged that changes to the Committee process was one of the more challenging elements to be considered and Members were concerned that if the Committee structures were changed, it would impact on Councillors' ability to represent their residents and they could lose the benefit of local knowledge when considering applications. Furthermore, Members were concerned as to how far some residents may need to travel if they were to make representations at an Area Planning Committee held far from their homes.
- The current Planning Committee structure was raised, and it was highlighted that some committees cancelled many of their meetings and therefore, it was suggested that a more effective structure could be to have more agenda items per meeting which could lead to a higher level of efficiency.
- Members raised concerns as to any changes to call-in arrangements as they felt that at times, calling in an application to a committee had led to them being improved through changes to conditions and proposals. However, it was noted that the review had found inconsistencies in what applications were being called in across the different committee areas and therefore, the recommendations had been suggested to ensure greater consistency, service delivery efficiency, and best practice throughout the County.
- Members felt that there was, at times, a disconnect between the planning authority and its enforcement mechanisms, as a lot of enforcement measures were retrospective and therefore a more robust system was needed to ensure that conditions placed on developments were being adhered to. However, officers noted the resourcing pressures experienced in the Enforcement Team due to the scale of complaints

raised alongside the number of conditions and permissions to enforce, and therefore the review recommended that Enforcement Officers worked on a priority system.

- It was agreed that the Committee would be updated at various stages of the process to ensure the appropriate level of scrutiny throughout the project.
- All officers involved in bringing the peer process through to the reporting stage were thanked for their hard work on assisting with the review alongside their usual workload.

At the conclusion of the discussion, it was:

Resolved:

- a) The Committee noted the findings of the Peer Review, recognising the challenges that the service faces in order to create one of the best performing planning services in the Country.**
- b) The Committee noted the initial officer response to the recommendations and the efforts of officer in supporting the Peer Review process.**
- c) The Committee requested that it receives updates on the process at timings to be agreed.**

Councillor Bob Jones MBE departed from the meeting at 12.45pm.

Councillor Tony Jackson departed from the meeting at 12.50pm.

58 Updates From Task Groups and Representatives on Programme Boards

Councillor Jonathon Seed, Chairman of the Housing Allocations Policy Task Group, presented an update on the Task Group since 25 July 2023.

The recent activities of the Task Group were detailed, namely:

- A meeting held on 31 August 2023 focusing on local connection and banding. John Walker, Service Manager – Housing Solutions, raised an issue on behalf of Councillor Jane Davies, Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care, SEND, and Inclusion, regarding people with learning disabilities on the housing register who wanted to share tenancies.
- During the same meeting, the Task Group looked at current local connect and banding criteria and considered whether the number of bands could be reduced, how the residency and employment criteria could be rethought, and whether the number of criteria exclusions could be reconsidered.

Members were informed that a number of questions seeking clarification on the impact of any potential changes were posed to Housing Officers who confirmed that they would bring answers for discussion during the next meeting of the Task Group on 28 September 2023. The areas for consideration at that meeting were then detailed and it was confirmed that Nicole Smith, Head of Housing, would also be in attendance. Furthermore, Members were informed that during the meeting scheduled for 18 October 2023, the Task Group would be reviewing and agreeing its draft final report.

Councillor Graham Wright, Chairman of the Climate Emergency Task Group, was then introduced and noted that as the Task Group had not met since the last meeting of the Committee, there were no specific updates to be presented.

After which, it was:

Resolved:

The Committee noted the update on the Task Group activity provided.

Councillor Stuart Wheeler departed from the meeting at 1.10pm.

59 **Forward Work Programme**

The Committee received the Forward Work Programme for consideration.

Councillor Nick Murry asked if the Local Transport Plan was to be included and it was confirmed that although the plan was still in the early stages of development, the Climate Emergency Task Group were intending on undertaking a review of the document, and therefore it would be added to the Forward Work Programme in due course.

Following which, it was:

Resolved:

The Committee approved the Forward Work Programme.

60 **Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items.

61 **Date of Next Meeting**

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 7 November 2023.

(Duration of meeting: 10.30 am - 1.15 pm)

The Officer who has produced these minutes is Ellen Ghey - Democratic Services
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