

Environment Select Committee

MINUTES OF THE ENVIRONMENT SELECT COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 11 JANUARY 2024 AT KENNET ROOM - COUNTY HALL, BYTHESEA ROAD, TROWBRIDGE, BA14 8JN.

Present:

Cllr Jerry Kunkler (Chairman), Cllr Tony Jackson, Cllr Mel Jacob, Cllr Dr Brian Mathew, Cllr Ian McLennan, Cllr Dr Nick Murry, Cllr Tom Rounds, Cllr Iain Wallis, Cllr Derek Walters, and Cllr Stewart Palmen (Substitute)

Also Present:

Cllr Nick Botterill (Virtual), Cllr Richard Budden, Cllr Nick Holder, Cllr Johnny Kidney (Virtual), Cllr Tamara Reay, Cllr Jonathon Seed (Virtual), Cllr Caroline Thomas (Virtual), Cllr Graham Wright, and Cllr Robert Yuill

1 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from:

- Councillor Charles McGrath

It was further noted that Councillor Stewart Palmen was substituting for the vacancy from the Liberal Democrat Party.

2 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 7 November 2023 were considered. Following which, it was:

Resolved:

The Committee approved and signed the minutes of the previous meeting held on 7 November 2023 as a true and correct record.

3 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4 **Chairman's Announcements**

The Chairman paid tribute to Councillor Tony Trotman and Councillor Bob Jones MBE who had both sadly passed away since the last meeting of the Committee.

Councillor Tony Trotman was a Member for Wiltshire County Council and North Wiltshire District Council, and had represented Calne, Chilvester, and Abberd on Wiltshire Council since 2009. He had rejoined the Environment Select Committee in March 2023.

Councillor Bob Jones MBE had been the Vice-Chairman of the Environment Select Committee since 2017 and had represented Cricklade and Latton since 2013.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chairman sent condolences to both Cllr Trotman and Jones' families and friends.

5 **Public Participation**

There were no statements or questions submitted.

6 **Speed Limit Assessments**

Councillor Caroline Thomas, Cabinet Member for Transport, Street Scene, and Flooding, alongside Samantha Howell, Director of Highways and Transport, presented a verbal update regarding speed limit assessments as a result of a referral from the Overview & Scrutiny Management Committee meeting held on 15 November 2023.

It was noted that officers along with the Cllr Thomas, had been reviewing speed limit assessments with regard to the gap between public perception and public understanding of the process. Within this review, speed limit assessment reports had been compared with the Department of Transport (DfT) guidelines on a wider basis which had identified areas of improvement.

Officers emphasised that road safety was a priority within Wiltshire Council and the speed limit assessment process was one of the tools available under the Wiltshire and Swindon Road Safety Partnership to ensure that any incidents on the network were reducing. Reference was made to the DfT Circular 01/2006 which the Council adhered to from 2009, however it was highlighted that this was superseded in 2013, and Wiltshire Council had endorsed the subsequent DfT approach for setting local speed limits since. One of the key changes of the most recent guidance was the ability to consider introducing 20 mph speed limits and zones in urban areas, therefore officers had evaluated all A and B roads within Wiltshire to determine appropriate speed restrictions and to ensure consistency across the network.

Officers confirmed that the relevant policies were all regularly reviewed, and it was highlighted that out of the 47 speed limit requests received in 2023, 25 had resulted in a change to the speed limit and 12 had not being recommended for a variety of reasons. Further recent changes were noted as including greater weight being paid to local concerns and improving report templates to highlight where these had been considered. Officers had also focussed on improving engagement with residents, and colleagues with Wiltshire Police in circumstances where there was a choice of appropriate speed limits, but where officers felt that drivers would not respect a speed limit reduction. Furthermore, officers had received assurance from Wiltshire Police as to their ability to enforce any implemented reductions, and it was highlighted that they were also statutory consultees when undertaking Traffic Regulation Orders.

Finally, officers noted that there were a number of ongoing pilot initiatives, and that the Council was in a better position with partners at National Highways in terms of assessing data relating to the strategic road network. It was stated that officers were intending to provide an update to the Committee in September 2024 with a set of recommendations.

During the discussion, points included:

- Members expressed concerns when considering vulnerable road users such as children walking to school, active travel routes, and increased traffic passing through village communities, and queried how much consideration was given to these aspects when undertaking any assessments. In response, it was highlighted that it was key that officers worked with schools through the travel planning process but noted that wider solutions would also be taken into account. Officers also explained that Atkins were responsible for part of the process and that it was ultimately officers who made the evidence-led recommendations on speed limit assessments. Therefore, it was emphasised that officers were looking to increase the robustness of the process by improving education, engineering solutions, and undertaking appropriate enforcements where necessary.
- Community perception in the system was raised and it was noted that Members did not feel as if the current process addressed the dissatisfaction in the system's delivery and risks that large communities in Wiltshire perceived. Furthermore, Members noted that the engagement and relationship between officers, Local Highway and Footway Improvement Groups (LHFIGs), Parish Councils and residents needed to improve. Officers reiterated that bettering communications and engagement with residents was a key priority within the review.
- Disparity between different neighbouring authorities' approaches and interpretations of the guidance was noted and officers confirmed that as part of the review, there were ongoing discussions between the relevant authorities' officers to ensure greater consistency and improvements across the network.

- Members suggested that further deterrents could be utilised when combating motorists who did not adhere to speed limits.
- Officers highlighted that the Council was moving to a Safer Systems approach which comprised of 5 pillars of action around road safety with the speed limit assessments forming a part of the process. Furthermore, pilot schemes were being introduced which would enable officers to gather further evidence and understanding of the actions needed to promote road safety.
- Cllr Thomas highlighted that she was confident in the officers' ability to undertake a rigorous review and to develop appropriate ways forward.
- Finally, Members suggested that a Task Group be formed to assist with, and scrutinise, the review process.

At the end of the discussion, it was then:

Resolved:

- 1) The Committee noted the update.**
- 2) The Committee agreed to set up a Task Group to look at Speed Limit Assessments.**

7 Public Transport Review

Councillor Caroline Thomas, Cabinet Member for Transport, Street Scene, and Flooding, alongside Samantha Howell, Director of Highways and Transport, and Jason Salter, Head of Service Passenger Transport, updated the Committee on the outcomes of the public consultation that took place between October and November 2023 on the draft revised Public Transport Policy.

It was explained that the consultation focussed specifically on Wiltshire's Bus Policy and the supported bus network due to the changes in travel patterns post Covid. The list of policies being consulted on were detailed in Paragraph 6 of Appendix 1 and it was noted that there was more of a focus on decarbonisation, which when combined with emerging transport technologies, could lead to advantages that could be tied into the procurement of services in the future.

Officers explained that review was a rigorous process that included data analysis through the creation of a modelling tool to assist with the assessment of investment priorities for supportive services, and stakeholder analysis centring on bus companies and other transport groups, which in turn, led to the refinement of the draft policies. It was highlighted that the industry was operating within severe financial constraints such as wage increases, fuel prices, driver shortages, and reduced patronage. As such, notwithstanding the benefits of recent enhancements in funding, it was important that the relevant Council policies supported and facilitated bus services in the face of those pressures. Therefore, it was a priority to maintain bus services to the highest

level and consider shifting from traditional deliveries of bus services to increase vital patronage, support residents, and assist in achieving the Council's environmental objectives.

It was noted that there had been more responses than previous consultations and officers felt that there was a good representation of Wiltshire's bus users from frequent to less frequent patrons, with the majority supportive of the main policy objectives. Officers highlighted that if the policy was adopted in the February meeting of Cabinet, a network review would be implemented to reflect the revised policy. Finally, officers noted that they were looking to expand Wiltshire's Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) services using funding received through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

During the discussion, points included:

- DRT was raised and Members suggested utilising other vehicle options such as taxis, private and community vehicles. Members also commended officers on their hard work in the introduction and management of the scheme, but it was emphasised that DRT should be used to complement rather than replace traditional bus services.
- Paragraph 3.4 of the report was referenced, and Members acknowledged the reasonings detailed, but felt that DRT in particular was a good piece of policy that added community and social value. Members then asked how officers were ensuring that the wider community of Wiltshire understood the different schemes in place. Officers noted that the feedback was useful in determining where improvements could be made, but also highlighted that there had been a very positive response for DRT in the relevant areas that were benefitting from the initiative.
- Members asked what approach officers were taking in respect of encouraging residents to use public transport. Officers explained that the publicised Bus Service Improvement Plan contained these communication strategies alongside annual marketing plans for public transport, and joint campaigns with bus operators. The Enhanced Partnership mechanism was highlighted, and officers noted that this helped to better understand travel habits and passenger numbers.
- The notion of making public transport the default option for residents was explored with Members noting the importance of increased frequency and quality of services and giving people real and accessible travel choices. It was highlighted that additional funding had been received, a good proportion of which would be used to increase service frequency with those particular services being heavily marketed. Officers raised that the cost implications for introducing new routes or services into a network were significant, therefore it was important to continue supporting existing services.
- Officers explained that the Public Transport Network Review sat under the umbrella of the Local Transport Plan and agreed with Members that having a combination of measures to meet the Wiltshire Council

Business Plan objectives was imperative. Furthermore, it was noted that local cycling, walking, and infrastructure plans were being developed for certain areas within the County with the support of funding secured through Active Travel England which would also tie into the Public Health agenda.

- Members raised electrification of transport and it was confirmed that officers had put in bids for a number of Government schemes including the Zero Emission Bus Regional Areas (ZEBRA) scheme which if secured, would be used towards introducing more electric buses into Salisbury. It was further explained that other operators were still in the process of experimenting with electrification and/or alternative fuels, therefore officers would provide an update for the Committee once more information was received. It was suggested that the Climate Emergency Task Group be involved in any further conversations and/or plans on the subject.
- Officers emphasised that the heart of the Public Transport Network Review was understanding that one approach did not work across Wiltshire given its geographical differences. As such, it was noted that the Enhanced Partnership enabled officers to have effective conversations between operators in different areas to ensure that value for money was delivered alongside successful customer experiences and ensuring the right interventions in the right locations. Accordingly, officers noted that there was scope to consider initiatives such as super bus corridors, frequency increases, using smaller and alternative vehicles, connecting with partners who deliver community links, and more on demand services.
- Members queried if further school transport centric services could be introduced to support the safety of children and reduce traffic congestion around schools. Officers acknowledged the benefits of such schemes but explained that although the Department for Education (DfE) legislative framework allowed for some discretion, the cost implications for these models were extensive.
- Members noted the national driver shortages and were concerned as to the impact of such on the Council's ambitions. Officers confirmed that the wage gap had significantly closed from that of three years ago, which had helped the situation, however it was a national concern and further work was being undertaken to combat the issue.
- Officers were thanked for their presentation and commended for their hard work in supporting rural communities, and older and vulnerable residents who rely on bus services.

At the conclusion of the discussion, it was:

Resolved:

The Committee noted the contents of the report.

8 **Executive Response to the Report from the Housing Allocations Policy Task Group**

Councillor Nick Holder, Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change introduced the item on behalf of Councillor Phil Alford, Cabinet Member for Housing, Strategic Assets, and Asset Transfer. Nicole Smith, Head of Housing Migration and Resettlement, alongside Emma Legg, Director of Adult Social Care, James Barraah, Director of Assets, and Councillor Jonathon Seed, Chairman of the Housing Allocations Policy Task Group, were also in attendance to present the executive response to the final report of the Housing Allocations Policy Task Group.

The Task Group were thanked for their assistance and hard work in reviewing the Housing Allocations Policy and for their thorough and robust recommendations as detailed within their final report. Officers confirmed that each of the core recommendations had been accepted and that they would be used to support the development of any formal consultations and future Cabinet and Full Council reports.

Cllr Seed, as the Chairman of the Task Group, along with other present Task Group Members, highlighted the benefits of having a varied Membership and felt that it was a well-coordinated exercise between officers and Members with a good outcome which they believed reflected the quality of the process.

There being no questions or comments, it was then:

Resolved:

The Committee noted the Executive response to the final report from the Housing Allocations Policy Task Group.

9 **Wiltshire Council Housing Board Annual Report**

Councillor Nick Holder, Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change introduced the item on behalf of Councillor Phil Alford, Cabinet Member for Housing, Strategic Assets, and Asset Transfer. James Barraah, Director of Assets, alongside Nick Darbyshire, Head of Strategic Assets & FM, and Mike Dawson, Head of Estate and Development, presented a report updating the Committee regarding the activities of Wiltshire Council's Housing Board (WCHB) between October 2022 and November 2023.

The background and brief overview of the report was detailed including a breakdown of the Membership of the Board, meeting activity, attendance, and reflections, achievements, and thoughts regarding future priorities for the upcoming year. It was confirmed that the report was also circulated to tenants and lease holders which contained specific examples of the work undertaken within the service.

The Council House Build Programme was highlighted, and Members were reassured that it was progressing well despite considerable financial pressures as a result of challenges such as increased build costs to meet higher environmental standards, inflation increases, and fluctuating labour costs. Consequently, it was noted that these financial strains had impacted on the Council's Business Plan as the initial scoping of the programme cost had increased significantly. As such, officers were working hard to devise solutions to alleviate that substantial expenditure over the life of the Business Plan.

Paragraph 13b of the report was referenced and it was explained that the results of the Regulator of Social Housing's Tenant Satisfaction Measures (TSM) survey had shown that service satisfaction had extensively declined across a range of indicators. As such, Members were reassured that an improvement action plan had been developed to address the areas of concern and increase tenant satisfaction levels. However, it was highlighted that the wider social housing sector had seen a similar decline of 5% across those measures. Furthermore, it was explained that Board Members had discussed in detail budget and rent setting activities and the impacts on individuals when balancing cost of living pressures on tenants and rent affordability with the financial viability of the service.

Finally, officers explained that from April 2024 the service would be subject to a renewed regulatory focus with greater scrutiny and as such, there was a lot of work being undertaken by officers to bolster all governance and assurance processes. Further priorities were highlighted as reviewing the policy framework which was an important foundation stone to the service, and maximising opportunities for resident involvement and engagement in different levels of decision making.

During the discussion, points included:

- The two properties that had been fitted with an air source heat pump and infrared panels respectively were raised, and Members asked for an update on the progress of the project. Officers highlighted that it was still too early to come to any conclusions, however it was confirmed that officers were receiving a lot of data that would be analysed and brought back to the Committee in due course. The importance of maintaining a good dialogue with those tenants was emphasised, as achieving a general understanding of their lifestyles and behaviours was paramount to any subsequent results and confirming baseline figures. Officers also highlighted the current climate with regard to energy prices and noted that it was difficult to make comparisons between properties during this time.
- Members requested a breakdown of the types of housing being built or purchased. In response, officers confirmed that Phases 3.1 to 3.5 of the Build Programme included 479 units of which 130 were 1 bed dwellings (27.14%), 220 were 2 bed (45.96%), 96 were 3 bed (20.04%), 22 were 4 bed (4.59%), and 1 was 5 bed (0.21%).

- Ground source heat pumps were discussed with officers explaining that a relatively substantial plot per house was needed to generate enough heat from the ground, therefore it was larger houses rather than the standard houses within the Council's portfolio that would usually utilise such methods. However, it was noted that officers would continue to consider installing them as technology and environmental requirements evolved. Furthermore, it was confirmed that the Climate Team had launched a project looking at district heating and heat networks to assess its viability in respect of housing need.
- The target of 1,000 affordable homes being delivered by 2026 was highlighted and Members asked for a progress update alongside more details on how many homes out of that 1,000 were planned to be modular. Officers confirmed that approximately 103 had been delivered to date with approximately 550 in the pipeline ready for completion. Furthermore, there were 19 units across 3 sites that were modular and in construction. Officers explained that there were frameworks used to deliver modular homes and that officers in tandem with the existing provider, Rollalong, would work together to discuss where and when modular homes could be manufactured and if not, what other options would be more appropriate. It was further explained that there was a broad spectrum of delivery methods with the cost of those per unit varying significantly, therefore officers would compare each method of construction in terms of value for money, affordability, and national requirements, while bearing in mind the ability to deliver the scale of the programme. As such, it was highlighted that there was no best fit solution, and all appropriate methods would be assessed.

At the conclusion of the discussion, it was:

Resolved:

The Committee noted the annual report.

10 **Updates from Task Groups and Representatives on Programme Boards**

Councillor Graham Wright, Chairman of the Climate Emergency Task Group, presented an update on the Task Group since 11 November 2023.

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

- A meeting held on 28 November 2023 where the Task Group's Forward Work Plan was considered alongside the following:
 - Air quality, monitoring, and action planning.
 - The Local Transport Plan, with a particular focus upon bus travel and the use of alternative fuels in public transport.

- Carbon audits and their wider application, particularly within small businesses.
- Engagement with the wider community.

Appendix 1, the Forward Work Plan, was briefly detailed and it was noted that the Task Group were meeting with See Through Carbon on 16 January 2024, with the other meetings being held throughout early 2024. As such, Members were reassured that a further report detailing these meetings would be brought to the next meeting of the Committee.

The Members of the Task Group and Simon Bennett, Senior Scrutiny Officer, were thanked for their hard work.

Following which, it was:

Resolved:

- 1) The Committee noted the update on the Task Group activity provided.**
- 2) The Committee noted the Climate Emergency Task Group's Forward Work Plan in Appendix 1.**

11 Forward Work Programme

The Committee received the Forward Work Programme for consideration.

There being no questions or comments, it was:

Resolved:

The Committee approved the Forward Work Programme.

12 Urgent Items

There were no urgent items.

13 Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 6 March 2024.

(Duration of meeting: 10.30 am - 12.10 pm)

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