

Environment Select Committee

MINUTES OF THE ENVIRONMENT SELECT COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 7 NOVEMBER 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 Dr Brian Mathew, Cllr Ian McLennan, Cllr Tom Rounds, Cllr Tony Trotman, Cllr Iain Wallis, Cllr Derek Walters, Cllr Stuart Wheeler, and Cllr Stewart Palmen (Substitute)

Also Present:

Cllr Phil Alford, Cllr Nick Holder, Cllr Tamara Reay, Cllr Jonathon Seed, and Cllr Graham Wright (Virtual)

62 **Apologies**

Apologies for absence from Members were received from:

- Councillor Charles McGrath
- Councillor Mel Jacob, who was substituted by Councillor Stewart Palmen

Further apologies were noted from Councillor Caroline Thomas, Cabinet Member for Transport, Street Scene, and Flooding.

63 **Minutes of the Previous Meeting**

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 19 September 2023 were considered. Following which, it was:

Resolved:

The Committee approved and signed the minutes of the previous meeting held on 19 September 2023 as a true and correct record.

64 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

65 **Chairman's Announcements**

There were no Chairman's announcements.

66 **Public Participation**

There were no statements or questions submitted.

67 **Fleet Strategy 2023-2030**

Adrian Hampton, Head of Highways Operations, alongside Samantha Howell, Director of Highways and Transport, updated the Committee on the Fleet Strategy 2023 – 2030.

It was noted that the Fleet Strategy was based upon the Council's pledge to deliver carbon neutrality by 2030, and detailed how the Council would use, run, manage, and optimise the fleet vehicles owned or leased by the Council. The new strategy priorities were then listed as per the slides within the Agenda Pack.

It was then explained that officers were intending on moving to the electrification of vehicles where possible as it was felt that this was the best and most cost-effective way to deliver the Council's carbon neutral objectives. Despite this, it was explained that other alternative fuels such as Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil (HVO) had to be used and considered to ensure business continuity across services such as road gritters, while the infrastructure to support increased electrification across the network advanced. As such, it was highlighted that it was crucial that the Fleet Strategy directly interlinked with the Depot Strategy.

It was further noted that as the majority of vehicles were not fit for purpose, there would be challenges and costs involved, and therefore additional funding would be needed to deliver against both the Council's financial requirements and carbon neutral pledge. As such, officers explained that there was funding allocated until 2025, with further growth and capital bids being made for future years, all of which would be developed in tandem with the Finance Team.

Further data and performance driven decisions were detailed including using telematics in vehicles, dash-cams to monitor route efficiencies, and reducing the number of vehicles, all of which would provide further data to support officers in deciding where the maximum benefits lay, and to maximise the use of storage space. Members were then informed that a three-year review into how services should be delivered was in process, which was being undertaken with the support of the Energy Saving Trust. During this review, it was noted that if more innovative methods came into effect and/or further opportunities for cost savings or increased efficiency was identified, they would be duly considered, and the strategy could be updated accordingly.

Finally, the table within the report was explained in detail for Members.

During the discussion, points included:

- The possibility of using methane to power vehicles akin to other Local Authorities in the Country. Officers assured Members that it had and

would continue to be considered, with the decision to use a combination of electric vehicles (EVs) and HVO as an alternative fuel arising from a review carried out 3 years ago by the Council alongside the Energy Saving Trust. It was highlighted that the vast majority of waste collection, highways, and streetscene vehicles were operated by the Council's contractors and therefore, further conversations were needed with these departments and companies to discuss alternatives.

- Members queried the decision to reduce the baseline number of vehicles when considering the possibility that waste collection vehicle numbers could increase pending a decision from the Government to consider including food waste into the existing waste collection regime. It was emphasised that waste collection vehicles were subject to a separate review, currently being undertaken in the Waste Management department and as such, were not included within the Fleet Strategy. However, these vehicles were recognised in respect of their carbon output and achieving carbon neutrality by 2030.
- The launch of the Demand Responsive Transport Project was raised, and officers reiterated that the current infrastructure system was insufficient to support moving these vehicles to EVs due to the range of travel needed.
- Despite the number of vehicles reducing across the fleet, it was explained that it would not create any landscape that could be built into cost savings. It was further explained that as officers were anticipating the number of waste collection vehicles increasing, these space savings would be mitigated by said increase due to the size of those vehicles. However, it was reiterated that both the Fleet and Depot Strategies would be interlinked and as such, officers would be considering how best to manage those depots in order to maximise the spaces available.
- It was highlighted that both the Highways and Streetscene contractors had been tendered and carbon neutrality requirements had been built into both contracts. Therefore, although those vehicles would sit outside of the remit of the Fleet Strategy, their carbon output had been recognised when considering how to meet the Council's carbon neutrality pledge.
- It was confirmed that 90 EVs and charging points would be delivered by the end of the financial year. In response to a question with regard to the intention to increase the amount of EVs across the fleet, officers emphasised that business continuity and resilience was a priority and as such, it was not feasible to be entirely reliant on EVs at present, hence the need to continue considering more sustainable alternative fuels. Furthermore, although officers could not guarantee the electrification of all vehicles by 2030, they stated that the Fleet Strategy would deliver carbon neutrality alongside those vehicles within other directorates. It was acknowledged that once the provision of funding was secured, the infrastructure system could be improved which when taken in tandem

with the Depot Strategy, would allow officers to consider delivering more EVs.

- It was explained that to ensure resilience within the gritting services across the network, the Council provided the vehicles and salt for Milestone staff members to deliver the service which was noted as being as competitive as other commercial operators.
- Finally, officers were thanked for their presentation and hard work in developing the strategy.

At the conclusion of the discussion, it was:

Resolved:

- 1) The Committee noted the briefing.**
- 2) The Committee requested that an update on the delivery of the Strategy be brought to the Committee in 12 months' time.**

68 Wiltshire Housing Development Partnership

Councillor Phil Alford, Cabinet Member for Housing, Strategic Assets and Asset Transfer, alongside Richard Walters, Head of Service – Major Projects, and Claire Moore, Housing Enabling Lead, updated the Committee on the Wiltshire Housing Development Partnership.

An introduction to the Partnership was given, where it was explained that it acted as a forum for the Housing Enabling Team and various Registered Providers of Affordable Housing (RPs) to discuss shared practices, ways to overcome challenges, and how to achieve the delivery of an average of 650 affordable houses per year. Officers noted that in 2022/23, 643 Affordable Homes were delivered in Wiltshire, with only 235 homes delivered by the end of Q2 2023/24, showing a marked decrease in delivery and presenting a challenge in achieving the average annual target.

It was explained that the Partnership worked together to ensure that the delivery of Affordable Housing met demonstratable need within Wiltshire. As such, the two main tenures delivered at present were Affordable Rented Housing allocated to households on Wiltshire's Housing Register, and Shared Ownership Housing sold to eligible households with a household income of less than £80,000. It was noted that it was still to be determined which rented tenure officers would be encouraging until the Local Plan was finalised, although when considering both the Local Housing Needs Assessment and Viability Assessments of relevant policies, officers were anticipating a move towards more social rented houses rather than Affordable Housing.

Officers noted that soon Affordable Housing provision would include an element of First Homes as required by a change in Government Policy. It was also

highlighted that officers had noticed a trend in which RPs were moving towards more land-led schemes as it allowed for greater control over the delivery and quality of Affordable Homes.

It was explained that by adopting a more formal approach to selecting RPs, the Housing Enabling Team could ensure that the right partners were chosen to assist in focusing on the Council's key priorities. Partnership meetings were held quarterly, were well attended by senior RP management, and ran more focussed sessions in which certain Council teams attended, such as the Climate Team.

Finally, officers felt confident that subject to the continued commitment of the Council and RPs, the Partnership offered the potential to continue assisting the Council in working towards its key priorities and meeting the housing needs of Wiltshire residents.

During the discussion, points included:

- The definition of Affordable Housing.
- The number of houses being disposed of by RPs per year and if those figures were being monitored by officers. In response, it was explained that officers only monitored those houses being disposed of by the Council as monitoring those by RPs was the responsibility of the Regulator of Social Housing. However, officers noted that they could retrieve and provide the data for Members outside of the meeting.
- It was noted that officers were seeing that developers were experiencing significant amounts of stock and as such, were looking to sell properties to RPs to be used as Affordable Homes outside of Section 106 (S106) agreements. Therefore, in addition to those S106 properties already agreed, officers were anticipating a rise in the number of Affordable Homes across the County.
- Members sought clarification on Paragraph 9, bullet-point 3. Officers explained although the S106 units were provided by developers, they were continuing to encourage RPs and others to achieve EPC (Energy Performance Certificate) A and B ratings for those homes. However, it was emphasised that any energy efficiency measures could only go at the same pace that Government changes and regulations came into effect. Despite this, officers highlighted that with any Council stock, existing homes were being retrofitted to EPC standards and any later land-led schemes were being developed in line with zero carbon standards. Furthermore, it was reiterated that the Partnership was an effective forum for joint problem solving, to exchange ideas, encourage improvements, and share best practices in order to deliver better quality homes and higher environmental standards.
- Although officers emphasised that it was a priority to support tenants with regard to rising utility bills. However, it was highlighted that retrofitting came with high costs and the necessity to undertake any works during the void process led to subsequent impacts on business plans, extended

void periods, a reduction in the ability to allocate people to homes, and a reduction in the amount of rent payments.

- It was highlighted that the standards on EPC engineering had not changed since they were set 22 years ago.
- In respect of any submitted planning applications, officers confirmed that they engaged with developers from pre-application stages onwards and could therefore ensure that those developments provided an adequate housing mix that met the demonstrable need with regard to considerations such as unit sizes and adaptable units.
- It was further confirmed that a large part of the Wiltshire Council House Build Programme to date had been through the acquisition of properties as able, alongside the increase of land-led schemes through the HRA (Housing Revenue Account) by purchasing S106 properties. However, it was explained that although S106 properties were generally cheaper, they were negotiated on an affordable rent basis which then impacted on the wider business plans.
- The role of the Stone Circle Housing Company's programme was explained, and Members were encouraged to attend shareholder meetings if they had any specific questions.
- With regard to any data in relation to void properties, Members were informed that it was not within the remit of the Partnership, and any questions should therefore be directed to the Allocations Team.
- It was explained that Affordable Housing could not be achieved in all schemes, therefore the Local Housing Needs Assessment would consider proposed schemes in line with the finalised Local Plan.
- Members were informed that although Shared Ownership sales had slowed down, they were still a popular option as it provided a choice with regard to which level buyers could purchase a home at. Furthermore, it was noted that the Local Plan would not include as many Shared Ownership homes due to the introduction of the Government's First Homes Scheme and therefore, the split between Shared Equity, Affordable, and Social Rented Homes would vary on a site-by-site basis.
- Finally, officers were thanked for their presentation and time.

At the conclusion of the discussion, it was:

Resolved:

- 1) The Committee noted the contents of the report.**
- 2) The Committee requested that an update on the Partnership be brought to the Committee in 12 months' time.**

Report from the Housing Allocations Policy Task Group

Councillor Jonathon Seed, Chairman of the Housing Allocations Policy Task Group, presented the findings and recommendations of the Task Group for endorsement by the Committee.

The background and Terms of Reference of the Task Group alongside an overview of Housing Allocation policies and relevant evidence were detailed as per the report, and the various witnesses who provided information and supported Members in their decision-making were thanked, with particular thanks given to Nicole Smith, Head of Housing, Migration & Resettlement, and her team.

The conclusions and then each of the 13 recommendations were summarised, and thanks were given to the Members of the Task Group and Simon Bennett, Senior Scrutiny Officer, for his support and hard work throughout the process.

During the discussion, points included:

- Under occupation was raised and it was confirmed that the Task Group had deliberated upon providing incentives to downsize for applicable occupants. If an incentive scheme was developed and accepted by tenants, officers could then enable a better use of the housing stock by providing more suitable homes for those in housing need.
- Recommendation 8 was raised, and it was further explained that as discussed in detail with officers, such multi-tenancies could be an option for individuals that had particular personal needs.
- It was highlighted that one of the aims of the Task Group was to encourage housing providers to consider implementing certain policy areas in tandem with the Council.
- Paragraphs 15, 16, and 53 were highlighted and Members were reassured that officers would continue striving to increase the number of people housed from the housing register. It was further noted that any tenants that wished to bid for a Shared Equity House were required to be on the housing register. As such, within the total amount of people on the housing register, there would be a significant number of those that would not qualify for social housing.
- It was confirmed that the figures as specified in Paragraph 20 were as up to date as officers could provide at the time of the Task Group's deliberations. Members noted that the breakdown of figures was useful when considering planning applications and housing needs within different areas. It was highlighted that in order to understand those needs further, Housing Need Assessment Surveys could be conducted to provide better insight when considering any planning applications.
- Table 5 of the report under Paragraph 31 was raised, with Members expressing concerns as to the high level of people fleeing domestic abuse. It was confirmed that those applications verified under the exclusions criteria were a priority for housing, and it was highlighted that

there had been a concerted effort to encourage people to report domestic violence, therefore better reporting may have led to such a figure.

- Councillor Seed, other Members of the Task Group, and associated officers were commended for their hard work and effort throughout.

At the conclusion of the discussion, it was:

Resolved:

The Committee endorsed the report of the Task Group and refers it to the Cabinet Members for Housing, Strategic Assets, Asset Transfer, for response at the Committee's next meeting.

70 **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 19 September 2023.

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

- A meeting held on 9 October 2023 in which the Task Group considered the update on the Council's response to the Climate Emergency and the revised Environmental Policy, and raised questions as per Paragraph 11 of the report.
- The Chairman of the Task Group with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Environment Select Committee met with the Cabinet Member for Environmental and Climate Change on 20 October 2023 to discuss the Forward Work Plan in relation to climate change.

Appendix 1, the Forward Work Plan, was briefly detailed and it was noted that Members of the Task Group were looking forward to working with officers to help achieve the Council's pledge of carbon neutrality by 2030. Thanks were given to Simon Bennett, Senior Scrutiny Officer, for his continued hard work and support.

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.**

71 **Forward Work Programme**

The Committee received the Forward Work Programme for consideration.

The Rights of Way item due for discussion was raised, and it was noted that further conversations were needed with the Legal Team on the point of potentially inviting a specific member of the public to deliver a presentation at the relevant meeting.

Additionally, Members queried the length of time it took for certain reports to reach the Committee for scrutiny, particularly around climate change. In response, it was suggested that Members contact the relevant Cabinet Member for further information when required, but it was also confirmed that the point would be raised between relevant officers outside of the meeting.

Following which, it was:

Resolved:

The Committee approved the Forward Work Programme.

72 **Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items.

73 **Date of Next Meeting**

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 11 January 2024.

(Duration of meeting: 10.30 am - 12.05 pm)

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