

Environment Select Committee

MINUTES OF THE ENVIRONMENT SELECT COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 20 MARCH 2024 AT KENNET ROOM - COUNTY HALL, BYTHESEA ROAD, TROWBRIDGE, BA14 8JN.

Present:

Cllr Jerry Kunkler (Chairman), Cllr Richard Budden, Cllr Tony Jackson, Cllr Mel Jacob, Cllr Jacqui Lay, Cllr Ian McLennan, Cllr Tom Rounds, Cllr Iain Wallis, Cllr Derek Walters (Vice-Chairman), Cllr Stuart Wheeler, and Cllr Stewart Palmen (Substitute)

Also Present:

Cllr Ian Blair-Pilling, Cllr Nick Holder, Cllr Dominic Muns, Cllr Ashley O'Neill, Cllr Tamara Reay (Virtual), Cllr Jonathon Seed (Virtual), Cllr Christopher Williams, and Cllr Robert Yuill

14 Election of Vice-Chairman

Nominations were sought for a Vice-Chairman, and it was:

Resolved:

The Committee elected Councillor Derek Walters as the Vice-Chairman of the Environment Select Committee.

15 Apologies and Membership Update

Apologies for absence were received from:

- Councillor Charles McGrath
- Councillor Dr Nick Murry
- Councillor Dr Brian Mathew, who was substituted by Councillor Stewart Palmen

16 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 11 January 2024 were considered. Following which, it was:

Resolved:

The Committee approved and signed the minutes of the previous meeting held on 11 January 2024 as a true and correct record.

17 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

18 **Chairman's Announcements**

There were no Chairman's announcements.

19 **Public Participation**

There were no statements or questions submitted.

20 **Highways Annual Review of Service 2023**

Councillor Nick Holder, Cabinet Member for Highways, Street Scene, and Flooding, alongside Samantha Howell, Director of Highways and Transport, Dave Thomas, Head of Highways Asset Management and Commissioning, and Chris Clark, Head of Local Highways, presented the Highways Annual Review of Service 2023 for consideration.

Members were informed that on 15 March 2024, after the publication of the agenda, the Leader, Councillor Richard Clewer, announced changes to the Cabinet portfolios. As such, it had been confirmed that Councillor Caroline Thomas had stepped down from her role as Cabinet Member for Transport, Street Scene, and Flooding, with Councillor Nick Holder subsequently taking on the Cabinet Member responsibilities for Highways, Street Scene, and Flooding. Cllr Holder thanked Cllr Thomas for her hard work, commitment to benefitting residents, and integrity during her time as part of the Cabinet.

It was highlighted that 2023 had been a challenging year for the Highways Service in respect of the ongoing national resourcing issues, and the volatile and adverse weather conditions impacting on officers' ability to maintain the integrity of the network. Despite this, it was highlighted that further long-term investments had been made into the apprenticeship programme which provided good employment opportunities and added additional resource into the service.

Members were reminded that although an annual review of the service was undertaken and then submitted to the Committee, officers also held bi-monthly meetings to discuss performance relative to prior periods and benchmarks. As the Council were dependent on contractors delivering much of the necessary maintenance work, it was reiterated that their performance and value for money

was monitored through the contract management process and agreed upon KPIs. The importance of high levels of communication and engagement between the Council, Wiltshire residents, Parish and Town Councils, and other partners was emphasised, and it was noted that there would be a focus on how to improve these communication channels and networks to ensure that there was a greater understanding of the Council's procedures and processes within the Highways Service.

Cllr Holder then thanked those officers for their hard work in creating a comprehensive and informative report, in addition to those officers across the service for their continued dedication, hard work in responding to scores of queries received from the public and press on all aspects of the service, and focus on the safety of all road users, be they driver or pedestrian.

During the discussion, points included:

- Members reported concerns from residents with regard to road conditions in both rural and urban areas and noted that some rural roads were not fit for purpose. It was acknowledged that road maintenance was a challenge when accounting for recent extreme weather conditions leading to quicker road deterioration. However, Members felt that strengthening, resurfacing, and road preservation should be prioritised, particularly when considering the continuing effect of climate change.
- Members were pleased to hear that there was a focus on improving communications.
- Freight routes were raised, and officers confirmed that the Local Transport Plan was under review which would include the prioritisation of a review of the Freight Strategy.
- Members highlighted drainage and the backlog of gully clearings, and queried how officers were intending on rectifying the issue. In response, it was noted that prolonged extreme weather had delayed clearings as officers had prioritised responding to the storms affecting Wiltshire. However, Members were informed that additional investment had been received for highway maintenance activities, therefore officers were working with Area Boards to understand local priorities and develop scheduled regimes in order to target local investment in more productive ways. Furthermore, it was highlighted that there was a discretionary clearing service that could be utilised by Parish Stewards, therefore Members were urged to liaise with their respective Town and Parish Councils, LHFIG Officers, and Parish Stewards to request the service if needed.
- Members sought clarification on the figures in the report with regard to resurfacing compared to the number of miles that the network covers. It was confirmed that the figures in the report were accurate, and although officers were managing to complete a relatively small amount of resurfacing each year, they were doing what was achievable with the available budget.

- Officers acknowledged that signage when road maintenance was taking place needed to be clearer, with better reasons as to why and for how long work would be taking place in order to improve residents' understanding of the highways process.
- It was explained that officers evaluated different innovative techniques for road surfacing through a collaborative framework between officers, consultants, and all contractors to look at the available options for material choices and performances to improve asset management. It was highlighted that within the construction industry, there was a focus on net zero and carbon reduction in the supply of black top type materials and lowering the laying temperatures of materials to reduce the overall impact of carbon which could lead to better performance in the future. As such, all factors were being considered when looking at locations and determining the best materials to use for each area.
- Members raised the issue of water from farming lands running off into roads, exacerbating road deterioration, and queried if farmers could be consulted with to help reduce water levels entering the network. Officers noted that there was a complex legal process with regard to this issue, and therefore a detailed briefing note could be provided to Members outside of the meeting.
- Officers noted that they were content that the conversations between the Council and utility companies were delivering improved outcomes, however these were monitored closely in order to ensure that utility companies were held to account when conducting works across the network.
- Officers welcomed the feedback from Members and emphasised that although there was a lot of resource deployed in responding to Storm Hank, officers were focusing on ensuring clear, open, transparent, and improved communications to residents on what is achievable within an appropriate timescale in the medium to long term.

Following which, it was:

Resolved:

The Committee:

- 1) Endorsed the Highways Annual Review of Service and confirmed that the performance of the Council's highways contractors has been good during 2023.**
- 2) Welcomed the additional funding provided by the Council for highways activities in 2023.**

- 3) **Acknowledged the extensive programme of road resurfacing and highway maintenance being proposed for 2024-25, and the additional funding being made available by the Council to help support this.**
- 4) **Requested a report on the Highways Service and the performance of the Highway Service's contractors in a year's time.**

21 **Update on the Development of the MyWilts Potholes Reporting Functionality**

Councillor Ashley O'Neill, Cabinet Member for Governance, IT, Broadband, Digital, Licensing, and Staffing, alongside Mark Tucker, Director of ICT, and Andy Brown, Deputy Chief Executive and Corporate Director for Resources, updated the Committee on the development of the MyWilts pothole reporting functionality.

The importance of the app was emphasised in respect of identifying defects, improving resident engagement, and feedback. As such, the issues that had been experienced and raised regularly were acknowledged, but Members were informed that recent fixes had been undertaken to improve the technical issues within the app and the communications surrounding these. A replacement app (scheduled to launch in Summer 2024) was being developed to both address the issues being experienced in the current app, and the way in which the service operates and integrates with the app.

The difficulties associated with ensuring that the app and web-versions of the system worked across different phone operating systems alongside the complex nature of the Council's organisational structure were highlighted. However, it was explained that the developers of the new iteration of the app were Council employees and therefore understood the nuances of the different internal systems and processes and could ensure synchronisation across the service as a whole. Officers noted that they were working hard to deliver a platform that met expectations and took away the current frustrations for users.

Officers presented a series of slides that explained the background of the project, the issues identified, the improvements made to the current app, and the communications between different services to understand internal processes and areas for improvement.

During the discussion, points included:

- Members queried if other Local Authorities were developing similar apps. In response, it was explained that Wiltshire Council had the largest number of surface areas and therefore, more backend systems to link which was where most of the complexity lay. As such, there were not any common libraries/apps that had been developed and although officers

had reached out to other Local Authorities, they did not feel there was an appetite for a cross-sector effort. However, officers had looked at best practice across the country and had applied these to the new design.

- Members noted the reliance on one internal team to deliver the next iteration of the app and highlighted the importance of developing detailed guidance documents should another team need to take over due to unforeseen circumstances.
- It was explained that officers had decided to adopt the industry standard progressive web app technology which used more generic tooling and one code base instead of the current 3 bases to reduce the complexities. It was noted that this may lead to slight differences on the installation methods, but these impacts would be addressed in due course upon completion. However, the skillsets of the developers could therefore be applied as a single approach to provide engineering and development resource in different areas of the Council.
- The importance of a friendly user interface was emphasised, and it was noted that if the targeted Summer 2024 rollout was successful, there may be a period of time in which both apps could run concurrently. Therefore, officers were aiming to offer an early release to Members for feedback which can then be incorporated into the development process to address any early concerns.

Following which, it was:

Resolved:

The Committee:

- 1) Noted the improvements made to the MyWilts application to provide more information to the public when a case is closed.**
- 2) Noted the roadmap for the planned improvements to the MyWilts application moving forward.**
- 3) Requested an update report after the release of the new MyWilts system in 2024.**

22 Libraries Development Update

Councillor Ian Blair-Pilling, Cabinet Member for Public Health, Communities, Leisure, and Libraries, alongside David Redfern, Director of Leisure, Culture, and Communities, and Claire Dow, Library Staff and Customer Engagement Manager, delivered a presentation regarding libraries development.

It was explained that there were three core areas within the strategy: financial sustainability; contribution to the health and wellbeing of our communities; and environmental sustainability. It was noted that those priorities aligned with the contributions to the wider Council Business Plan and supported other services such as Public Health, Children's Services, and Adult Social Care.

Officers then presented a series of slides which detailed the performance data of the Library Service, the Library Strategy, and how the Council's priorities are being delivered through supporting vulnerable residents, children, and the roll out of Family Hubs as well as different health awareness schemes. The results and recommendations arising from the LGA Peer Challenge were also highlighted alongside the approaches being taken to address those recommendations.

Officers finished by displaying feedback from members of the public on how the libraries across the County had impacted them, and Members were asked to both make suggestions for improvements to officers and encourage their residents to communicate with leisure centre managers directly to provide feedback and establish local relationships.

During the discussion, points included:

- Members congratulated officers on their hard work.
- Members queried the carbon neutrality of rented buildings used for libraries across the County and if different strategies could be implemented to support the Council in meeting its carbon neutrality goals.
- The importance of libraries within communities was emphasised, particularly with regard to supporting those residents who don't have online access and children in improving literacy and numeracy skills. As such, Members highlighted that different departments within the Council should be working in tandem to ensure that all libraries were accessible, such as specific bus routes, to allow all residents to visit the libraries.
- Members raised the 'Library of Things' scheme utilised in different Local Authorities which allowed families to share and access different equipment that may not be affordable. Officers noted that in order to maximise public facing spaces, there were storage limitations for that specific scheme, however a number of libraries offered initiatives such as 'Repair Cafés'.
- The importances of different offerings such as knitting groups and warm spaces was emphasised to help in removing barriers for people in visiting, particularly those who were more vulnerable.
- It was explained that public visiting habits and behaviours had changed nationally which could be as a result of decreased footfall in high streets and cost living concerns, however borrowing rates within the libraries had bounced back to pre-covid levels. Furthermore, there had been a rise in e-book issuing, therefore as part of the Library Strategy, officers were

looking to analyse whether these were by new users or users who also physically visited a library and had done so pre-covid.

Following which, it was:

Resolved:

The Committee:

- 1) Noted the presentation.**
- 2) Noted the results of the LGA Peer Challenge.**
- 3) Noted the progress on the Library Strategy and requested a further update in due course.**

23 Leisure Services

Councillor Ian Blair-Pilling, Cabinet Member for Public Health, Communities, Leisure, and Libraries, and David Redfern, Director of Leisure, Culture, and Communities, delivered a presentation regarding leisure services.

Officers then presented a series of slides which detailed the core membership growth for all centres alongside the growth of all memberships (including swim schools) for insourced and Wiltshire Council centres for the period October 2021 to February 2024. Namely, that there had been a 31% growth in core membership types since the transition of Places Leisure Centres in October 2021, and a growth of 8% for swim school memberships.

Members were then informed of the financial results of the August Bank Holiday 2023 opening trial in which four sites opened across Wiltshire for limited hours on a single shift basis. It was highlighted that as working Bank Holidays was not a contractual requirement, ensuring that there were enough staff working at each of the sites was the biggest challenge. Despite this, officers were intending on continuing the trial for the full year 2024, excluding Christmas Day, Boxing Day, and New Years Day.

During the discussion, points included:

- Officers noted that the current strategy was focussing on embedding experience throughout the operational structure by ensuring that the right people were in the right posts within the Leisure Management Team. Furthermore, each site manager had ownership of their site and were responsible for driving targets which was supported by a specific marketing budget which increased agility and could allow more targeted strategies based on individual site needs.

- In respect of the Bank Holiday trial, the four sites were chosen to target the biggest population densities. All staff who worked on those days were thanked by Members.
- It was noted that membership growth would help in understanding financial sustainability in continuing to provide services. Officers highlighted that since the implementation of the strategy, there had been a noticeable boost in staff morale as they had increased ownership and were instrumental in service delivery which had enabled officers to make a universal offer across all centres.
- Once the Oracle financial management system was launched, it was explained that deeper data analysis could be conducted to allow for centre comparisons and more targeted initiatives.
- The Trowbridge Leisure Centre project was raised, and officers stressed that they were prioritising the management of the £10m investment. As such, officers were meeting with various design and planning consultants, and the architects would soon meet with a panel of planning experts to submit a series of proposals. Officers confirmed that the project was still on schedule to be functional in 2026.
- Members welcomed the progress made, the promotion of health and wellbeing within centres, and the outreach model to ensure that more residents could access leisure centres and libraries.

Following which, it was:

Resolved:

The Committee:

- 1) **Noted the update.**
- 2) **Requested a further update on the Bank Holiday opening trial in due course.**
- 3) **Requested a further general leisure services update when the enhanced financial information became available.**

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

Councillor Tony Jackson, on behalf of Councillor Graham Wright, Chairman of the Climate Emergency Task Group, presented an update on the Task Group since 11 January 2024.

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

- Members met with See Through Carbon on 16 January 2024, a non-profit organisation running a number of pilot projects with organisations and sectors across the world. Members discussed the importance of transparent and low-cost carbon auditing and how See Through Carbon unusually operates without a bank account.
- Members also met with officers on 24 February 2024 to consider the development of the Council's emerging Climate Change Adaptation Plan. Following the meeting, the Task Group were confident that there was a robust plan in place to deliver an effective document.

Councillor Jonathon Seed, Chairman of the Speed Limit Assessments Task Group, then presented an update on the Task Group since 11 January 2024.

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

- A scoping meeting on 1 March 2024 in which a presentation was delivered by Councillor Caroline Thomas, Cabinet Member for Transport, Street Scene, and Flooding, Parvis Khansari, Corporate Director – Place, Samantha Howell, Director – Highways and Transport, and Dave Thomas, Head of Highways Asset Management and Commissioning). A number of areas were considered, including:
 - Background and context to speed limit assessments
 - The current process
 - Recent changes to the process
 - Issues arising from that process
- The Task Group's Terms of Reference were drafted, and a work programme would be developed.

Members queried the level of flexibility with regard to the Department for Transport guidance and if exceptions could be made based on an individual area's needs and community feeling. It was highlighted that one of the challenges was less the guidance itself, but more how the guidance was being interpreted by different Local Authorities; as such, Members wanted to explore and understand the impact that local knowledge had on the current process. It was explained that the Task Group was aiming to help support a system that retained public confidence and operated in a consistent and transparent matter.

At the conclusion of the discussion, it was then:

Resolved:

The Committee:

- 1) **Noted the update on the Task Group activity provided above.**

- 2) **Noted the Climate Emergency Task Group's Forward Work Plan in Appendix 1.**
- 3) **Appointed the Membership of the Speed Limit Assessment Task Group as listed in the report.**
- 4) **Approved the Terms of Reference of the Speed Limit Assessment Task Group.**

25 **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.

26 **Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items.

27 **Date of Next Meeting**

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 4 June 2024.

(Duration of meeting: 1.00 - 4.00 pm)

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