

Environment Select Committee

MINUTES OF THE ENVIRONMENT SELECT COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 12 NOVEMBER 2024 AT KENNET ROOM - COUNTY HALL, BYTHESEA ROAD, TROWBRIDGE, BA14 8JN.

Present:

Cllr Jerry Kunkler (Chairman), Cllr Richard Budden, Cllr Tony Jackson, Cllr Ian McLennan, Cllr Iain Wallis, Cllr Derek Walters (Vice-Chairman), and Cllr Stuart Wheeler

Also Present:

Cllr Phil Alford, Cllr Nick Holder, Cllr Jacqui Lay (Virtual), Cllr Dominic Muns, Cllr Tamara Reay, and Cllr Graham Wright (Virtual)

67 Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from:

- Councillor Charles McGrath
- Councillor Dr Nick Murry
- Councillor Tom Rounds
- Councillor Dr Brian Mathew MP

It was further noted that Councillor Jacqui Lay would be joining the meeting remotely.

68 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes for the previous meeting held on 3 September 2024 were considered.

Following which, it was:

Resolved:

The Committee approved and signed the minutes of the previous meeting held on 3 September 2024 as a true and correct record.

69 Declarations of Interest

Councillor Iain Wallis declared an Other Registrable Interest by virtue of his role as a Trustee for Devizes Opendoors.

70 **Chairman's Announcements**

There were no specific Chairman's announcements.

71 **Public Participation**

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

72 **Homeless Prevention Strategy Action Plan Update 2019-2024**

Councillor Phil Alford, Cabinet Member for Housing, updated the Committee on progress to deliver on the Homeless Prevention Strategy Action Plan that was approved by Full Council in November 2019, alongside John Walker, Housing Solutions Service Manager.

The progress of each of the five priority areas were briefly detailed, with the continued significant increase in demand being highlighted. Despite this, officers had worked hard to retain sustainability, manage expectations, and increase the Council's temporary accommodation portfolio. The unaffordability and unstable nature of the private rented sector alongside the rising demand for housing was noted and Members were reassured that the issues within the sector were nationwide and not affecting just Wiltshire specifically. Officers were confident that the strategy was dynamic and responsive and that it had demonstrated robustness and resilience across the service.

Finally, officers drew attention to the positive work undertaken within Priority 4, specifically the dedicated accommodation for care experienced young people and prison leavers as part of SDS40.

During the discussion, points included:

- It was confirmed that the impacts of SDS40 on the Council had been minimal.
- It was explained that the Rough Sleepers Service was very active with mechanisms in place to identify those persons who may begin rough sleeping, wraparound support for those persons with personal or health issues, and one officer dedicated to preventing rough sleeping at the outset. Furthermore, it was confirmed that the Council had a substantial rough sleeper portfolio with various temporary accommodations available for rough sleepers.
- Members raised concerns in respect of the potential for a higher rate of failure by housing rough sleepers outside of their community areas and into more central areas. In response, it was explained that as house prices varied significantly across Wiltshire, it was difficult to acquire suitable temporary accommodation stock in every community in order to meet local need. Despite this, Members were reassured that there was a

significant purchasing programme in place and that officers undertook regular operational meetings on a case-by-case basis to move people on from temporary accommodation as soon as possible. However, it was highlighted that the speed in which people were rehoused was dependent on factors such as the persons themselves in terms of readiness to live independently, and the turnover rate of suitable affordable homes of the right size.

- It was explained that the number of rough sleepers within the County was assessed by a standardised annual count in line with a national formula alongside various internal systems, such as monthly snapshots. However, it was highlighted that due to the relatively small number of rough sleepers in County, there were inherent challenges around the interpretation of the trend line as one person could make a statistically large impact/variation. Furthermore, it was emphasised that rough sleepers were generally a transient group which could be difficult to quantify at times.
- Seasonal impacts were highlighted, with it being noted that rough sleeper numbers historically rose during the summer months when the temperature was warmer. It was also highlighted that although the Rough Sleeper Team engaged closely with a persistent and core group of rough sleepers and offered support and accommodation, there were challenges with those individuals who may be disengaged from more conventional lifestyles.
- It was further explained that during the winter months where the weather was forecast to be 0°C or below for three nights or longer, all partner organisations, statutory and voluntary agencies would be notified in order for them to organise any necessary arrangements to get any person known to be sleeping rough into temporary accommodation as soon as possible.
- It was noted that the current strategy and 5 priority areas had been very effective and that those practices implemented by the strategy were now embedded into the service and would be reviewed on an ongoing basis. Further to this, officers were reflecting upon the results of the past 5 years and were intending on continuing conversations with colleagues and stakeholders to maintain best practice.
- With regard to social rented homes, it was noted that the current rate at which social rented and affordable rented homes were being built was not meeting the pace of demand. However, although officers had no control over demand, they reassured Members that officers within the Council's enabling function were working hard with landowners, developers, and housing providers/associations to develop other sites to meet the need, and that as much affordable housing as possible was being sought.
- It was noted that within the Development Programme, officers were considering all opportunities that best delivered homes in the most cost-effective way. As such, options such as prefabricated buildings or dwellings made from repurposed shipping containers were all investigated. However, it was highlighted that the priority was to acquire

sustainable properties that ensured longevity, were suitable, and met necessary space standards for the individuals moving into them.

- Finally, officers were commended for their hard work and positive report, particularly with their approach around the Rough Sleeper Partnership.

At the conclusion of the discussion, it was

Resolved:

The Committee:

- a) Welcomed the progress made on the Homeless Prevention Strategy Action Plan.**
- b) Requested that the next Homeless Prevention Strategy Action Plan is presented to the Committee when appropriate. The report to also include budgets and trends in rough sleeper numbers.**

73 **Update on Wiltshire Housing Development Partnership**

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

It was explained that the vast share of affordable homes were delivered through large scale housing developments with the provision of those homes therefore coming through the Section 106 agreement. As such, the Council was beholden to market forces such as the impact of inflation and interest rates on homes which led to developers considering delaying the supply of homes in order to retain the values for the consumer while ensuring that supply was sufficient, and costs were met.

Members were reminded of the roles of the Housing Enabling Team, the Housing Development Partnership, and the role of Registered Providers of Affordable Housing (RPs). It was confirmed that 532 Affordable Homes were delivered in Wiltshire in 2023/24, with 61% being rented accommodation and 39% being Affordable Home Ownership. Despite being below the annual average target of 650 homes per year, it was explained that this reflected a fall in the overall number of housing units delivered in Wiltshire. The importance of the Housing Development Partnership was emphasised, with Paragraphs 9 through 15 of the report being outlined.

Finally, officers stated that they were confident that, subject to the continued commitment of the Council and RPs, the Partnership offered the potential to continue to assist the Council in working towards its key priorities.

During the discussion, points included:

- The definition of affordable in relation to Affordable Homes was explained, and it was noted that Affordable Rented Accommodation was viability tested through the Council's Local Plan and the evidence base as part of the Council's Core Strategy suggested that officers should focus on negotiating further Affordable Rented Accommodation on Section 106 sites.
- It was explained that officers held developers to account in delivering the Affordable Housing percentage with the mix that was suggested by the Strategic Housing Market Assessment. As such, officers aimed for a 60/40 split between Affordable Home ownership and Private Rented accommodation. It was further explained that in terms of viability, the Housing Allocations Policy allowed the Affordable Housing percentage to decrease if there was an agreed viability, with 4 units lost in 2023/24 due to either viability or vacant buildings credit.
- It was confirmed that the average annual target was gross and not nett figures and so it did not account for properties which were disposed of by Housing Associations (HAs). However, it was highlighted that the number of disposals was included within the report with reasons being noted as Right to Buy Purchases or Shared Ownership properties where owners have staircased their percentage of ownership up to 100%.
- It was explained that it was not within the remit of the Housing Enabling Team to consider acquisitions of former Ministry of Defence properties, and that this would be considered by the Development and Estates Team.
- With regard to comparisons between other similar Local Authorities, the challenges within the national housing market were highlighted, with Members being reassured that the initial target accounted for loss through schemes such as Right to Buy and that officers were satisfied with delivery to date.
- It was further explained that as RPs acquired the homes that could be used for Affordable Housing, they were subject to the same elements of constraint and market conditions in the current climate, and it was noted that it was mostly Section 106 units that were being acquired through new developments.
- It was acknowledged that officers were beholden to developers delivering units to therefore be acquired by the RPs for Affordable Housing. It was further noted that there were changes in policy around rental incomes which could lead to RPs not having the financial confidence to acquire properties. However, it was highlighted that officers annually reported Wiltshire's Housing Statistic which looked at the number of final planning consents granted for Section 106 units. It was confirmed that although the figure did not include those units delivered by RPs or funded by Homes England, 556 units had been granted final planning consent in 2023/24 which officers reassured Members was a positive figure in terms of delivery moving forward into 2024/25.

At the conclusion of the discussion, it was:

Resolved:

The Committee:

- a) **Noted the contents of the report and performance of the Housing Development Partnership.**
- b) **Requested an updated on the Housing Development Partnership in 2025.**

74 **Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Landlord Compliance Report**

Councillor Phil Alford, Cabinet Member for Housing, along James Barra, Director for Assets, and Nick Darbyshire, Head of Strategic Assets Maintenance and Facilities Management, updated the Committee on the main compliance disciplines associated with the Council's landlord role in the provision of social housing.

The background to the report as per Section 2 of the report was outlined, with Members being informed that the service was reporting a high level of performance against the key compliance indicators and where compliance was not 100%, the service had a full and detailed understanding of the reasons, with plans being developed to improve performance towards achieving 100%.

Officers highlighted that the majority of reporting was around the housing landlord function, with activity routinely going to the Housing Board. As such, officers felt that as the area was one of the highest risks, the report focussed on providing greater visibility and assurance in terms of the current performance and that there was a focus on raising the profile of the service and information flowing into the organisation. It was highlighted that the Landlord Compliance Policy Framework had been reviewed and revised over the past 12 months, with key policies and corresponding procedure documents being re-written before being considered and ratified by the Housing Board.

It was explained that a structured approach was required to provide the highest levels of assurance, with compliance activity being considered, delivered, and reported against the key governing framework as outlined within the report. Officers noted that a cycle of internal audits on each discipline had been commissioned, with 2 specific key compliance areas being audited in 2024 by the South West Audit Partnership; namely, Gas Safety and Fire Safety. Furthermore, external assurance had been sought with a full review of the housing data contained within the QL Housing Management System being commissioned from a consultant provider, Savills, to provide feedback on data quality, validate the current compliance activity, and identify any data gaps. Officers were pleased to report that the assessment had commended the Council for its efforts and performance in establishing a comprehensive

compliance dataset and accurately reporting on landlord compliance obligations.

During the discussion, points included:

- The data relating to fire safety doors was raised and it was explained that as regulations had changed in recent years, a regime had been put in place to inspect each door on an annual basis and so officers had made a fresh start on data collection. As such, the figure would continue to rise in time, with an aim to employ Compliance Technicians to assist in the 12 monthly rolling programme.
- It was explained that Asbestos Surveys were undertaken on a cyclical basis every 4 years with additional surveys being undertaken when major refurbishments, demolition, or any other major construction works were required in a property when asbestos-containing materials were most likely to be disturbed. In response to a query, officers stated that they would look at how to track any remedial works as they were noted as repairs jobs at present.
- In relation to damp and mould, it was emphasised that ventilation was critical for management of any issues, with officers highlighting that work was being undertaken with landlords and tenants to encourage best practice whenever a case was identified. Furthermore, Members were informed that a routine cycle of information went out in newsletters, with the latest iteration including a video to illustrate how to do self-checks/tests of carbon/smoke detectors, and moisture management.
- It was further noted that all of the disciplines outlined in the report were the cornerstone of the Council's communications with residents, with officers looking at different approaches for continuing to ensure access to properties to undertake surveys in order to meet responsibilities and keep tenants safe.
- Officers were thanked for their hard work and presentation.

At the conclusion of the discussion, it was:

Resolved:

The Committee:

- a) Noted the contents of the report and progress being made.**
- b) Requested an update report in 2025.**

75 **Previous Investment in Carriageway Surfacing Activities**

Councillor Nick Holder, Cabinet Member for Highways, Street Scene, and Flooding, alongside Samantha Howell, Director for Highways and Transport, and Paul Bromley, Highways Asset Manager, provided an overview of recent previous investment in carriageway resurfacing activities broken down by Area Board.

It was emphasised that effective and efficient highway asset management was essential in allowing residents, businesses, and visitors to Wiltshire to undertake travel in and around the county to meet daily needs, as well as for leisure and recreation. Furthermore, officers took an evidence-led risk-based approach to asset management in line with agreed best practice and adopted policies, with frequent updates provided through the Engagement Strategy. It was explained that the principles of asset management had been applied to the maintenance of the network which involved accounting for the life cycle of the asset by undertaking regular surveys and monitoring performance of the network, interventions, and investment strategies within the objective of minimising expenditure while providing the desired outcomes for Wiltshire.

It was acknowledged that a lack of availability across the highway network could cause considerable impacts on communities and the economy. As such, the report set out investment as records allowed broadly over a 5 year period, with detailed analysis being undertaken to ensure that investment in the network continued to be targeted at the right areas. Paragraphs 9 to 11 of the report were noted as providing a full explanation of the analysis informing the Wiltshire Highways Investment Plan and historic condition data broken down by Area Board.

Finally, Paragraph 5 of the report was highlighted alongside Figure 3 through 9 which detailed planned major carriageway maintenance from 2018/19 to October 2024.

During the discussion, points included:

- It was explained that officers assessed the immediate risk to residents when undertaking reactive maintenance/treatments in different areas, hence why the data showed a spread of different activities taking place which had deemed to be the best reactive measure to tackle that immediate issue. It was noted that higher expenditure levels varied across each of the community areas which could be as a result of increased reporting by residents, and the variability in carriageway length, type, topography, geography, and traffic levels.
- It was confirmed that final testing was underway for the MyWilts app which was due to go live on 19 November 2024.
- With regard to works undertaken by utility companies, officers explained that companies were required to reinstate the network to appropriate levels, but monitoring the number of utility works across the network was resource intensive for the Council. However, Members were reassured that officers were working hard in terms of ensuring reinstatements were done correctly, in a timely manner, and then monitored. In the event that the reinstatements were not satisfactory, there were escalation processes in place and that these accounted for instances in which officers would not issue any permits for further works until an agreement was met.
- It was confirmed that not all vehicles were equipped with vehicle mounted lasers to undertake scanner surveys, however this was being

considered as part of the Fleet Replacement Strategy. Furthermore, there was an annual survey to assess defects to feed into a road condition index that picked up 50% of the A Class road network in both directions which alternated each year, 100% of the B Class road network in one direction, 50% of the C Class road network in one direction, and then 50% of unclassified roads. It was also highlighted that highway safety inspections were also carried out on a monthly basis, predominantly for safety defects, on A and B Class roads, and annual inspections on residential streets.

- Members were also informed that officers were trialling a new piece of technology called Vaisala which used AI to recognise certain defects and build a condition pattern. In tandem with current scanner data, this would enable officers to continue improving decision making, better understand deterioration curves for each road, and the best time to intervene to get the cost benefit.
- It was explained that when considering preventative maintenance and the annual Forward Work Plan, discussions were had with Area Boards, Parish and Town Councils to understand local concerns and recommendations for future work. These conversations were then assessed in line with the evidence-led risk-based approach to identify whether repairs were appropriate, and it was highlighted that recent additional investments had allowed officers to specifically address some Member concerns in areas where it might not have been feasible in the past.
- The threat to infrastructure from climate change was raised and Members emphasised the importance of understanding historic costs to determine what maintenance would be sufficient and the future needs of the county and budgeting moving forwards. Officers acknowledged Member concerns and highlighted that the report should be seen as one part of the response to climate change and adaptation.
- Officers reiterated the variability of the network in terms of road types, topography, and geological conditions and noted that cost projections were difficult due to Central Government settlements not being fully understood. As such, officers had taken a proportional approach in terms of supplying historic data in an easily accessible format to then focus on the delivery of the work across the network. Furthermore, it was noted that Figure 3 demonstrated that no one community area was disadvantaged in terms of the range of investment measures across the county and mitigating risk, particularly in areas where there were higher traffic levels and therefore a higher safety concern.
- Members queried what redress the Council had against historic contractors and mutual expectations after the conclusion of the contract if repairs were needed. In terms of specific recourse, officers noted that it would be addressed in future reports once further information had been gathered. However, it was explained that there was a general recourse in terms of standards of work through the procurement process.
- Officers noted that additional investment had been allocated to support rural overrun but highlighted the challenges with regard to the extent of

the rural network across the County and land ownership constraints in many areas.

At the conclusion of the discussion, it was:

Resolved:

The Committee:

- a) **Noted the contents of the report and the progress that is being made.**
- b) **Requested a new report in January 2025, breaking down spend in detail by area and road categories.**
- c) **Requested that future Highways Review of Service reports incorporated a breakdown of expenditure information in its Highways Investment Plans.**

76 **Cabinet Member Update**

Verbal updates were provided by Councillor Nick Holder, Cabinet Member for Highways, Street Scene, and Flooding, Councillor Tamara Reay, Transport and Assets, and Councillor Dominic Muns, Cabinet Member for Waste and Environment.

Highways, Street Scene, and Flooding

Cllr Holder provided brief updates on winter preparations, Local Highways and Footpath Group (LHFIGs) requests, and pavement conditions.

It was explained that preparations were being undertaken for the winter season with a significant amount of information distributed to Members who were encouraged to share with their residents, Town and Parish Councils. Furthermore, it was highlighted that there was a high level of requests coming through the LHFIGs, with officers tackling a significant backlog, leading to longer processing times for projects. As such, the Portfolio Holder for Highways was working with officers to consider different approaches for best utilising LHFIGs and removing the current backlog of requests. It was further noted that once the additional investment allocated into the road network and further understanding on future Government settlements had been realised, officers would identify priority areas and consider how best to improve pavement conditions across the County.

Members concurred with the aim of re-evaluating the LHFIG system and clearing the backlog of requests to ensure that new schemes could be delivered in a timely manner. Furthermore, it was highlighted that there were funds available to fix pavements where any defects were identified as a safety concern, however this did not include general repairs.

Transport and Assets

Cllr Reay informed Members that the Draft Local Transport Plan for the period 2025-2038 was part of the agenda for the 19 November 2024 Cabinet meeting and it was highlighted that the draft plan aligned with the Local Plan, Business Plan, Climate Strategy, the drive for decarbonisation, and set out the strategic direction of travel for Wiltshire, recognising that one size did not fit all, particularly when considering the mix of urban and rural areas across the County. It was confirmed that there would be a two-month period of consultation, following which officers would assess all of the responses received to work on focused delivery plans to move forward towards the adoption of the plan.

It was further highlighted that a full briefing would be taken to the Climate Emergency Task Group, that the plan would be considered by the Committee in their January 2025 meeting.

Members raised increasing bus prices, and it was noted that discussions were being undertaken with bus operators through the Enhanced Partnership to see if there was any scope to further reduce fares.

Waste and Environment

Cllr Muns provided further information with regard to incinerating residual waste and associated emissions, and updated Members on the Public Space Protection Order (PSPO) for Devizes where officers, Local Members, Town Councillors, residents, and Wiltshire Police were thanked for their work in coordinating the project. It was highlighted that anti-social behaviour was taken seriously by the Council and the importance of protecting residents, communities, and spaces was emphasised.

The Waste Transformation Strategy was noted as seeking to tackle and further understand associated emissions with incinerating residual waste while continuing to improve recycling rates. Members thanked Cllr Muns for his update and work on the PSPOs.

Resolved:

The Committee noted the Cabinet Member updates.

77 **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 18 July 2024.

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

- A Climate Audit commissioned by the Council on 12 July 2024 for SWAP Internal Audit Services to look at whether the Council has appropriate

plans and structures in place to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030. Paragraphs 8 to 12 of the report detailed the seven areas covered by the audit, what was reviewed by SWAP, and the audit's conclusions.

- A meeting on 11 October 2024 to discuss the update report on the Council's response to the climate emergency which went to 17 September 2024 meeting of Cabinet and 15 October 2024 meeting of Full Council. It was noted that although the Council was on track to reach its emissions targets by 2030, significant work needed to be undertaken to lower the County's overall emissions.
- A meeting on 18 October 2024 looking at a summary of conclusions from the Climate Delivery Plan review and future priorities. It was noted that the majority of the actions in the plans had been progressed as expected, with most reaching their milestones. Furthermore, there would be a renewed focus upon the County with more Countywide projects and 7 key themes in the Council's new plan with clearer links to Key Performance Indicators (KPIs); a focus on key areas; strengthening governance, monitoring, and reporting within a new framework; and merging some of the current delivery themes.

There being no questions or comments, it was then:

Resolved:

The Committee:

- a) Noted the update on the Task Group's activity.**
- b) Approved the amended Climate Emergency Task Group Terms of Reference.**
- c) Noted the Climate Emergency Task Group's draft Forward Work Plan in Appendix 1.**

78 **Forward Work Programme**

The Committee received the Forward Work Programme for consideration.

Following which, it was:

Resolved:

The Committee approved the Forward Work Programme.

79 **Urgent Items**

There were no urgent items.

80 **Date of Next Meeting**

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as 14 January 2025.

(Duration of meeting: 10.30 am - 1.35 pm)

The Officer who has produced these minutes is Ellen Ghey - Democratic Services
Officer of Democratic Services, direct line 01225 718259, e-mail

ellen.ghey@wiltshire.gov.uk

Press enquiries to Communications, direct line 01225 713114 or email

communications@wiltshire.gov.uk

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