

Minutes of the Place Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 6th July, 2016 at 6.00 pm
in Committee Room 2 at the Council House, Dudley

Present:

Councillor A Finch (Chair)
Councillor M Aston (Vice-Chair)
Councillors C Bayton, L Johnson, I Kettle, C Perks, H Rogers, M Rogers, R Scott-Dow, K Shakespeare and V Wale.

Officers:

T Oakman – Strategic Director People (Acting Lead Officer to the Committee) (People Directorate), A Lunt - Strategic Director Place, P Coyne - Chief Officer Planning and Economic Development, M Williams – Chief Officer Environmental Services (All Place Directorate) and K Taylor – Democratic Services Officer (Chief Executive's Directorate)

1 Apology for Absence

An apology for absence from the meeting was received on behalf of Councillor Z Islam.

2 Appointment of Substitute Member

It was noted that Councillor C Bayton had been appointed as substitute member for Councillor Z Islam, for this meeting of the Committee only.

3 Declarations of Interest

No Member made a declaration of interest in respect of any matter to be considered at this meeting.

4 Minutes

Arising from consideration of the minutes, an update was provided by the Strategic Director Place on the current position on voids, giving responses to questions raised in respect of the increase in void properties and the high rise apartment blocks in Netherton.

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 30th March, 2016, be approved as a correct record and signed.

5 **Public Forum**

No issues were raised under this agenda item.

6 **Terms of Reference for the Place Scrutiny Committee**

The Committee considered a report of the Lead for Law and Governance on the terms of reference of the Place Scrutiny Committee for the 2016/17 municipal year.

Resolved

That the terms of reference of the Place Scrutiny Committee, as set out in the Appendix to the report submitted, be noted.

7 **Annual Scrutiny Programme 2016/17**

The Committee considered a report of the Lead for Law and Governance on the items for inclusion in the Annual Scrutiny Programme for 2016/17, these being:-

- Regeneration and Tourism
- Housing
- Recycling and Waste Collection
- School crossing patrols

A brief summary on each topic was given by the relevant Chief Officer/Strategic Director, in which the following issues were referred to:-

Regeneration and Tourism – the Chief Officer Planning and Economic Development referred to the work previously undertaken by the Place Scrutiny Committee in relation to the business support and inward investment activities and business friendly planning.

Reference was made to the recent regeneration projects such as Castle Hill, town centre public realm improvements and the new glass museum at Wordsley, and the Chief Officer Planning and Economic Development suggested that members may wish to consider scrutinising the developing area of Dudley's visitor economy which would link to the regeneration projects. The opportunity for the Committee to call witnesses from the wider visitor economy sector across the borough, including hotel managers, to explore the effectiveness of how the council and partners currently worked together; and to look at potential improvements during the development of the area in the next 12 months, was also suggested.

Arising from the summary provided, Members asked questions, made comments and responses were given where appropriate:-

- In relation to the proposed extension of the Metro to Brierley Hill, the Chief Officer Planning and Economic Development confirmed that Centro had programmed the works to be completed by 2023.
- A member questioned whether the funding for the regeneration projects in Dudley had been affected by the recent European Union Referendum result. The Chief Officer Planning and Economic Development outlined funding awarded to various projects and that he hoped the funding would be unaffected.
- It was suggested that a list advertising hotels and accommodation within the borough would greatly benefit visitors, which could also be accessed online. The Chief Officer Planning and Economic Development also commented on the possibility of utilising vacant land to build additional attractions, including hotels, to attract more visitors. The Chair invited members to give consideration to any witnesses they would like to invite to the Committee to answer any questions and to feed back on their experiences of the visitor economy.
- That there was a legal discussion between Dudley Zoo and Black Country Living Museum in relation to the use of the car park, and although a debate would be welcomed at Committee, any discussion surrounding the legal dispute should be avoided.
- Members commented positively on the improvements made at Dudley Zoo, and the Chief Officer Planning and Economic Development confirmed that work would commence on the next phase of the Castle Hill development, and reported that visitor numbers had significantly increased and it was essential to maintain the partnership with Dudley Zoo and the Black Country Living Museum.

Housing – the Strategic Director Place summarised four areas that members may wish to consider scrutinising, namely:-

- (1) Housing Asset Management Strategy and phase 1 demolitions programme;
- (2) Review of the Community Safety service;
- (3) Review of Housing Repairs Service (including Direct Service Organisation)
- (4) Dudley Allocations Policies and Lettings Process.

During his presentation, the Strategic Director Place reported that analysis work undertaken on Housing Asset Management had identified 3,000 units that were no longer viable, including a number of high rise flats, and the findings would be presented to Cabinet in July, 2016.

Arising from the summary provided, Members asked questions, made comments and responses were given where appropriate:-

- The quality and productivity of repairs undertaken was questioned, and in responding the Chief Officer Environmental Services confirmed that a review of the housing repairs service would be undertaken, which would also be compared against the private sector. Further engagement with members and potential site visits to the depot was also suggested.
- In responding to a request for a presentation to be submitted to the Committee including voids that were categorised as red (non viable) within the Asset Management Analysis. The Strategic Director Place explained that not all 'red' properties were voids, and that some may appear desirable but may have, for instance, major structural defects which rendered repairs unviable.
- A member referred to historical issues relating to structural damage to properties and questioned whether engineering reports had been undertaken to each property. It was confirmed that any property that was subject to demolition should have been correctly investigated and an engineering report completed.
- In response to a comment by a member as to whether new homes would be built if the high rise flats in Netherton were demolished, the Strategic Director Place confirmed that the Council's new build programme was constantly reviewed, and all sites would be utilised as development sites for either affordable or market housing. It was also noted that the Council had an obligation to meet housing needs, and residents that had lived in the high rise flats in Netherton would be given every possible opportunity to move back into the area if they wished. The needs of the residents would be assessed during consultation and the re-housing programme would seek to meet identified needs..
- A member requested assurance that where land had been sold to private developers the money should be allocated specifically to that particular ward. The Strategic Director stated that any funds raised would be allocated to the Housing Revenue Account rather than on a Ward specific basis.
- In relation to the review of the Community Safety service it was confirmed that anti-social behaviour team and timescales of cases would be included. A review of the working patterns of the Anti-Social behaviour team particularly during the weekend was requested.

Recycling and Waste Collection / School Crossing Patrols – the Chief Officer Environmental Services referred to the proposed fortnightly refuse collection and charging for green waste, and in doing so confirmed that the Committee would scrutinise green waste collection only, as Cabinet had recommended that a cross-party working group be established to consider the proposal concerning alternate weekly refuse collections.

During his presentation, the Chief Officer Environmental Services confirmed that a benchmarking exercise had been undertaken with similar Authorities that had implemented a charge for the collection of green waste, and that it was inevitable that there would be a number of issues, due to the service change, therefore assurance would need to be demonstrated together with viable proposals.

Arising from the summary provided, Members asked questions, made comments and responses were given where appropriate:-

- A member questioned whether officers had looked at other areas in the country where residents failed to pay the charges applied and whether it would cost more to collect the green waste overall. It was reported that extensive research had been undertaken, including associated risks and methods for payment, identifying residents that were unable to pay electronically, early education and communication plans would all be reviewed.
- A number of concerns were raised in relation to the number of press releases prior to the Cabinet meeting that reported on the proposed charges for green waste and alternate waste collection, and the proposal for the cross party working group, and questioned why the Committee had not been informed of the proposals prior to Cabinet and therefore was confused as to the role of the Scrutiny Committee. In view of the potential low take-up by residents, it could cost more to collect the green waste than the proposed £30 a year charge and that residents had started to question why they were being asked to pay when the Council Tax had already been increased by 4%.
- That some residents would not be able to afford the proposed charge, in particular residents that were on a low income and were also paying 'bedroom tax'.
- The proposed increased number of collections of green waste and whether the proposed charge was in view of the extra collections was questioned. It was confirmed that the green waste collection would be extended to 10 months and the charge was not a reflection of the increase in collection but for the service that was provided.
- The Chief Officer Environmental Services confirmed that the proposed charges for both green waste collection and school crossing patrols had been included in the Medium Term Financial Strategy that was submitted to Cabinet as this was consistent with previous years. It was also reported that the Household Waste Recycling Centre would continue to be available free of charge, and although it was anticipated that fly tipping would be an issue, the Committee was assured that there was a clear hierarchy and all costings had been looked at in detail.

- The Strategic Director People referred to the ongoing budget pressures faced by the Council and confirmed that the charge for green waste and school crossing patrols had been approved by Cabinet for public consultation only and therefore the proposals would be scrutinised. With regards to the proposed alternate weekly refuse collection, he stated that the Cabinet recommended further consideration by establishing a cross-party working group with an 'executive' role to consider wider budget options for relevant services and to identify any potential alternatives. The working group would be separate from the Scrutiny Committee process, however, the Committee would be involved in future discussions. He also confirmed that the proposals included in the Medium Term Financial Strategy were standard practice, but did not pre-determine the decision.
- That the Household Waste Recycling Centre in Stourbridge does not have the capacity to meet an increase in demand should residents choose to dispose their green waste at the Centre.
- The proposed in Cab technology would link with existing systems used by refuse collectors.
- A member questioned whether the collection would be removed altogether if participation was low, and whether a reduction in service would result in staff being made redundant. The Chief Officer Environmental Services responded that if there were sufficient demand to use 1 vehicle and 1 crew then it would be viable, staff could be re-located to other departments and a number of employed staff may be interested in voluntary redundancy.
- In responding to comments made by members in relation to public consultation, the Chief Officer Environmental Services acknowledged the potential concerns of residents associated with the service change, and that a unique service for Dudley was necessary in order to provide a robust model and to achieve a £1million saving.
- That the £30 charge could be reduced depending on residents participation.
- The need for public consultation was emphasised, and the Chief Officer Environmental Services stated that a multi-tier approach would be developed to ensure that all residents were informed including newsletters and door to door visits.
- The process in disposing of household waste was outlined including open window composting.
- It was suggested that whilst undertaking the public consultation a clear message should be given as to the reasons why the decision has to be made.

It was recommended by a Member that consideration be given to the procedures and policies in relation to Travellers, including communication with Members responding to residents' complaints and questions. The Strategic Director Place agreed to submit a report to a future meeting and commented that there had been an increase in travellers occupying vacant land throughout the Borough, and that further consideration would be given to developing a protocol between local authorities. He also confirmed that Chief Superintendent Fisher had offered to brief members on the decision making process in relation to the emergency powers provided to West Midlands Police by means of section 61 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, given Member concerns at the perceived reluctance to utilise these powers to address unauthorised encampments more speedily..

Following further discussion members agreed that a comprehensive and detailed report on the charging for green waste collection and school crossing patrols, be submitted to the meeting of the Committee in September, 2016.

Resolved

- (1) That the information contained in the report on items for detailed consideration by this Committee for 2016/17, as set out in paragraph 4 of the report and reported at the meeting, be confirmed.
- (2) That the Lead Officer, in consultation with the Chair and Vice-Chair, together with the Democratic Services Officer, be authorised to make all necessary arrangements to enable this Committee to undertake its programme of scrutiny work during the 2016/17 municipal year.

The meeting ended at 7.50 pm.

CHAIR