

## SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT

Thursday, 11th September, 2003, at 6.00 p.m.

### PRESENT:-

Councillor Sheppard (Chair)  
Councillor Mrs Coulter (Vice-Chair)  
Councillors Banks, G H Davies, Ms Harris, Jackson, Mrs Patrick, Ryder, Stanley and Whitehouse, together with the Director of Law and Property, Director of Housing, Assistant Director of Housing (Mr Harris), the Assistant Directors of the Urban Environment (Mrs Holmyard) and (Mr Williams), Mr Downing (Directorate of Finance) and Mr Sanders (Directorate of Law and Property)

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### MINUTES

#### RESOLVED

That the minutes of the special meeting of the Committee held on 5th August, 2003, be approved as a correct record and signed.

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### DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Stanley declared a Personal Interest in the subject of agenda item number 6 (Area Housing Panels) in so far as it related to Council-owned garages in view of his renting such premises from the Council.

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### WORK PROGRAMME OF THE COMMITTEE FOR 2003/04

A report of the Lead Officer to the Committee was submitted seeking consideration of the proposed work programme for the Committee for the 2003/04 municipal year.

Reference was made in the report to a proposal by the Chair that a Working Group be set up to consider the Best Value report on Housing Repairs, which would be available shortly, and an options appraisal for improving the standard of the housing stock, in accordance with government guidelines.

#### RESOLVED

- (1) That the work programme for the Committee, as set out in paragraph 3.1 of the report now submitted, be approved.

- (2) That a Working Group of five members, comprising two members of the Labour group, two members of the Conservative group and one member of the Liberal Democrat group, with a membership of Councillors Mrs Coulter, Jackson, Sheppard, Stanley and Whitehouse, be appointed to consider the Best Value report on Housing Repairs and an options appraisal for improving the standard of the housing stock, in accordance with government guidelines.

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#### AREA HOUSING PANELS

A report of the Director of Housing was submitted, which included appendices summarising the background and work of the five Area Housing Panels in Dudley.

The Chairs of the respective Panels then reported orally on the work of those bodies, amplifying the information contained in the appendices and drawing attention to issues identified.

The issues raised included the duration of the probationary tenancy was not considered long enough (the Chair of the North Dudley Area Housing Panel indicated that that Panel would be looking at this matter) and the concentration of young single persons in certain locations. Initiatives aimed at improving the condition of the gardens of some tenants were reported on and with regard to this issue, reference was made to the need for gardening assistance to be provided for vulnerable tenants, including those with mental or physical health problems and the elderly. A suggestion was made that Area Panels might provide information regarding agencies able to assist in this regard.

A suggestion by the Chair of the Committee that meetings between Chairs of Panels from time to time might be advantageous was accepted.

#### RESOLVED

That the contents of the report now submitted and the points made orally by the Chairs of the Area Housing Panels, be noted.

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#### STREET CARE

A report of the Director of the Urban Environment was submitted, advising the Committee of the latest developments relating to the Street Care Service and seeking approval to the draft Street Care Plan, which was appended to the report.

The report summarised operational initiatives being implemented currently to bring about change in the areas of grass cutting, street cleansing, litter collection and fly tipping. Regarding issues raised previously in relation to grass cutting operations and 'shredded' litter, the report indicated that a reduction in the number of complaints on these matters had been achieved since the change in culture and working practices which had resulted from the Street Care plan.

In relation to the maintenance of the traffic island at Mucklow Hill, a suggestion was made by one member that an accommodation be entered into with the adjacent B&Q superstore whereby the store would maintain the roundabout in return for the provision of advertising sites by the Council. The same member advocated a similar accommodation being entered into in relation to the roundabout at Shenstone. The Assistant Director of the Urban Environment (Environmental Management) agreed to consider the issue of sponsorship in relation to the improvement of Gateway roundabouts in reviewing policy on the matter.

In relation to the impact of dilapidated areas on the visual amenity and the implications regarding anti-social behaviour, with particular regard to derelict garages, the Assistant Director of the Urban Environment (Environmental Management) explained the co-ordinated approach now applicable under the Street Care Plan regarding land owned by the Council but acknowledged that problems continued to exist with land in private ownership. On dog fouling, reference was made to the major impact in the Wall Heath area that had resulted from publicity in the press being given to a recent prosecution.

In relation to the achievements against the targets in the Action Plan, improvements made in respect of street cleansing as a result of the street cleansing teams were commented on. Regarding street lighting, the target to install 200 new units was reported, in response to which, the Assistant Director of the Urban Environment (Environmental Management) explained the nature and type of the columns that required replacing. Attention was drawn by one member to a possible need to replace lamp standards on residential estates in certain areas, in response to which the Assistant Director agreed to investigate. The Assistant Director also agreed to investigate the need to replace some street signs in residential areas.

One member expressed the view that children attending school were responsible for an increase in litter depositing during term time. The Assistant Director of the Urban Environment indicated that the issue of litter was raised routinely by the Education Officer in the Directorate when visiting schools. He also indicated that he would arrange for the Education Officer to contact a school directly should any particular incidents be reported to him. The issue of the practice involved with weeding of flowerbeds was raised, in response to which the Assistant Director agreed to refer the comments made back to relevant officers.

#### RESOLVED

That the progress made in relation to street care be noted and that the Lead Members for Transportation and the Environment be advised that the draft Street Care Plan, as appended to the report now submitted, is supported by this Committee.

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#### REVIEW OF PUBLIC CONVENIENCES

A report of the Director of the Urban Environment was submitted seeking approval of the final report on the Review of Public Conveniences. The review report had been circulated to the Committee, separately from the agenda.

In introducing the report, the Assistant Director of the Urban Environment (Environmental Management) made specific reference to progress made so far to pursue the objective of providing modern facilities in return for an advertising agreement with the provider. In the discussion on the issue, the Assistant Director referred to the proposal in the Action Plan for links with supermarkets to be explored.

On the issue of consultation regarding the location of existing and new facilities, the Assistant Director referred to the proposal to engage the Citizens Panel and expanded on the nature of the Panel. In strongly advocating the retention of a public toilet in Wall Heath, Councillor Mrs Patrick questioned whether the Panel was fully representative of all areas in the Borough, with particular reference to Wall Heath.

Reference was also made in the discussion to the recent vandalism of the toilets in Kingswinford, following their reopening. The Assistant Director agreed to look into the matter, with a view to giving consideration to the closure of those toilets at night.

A suggestion was made that the use of Section 106 agreements could be explored as a way of securing finance for new toilet provision, in response to which, in explaining this legislation, the Lead Officer to the Committee indicated that the facility might be utilised in certain cases where such a provision was linked directly to the grant of planning permission but could not be used routinely.

The need for any new build to take account of parents with young children, people with disabilities, older people and cultural differences was emphasised.

In concluding consideration of the report, the Committee accepted that, with the limited budget available, it would be necessary to dispense with some of the peripheral toilets in the Borough in order to be able to concentrate resources on the provision of modern, automated and user friendly facilities. It was considered further that Area Committees could be utilised as a medium for consideration of the location of such facilities.

#### RESOLVED

- (1) That, subject to resolution (2) below, the Review of Public Conveniences, as circulated, be approved and the Action Plan contained therein, supported.
- (2) That with the limited financial resources available, it is recognised that in order to accommodate the provision of good quality, automated, toilets some of the peripheral toilets in the Borough will need to be dispensed with, and that this viewpoint be added to the conclusions of the review.
- (3) That the use of Area Committees as an appropriate mechanism for the consideration of appropriate locations for new toilets be supported and recommended in the report.

#### POLICY STATEMENT ON FLOOD DEFENCE

A report of the Director of the Urban Environment, seeking consideration of a policy statement be proposed for adoption in respect of flood defence and land drainage matters, was submitted.

#### RESOLVED

- (1) That the policy statement on flood defence, as attached to the report now submitted, be supported.
- (2) That the Executive be recommended that the Policy Statement on Flood Defence be approved.

- (3) That a report be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee on the implications of the Flood and Coastal Defence Funding Review.

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UPDATE OF THE COUNCIL'S CAPITAL STRATEGY

A report of the Director of Finance was submitted seeking consideration of the draft Capital Strategy for the Council.

Regarding the section of the draft Strategy relating to environment, protective and cultural services, reference was made in the discussion to the possible need to include provision for public toilets. The Chair also reported on the consideration given to provision for changing rooms given by the Select Committee on Culture and Recreation.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the Executive be advised that the draft Capital Strategy be approved.
- (2) That the Executive be also advised that it may also be necessary to include provision for public toilets.

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COUNCIL PLAN MONITORING

A report of the Lead Officer to the Committee was submitted advising the Committee of those elements of the Council Plan falling within its terms of reference.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted.

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POLICY STATEMENT ON GENETICALLY MODIFIED FOOD CROPS AND FEEDING STUFFS

(At this juncture, and prior to consideration of this item, Councillor Ms Harris declared a personal interest in the subject of the item in view of her membership of the Henry Doubleday Research Association).

Further to the notice of motion approved at the meeting of the Council held on 21st July, 2003, a report of the Director of the Urban Environment was submitted on the feasibility of declaring that the Council would, so far as possible, be kept free of Genetically Modified Crops, food and feeds.

Mr Jack Coburn of the GM Animal Campaign Group, Stourbridge attended the meeting for this item and, at the request of the Committee, addressed the Committee and answered questions.

RESOLVED

That the Council be recommended;

- (1) To ensure that no genetically modified crops are grown on land over which the Council has control
  - (2) To accept a 'genetically modified' free policy for all goods and services for which the Council is directly responsible.
  - (3) To engage in the public consultation process when each prospective genetically modified organism commercial or experimental, consents are considered.
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## COMMUNITY TRANSPORT PROJECT FUNDING

A report of the Director of the Urban Environment was submitted seeking consideration of provisional financial assistance towards the funding of the Community Transport Project through the Highways Allocation of the Local Transport Plan.

Further to the request made previously by the Committee for information on bus operations and their implications for social inclusion, the report indicated the current position with the development of the Bus Strategy, published as part of the 2000 Local Transport Plan. It was also noted that the revised Bus Strategy would be submitted to the Committee for consideration at the December meeting.

A strategy for the co-ordination of voluntary sector transport and a list of subsidised bus services in the Dudley area were appended to the report.

A discussion on local public transport provision ensued in which the need to make public transport easily available to people with special needs was acknowledged. The view was expressed by some members that the services on some estates were not as good as they might be and that gaps in provision needed to be bridged in certain instances. A further view was expressed that the publicity provided by Centro was sometimes inadequate. In relation to services provided wholly or partially by the voluntary sector, difficulties in monitoring staffing levels were discussed.

### RESOLVED

- (1) That the proposal in the report that a funding stream be established to part finance the capital element of the Community Transport Initiative, subject to annual review, be supported.
- (2) That the proposal that £100,000 be made available for the current year's Basic Credit Approval for minor highway works to support the initiative be also supported.
- (3) That the Assistant Director of the Urban Environment (Environmental Management) arrange for the concerns in public transport provision expressed in the debate and referred to in this minute to be reported to the West Midlands Passenger Transport Authority.

The meeting ended at 8.50 pm

CHAIR

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