

## **Minutes of the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel**

### **County Hall, Worcester**

**Wednesday, 18 January 2023, 2.00 pm**

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#### **Present:**

Cllr Alastair Adams (Chairman), Cllr Tony Muir (Vice Chairman),  
Cllr Mel Allcott, Cllr Paul Harrison, Cllr Emma Marshall and Cllr Emma Stokes

#### **Also attended:**

Cllr Richard Morris, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Environment  
Cllr Mike Rouse, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways &  
Transport  
Cllr Matt Jenkins  
Richard Fryer, Ringway  
Nick Goddard, Ringway

John Hobbs, Strategic Director for Economy and Infrastructure  
Michael Hudson, Chief Financial Officer  
Steph Simcox, Deputy Chief Finance Officer  
Rachel Hill, Assistant Director for Economy, Major Projects and Waste.  
Paul Smith, Assistant Director for Highways & Transport Operations  
Gary Woodman, Interim Assistant Director, Economy  
Sarah McDonald, Senior Finance Business Partner  
Elliot Pritchard, Head of Highways Operations  
Nick Twaite, Infrastructure and Asset Manager  
Samantha Morris, Overview and Scrutiny Manager  
Alyson Grice, Overview and Scrutiny Officer

#### **Available Papers**

The Members had before them:

- A. The Agenda papers (previously circulated);
- B. The Minutes of the Meeting held on 8 November 2022 (previously circulated).

(A copy of document A will be attached to the signed Minutes.)

## **24 Apologies and Welcome**

Apologies were received from Councillors Beverley Nielsen and David Ross.

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## **25 Declarations of Interest and of any Party Whip**

None.

## **26 Public Participation**

None.

## **27 Confirmation of the Minutes of the previous meeting**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 8 November 2022 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

## **28 Budget Scrutiny 2023/24**

The Panel considered the draft budget for 2023/24 for the areas within its remit relating to the Environment including Net Zero Plans, Highways, Flooding and Waste.

By way of introduction, the Chief Financial Officer made the following main points:

- Cabinet had agreed the Council's draft budget for 2023/24 on 5 January and a programme of public engagement would run throughout January. Comments from the Overview and Scrutiny Panels would be reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board on 30 January. The draft budget and comments received would be discussed by Cabinet on 2 February and the budget would be agreed at Council on 16 February.
- The Local Government Settlement had been announced on 19 December. It was a one-year settlement and contained net additional grant funding for the County Council of £26.3m. The Government had also published a policy statement which suggested that core funding grants would increase by inflation in 2024/25 and a funding review was anticipated for 2025/26.
- In response to a question from the Panel Chairman, it was confirmed that Worcestershire County Council's settlement was average in relation to other County Councils and this was a good result for the County.
- It was confirmed that this was the last year of the New Homes Bonus which would be replaced next year by a new 'Housing Grant' covering all councils.
- It was proposed that Council Tax would be increased by 2.94%, plus a 2% Adult Social Care Levy, giving a total increase of 4.94%.
- Pressures on the budget included inflation and latent demand in some services such as adult and children's social care and home to school transport. Additional borrowing would support the capital programme and public transport would be supported by the use of reserves.
- The proposed increase in Council Tax would mean an average £1.33 increase per week for a Band D household. The annual cost would be

£266 less than the highest County Council and Worcestershire would remain in the lower quartile.

- Representatives of the County Council would continue to lobby the Government on Fair Funding.
- In response to a Member's question, it was confirmed that, if the Council had proposed increasing Council tax by 4.99% (the maximum allowed by Government), this would have raised an additional £152k and meant an extra 70p per year on Council Tax bills for a Band D property.
- The Council expected that Department for Transport grants would be received by 16 February (the date the Council would set its budget). Lobbying had been to increase grants in line with inflation but this had not yet been confirmed by Government.

The Deputy Chief Finance Officer summarised the draft budget for areas with the remit of this Panel. The following points were raised in the ensuing discussion:

- Members were reminded that the figures in the Cabinet report (included at appendix 2 to the Panel's agenda report) included areas within the remit of the Economy O&S Panel. The total budget for areas within the remit of the Environment O&S Panel was £53,759m.
- The draft budget included a £500k revenue increase for highways maintenance and tree pruning, and a £434k increase in response to increased demand for waste services. It was suggested that this increase in demand was as a result of more houses having been built and more people working at home.
- A further £519k was included for pay inflation and £3.631 for contract inflation (including waste). Further details were given on the investment of £7.4m to rebase budgets to reflect the full cost of waste PFI financing and to remove the use of one-off funding.
- In response to a question from the Chairman, it was confirmed that the service was confident that current levels of income generation via fees and charges for streetworks would be maintained. The amount of income generated had increased due to higher prices and an increase in volume of work.
- In relation to lane pricing, the Strategic Director informed the Panel that a policy paper was currently being refined with a view to bringing it to Corporate Business Board in due course. The Chairman looked forward to hearing further details at a future Panel meeting.
- With reference to vacancy management, there was a Council-wide savings target of 6.5% of the overall salary budget. For service areas within the remit of this Panel, this equated to £981k. In response to a question about what would happen if turnover of staff was less than forecast, Members were reminded that this target covered the Council as a whole. If fewer than expected staff left the organisation, managers would be asked to look at alternative ways of making savings. There was also a buffer in reserves in case the savings target was not met.
- In terms of reporting lines, a number of staff had moved from the remit of this Panel to that of the Economy O&S Panel. It was confirmed that

data in relation to Public Rights of Way would still be considered by the Environment O&S Panel as part of quarterly performance monitoring.

- With reference to contract inflation, it was confirmed that different inflation rates had been used to reflect the different inflationary factors impacting each contract.
- A question was asked about the budget for Development Management. It was confirmed that the figures in the agenda report referred to the net budget and the gross budget was significantly bigger. Most of the budget was offset by income. It was suggested that, for clarity, in future reports it may be helpful to include a column giving the figures for the gross budget.
- The Chairman agreed that it would be helpful to see the full cost and actual number of employees for each service, details that had been considered in previous years via a budget task group. This had not been possible this year due to the late arrival of the Local Government Settlement. He hoped that it would be possible to have a budget task group in future as this approach gave a greater understanding of each department's budget.
- It was confirmed that the £14k savings in Road Lighting would be achieved as a result of vacancy management and energy savings from the ongoing LED conversion programme which was scheduled to be completed by June 2023. The Assistant Director for Highways and Transport Operations confirmed that a trial of solar power for streetlights (and other highways uses) was ongoing and the Panel would be provided with an update when available. It was confirmed that all LED lights were switched on for the hours of darkness.
- The currently approved capital programme for the Environment totalled £174m. It was confirmed that the Pavement Improvement Programme was in addition to funding available for maintenance. It also excluded contributions from local members.
- Members were reminded that the use of solar power and other renewable energy infrastructure by the Council would be part of the corporate budget via property services. The Council acted as the administrator of grants to business to improve energy efficiency.
- The Panel was informed that the draft budget for areas within the remit of the Economy O&S Panel was similar in that it included investment in relation to contract and pay inflation and a target for vacancy management.

The Chairman summarised the discussion as follows. The Panel felt that this was a good budget for the environment and for Worcestershire and welcomed the unexpected additional grant funding from central Government. Members also welcomed the Cabinet's continued commitment to funding the Pavement Improvement Programme, flood mitigation measures and LED street lighting.

However, concerns remained about particular service areas which the Panel had identified through its quarterly monitoring of performance information, including Public Rights of Way and the backlog of Definitive Map Modification Orders (DMMOs), and issues relating to Section 278s.

Overall, the Panel welcomed the budget proposals. Looking forward to 2023/24 budget scrutiny, the Chairman requested that a budget task group be set up to allow more in-depth consideration of proposed budgets. The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Members and Officers for their help and assistance.

## 29 Highways Innovations Update

The Panel had requested an update on new developments and efficiencies in highway maintenance which could benefit Worcestershire residents. Representatives of Ringway, the Council's Highways Maintenance Contractor, attended along with the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Highways and Transport and Senior Officers from the Economy and Infrastructure Directorate.

The Panel received a presentation from the Divisional Director, Ringway. In the course of the presentation and the ensuing discussion, the following main points were made:

- Representatives of Ringway had previously attended a meeting of the Economy and Environment O&S Panel in January 2020. The presentation covered action since then and followed up on information previously requested by the Panel.
- The Panel had previously been informed that defective repairs would be redone at the contractor's expense. It was agreed that confirmation of how many repairs this had applied to would be provided after the meeting.
- It was confirmed that all asphalt repairs were carried out using AC (Asphaltic Concrete) surface course (6mm or 10mm) which had a 99% success rate. All repairs conformed to British Standard.
- In response to a Member's question, it was confirmed that a new JCB machine had been trialled in the County but, although it was a useful piece of equipment, it was not felt to be right for the conditions in Worcestershire.
- Members were told about a footway workshop that had taken place in June 2022. The Panel was told about the benefits of micro asphalt and Ringway's ambition to move towards self-delivery rather than bringing in a supply chain partner. With reference to Recofoam (a recycled binder course), Ringway now used very little virgin binder course leading to a large reduction in carbon footprint.
- The Chairman asked for figures to show how much more warm asphalt had been used compared to hot asphalt over the past three years. It was agreed that this data would be provided after the meeting.
- It was also agreed that figures would be provided for the past three years showing the percentage of recycled material used to allow trends to be identified.
- Members were briefed on the use of E-Tech, a machine which ensured that the correct temperature was maintained when using warm asphalt reducing the risk of a job failing. This was ground-breaking technology and was currently being trialled in Worcestershire.

- The pros and cons of the different materials available for highway maintenance were discussed as outlined in the agenda papers.
- It was agreed that details of the Highways Maintenance Service Contract KPIs and associated data would be circulated to the Panel so that trends could be identified. It was confirmed that there was no cash reward for meeting KPIs. Instead, the contractor had the opportunity to earn contract extensions up to a total of 6 years. Earning extensions as the contract progressed (rather than at the end) aided forward planning for both parties. Members were informed that there were three 'Gateway KPIs' which had to be met before other KPIs would be looked at. To date the contractor had been successful in achieving extensions and had recently been awarded a further extension year to extend the current contract end date to 30 September 2025. The latest possible end date was 30 September 2026.
- Members were reminded about the use of 'Intelliframe', a sign which amended its message according to the start and end point of the road closure permit. It also sent a signal to update sat navs about road closures. The Chairman suggested that this was a good news story and felt it would be useful to issue a joint media release to make residents aware.
- He went on to suggest that communication with the public could also be improved by indicating on road closed signs the point at which the road was actually closed. Currently, this was not always clear leading to members of the public making unnecessary diversions. Anything that would improve communication with the public would be welcomed.
- With reference to new efficiencies and developments in highway maintenance, the Panel was told about root cutting and pipe sleeving work that was being carried out by a third party. It was agreed that warranty arrangements in relation to this work would be confirmed following the meeting.
- Other efficiencies and developments included asset management data collection, the use of drones for inspection of structures and bridges, laser cutting of paving materials, the use of a pontoon for bridgeworks and a remote-controlled compaction plant.
- Members were informed about the more extensive use of body cams by the Ringway workforce to provide greater protection. An anti-abuse campaign had also been run and was supported by the County Council. The Chairman informed the Panel about his recent very positive interactions with Ringway staff.
- The importance of disseminating information to Councillors about planned works in their divisions in advance of works starting was highlighted. Members were reminded about the weekly publication of 'Highways on Fridays' which listed planned works for the forthcoming week. Further consideration was also being given to alternative methods of communication (such as WhatsApp) which would allow dynamic communication with Councillors.
- A Member suggested that, although current information to Councillors was good, it would also be useful to hear about planned works in neighbouring divisions that might have a wider impact.
- The Chairman recommended the use of OneNetwork which showed road closures across the County. However, he suggested that it should

be updated more regularly as it currently indicated a road closure for the full length of the permit even though the work may have already been completed.

- The Panel was informed about the increased focus on the environmental impact of highways maintenance including the introduction of electric vehicles and the focus on reducing emissions. The Panel requested further information on carbon reduction including future plans and net zero targets.
- It was confirmed that Members should go through the correct channels with respect to specific highways maintenance concerns in their division. All contact should be through the Highways Liaison Officer.

In summarising the discussion, the Chairman noted that highlighting innovation and improved efficiencies in highways maintenance was a good news story. He went on to make the following points:

- Better communication with the public via on-site signage and information on the County Council's website should be a focus, allowing residents to 'self-serve' as far as possible.
- Although 'Highways on Fridays' was useful, the service worked several months ahead and allowing Councillors access to longer-term plans should be considered (on the understanding that plans may change).
- The Panel would welcome a further update in due course.

## **30 Work Programme**

Members discussed the Panel's work programme for 2022/23. It was agreed that:

- The draft Rail Investment Strategy would be removed from the work programme as it came within the remit of the Economy O&S Panel
- Road Diversion Signs would be considered in May 2023
- The update on Street Lighting would be considered in July 2023 and should include an update on the LED roll out
- An update on the Councils approach to Solar Power generation and use would be considered in July 2023
- An update on Buses would be considered in September 2023
- An update on the Net Zero Plan would be considered in November 2023

Members were reminded that:

- The Children and Families O&S Panel would be considering Home to School Transport on 22 March 2023 and all Members of the Environment O&S Panel were invited to attend.
- A pre-meeting (for Panel Members only) was held before each Panel meeting to allow preparation of lines of enquiry. If Members were not able to attend the pre-meeting, it would be helpful if they could submit in advance any questions they would like to ask.

The meeting ended at 5.06 pm

Chairman .....