

Minutes of the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel

County Hall, Worcester

Thursday, 14 March 2024, 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Alastair Adams (Chairman), Cllr Tony Muir (Vice Chairman),
Cllr Dan Boatright-Greene, Cllr Andrew Cross, Cllr Emma Marshall,
Cllr Beverley Nielsen, Cllr David Ross and Cllr Emma Stokes

Also attended:

Cllr Richard Morris, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Environment
Rachel Hill, Assistant Director for Economy, Major Projects and Waste
Steph Simcox, Deputy Chief Finance Officer
Richard Woodward, Waste Services Manager
Dave Corbett, Lead Analyst (Performance)
Samantha Morris, Interim Democratic Governance 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 25 January 2024 (previously circulated).

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

71 Apologies and Welcome

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

No apologies had been received.

72 Declarations of Interest and of any Party Whip

In relation to agenda item 5, Councillor Marshall declared that she was a member of the Carbon Reduction and Biodiversity Member Advisory Group.

73 Public Participation

There was one public participant, Councillor Jill Desayrah (Worcester City Council), who put forward concerns in relation to safety at the zebra crossing on Windermere Drive, Worcester. She also presented a petition which called upon the County Council to replace the zebra crossing with a light-controlled pelican crossing. The petition also called upon the Council to carry out a proper road safety assessment on the roundabout at the junction between Blackpole Road and Windermere Drive, and to take extra measures to improve pedestrian safety. Edward Kimberley and Councillor Lynn Denham also spoke in support of Councillor Desayrah.

The Chairman thanked the speakers for the petition and their comments and confirmed that they would receive a written response.

74 Confirmation of the Minutes of the previous meeting

At the Chairman's suggestion, it was agreed that, for accuracy, page 6 of the Minutes of the previous meeting should be amended as follows:

- Bullet point 6 to read: 'In response to a suggestion that there may be interest in learning how to lower costs in HTST from external companies the Officers advised that this was a possibility, however the Council was a front runner in use of route optimisation software, which was very successful.'
- The first sentence of bullet point 10 to read: 'When asked whether a Council owned fleet of vehicles would save money, the AD for Highways and Transport Operations explained the Council was looking to develop the commercial market as well as maximising route optimisation.'

Subject to the above amendments, the Minutes of the meeting held on 25 January 2024 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

75 Environment Act Developments

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Environment, the Assistant Director for Economy, Major Projects and Waste, and the Waste Services Manager had been invited to the meeting to update the Panel on developments relating to the Environment Act 2021.

By way of introduction, the Cabinet Member reminded the Panel that the Environment Act was a massive piece of legislation which covered a very wide remit across biodiversity, air quality and waste management. Work was now underway on some areas covered by the Act. However, for others, further guidance from central government was awaited.

Members were informed that further details on progress relating to biodiversity and the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) would be provided to the Panel in a further update in July 2024. The Chairman noted that the LNRS had been discussed at Cabinet in November 2023 and asked for an update on what actions had been agreed. The County Council was the designated lead

authority and had a responsibility to work with partners, including district councils and Natural England. It was confirmed that an issues and options consultation had been undertaken. Although initially over 100 responses had been received, these were mainly from landowners and the Council was also keen to hear from schools and local communities at a smaller/micro level. To this end students from Worcester University were working with local communities in Warndon (Worcester) and Westlands (Droitwich) to get their views on nature and how things could be improved.

The Panel was invited to ask questions and the following main points were raised:

Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)

- It was suggested that the requirement for all planning applications to deliver a minimum of 10% Biodiversity Net Gain from April 2024 was a huge task. It was confirmed that this would be within the remit of the Council's Ecology Team and further details would be provided to the Panel in July.
- In response to a question about the Council's approach to Biodiversity Net Gain (including the use of habitat banks and unit trading), Members were informed that further details would be included in the update in July.
- The number of Council-owned farms would be confirmed following the meeting.
- It was confirmed that developers' proposals for Biodiversity Net Gain, including whether these related to land within the site, elsewhere in the county or out of county, needed to be demonstrated at the planning stage. It may be that there was a role for County Council-owned land in this context.
- Further details of the work being undertaken by students from Worcester University were requested. It was confirmed that they were carrying out analysis with community and residents' groups and local schools which would feed into the overall strategy. Confirmation of whether district councillors had been approached to support this community engagement would be provided following the meeting.
- In relation to the further update in July, the following information was requested:
 - What methodology was used for data collection?
 - Details of liaison with landowners (including households with large gardens).
 - What was the sampling strategy?
 - What was the evidence base?
 - How will the 10% net gain be measured? What statistical method will be used?
 - Will capture vs emission be considered?
- It was suggested that the requirements in relation to BNG could provide a huge opportunity for the County Council, something that was already being explored by other local authorities and partners. The Cabinet Member confirmed that the Council was working with partner organisations in this area.

- In response to a question about why the LNRS issues and options consultation had been extended and how it could be ensured that there were no duplicate responses, Members were informed that the directorate had been keen to gain additional responses and there was sufficient time for the deadline to be extended to allow for this. Analysis of responses was now underway and it would be relatively easy to identify any duplicates given the small numbers.
- A question was asked about how proposals and action for BNG would be monitored over time, given that they must be maintained for a minimum of 30 years. In response, the Panel was informed that further secondary guidance was awaited on this.

Air Quality

- A question was asked about issues relating to parking and traffic flow which had impacted air quality at a specific location in Evesham. The Cabinet Member confirmed that the County Council contributed to the air quality management plan and reminded the Panel that different solutions would work at different locations.
- More details on the County Council's additional responsibilities under the Environment Act in relation to air quality would be included in the July update.
- It was suggested that further information should be provided to residents in relation to the impact of parking and idling cars on air quality (ensuring that this was done in a way that would not alarm people). The Cabinet Member agreed to raise this at a forthcoming meeting with public health colleagues.
- The Cabinet Member reminded Members that a survey on air quality in Worcestershire was currently being undertaken and would run until 12 May. It was agreed that a link to the survey would be circulated to Panel Members in order to encourage further engagement.
- The importance of helping and supporting bus companies in the move to greener transport was noted.
- A Member suggested that citizen science had a role to play in this area and informed the Panel about his experience of using a portable air quality monitor. He went on to suggest that there was a real opportunity to link this with public health messaging.

Waste

- Further details were provided on the funding streams available to support the introduction of food waste collection. Capital transition funding would include money for new vehicles, kitchen caddies and kerbside boxes. Transitional resource funding would include funding for communication with residents, a team to implement the changes and the distribution of bins. There would also be ongoing resource (revenue) funding. It was confirmed that the funding would go to the waste collection authorities ie the district councils.
- It was confirmed that, although there were currently no anaerobic digesters in Worcestershire, three were situated close to the county border and a further facility was in development (at the planning stage)

in Worcester City. The Cabinet Member reminded the Panel that a task and finish group had been set up (including district council members and officers) to agree a 'one Worcestershire' approach moving forward. The task and finish group had been asked by the Leaders' Board to develop a lobby paper. A key decision to be made related to whether waste should be moved direct from the kerbside to anaerobic digesters or whether collection/distribution points should be set up. There were pros and cons to each approach. A Member suggested that a sensible solution would be to develop collection points, although acknowledged that this would involve additional capital costs. It was suggested that the Council should lobby for these costs to be covered by government centrally.

- A Member of the Panel pointed out that the best approach would be for residents to avoid creating food waste in the first place and highlighted that advice on this was available on social media.
- Another Member reminded the Panel that the food waste collected could provide a potential source of revenue and asked whether any such revenue would be shared with the district councils. It was confirmed that these discussions had not yet taken place as decisions about the system of collection and transfer had still to be taken.
- It was confirmed that, in developing the food waste collection system, officers would work with Severn Waste (whose current contract would run until 2029). Members were informed that forecasting the volume of food waste involved was a big challenge.
- A Member suggested that there needed to be a cultural shift to change behaviour in relation to food waste, noting that the availability of relatively cheap food had an impact on cultural attitudes. Another Member noted the importance of promoting messages in schools, with children taking these views home to influence their parents.
- It was noted that the development of a Deposit Return Scheme may have an impact on the EnviroSort facility by removing a proportion of the high value recycling. It was confirmed that this had been accounted for in planning.
- In relation to caddy liners (for food waste caddies), it was suggested that initial funding may be made available although the full details of funding were not yet clear. A Member suggested that the use of a conventional plastic bag rather than a biodegradable bag may make it easier for the anaerobic digestion facility to extract the food waste.

The Chairman thanked those attending for their contribution and looked forward to the further update on developments in July.

76 Performance and 2023-24 In-Year Budget Monitoring

The Panel was updated on performance and financial information for services relating to the Environment.

Performance Information Q3 (October to December 2023)

The Chairman noted that this was the first time that the Panel had been able to access performance information via Power BI with a link to the relevant

webpages having been included in the agenda papers. The Lead Analyst confirmed that this would allow Members to choose how to view the information, eg more visually in chart form, by comparing data across time or focussing on one area. It was noted that the Power BI version did not include the commentary that was presented in the agenda report. For future meetings, the Lead Analyst agreed to include the commentary as a 'tool tip' in Power BI.

It was confirmed that the Power BI version contained exactly the same information as the agenda report and this was publicly available information. It was not currently possible for Members to 'drill down' into more detailed information and it would be a large task involving numerous data sources to facilitate this. Moving forwards, it would be important for a collective approach to be taken across all scrutiny bodies via the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board (OSPB). It was confirmed that, although the information shared for Panel meetings was publicly available, Members could also access other (non-public) information as necessary.

Members were invited to ask questions and the following main points were raised:

- A question was asked about the maintenance and cleaning of highways signage. The Panel was informed that this would be covered via the highway maintenance contract and concerns would be fed back to the contractor. It was confirmed that the current highway maintenance contract would run until October 2026 (if all extension periods were earned). Members were reminded that specific concerns should be reported via the member portal.
- In terms of highway maintenance, it was confirmed that active travel routes were not specifically prioritised.
- The Chairman reminded the Panel that he had previously requested data on how many potholes needed to be refilled within 90 days of an initial repair and this information had not yet been provided. It was important to ensure that the Council was getting value for money from the contract.
- It was confirmed that the development of the new highway maintenance contract was at an early stage and the Panel agreed that it would wish to be involved in this process in due course, via an informal Panel meeting to provide Member feedback.
- It was suggested that monthly 'review' meetings between Members, Officers and representatives of the contractor should be set up to discuss ongoing highways maintenance issues identified by Members.
- The Chairman expressed concern about the way the member portal was currently working, noting that some issues had been deleted or not taken forward.
- With reference to data on the percentage of waste reused, recycled or composted, it was suggested that it would be helpful to include actual data (in kgs) as well as the percentage figure. The Panel was informed that, although these figures were available, this was not the standard way to presenting the data. The Waste Services Manager agreed to discuss this further with Councillor Stokes following the meeting.

- It was confirmed that data relating to the Public Enquiry Management System (PEMS) related to issues raised by the public, with the categories allocated accordingly. Concern was expressed about the categories used and the Lead Analyst agreed to meet Councillor Muir following the meeting to clarify.
- Councillor Muir asked a specific question relating to manhole covers in his local area and the Assistant Director for Economy, Major Projects and Waste agreed to follow this up after the meeting.
- It was noted that the largest number of PEMS enquiries related to drainage and a question was asked about how many gullies had not been cleansed in the last four years. It was agreed that a response would be provided after the meeting.
- The Chairman welcomed the improvement in the condition of highways and thanked all those involved in this.
- He went on to express concern about the data in relation to Section 278s and asked that the latest version of the master spreadsheet be sent to him following the meeting.
- In response to a question about the contamination of recycling, Members were informed that this would be recorded at district council level.
- Although concern was expressed about the increase in the number of outstanding Public Rights of Way (PROW) reports, the increase in the number of issues resolved by volunteers was welcomed. The Chairman asked that the use of volunteers be promoted more widely.
- The Chairman welcomed the inclusion of data for the number of Public Path Orders (PPOs) being progressed and it was confirmed that, going forward, historical data would also be included.

In-Year Budget Monitoring

The Panel received information relating to Q3 (Period 9). The following main points were made:

- At the end of December, the Council's net overspend was forecast at £19.2m after the use of one-off monies, reflecting an exceptionally large increase in costs for demand-led services, set against a constrained ability to raise additional income. The structural deficit was £35m.
- In response to a question about Section 106 money, the Panel was informed that it had been taken into account in the figures provided. It was confirmed that this money was accounted for in the year it was received.
- In relation to the £8.99m overspend on home to school transport, it was agreed that the following information would be provided following the meeting:
 - How much had been offset, ie what was the gross position?
 - How much Section 106 money had been included?
 - What was the income from the vacant seat scheme?
- With reference to savings, 76% were rated as green (delivered or expected to be fully delivered). The main reason for delay in the remaining savings related to the vacancy management target which was a corporate issue.

- The current value of the Capital Programme totalled £390m.
- Members were reminded about management actions that had been put in place to control spending across the council to reduce the deficit in the current financial year.
- The required refresh of the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) had been approved by Council. It was noted that this was an extremely difficult time for local government.
- In relation to the revenue position, it was noted that figures for Home to School Transport were displayed separately.

Members were invited to ask questions and the following main points were raised:

- It was agreed that, for future meetings, historical budget information in relation to Home to School Transport would be added to Power BI.
- Following a discussion on the use of capital and revenue budgets, the Deputy Chief Finance Officer agreed to discuss this further with Councillor Stokes following the meeting.

77 Refresh of the Scrutiny Work Programme 2024-25

Members were invited to consider suggestions for the Panel’s 2024/25 work programme prior to it being submitted to Council for approval.

Members were reminded that Panel Members were invited to attend meetings of Children and Families O&S Panel when Home to School Transport was discussed.

The Panel confirmed that it was content with the draft work programme for submission to OSPB for consideration on 25 April.

The meeting ended at 12.23 pm

Chairman