

Environment Overview Committee

Minutes of a meeting held at County Hall,
Colliton Park, Dorchester on 28 March 2013

Present:

Robin Cook (Chairman)
Rebecca Knox (Vice-Chairman)
Richard Biggs, David Budd, Ian Gardner, Mike Lovell and John Wilson.

Peter Finney and Robert Gould attended under Standing Order 54(1).

Officers attending:

Miles Butler (Director for Environment), Mike Harries (Head of Dorset Property, Deputy Director), Steve Hedges (Group Finance Manager) and David Northover (Senior Democratic Services Officer).

For certain items, as appropriate:

Don Gobbett (Head of Planning), Andrew Martin (Head of Dorset Highways Operations, Mike Winter (Head of Dorset Highways Management), John Alexander (Policy and Performance Manager), Mike Harden (Chief Engineer), Dugald Lockhart (Policy Lead, Superfast Dorset), Helen Owens (Group Manager), Gill Smith (Senior Planning Officer), Gordon Sneddon (Group Manager) and Jan Stevenson (Business Manager).

Apologies for Absence

54. Apologies for absence were received from Les Ames, David C Fox, Peter Hall, Mervyn Jeffery, and Peter Richardson.

Code of Conduct

55. There were no declarations of personal or disclosable pecuniary interests by members under the Code of Conduct.

Minutes

56. The minutes of the meeting held on 10 January 2013 were confirmed and signed.

Draft Policies for Signs on the Highway

57.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director for Environment which sought approval for a range of policies covering the placement of various signs on the highway which were designed to establish some common objectives within these policies such as minimising clutter on the highway, supporting traffic management, promoting safety on the highway and supporting local businesses.

57.2 Member's attention was drawn to the four categories of signage policy and requirements and officers explained that the opportunity was being taken to rationalise those policies on signage which already existed and make them more meaningful and fit for purpose and which might be consolidated in one opportunity.

57.3 Whilst understanding the principle of why this was necessary, one member considered that the opportunity should be given to town and parish councils being consulted on this and play some part in shaping the way in which it operated before being formally adopted.

57.4 However the Committee were reminded that these were not brand new initiatives, but rather policies which already existed and were now being made more robust, relevant and applicable. Officers confirmed that as signage was a Highway Authority responsibility, there was no formal requirement for the views of town or parish councils to be sought, but officers were mindful that for this policy to work, there was a need to engage with all interested parties.

57.5 Accordingly, the views of respective Chambers of Trade and businesses had been sought but, as yet, no responses had been received. Officers agreed to revisit this at the earliest opportunity in order determine if they wished to make comment so that these might be reported to the Cabinet on 3 April 2013.

57.6 Members suggested some minor variations to the wording of particular aspects of the policies which officers duly took into account, particularly in respect of "A" Boards, so as to provide for the inclusion of all variations of these.

57.7 Members considered that the opportunity should still be given to town and parish councils to express any views they wished to make on the policies, once these had been implemented, so that these might be taken into consideration in any future review. Those councils should also be made aware of the part they might play in these policies being enforced and how that might be achieved.

57.8 Members discussed the way in which information regarding how "A" Boards should be displayed was disseminated to businesses and traders so that they were aware of their responsibilities and what was acceptable. Officers confirmed that arrangements would be put in place to ensure that this was the case.

57.9 With regard to unauthorised signage, discussion took place on how lay-bys were being used in this regard and what options were open to the County Council to regulate this if necessary. Officers assured the Committee that they would remain diligent in the way in which these were regulated so as to avoid any abuse of, or advantage being taken of, the system.

57.10 The Committee were minded to recommend the draft policies to the Cabinet on the basis of the provisions set out in the Director's report, taking into account the comments Members had asked to be taken into consideration.

57.11 The Committee appreciated the way in which this rationalisation was adopting a "light touch" approach to the way in which the policies were being applied so as to provide a balance between highway management and the opportunity for appropriate publicity to be given to events and the means by which the public might be directed there in traffic management terms.

Recommended

58. That the Cabinet be asked to approve the policy and requirements for the following:-

- "A" Board Advertising Signs
- Temporary Event Direction Signs
- Tourism Signs
- Unauthorised Signs

Reason for Recommendation

59. In order to progress the corporate aim to safeguard Dorset's unique environment and to provide a more consistent approach to sign enforcement across the County.

The Dorset Heathlands Joint Development Plan Document

60.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director for Environment on the Dorset Heathlands Development Plan Document (DPD) which was designed to set the policy framework for the protection of European and International sites and was being prepared by the South East Dorset local authorities. A consultation document had been published which identified the preferred options of the Councils.

60.2 Members were informed that the County Council had been party to the production of the document although it had no statutory responsibility for this type of DPD. The suggested response to the consultation was based on the wider interests of the Council.

60.3 Officers explained that the main issues for the Council were the possible implications for future infrastructure funding across South East Dorset that might arise as a result of prioritising limited funds from the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) on heathland avoidance and mitigation. Concerns were also raised in respect of the lack of any policy requiring future monitoring and review of the strategy.

60.4 Officers explained that the aim of the DPD was to set the policy framework for such developments to proceed in close proximity to designated heathland and there would be a requirement for a means of alternative recreational land to be made available so as to divert use away from the heath. Clarification was provided that there was not provision however for increasing either the availability of, or the development of more, heathland.

60.5 The Committee expressed a preference for Option 1 of the two visions that had been put forward as the response to the consultation.

60.6 Members were informed of the objectives of the DPD and the reasons why it was being prepared and set the background for the long term strategy and policies which were to follow. The Strategy and Policies were also set out for the Committee's consideration.

60.7 Whilst, generally, members understood that there was a need for a framework such as this to provide protection of the heath, other members did not necessarily wish to see an expansion of the heath at the detriment of productive agricultural land or sustainable development. They considered that the way in which heathland was designated could be seen to have too much of an influence on the ability to provide for permitted development but understood there was little that could be done to change this.

60.8 Officers confirmed that this document was not designed to replace heathland or increase its availability but rather was designed to provide for alternative recreational space.

Recommended

61. That that Cabinet be asked to approve the content of the Director's report as the basis of a response to the South East Dorset Heathland Partnership.

Reason for Recommendation

62. To support the County Council's aim to safeguard and enhance Dorset's unique environment and support our local economy.

Corporate Performance Monitoring Report Third Quarter 2012-13 and Draft 2013-14 Refresh of the Budget and Corporate Plan

63.1 The Committee considered a joint report by the Chief Executive and the Director for Environment which presented the results of the monitoring of the County Council's Budget and Corporate Plan for the third quarter of 2012/13, with a specific focus on those elements of the plan which were managed by the Environment Directorate. The report also contained analysis of the Council's progress against all five of its corporate aims and presented the Corporate Balanced Scorecard.

63.2 The Policy and Performance Manager drew members' attention particularly to the work and budget of the Environment Directorate, which was largely encapsulated in Aim 4 of the plan.

63.3 Members were informed that at the end of the second quarter the performance indicators in the Budget and Corporate Plan had an average "amber" (0% - 5% off target) rating. The percentage of indicators that were meeting their targets had fallen slightly, from 61% in quarter 2 to 56% in quarter 3. 73% of actions were on course. The forecast overspend for the whole authority had now reduced to £651,000.

63.4 Regarding performance indicators for the Directorate, Aim 4 had an average "amber" rating, with 74% of actions being on course. Aim 4 budgets were currently projected to be underspent by £110k in spite of pressure due to the effects of flooding, but the heavy snowfall in January 2013 was likely to have had an adverse impact on this. The Dorset Waste Partnership budget had a forecast overspend of £594k for 2012-13.

63.5 The Policy and Performance Manager explained the detail behind the reasons for red performance indicators and answered a series of questions raised by members on specific elements of the report.

63.6 Clarification was also provided that EN1 of Aim 4, relating to 'Support the local economy, including making the most of the Olympic and Paralympic Games', on page 7 of the report, should be coloured green, instead of red, in the spend column. The Head of Planning also explained that performance of EN6 had been seemingly affected by some delays which had been experienced in the processing of County Matter planning applications as a result of a significant suite of applications from Perenco pertaining to future production arrangements at Wytch Farm oilfield which required processing.

63.7 In response to a question on the Superfast Broadband tender process by the Vice-Chairman on how the technical solution for rural areas was being applied, the Project Lead explained that the tender was targeted at suppliers who had pre-qualified through the national framework contract. Where details did not breach contract confidentially, they would be made available on the website.

63.8 He also confirmed that a range of solutions were currently being considered for rural areas, but were dependent with their compliance with the necessary Government framework. Analysis was being undertaken to ensure that the needs of rural Dorset broadband users were taken into account and suitable provision made, whilst also building into the process the necessary flexibility and scope for such provision. These solutions

would then be considered on their individual merit. However, he confirmed that a lot of information was already available about the project, including a map showing current coverage and the intervention area the project would focus on.

63.9 The Policy and Performance Manager then also took the opportunity to draw the Committees attention to the draft Budget and Corporate Plan for 2013-14 which reflected those budget agreed by the County Council at their February 2013 meeting.

Noted

Revenue Budget Monitoring 2012/13, including MFC Update

64.1 The Committee considered a report by the Chief Financial Officer which showed budget monitoring information as at the end of 31 January 2013 and which showed a projected overspend against all service budgets for the County Council of £4,392,000. For the Environment Directorate this represented a projected overspend of £263,600, or 0.7% of the budget, for the year. The latest figures showed that this had since been reduced to an overspend of £230,000 at the end of February 2013.

64.2 The Committee noted how this proposed overspend had arisen and the Services to which this was attributable. Particular mention was made of the proposed carry forward of £12,000 for Planning, to be used to fund a strategic landscape and visual assessment for Navitus Bay Wind Farm. Accordingly there were no projects with a red status against the Environment Directorate's Meeting Future Challenges Programme objectives for 2012/13 and only three with an amber status, all of which were listed and an explanation provided for each.

64.3 The Head of Planning took the opportunity to explain to the Committee what the carry forward funding for Navitus Bay Wind Farm would be used for and how it would be applied and considered that this would be a sufficient amount to achieve all that was necessary. Members welcomed the use of the carry forward for this purpose.

64.4 Following an observation by one member, confirmation was provided that there were four categories with amber status, and confirmed that these included " EN-089 - On Street Parking – Christchurch and Weymouth and Portland On Street Parking Agency" and " EN-052 - Streetlighting".

Recommended

65. That the Cabinet be asked to agree the carry forward proposal of £12,000 for Planning, to be used to fund a strategic landscape and visual assessment for Navitus Bay Wind Farm, which was outlined in Section 3 of the Chief Financial Officer's report.

Reason for Recommendation

66. That close monitoring of the budget position was an essential requirement to ensure that money and resources were used efficiently and effectively.

Developer Led Infrastructure – Section 278 Schemes

67.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director for Environment on arrangements associated with development led infrastructure and which set out an update on outstanding Section 278 schemes, this information having been requested by members at their meeting on 29 March 2012, in order that progress of these might be monitored. The Director's report now provided that opportunity and detailed the progress being made in resolving those outstanding issues.

67.2 The report provided a list of those Section 278 schemes which were outstanding and explained how these were being managed and the status of each of them.

67.3 The Committee were pleased to have been provided with a better understanding of these arrangements.

Noted

Citizen's Panel Survey 28

68.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director for Environment on the findings of the Citizens' Panel Survey 28, which received 3,119 online and posted responses, which represented a response rate of 60.8%.

68.2 Members noted that on this occasion the evidence gathered covered the following areas of County Council and NHS activity:-

- Access to Council Information and Services,
- Future Provision of County Council Services,
- Budget Strategy 2013-14,
- Transport Planning,
- Dorset History Centre,
- Dorset's Library Service, and
- Community Based services (NHS questions).

68.3 As part of an exercise to establish which services the Citizen's Panel most valued, the two categories of most significance to the Committee, relating to highway maintenance and public transport provision, both featured prominently in what the Citizen's Panel considered to be of greatest priority of those services the Authority provided. The way in which the highway network was both perceived and valued was apparent from the responses received, both in terms of it fulfilling a specific function and in providing the means for other services to be accessed and in generating economic growth.

68.4 The Committee recognised that the responses received were, on this occasion, largely from an older demographic profile. Efforts were being maintained to ensure that a more representative cross section of society contributed to future responses. Ways in which this might be achieved were discussed including the use of social media.

68.5 The Committee were pleased that the highway network appeared to be highly valued and that it was recognised to make a significant contribution to the benefit of Dorset.

Noted

Corporate Geographical Information Systems (GIS) Strategy 2013-17

69.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director for Environment on the Corporate Geographical Information Systems (GIS) Strategy 2013-17, consideration of which had previously been deferred by the Cabinet at their meeting on 6 March 2013 in order to provide the opportunity for consideration and comment by the Overview Committees and the Audit and Scrutiny Committee so that this would shape the Cabinet's final decision.

69.2 Officers explained that the GIS Strategy outlined the aim and objectives for the provision and use of GIS across Dorset County Council and its partners, this being designed to deliver an improved service that was both fit for purpose and provided value for money. The objective was that the Authority had an opportunity to maximise its use of spatial data which would contribute towards efficiency savings.

69.3 The Vice-Chairman queried how such efficiencies might be measured and quantified and, consequently, how any anticipated improved performance might be monitored. Officers considered that as GIS was essentially a means of enabling other facets of the Authority to more readily access information, the ability to quantify efficiencies was not readily apparent, but that this could be more effectively identified through the management systems operating within each Directorate. It was recognised however that such a system would contribute towards Directorates being able to achieve the optimum delivery of their Service.

69.4 Members considered this to be an essential system to complement a progressive Authority and one upon which all services might draw. It provided a critical role in presenting information about the County Council's functions to external customers and its applications were acknowledged.

69.5 Consequently, Members considered that investment in GIS should be maintained.

Recommended

70. That the Cabinet be asked to approve the Corporate GIS Strategy.

Reason for Recommendation

71. To ensure a consistent and integrated approach to the use of and implementation of GIS and spatial data to support the Corporate Plan.

Policy Development Panel on Home to School Transport

72.1 The Committee considered a joint report by the Acting Director for Children's Services and the Director for Environment on future arrangements for home to school transport provision in Dorset.

72.2 Members were reminded that the Cabinet had approved the reconstitution of the Policy Development Panel on Home to School Transport in January 2013, this having been once again established to ensure that Dorset's Home to School Transport Policy was up to date and reflected the latest national policy and took into account any necessary legislative changes.

72.3 The Panel had met between January and March 2013 to consider changes to the Policy, and recommended the following:-

- improvements to some of the terminology used,
- removal of inconsistencies,
- changing the sixth form section to reflect the raising of the participation age (RPA),
- clarification about concessionary seats arrangements,
- raising the cost of a concessionary seat to £450,
- removing the requirement to apply annually for a concessionary seat if a young person was already using one, and
- reducing the number of criteria for a concessionary seat.

72.4 Members' agreement was now being sought for ratification of the new Home to School Transport Policy which would then be published on the Dorsetforyou.com website and used for the allocation of seats in the new academic school year, starting in September 2013.

72.5 In answer to one member's question, officers clarified that whilst the mandatory school leaving age had now been raised from 16 to 17, there was no additional funding available for local authorities to take account for this in the consideration of concessionary travel provision.

72.6 One member queried the use of terminology in how "reasonable / unreasonable" could be defined. Officers explained that this terminology was habitually used by those other authorities which operated best practice and in which arrangements had operated successfully. There was therefore no reason to believe that similar arrangements could not also be operated successfully in Dorset.

72.7 Officers confirmed that advice would be given to those parents applying for school places of how the new arrangements would be applied in order to enable them to make decisions regarding schooling arrangements for their children.

72.8 The Committee took the opportunity to agree that no new policy development panels were necessary to be established at this time.

Recommended

73. That the Cabinet be asked to approve the newly updated Home to School Transport Policy, as set out in Appendix A to the Director's joint report.

Reason for Recommendation

74. To ensure that Dorset's Home to School Transport Policy reflected current national policy.

Environment Overview Committee Work Programme

75. The Committee considered and agreed its work programme for the remainder of 2013.

Noted

Schedule of Members' Seminars and Events 2013

76. The Committee's attention was drawn to the Schedule of Members' Seminars and Events for 2013.

Noted

Member Briefings

77. The Committee were provided with the opportunity to submit requests for issues they would wish to see the subject of future Member briefings, in order to have a better understanding about what were the headline issues for the Directorate or how certain issues were being dealt with. As part of the arrangements for this, all members would be able to participate by way of telephone conferencing provision.

Noted

Questions

78. No questions were asked by members under Standing Order 20(2).

Acknowledgement

79. As this was the last meeting of the Committee before the County Council elections in May 2013, the Chairman took the opportunity to thank members and officers for

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their contribution to the work of the Committee since its inception and wished them every success in the future. The Director thanked the Chairman for the way in which he had conducted the business of the Committee in that time.

Meeting duration
10.00am – 12 noon

