

Minutes of the Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at Walsall Council House

Tuesday, 27 February 2024 at 6.00p.m.

Committee Members present: Councillor M Follows (Chair)
Councillor P Bott
Councillor S Cheema
Councillor A Hicken
Councillor P Gill
Councillor R Larden
Councillor M Ward
Councillor J Whitehouse

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Bird – Leader of the Council
Councillor G Flint – Wellbeing, Leisure and Public Spaces
Councillor K Murphy – Street Pride

Officers Present: Katie Moreton - Director of Place & Environment
David Elrington – Head of Community Safety and Enforcement
Paul Gordon – Director of Resilient Communities
Richard McVittie - Healthy Spaces Community Development Officer - North
Matt Powis – Senior Democratic Services Officer

51. **Apologies**

An apology was received from Councillor P Kaur.

52. **Substitutions**

There were no substitutions.

53. **Declarations of Interest and Party Whip**

There were no declarations of interest or party whip.

54. **Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)**

There were no items to consider in private session.

55. **Minutes**

A copy of the Minutes of the meeting held on the 16 January 2024 was submitted. [annexed]

A Member sought clarification on the number and location of leaflets for Darlaston South in respect of Minute No. 47, Off-Road Vehicles – Updates. In response, the Senior Democratic Services Officer confirmed that he would provide a response in writing.

Resolved

That, the minutes of the meeting held on 16 January 2024 copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

Councillor Cheema joined the meeting at this point at 6:03p.m.

56. **Litter Volunteering – Progress Update**

The Portfolio Holder for Wellbeing, Leisure and Public Spaces presented an update of the Council's Volunteer Litter Programme. [annexed]

The programme was designed to support and empower local people to help keep streets and open spaces across the Borough free from litter. In addition, the programme enabled:

- Community and enhance wellbeing.
- Development of Civic Pride.
- Improvement of the environment.

In 2019, two volunteer coordinators were appointed to support the creation of Walsall Community Litter Watch (WCLW). To assist volunteers of the WCLW, the Council had developed a reporting portal as well providing opportunities for volunteers to request litter picking equipment, bags, stickers and report bag collections.

The Council had developed a WCLW Action Plan 2024 with the aim of engaging with local businesses, partner organisations, improving educational programmes and identifying persistent litter hotspots.

A question and answer session took place and following on, the principal points from the ensuing discussion:

- There was an aspiration to access more schools to educate young people about recycling and promote responsible refuse disposal.
- Some schools had their own litter education programmes.
- There was a view that civic pride was important, and communities should be empowered to clean up their own communities.

- As part of the work to educate individuals about recycling, there was a need to ensure HMO landlords had appropriate sized bins.
- Members conveyed their thanks to the Borough's litter volunteers.
- The Council was working with local businesses to continue the legacy of the litter charter.
- Technical issues regarding the report portal had been resolved.
- The Council had submitted a total of 13 green flag proposals for local green spaces. Following a number of improvements, 10 areas had been green flag accredited.
- The Chair sought clarification on the retention rates of local volunteers. In response, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that Council had seen the overall number of volunteers reduce post-pandemic. However, the Healthy Spaces team continued to encourage and signpost any new volunteers for the programme.
- There was a view that the Council needed stricter littering enforcement powers to act as a viable deterrent.
- There was a consensus that engagement at litter stations was positive and there were many volunteers that actively contributed to their local area.

The Chair thanked officers for their attendance and requested that a reminder be circulated to the Committee on how to get involved with the strategy, upcoming action days and local litter stations.

Councillor Gill joined the meeting at this point at 6:06p.m.

Resolved:

That, the litter volunteering support programme be noted.

57. Grass Cutting Schedule and mapping of Council Assets

The Portfolio Holders for Street Pride presented an update on the Council's grass cutting schedule and mapping of Council assets. [annexed]

In January 2023, the Government published the Environmental Improvement Plan, which outlined plans to improve the natural environment. As such, there was a commitment to halve the decline in species abundance by 2030 and restore or create at least 500,000 hectares of a range of wildlife rich habitats.

As part of this commitment to improving biodiversity, the Council undertook rewilding in areas such as Nest Common. There was commitment to ensure proper consultation with local residents and communities on the benefits of rewilding. The Committee noted that the Council was still maintaining grass areas and undertook maintenance between three and give weekly cuts from late March to early October, weather dependant.

A question and answer session took place and following on, the principal points from the ensuing discussion:

- There were concerns about the number of complaints received by Members about areas of unkept grass in the Borough.
- Areas of high pedestrian traffic such as parks and churchyards would continue to benefit from regular grass cutting.
- The Portfolio Holder confirmed that many communities were aware of the benefits of rewilding and as such, the Council received less than average complaints from residents than the previous year.
- The Council revised its maintenance schedule based on submitted feedback and comments from the previous year.
- Members were encouraged to provide feedback on grass cutting in their wards during the season and note the Council's communication in preparation for the schedule of works in the summer.
- The Leader of the Council reflected on the importance of advertising the risks and associated health implications of tick bites when walking through long grass.
- The Council would utilise social media and physical notices in communities to explain rewilding in areas.
- Some Councils had improved their biodiversity net gain by reducing grass verge cutting.
- The Council was aware of the problems and associated nuisance of grass verge parking. The Director of Place and Environment confirmed that unless parking was unsafe, the Council had no statutory power to intervene.
- The Chair sought clarification on whether the Council had collated data on green space site ownership across the Borough. The Director of Place and Environment confirmed that the Council had collated information on grass site ownership and was working to make this information available to the public. It was confirmed that once available, this information would be made available to the Committee.
- The Council was working closely with Walsall Housing Group on ground maintenance and fly tipping.

The Chair thanked officers for their attendance.

Resolved:

That, the Council's grass cutting schedule and biodiversity programme be noted.

58. Fly Tipping Enforcement and Activity

The Head of Community Safety and Enforcement presented an overview of the enforcement activity in respect of fly tipping.

The Committee was informed that the Council had a statutory responsibility to ensure that the collection and disposal of waste generated or deposited was appropriately undertaken. Fly tipping was a primary concern for the Council and Members noted that the number of reported cases of fly tipping and side waste had remained consistent throughout 2023 but had reduced since 2020.

The Environmental Crime Scene Initiative was noted as a good example of working with local areas to identify and advertise fly tipping incidents within areas. This work provided an example to local communities that fly tipping was a crime and due to its success, the initiative was being rolled out to other areas of the Borough. To complement this approach, the Council was committed to strengthen enforcement and had invested in five new staff within Community Protection. Members noted several examples of enforcement action taken by the Council including actions resulting from CCTV deployment.

A question and answer session took place and following on, the principal points from the ensuing discussion:

- Change in legislation to raise the upper limits of fixed penalty notices for littering from £150 to £500 and fly tipping from £400 to £1000 was inadequate and did not go far enough to discourage individuals from fly tipping.
- There was a discussion on whether removal vans should be licensed in the same way as private hire or hackney carriage vehicles.
- Any fly tipping on unadopted land required the Council to undertake a public health assessment and ascertain whether the items required removal. It was confirmed that the Council would always try to identify a landowner or responsible persons.
- Non-payment of Fixed Penalty Notices would result in prosecution in accordance with evidence.
- Income from fixed penalty notices were reinvested into the service and engagement programmes.
- CCTV cameras were checked and rotated around the Borough regularly. Members noted the importance of engagement with residents and local communities to reduce the instances of fly tipping.
- The Leader of the Council outlined that the Council was committed to reduce the instances of fly tipping. It was noted that fly tipping costed the Council over £750k a year.
- Members heard multiple examples of fly tipping in areas across the Borough.
- A Member highlighted a reward scheme by Wolverhampton Council to encourage the public to notify and provide evidence of fly tippers.
- The Council was investigating the viability of intelligent cameras to improve evidence gathering.
- Walsall Housing Group was working with Council to use the incidences of fly tipping by tenants.
- Skip days were noted as a popular incentive for reducing fly tipping.
- There was a suggestion that Walsall Housing Group could procure the Council to be a designated contractor for fly tipping removals.
- The Leader of the Council confirmed that the Council would utilise all legal tools available to prosecute and hold landowners accountable for incidences of fly tipping.
- Bulky waste collection charge increases were raised in line with neighbouring authorities.

- There were some households which required larger refuse bins in accordance with their needs. However, it was noted that many households struggled to correctly recycling and utilise their bins appropriately.
- Black bags classed as side waste would be investigated by the Council's enforcement team to identify root cause of fly tipping and whether it was caused by a household or business.
- Many individuals and families were confused by recycling packaging.
- A Member sought clarification on how many fixed penalty tickets were issues across the Borough in respect of dog fouling. In response, it was confirmed that the Council's enforcement team had only issues a few fixed penalties recently.
- There was a suggestion the Council could use Public Spaces Protection Orders to enforce dog owners to carry waste bags or face fixed penalty notices.

Following a lengthy debate, it was proposed and seconded that the Cabinet work with the Local Government Association to increase the financial levels of fixed penalty notices and strengthen enforcement legislation.

Resolved

That, the Cabinet work with the Local Government Association to lobby Government to increase the financial levels of fixed penalty notices and strengthen enforcement legislation.

59. Areas of focus – 2023/24

The Committee noted the proposed areas of focus for the remaining meetings of the municipal year. [annexed]

Resolved

That, forward plans be noted.

60. Recommendations Tracker

The Senior Democratic Services Officer updated Members on the recommendations from previous meetings of the Committee. [annexed]

A Member sought clarification on an outstanding action in respect of recovering costs associated with fly tipping from a Magistrates or Small Claims Court. In response, the Senior Democratic Services Officer confirmed that he would liaise with officers to provide an update.

Resolved:

That the progress on recommendations from the previous meeting be noted.

61. **Date of next meeting**

The date of the next meeting is scheduled for 11 April 2024.

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 7.31p.m

Signed:

Date: