

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

Tuesday, 10 September 2024 at 6.00p.m.

Committee Members present: Councillor M Follows (Chair)
Councillor J Whitehouse (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Cheema
Councillor Gill
Councillor Hassan
Councillor Hicken
Councillor Larden

Officers present: Dave Brown – Executive Director of Economy, Environment and Communities.
Irena Hergottova – Head of Community Building and Cohesion
Craig Goodall – Principal Democratic Services Officer

82. **Apologies**

Apologies was received from Councillors Bott, Margetts, Singh-Sohal and Murphy.

83. **Substitutions**

There were no substitutions submitted for the duration of the meeting.

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

There were no declarations of interest or party whip.

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

There were no items to consider in private session.

86. **Minutes**

A copy of the Minutes of the meeting held on the 9 July 2024 was submitted. [annexed].

Resolved

That, the minutes of the meeting held on 9 July 2024 copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

87. Portfolio Presentations and Update on the Chemical Spill

The Chair introduced the item and stated that it aimed to inform the Committee about Portfolio Holder priorities for the municipal year.

Councillor P. Kaur presented the priorities for her portfolio of (Education) Skills. Priorities included creation of meaningful opportunities for all, ensuring that people's lives were improved through access to high quality education and training. Another priority was addressing unemployment, which was above the national average in Walsall – detail was provided on the methods used to support individuals back into work. Special consideration would be given to Youth Unemployment, noting that the Council was part of a Combined Authority taskforce to tackle this issue.

Councillor G. Perry presented his priorities as Leader of the Council and Strategy, Partnerships and Communities. This presentation also included priorities on Economic Growth and Regeneration and Street Pride. The Leader provided an update on current work streams along with upcoming challenges and priorities for Regeneration and Street Pride. It was noted that 'rewilding' consultation would be taking place in October and Members were encouraged to engage.

The Committee was advised that a review would also take place in relation to sparking, traffic management and speeding in the Borough. Priorities included:

- Delivery of the Walsall Plan.
- Community development and diversity – 'Team Walsall' was established.
- Community safety – including knife crime.
- Community protection.
- Environment health – food safety was taken seriously.
- The strategic use of assets was noted as key to supporting the financial stability of the Council.
- Changes to planning policy would be worked through, with protection of green belt land being prioritised.
- Transport, regional pressure in relation to public transport was acknowledged and it was suggested that the Committee may wish to focus on strategic public transport.

Councillor Perry paid tribute to the Emergency Planning team in their response to the chemical spill in Walsall which worked at pace to protect the community and environment from harm.

Councillor G. Flint provided detail in relation to priorities relating to Health and Wellbeing. Further information was given on rewilding and the benefits this provided. Priorities included development of volunteers due to the benefit this

provided to the community and to individuals themselves. Work was being done through the community litter watch programme delivered with schools to educate children in relation to littering and recycling. Members were also advised that heritage and culture was an area of cross portfolio working which was prioritised as part of the Walsall plan.

Councillor A. Garcha outlined her three main priorities in relation to her portfolio - Resident Access and Housing Support. This included:

- Walsall Connected – which had been shortlisted for awards. Progression of this service would be continued to ensure residents needs were being fulfilled.
- Details of the modernisation of Customer experience centre were provided and technology was used to modernise and grow the service.
- The launch of a new housing allocation policy to ensure housing was allocated in according to need.

There then ensued a period of questions in relation to Portfolio Holder presentations. The Leader stated that the views of communities and business were very important in shaping the regeneration of town, citing the 2040 plan and the consultation of businesses. A Member expressed concern that this was not adequate, and reassurance was provided that this would continue to be prioritised. In response to questions relating to overcrowding within rental accommodation, it was noted that any issues should be referred to the Housing Standards and Improvement who had the power to investigate.

The Executive Director stated that there were currently no active plans for Friars Road Waste Centre, and this would be progressed in the near future.

Members requested that the following items be added to the work programme:-

- Review of the Regeneration of District Centres.
- Voluntary Sector –Team Walsall.
- Community Safety and knife crime recommendation to Scrutiny Overview Committee.
- Strategic public transport point and bus networks.
- Information on the number of successful prosecutions on Fly Tipping and litter offences. Outcomes of 'Educate before enforcement' programme.
- Community protection of environmental crime (success of enviro crime scenes).

The Executive Director provided an update on the recent canal chemical spill, informing Members that there was an ongoing investigation being conducted by the regulators. The incident had highlighted that the canal network was a real asset to the Borough. This incident occurred on 12th August (estimated) in Pleck, and the Committee was informed that 4,000 litres of Sodium Cyanide plating solution was discharged into the canal - the immediate impact of this was severe. It was declared as a major incident by West Midlands Police, and Walsall Council became the Lead Authority dealing with the incident – the

governance of this was described. Although no longer considered a major incident, a 'Recovery Coordination Group' continued to meet. The actions taken by the Council to protect the community and wildlife were described. Specialists were working on a strategy to remediate the silt within the canal, and the Environment Agency would continue to investigate the incident. A full debrief report would be prepared to ensure that lessons were learnt for the future.

Members commended the Council for taking the lead on the incident, and the communications used to inform residents. It was requested that a full report be considered at a future meeting.

Resolved:

- 1. That Portfolio Holder presentation and update on the chemical spill be noted.**
- 2. That the following items be added to the work programme:**
 - **Review of the Regeneration of District Centres.**
 - **Voluntary Sector –Team Walsall.**
 - **Community Safety and knife crime recommendation to Scrutiny Overview Committee.**
 - **Strategic public transport point and bus networks.**
 - **Information on the number of successful prosecutions on Fly Tipping and litter offences. Outcomes of 'Educate before enforcement' programme.**
 - **Community protection of environmental crime (success of enviro crime scenes).**
- 3. A debrief report on the Chemical Spill be considered a future meeting.**

88. Community Cohesion

The Head of Community Building and Cohesion introduced the report and highlighted the salient points. Social cohesion in Walsall had been a priority for a long time, with a cross-party working group considering the issue. Evidence from communities had fed into the Council's first strategy in 2018 and as a result, the Council was invited to be part of a Government pilot which led to the 'Walsall for All' programme.

The Committee was advised of work that was undertaken during the covid lockdown to continue community cohesion and connection. The work of 'Walsall for All' was evaluated and subsequently nominated for regional and national awards. Further detail was provided on how the community cohesion team were involved with these areas of work.

Members were advised that the multi-agency partnership was working closely with other partnerships to co-design the third reiteration of the Community Cohesion strategy. It was noted that it would be a good time for the Committee to consider the draft strategy and actions to consider how it could be embedded.

There then ensued a period of questions, Members were informed that any potential community tension was considered at the Walsall Community Resilience Forum at which all four localities were represented and where challenges were discussed as part of a constant dialogue. It was noted that an all-encompassing approach had been taken in the recent years– it was suggested that this work should be taken to the Local Government Association (LGA) conference next year.

The Leader expressed his pride of the team and described the variety of work that had taken place to encourage community cohesion and their excellent leadership.

Resolved

That the Committee note their support for the current approach to community cohesion.

89. Areas of Focus

A Member asked if Planning enforcement could be considered, Officers agreed to consider if this would be appropriate for the remit of the Committee.

A discussion was held on the membership of the two established working groups. The Chair requested that Democratic Services e-mailed the Membership of the Committee to seek further volunteers to sit on the working groups.

Resolved:

The following Membership of the Working Groups were agreed:

High Streets Working Group

- **Councillor Cheema**
- **Councillor Hicken**
- **Councillor Larden**

Enforcement Working Group

- **Councillor Cheema**
- **Councillor Hicken**
- **Councillor Larden**

90. Forward Plans

The Committee considered the forward plans.

Resolved

That the forward plans were noted.

91. **Recommendations Tracker**

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

Resolved:

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

92. **Date of next meeting**

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 7:20 p.m.

It was noted that the date of the next meeting would be 24 October 2024.

Signed:

Date: