

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

Tuesday, 16 January 2024 at 6.00p.m.

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

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Bird – Leader of the Council
Councillor Perry – Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Resilient Communities
Councillor G Flint – Wellbeing, Leisure and Public Spaces

Officers Present: Dave Brown – Executive of Director, Economy, Environment and Communities
David Elrington – Head of Community Safety and Enforcement
Philippa Venables – Director of Regeneration and Economy
Benjamin Parker – Heritage Programme Officer
Pat Fleming – Climate Change Manager
Matt Powis – Senior Democratic Services Officer

40. **Apologies**

An apology was received from Councillor Allen (Vice-Chair).

41. **Substitutions**

There were no substitutions.

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

There were no declarations of interest or party whip.

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

There were no items to consider in private session.

44. **Minutes**

A copy of the Minutes of the meeting held on the 23 November 2023 was submitted. [annexed]

Resolved

That, the minutes of the meeting held on 23 November 2023, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

45. **Heritage Strategy – Reference to Highgate Brewery**

The Committee received an overview of the Council's Heritage Strategy by the Portfolio Holder for Wellbeing, Leisure and Public Spaces. [annexed]

The strategy was funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund with the aim of creating opportunities for celebrating past, present and future generations by identifying heritage assets in consultation with public, private and third sector partners within the Borough. In addition, there was a significant challenge to identify challenging heritage assets, which had fallen into a state of disrepair or neglect to secure a long-term future. One notable example was Highgate Brewery.

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

- There was a consensus that heritage assets were often overlooked across the building landscape in the Borough. The Committee welcomed continued dialogue with owners of heritage assets to secure long-term funding options.
- The Leader of the Council highlighted that Highgate Brewery was an example of the Borough's unique heritage, which must be preserved. There was a view that the Brewery could be transformed into a centre of excellence.
- The Council secured the Guildhall for future generations as part of the Council's masterplan.
- A Member sought clarification on the future of Darlaston Recreation Centre and requested a briefing paper. In response, the Portfolio Holder

confirmed that £20m of government funding had been received for Darlaston.

- A Member highlighted that the Council needed to work with communities to identify suitable cultural and historical assets for future preservation. There was a view that Highgate Brewery could be transformed into a purposed live music and entertainment venue.
- There was a discussion on the future of Walsall Leather Museum as there was a view that the location of the site was unsuitable for the long-term vision of the town centre.
- The Council was working with the Canal and Rivers Trust to reimagine and utilise the canal network effectively. Funding had been allocated to refresh local canal towpaths.
- The Council had embarked on various engagements activities as part of the early consultation of the strategy such as the heritage forum.
- Historical assets were vital for local communities. It was suggested that local pop-up events in communities would enable local people to get involved and contribute to the strategy.

Councillor Kaur joined the meeting at this point at 6:09p.m.

Resolved:

That, the Council's Heritage Strategy for 2021 – 2026 be noted.

46. Climate Change Update

The Portfolio Holders for Wellbeing, Leisure and Public Spaces and Street Pride presented an update on the Council's commitment become a net-zero Borough by 2041 in respect of Climate Change. [annexed]

In September 2019, the Council declared a climate emergency with a target to become a net-zero authority by 2050 in line with the UK Government's 2050 approach. In addition, there was a commitment to work with all relevant partners and stakeholders to make the whole Borough a net-zero in line with the regional target agreed by the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA).

Following an initial review of the Council's strategy, an action plan was developed which noted that the Borough's largest sources of greenhouse gas emissions were carbon dioxide from domestic sources and fossil fuel powered vehicles. It was highlighted that meeting the net-zero 2041 goal would be challenging.

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

- There was no suggestion that Walsall was developing a low-emission zone for the Borough like other national cities.

- The Council was considering different technologies in respect of fleet vehicles such as electric and hydrogen. However, there was a requirement to assess both the long-term cost of vehicle servicing and technical ability of some fleet vehicles such as waste lorries.
- The Borough continued to have good recycling rates, however, overall contamination of refuse remained high. There was a target within the waste strategy of recycling 65% of collected material.
- Green job opportunities were a priority as part of the devolution deal.
- There was a view that hydrogen buses would be used more in future. However, the manufacturing of hydrogen cells and refuelling of buses remained an issue.
- There were concerns about the displacement of older buses into Walsall due to the rollout of cleaner vehicles in Birmingham.
- Compost bins were available to purchase from the Council's website via a third-party supplier.
- The Leader of the Council confirmed that the Council was exploring proposals to turn food waste into energy or fertiliser. There was a discussion on the use and role of biochar.
- The Council was committed to sharing knowledge and resources about solar panel installations to education establishments to aid effective decision-making.

Resolved:

That, the Climate Change action plan be noted.

47. Off-Road Vehicles – Update

The Portfolio Holder for Resilient Communities gave an overview of the work carried out by the Council and partners to reduce the number of incidents involving off-road vehicles.

In November 2022, Operation Adhesion was launched with aim of gathering evidence, identifying offenders and formulate an effective approach to deterring future anti-social behaviour with off-road vehicles. Targeted days were carried out with police neighbourhood teams, police drone, community protection and healthy spaces staff to ascertain locations for off-road vehicles. Using drone technology, both the Council and partners were able to locate and apprehend vehicle riders.

Since Operation Adhesion, it was noted that the Council continued to engage with partners to reduce the number of off-road bikes in the area as majority of incidences were linked to criminal activity.

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

- Leaflets were distributed to noticeboards across the Borough on the issues relating to off-road bikes to increase awareness in communities.

- Young people were most likely to face convictions relating to off-road vehicles offences.
- In order to protect greenspaces against off-road vehicles, there was a need combine physical measures and intelligence data when carrying out enforcement activity.
- The Council was committed to closing gaps and implementing preventative measures on greenspaces across the Borough.
- The number of convictions in respect of off-road vehicles would be circulated to the Committee in writing.
- The Council had prepared literature to raise awareness of the dangers of off-road vehicles including the legal ramifications of using such vehicles. In this respect, it was agreed that an example of the literature would be circulated to the Committee in writing.
- Individuals caught using off-road vehicles were usually charged with driving without insurance. However, there were a broad range of options depending on the circumstances of the case. For example, social care involvement would be available in the case of a young person.
- A Member sought clarification on the involvement of the Probation Service in regard to litter picking. In this respect, it was agreed that a response would be provided in writing.
- There was a commitment for more to be done to promote legal facilities for off-road vehicles and educate young people on the dangers of the activity.

Resolved

That, the Council's response to off-road vehicles be noted.

48. 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.

49. Recommendations Tracker

The Senior 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.

50. Date of next meeting

The date of the next meeting is scheduled for 27 February 2024.

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

Signed:

Date: