

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

Thursday, 24 October 2024 at 6.00p.m.

Committee Members present: Councillor M Follows (Chair)
Councillor J Whitehouse (Vice-Chair)
Councillor M Bird
Councillor P Bott
Councillor S Cheema
Councillor P Gill
Councillor I Hussain
Councillor R Larden
Councillor K Margetts

Portfolio Holders present: Councillor A Andrew – Associate Leader and Economic Growth and Regeneration
Councillor G Flint – Health and Wellbeing
Councillor A Garcha – Resident Access and Housing Support

Officers present: Dave Brown – Executive Director of Economy, Environment and Communities.
Kathryn Moreton – Director of Place and Environment
Sundeep Sangha – Strategic Finance Business Partner
Jaki Brunton-Douglas – Healthy Spaces Team Manager
Matt Powis – Senior Democratic Services Officer

93. **Apologies**

An apology was received from Councillor Hicken.

94. **Substitutions**

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

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

There were no declarations of interest or party whip.

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

There were no items to consider in private session.

97. **Minutes**

A copy of the Minutes of the meeting held on the 10 September 2024 was submitted. [annexed].

Resolved:

That, the minutes of the meeting held on 10 September 2024 copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

98. **Protection of Trees, Wildlife and Biodiversity**

The Portfolio Holder for Health and Wellbeing presented a report on the Council's responsibilities to protection of trees, wildlife and biodiversity. [annexed].

The Committee were informed that a third of the Borough was classed as green, open space which included parks, recreation grounds, playing fields, children's play areas, woodlands, countryside sites, nature reserves and associated small pockets on housing and industrial sites.

The Environment Act 2021 set out biodiversity targets including 10% Biodiversity Net Gain for developments, halting species decline by 2030 and improving species abundance by 2042. There was an overall aim to restore 500,000 hectares of wildlife habitat including strengthening local nature recovery and conservation sites.

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

- There were limited protection methods available for the Council to secure biodiversity on private land. One protection method was Tree Preservation Orders (TPO) which the Council utilised on a case-by-case basis.
- Developers were required to submit planning permission for any new housing developments and as such the Council was able to liaise and negotiate with developers to provide protections on proposed development sites.
- Enforcement of planning permission was a tool available to the Council and used on a case-by-case basis.
- The Executive Director of Economy, Environment and Communities advised Members liaise with the planning team if they were aware of any sites in the Borough which were in breach of planning legislation.

- There were many opportunities for planning applicants to offset biodiversity of potential building works with other ecological projects within the Borough.
- There was a view that the Council needed to review and audit the safety and sensibility of street trees across the Borough.
- Purple Horizon aimed at extending up to 12,000 hectares of heathlands, wetlands, woodlands and grasslands across the West Midlands. Ultimately, restoring and connecting protected areas for future generations.
- Maintaining street trees has always been a difficult task for urban areas. The Council was dedicated to ensuring that any new development included the appropriate species of trees in suitable locations. It was also noted that the Council's Tree Planting Policy was scheduled for review in 2026.
- There was a wider call to identify how to improve biodiversity across the Borough which included parks and sites of interest.
- A call for sites was made across the Borough for future planning. This included a chance to assess potential sites for biodiversity net gain.
- The Council was dedicated to increasing the number of trees in current green areas to enhance both the space and its biodiversity.
- There was a regular call for volunteers across all aspects of Council work including litter picking and Children's Services. The Portfolio Holder called for new business sponsors to support volunteering work.

Resolved:

That, the Council's policy on the protection of trees, wildlife and biodiversity be noted.

99. Draft Revenue Budget and Draft Capital Programme 2025/26 – 2028/29

The Associate Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration introduced the report and underlined that it was still a time of budgetary pressures. He highlighted that the report covered aspects within the remit of the Committee and full budget consultation was published and available on the Council's website.

A Member expressed his frustrations about the Council's budgetary process and stated that Scrutiny only received the headline proposals of the budget and not the granular details needed to fully scrutinise the executive.

Safer streets, safer people

A Member supported the Council's commitment to not implement green waste collection charges. In response, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that the proposal was considered by the administration as part of the budgetary preparations. However, the proposal was abandoned.

Supporting business and inclusive growth

Ref: OP71 Markets Review

A Member sought clarification on the operational proposal for a markets review. In response, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that the Council was working with consultants in respect of the Borough Markets and findings were due to conclude in December 2024.

Ref: OP57 Increase bulky waste collection charges by 20%

A Member sought clarification on whether there had been an increase in fly tipping as a result of previous decisions to increase bulky waste collection charges.

In response, it was confirmed that there had been a dip in the number of collections however, there had been no material changes. The Council regularly benchmarked neighbouring areas for fees and charges of Council services to ensure competitiveness.

Ref: OP70 Increase in fees and charges

A Member queried whether there would be an increase to car parking charges. In response, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that there would be no increases.

Safer streets, safer people

Ref: P4 Introduce more rewilding

A Member sought clarification on the sites earmarked for rewilding. In response, it was confirmed that the Council was looking for additional sites for rewilding and not just existing sites. Public consultation on grass cutting was due to commence in the coming weeks which would also capture the views of rewilding in the Borough.

There was a discussion about ticks and the impact on humans and animals.

It was noted that the Committee would receive a report on the grass cutting consultation in January 2025.

Supporting business and inclusive growth

Ref: P5 Relocation of the leather museum

The Chair sought clarification on the proposal to relocate the leather museum. In response, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that a town centre location was being considered to relocate the leather museum permanently. However, the proposal was in its infancy, and it was important to relocate the museum to a more prominent location.

Efficient and effective services

Ref: P2 Phased changes to school crossing patrols

There was a discussion about the use of school crossing controls in the Borough. In response, the Director of Place and Environment confirmed that the Council was looking to implement appropriate road crossing mechanisms at category 1 school crossing locations across the Borough. It was noted that there were nearly 50 sites for potential installation of crossing equipment and a public consultation would commence in the coming months.

Ref: 39 Increase in the number of local buildings and the increased cleaning and caretaking responsibilities and OP33 Review of Cleaning and caretaking in Council buildings.

Different cleaning standards were in place across Council sites, leading to reported financial shortfalls. A review of cleaning frequency for Council estates was planned.

Ref: 41 One-off reduction in demand leading to income pressure on cremations income due to local competitor.

Members observed that a plan for cremation services was in progress to enhance what was provided to the residents. The service was being adjusted and modified to meet local requirements and demand.

Ref: OP58 Reaction in costs linked to waste strategy/Sherbourne

Contamination of waste was a continuing problem for the Council. It was noted that there needed to be continuing education to encourage people to dispose of waste in the right way. It was noted that state of the art technology would reduce costs associated with waste collection over a number of years.

There was a discussion in respect of the rollout of food waste collection services across the Borough. In this respect, it was noted that the food waste collection was due to be a mandatory service for Councils in England. However, Councils were still awaiting confirmation from the Government about any new burden funding to facilitate the rollout. In this respect, the Chair requested a future report on the topic.

Resolved:

That, the draft revenue budget proposals including the revenue and capital budgetary schemes be noted.

100. **Quarter 2 Financial Monitoring for 2024/25**

The Committee received a report which considered the forecast revenue and capital outturn for 2024/25 up to 16 October 2024. [annexed]

Members noted that in relation to forecast capital, it was proposed that £51.463m would be carried forward. In respect of forecast revenue, there was a predicted overspend of £2.705m with use of earmarked reserves.

Resolved:

That, the revenue and capital forecast for the financial year-end 2024/25 be noted.

101. Areas of Focus

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

A Member sought clarification on the Moxley Urban Farm and involvement of Wolverhampton City Council. In this respect, it was noted that the Executive Director of Economy, Environment and Communities would provide a response in writing.

Resolved:

- 1. That, the areas of focus for the Committee be noted.**
- 2. That, clarification on Moxley Urban Farm be circulated to the Committee in writing.**

102. Forward Plans

The Committee considered the forward plans.

Resolved:

That the forward plans were noted.

103. 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.

104. Date of next meeting

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 7:00 p.m.

It was noted that the date of the next meeting would be 21 November 2024.

Signed:

Date: