

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT

Thursday 30th March 2006 at 6 pm
In Committee Room 2, The Council House, Dudley

PRESENT:-

Councillor Mrs Cowell (Chairman)
Councillor Mrs Turner (Vice-Chairman)
Councillors Banks, Body, Mrs Collins, Ms Partridge, Stanley,
Tomkinson and C Wilson

Officers

Director of Law and Property (as Lead Officer to the Committee),
Assistant Directors of Adult, Community and Housing Services
(Housing Strategy and Private Sector) and (Housing Management),
Assistant Directors of the Urban Environment (Development and
Environmental Protection) and (Environmental Management), Principal
Planning Officer (Planning Policy) and the Head of Street Care,
Directorate of the Urban Environment, Mr Lawson (Chief Executive's
Directorate) and Mr Sanders (Directorate of Law & Property).

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DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Mrs Turner declared a personal interest, in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, in agenda item number 11 (Directorate of Adult, Community and Housing Services - Annual Equality and Diversity Action Plan 2006/07) in so far as it related to the detailed action/targets on page 62 relating to Age Concern at Green Lane, Halesowen, in view of her trusteeship of that body.

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MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 23rd January 2006, be approved as a correct record and signed.

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PUBLIC FORUM

No issues were raised under this agenda item.

HIGH HEDGES LEGISLATION

A report of the Area Liaison Officer for the Brierley Hill Area Committee was submitted on concerns on five issues raised by that Committee on the Council's proposals for dealing with the High Hedges legislation.

The concerns of the Area Committee related to the perceived lack of a clearly defined role for Ward Councillors in lobbying or supporting for action in disputed locations; uncertainty over the role to be played by the Council's Mediation Service prior to any formal application for action; the need for a fee to be charged, especially as this was being charged to the aggrieved party, and the lack of clarity of the make up of the fee; the lack of clear guidance as to when discretion would be used in cases of hardship; and uncertainty over who would pay the fee in the case of Council housing tenants.

In the discussion on this item, it was clarified that, while the fee of £405 was chargeable at the stage of formal complaint, the Mediation Service was free.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the report be received and the concerns of the Area Committee noted.
- (2) That it also be noted that a further report would be made to the September meeting of the Select Committee at which a meaningful assessment could be made after twelve months of operation of the service.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN DECISION MAKING

A report of the Director of the Urban Environment was submitted on an initial evaluation of the draft Sustainability Appraisal Toolkit within the Directorate of the Urban Environment.

The report indicated that feedback from initial pilots based on a range of projects had indicated that the Toolkit was straightforward to use and that it had the potential to be used widely across the Directorate. It had also helped to raise awareness of what sustainability meant in practice, including consideration of sustainability outcomes. Initial improvements to the Toolkit had included simplifying some of the questions and adding a table which helped assessors to prioritise key sustainability improvements.

The report suggested that further analysis of the Toolkit would be beneficial in order to consider in more detail impacts of outcomes and projects in sustainability terms. This would give a clearer indication of where the Toolkit could add value in terms of types of projects that would benefit from the process.

In considering the issue, particular reference was made to the usefulness of the Toolkit in the work of the Friends of the Park Groups.

RESOLVED

That further testing of the Sustainability Appraisal Toolkit be undertaken across projects and initiatives within the Directorate of the Urban Environment and that a further report be submitted to a future meeting of the Select Committee giving consideration to the following issues:-

- How the Toolkit impacts on outcomes and projects and initiatives in sustainability terms;
- The level of projects and initiatives that should be subject to a sustainability appraisal;
- Awareness raising and training requirements, including links into the project management training module.

MULTI-STOREY CAR PARKS

A report of the Director of the Urban Environment was submitted setting out the current position with regard to the four multi-storey car parks in the Borough.

The report stated that, although the budget was limited, it was sufficient to maintain the four car parks in an acceptable state of repair, with the majority of the budget being directed at addressing structural safety issues, and to provide some safety measures, including CCTV, better lighting and graffiti resistant surfaces. The fundamental area that had to be addressed, however, was essential structural repair, in order to avoid the possibility of closure of any car park.

The report confirmed current strategy, which was to redevelop Bell Street Car Park, Stourbridge, and the Precinct Car Park, Halesowen. With the removal of the need for extensive remedial works on those car parks, sufficient capacity would then be available in the improvement budget to allow comprehensive refurbishment to be undertaken to the Pool Road Car Park, Halesowen, and the Rye Market Car Park, Stourbridge. The view was expressed in the report that, by improving the parking environment, car park patronage would grow, making the two remaining multi-storey car parks sustainable.

In the discussion on this issue, the importance of sustaining the car parks was emphasised, in the light of the implications of easy access to town centres on trade.

RESOLVED

That the report be noted and that the current progress being made in relation to the re-development and refurbishing of multi storey car parks in the Borough be supported.

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PLASTICS RECYCLING

The Assistant Director of the Urban Environment (Environmental Management) reported orally on the visit of the Recycling Working Group to Lichfield District Council.

The Assistant Director confirmed the impression gained that Lichfield did not operate in a manner greatly different from Dudley, with the key exception that, while Lichfield had to deal with some 40,000 properties, Dudley currently dealt with some 130,000 properties. Lichfield, however, had developed a strategic approach to recycling, having engaged in extensive consultation with residents before starting the collection service. They had also developed a customer services hotline.

Insofar as the disposal of plastics was concerned, Lichfield were in a position similar to that of Dudley in that they had no real alternative to the re-use of plastics for instance, for clothing or other products.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the oral report by the Assistant Director of the Urban Environment (Environmental Management) be received.
 - (2) That the Recycling Working Group be re-appointed in the new municipal year with a remit to consider recycling feasibility options and to look further at the recycling of plastics.
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GROUNDS MAINTENANCE ON HOUSING ESTATES

A joint report of the Director of the Urban Environment and the Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services was submitted on the Council's responsibilities in respect of grounds maintenance on Housing land.

The report summarised the manner in which contracts for grounds maintenance were now completed and operated; gave details of the Green Care Budget; showed how resources were configured and described key operations in the maintenance of housing land. Benchmarking data was provided, in which Dudley was confirmed as the lowest spending authority per hectare in their family group, which consisted of ten local authorities.

A discussion ensued in which several members expressed concerns regarding the manner in which maintenance was provided in the areas of grass maintenance, chemical control, litter collection, shrub and rosebed maintenance and the inspection and maintenance of play areas. These included the timing of grass cutting; the apparent spraying of chemicals irrespective of weather conditions; the manner in which litter was collected, which sometimes resulted in cans and other debris being left if they could not be picked up by the mechanical sweeper; and difficulties in collecting waste where vehicles were parked.

RESOLVED

That the issues raised at this meeting, as summarised above, be considered by the Directorates concerned and that a further report be submitted to the Select Committee in due course.

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DIRECTORATE OF ADULT, COMMUNITY AND HOUSING SERVICES
- ANNUAL EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ACTION PLAN 2006/07

A report of the Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services was submitted, setting out the Annual Equality and Diversity Action Plan for the Directorate for 2006/07. Proposals for action in relation to Housing Services were also contained in the report.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the Annual Equality and Diversity Action Plan for the Directorate of Adult, Community and Housing Services for 2006/07, as attached to the report now submitted, be approved.
- (2) That the Action Plan included in the report be also approved.

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AFFORDABLE HOUSING

The Assistant Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services (Housing Strategy and Private Sector) and the Principal Planning Officer (Planning Policy) reported orally on this issue.

The report covered the definitions of Affordable Housing and referred to relevant planning policy issues and the situation of affordable housing in the Dudley Unitary Development Plan, with particular reference to Policy H5. A supplementary planning document in connection with the policy would be submitted to Council for approval in June.

In discussing the Dudley Housing Strategy, the Assistant Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services indicated that this was being updated in the light of housing needs surveys and the Unitary Development Plan. The key issues on affordability were being identified, including working with the Directorate of the Urban Environment to increase the supply of affordable housing through planning gain; addressing shortages of affordable family and elderly accommodation; and reducing mis-match between supply and demand in housing for younger people. A range of other complementary issues to address housing problems had also been identified, eg., the Decent Homes Standard, taxing poor housing, low demand housing, liability and meeting particular housing needs, including those of the elderly, people with special needs and black and minority ethnic persons and the homeless.

The latest survey on housing needs had been completed earlier in March and provided information at Borough and Township levels. The average house price in the Borough at the end of 2005 was £137,000 and 65% of households in Dudley received below the national average income of £27,500 per annum. The current market value in Dudley excluded many families and single person households currently seeking local housing from purchasing it and there was a clear affordability problem for low income households in the Borough.

Progress against targets insofar as affordable dwelling provision over the period from 2004 - 2011 was concerned was also indicated. Regarding future policy making to mitigate and anticipate the affordability problem, there would be continued close working between officers within the Council and with external partners to maintain a regular review of policies, and to meet the needs of residents, and respond to and facilitate change. This would be helped by the increased flexibility of the new planning system.

In the discussion on the item, one member in particular expressed his opposition to the high incidence of flatted developments in the Borough as a means to meet government targets. Another member referred to a perceived flaw in the current affordable housing scheme whereby it appeared that a developer could quite easily avoid current requirements.

RESOLVED

That the oral report now given be received and noted.

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QUARTERLY CORPORATE PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT REPORT

The Quarterly Corporate Performance Management Report for the third quarter for 2005/06, relating to performance for the activities relevant to the terms of reference of this Committee, for the period from October to December 2005, was submitted.

RESOLVED

That the report be received and noted.

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ANNUAL REPORT OF THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT

The draft annual report of the Select Committee was submitted.

RESOLVED

That, subject to the submission of a supplementary report to add reference to relevant issues considered at this meeting, the annual report of the Select Committee for 2005/06, as now submitted, be approved for referral to Council.

The meeting ended at 8.40pm.

CHAIRMAN