

MEETING OF THE COUNCIL – 18TH APRIL, 2005

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1. To consider the Annual Report of the Select Committee on the Environment.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1. Article 6 of the Council's Constitution requires Select Committees to report annually to the full Council on their work and to make recommendations for future work programmes and amended working methods if appropriate. The Select Committee Chairmen have agreed that the annual report for this Select Committee should be submitted to the April meeting of the Council.
- 2.2. In deciding its work programme for 2004/5 the Committee chose to concentrate on a manageable list of important issues to ensure that they could be properly scrutinised whilst at the same time giving the Committee some flexibility to add some additional items that arose during the course of the year.
- 2.3. Accordingly, the planned work programme for the Committee in 2004/5 was as follows: -
- Housing Services Options Appraisal
 - Housing Lettings Policy
 - Housing repairs (zonal system)
 - Re-cycling plastic bottles
 - Tree Management Policy

The Committee's work in relation to the above items is set out below.

2.4. Housing Services Options Appraisal

- 2.4.1 Throughout the year the Committee has received regular progress reports on the Housing Options Appraisal.
- 2.4.2 This project has had three distinct phases. Phase 1 (March – June 2004) concerned the identification of tenants' and leaseholders' priorities and aspirations as well as raising their understanding of the issues. During Phase 2 (July – September 2004) the main aim was to explain the various investment options available to tenants and leaseholders and what each option could deliver in general terms. Finally, Phase 3 (October 2004 – February 2005) has been concerned with ascertaining the views of tenants and leaseholders.
- 2.4.3 The Committee has particularly focused upon the various means of communicating and consulting with tenants, leaseholders and employees.

For example, at our meeting on the 10th November 2004 we drew attention to the fact that a number of roadshows by the Directorate of Housing did not cover certain areas in the borough. Members asked for information on when the roadshows were held, whether they were held during the day and statistics on the people that attended, together with a breakdown of the number of tenants who attended. We also made the point that, rather than the glossy letter that had been sent out, a plain informative letter would have had a wider impact on tenants and would have generated more interest.

- 2.4.4 On the whole, however, we were satisfied with the consultation arrangements and that the necessary information had been given to tenants and leaseholders to enable them to express an informed view on this most important issue, the outcome of which will be determined by the Council in April 2005.

2.5. Housing Lettings Policy

- 2.5.1 At our meeting on the 20th September 2004 the Committee received a report and presentation on the housing lettings policy and allocations process. The Committee had previously considered this matter at its March meeting when we received a presentation on Choice Based Lettings, which is a government target for all housing authorities by 2010.
- 2.5.2 The report to our September meeting explained the current letting policy and process. As members will already appreciate, the allocations system is extremely complex and is prone to create suspicion and a culture of “points chasing”. The Director of Housing pointed out to us that whilst it may be comforting to have applicants in an orderly queue separated only by a point or two, it is doubtful that the relative merits of different sets of circumstances can really be so scientifically analysed. Furthermore, the process of dealing with housing applications is labour-intensive and, since the majority of applicants will not in the end become tenants, much of this work is abortive.
- 2.5.3 Demand for Council housing in Dudley exceeds supply. Changing the lettings policy and implementing a Choice Based Letting Scheme will not alter this fact. However, Choice Based Lettings may give greater positive choice to those who are at or near the top of the waiting list, may reduce bureaucracy and may improve information to applicants on which to base their housing aspirations.
- 2.5.4 In order to test any potential value in Choice Based Lettings the Committee has decided to have a site visit to another housing authority that has introduced this system.

2.6. Housing Repairs (Zonal Work)

- 2.6.1 At our September 2004 meeting we considered the system of zonal working for the carrying out of non-urgent repairs.
- 2.6.2 We received a list of completed and outstanding works for 2004/5. Window repairs were excluded from the list but we were informed that such repairs would commence in approximately two years time.
- 2.6.3 The Committee expressed some concern in relation to work not being completed in certain areas and queried the position regarding urgent work that needed to be undertaken outside the zonal area. The response from officers was that under the previous system there had been a problem with short cycle times and with workers arriving late and leaving early. However this was not the case with zonal working and it was anticipated that criticisms would abate with the new system. Furthermore, in relation to urgent repair works, the principal difficulty was assessing whether work was urgent or not. However, we were informed that visits to properties would be undertaken more quickly and this would result in repairs being identified earlier. Finally, we were assured that repairs to exceptionally urgent problems identified outside the zonal area would be carried out as a priority.

2.7. Re-cycling Plastic Bottles

- 2.7.1 A huge number of plastic bottles are produced every year. Nationally in 2003 over 9 billion plastic bottles were disposed of and in the same year 486 million (24,300 tonnes) were re-cycled.
- 2.7.2 In view of this the Committee felt that plastics re-cycling should be examined and we received an initial report at our November 2004 meeting.
- 2.7.3 Officers advised the Committee that currently the Council does not re-cycle plastic containers or film for a number of reasons including: -
- cost of sorting, storage and transport
 - limited income
 - high volume and low density
 - difficulties of segregating plastic types (there are fifty different types)
 - limited markets and uncertain income
 - lack of storage facilities
 - need for collection vehicles and staff.
- 2.7.4 Two local authorities within the West Midlands region have recently embarked on plastics re-cycling and the Committee asked that these authorities be consulted with a view to the Directorate of the Urban Environment developing options that could be considered at a future meeting of the Committee.
- 2.7.5 At its meeting on the 10th March 2005 the Committee was advised that the authorities concerned have plastics recycling collections as part of a

fortnightly waste collection service. Metropolitan areas such as Dudley have not yet established fortnightly household waste collections.

- 2.7.6 Before reaching any conclusion on the viability of plastics recycling we have asked the Director of the Urban Environment to produce the estimated costs of introducing a scheme and this will be considered at our first meeting in 2005/6.

2.8. Tree Management Policy

- 2.8.1 Tree management is a major issue for the Council.

- 2.8.2 At our July 2004 meeting we considered a report on the current tree management policy, particularly with regard to the pollarding of highway trees and the system of inspections.

- 2.8.3 During the scrutiny process the Committee raised the following concerns: -

- overgrown trees that block natural daylight into elderly persons' flats causing the occupiers to have their lights on during day as well as at night
- the pruning of trees on bus routes because of the potential danger of overgrown branches hitting the top deck windows of buses
- tree roots that cause pavements to rise and become a tripping hazard.

- 2.8.4 The Committee received a further report at its January 2005 meeting when we were advised of the measures taken by the Green Care team of the Directorate of the Urban Environment to more effectively manage the Council's tree stock.

- 2.8.5 The Committee was also informed that a new portable data mechanism was now being used to enter tree data whilst officers were on site, with information being downloaded onto the database.

- 2.8.6 During our consideration of this matter we expressed our concern about the replacement of trees that have been felled. Factors such as the suitability of the general location, Health and Safety implications and consultation within the local community often resulted in trees not being replaced on a like for like basis. In view of our commitment to a sustainable environment, we asked officers to pursue this matter and report back to a future meeting.

2.9. Other Items Considered

- 2.9.1 During the year we also considered the following principal items: -

- the annual report on equality and diversity 2003/4 for the Directorate of Housing
- the Food Service Plan for 2004/5 which was ultimately approved by the Council
- the key improvement actions arising from the themed best-value review of maintaining and improving the environment
- the update of the Council's capital strategy

- quarterly reports on corporate performance regarding housing and the environment
- declaration of an Air Quality Management Area for Sedgley
- the draft Scrutiny Protocol for Select Committees
- the draft Protocol for Relationships between Members and Officers of the Council

2.10. OUTLINE WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2005/06

2.10.1 The proposed plan of the Committee for 2005/06 will be considered at the first meeting of the Committee in 2005/06. The Committee will consider its outline Work Programme for 2005/06 at its meeting to be held on 10th March, 2005 and the Programme will consist of the following:-

- Plastics Recycling
- Choice Based Lettings
- Tree Management Policy – Replacement of felled trees
- Review of Public Conveniences
- Condition of Public Multi-Storey Car Parks
- Traffic Management
- Air Quality Action Plan – Sedgley
- The Food Service Plan
- Implementation of Best Value Service Continuous Improvement Plans
- Update the Council's Capital Strategy
- Equality and Diversity Reports for the Directorate of Housing
- Quarterly Reports on Corporate Performance Regarding Housing and the Environment

3. PROPOSAL

3.1. That the Annual Report of the Select Committee on the Environment for 2004/5, as set out above, be received and noted and that the proposed work programme for 2005/06 be approved.

4. FINANCE

4.1. There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

5. LAW

5.1. The requirement for Select Committees to make an annual report to the Council is contained in Article 6 of the Constitution.

5.2. The relevant statutory provisions regarding the Council's Constitution are contained in Part II of the Local Government Act 2000, together with regulations, orders and statutory guidance issued by the Secretary of State.

6. EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

- 6.1. This report complies fully with the Council's policies on equal opportunities and diversity.

7. RECOMMENDATION

- 7.1. That the proposals set out in section 3 above be approved.

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CHAIRMAN OF THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE ENVIRONMENT

BACKGROUND PAPERS

1. Nil.