

URBAN ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Tuesday 29th October, 2013 at 6.00 p.m.
in Committee Room 2 at the Council House, Dudley

PRESENT:-

Councillor Tyler (Chair)
Councillor Hale (Vice Chair)
Councillors Ali, Duckworth, Hanif, Harley, J Jones, Sykes, K Turner and Mrs Westwood

Officers

Assistant Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services (Housing Strategy and Private Sector) (Lead Officer to the Committee), Assistant Director of Urban Environment (Environmental Management), Assistant Director of Urban Environment (Culture and Leisure), Project Development Manager, Head of Street and Green Care, Team Manager (Green Care), Countryside Manager (All Directorate of the Urban Environment) and the Assistant Democratic Services Officer (Directorate of Corporate Resources)

12 APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Councillor Jordan.

13 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No member declared an interest in any matter to be considered at this meeting.

14 MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 9th September, 2013, be approved as a correct record and signed.

15 PUBLIC FORUM

No matters were raised under this Agenda Item.

16 PARKS, NATURE RESERVES AND OPEN SPACES STRATEGY

A report of the Director of the Urban Environment was submitted together with a detailed presentation on the development of a strategy and a hierarchy to guide both future investment and inform re-alignment of future revenue budgets.

A copy of the PowerPoint presentation slides, together with a list of town and local parks and nature reserves and an information sheet in relation to tree diseases, were circulated to Members at the meeting.

The Assistant Director of the Urban Environment (Environmental Management) introduced the presentation and stated that it was anticipated that the questions and queries raised at the previous meeting would be addressed during the presentation and that at the end of the presentation Members would be able to provide officers with some recommendations and focus in preparation for the November meeting.

The Head of Street and Green Care then highlighted to Members the different service delivery options that were available which could be considered for the management of Council services and referred to the advantages and disadvantages of each option. It was stated that not just one option may be suitable for all services but a combination could be considered.

In response to a question raised in relation to the proposed revenue savings for Green Care Services, the Lead Officer suggested that this information be discussed at the Scrutiny Committee in November when the Revenue Budget Strategy report would be submitted for consideration.

A Member expressed his concerns about the provision of information and considered that a combination of the service delivery options discussed should be explored.

Another Member referred to Shared Services between Local Authorities and considered that it was unfortunate that the Black Country Authorities had not embraced this option when it had had the opportunity. It was stated that the Council needed to make some radical changes to the way in which its services were delivered, including consideration of arms length management, third sector delivery and outsourcing.

In response to a question raised by a Member in relation to insourcing and bringing back services in-house, the Head of Street and Green Care provided a detailed response and highlighted the advantages and disadvantages involved with this service delivery.

A Member stated that a detailed options appraisal should be undertaken and the Assistant Director of the Urban Environment (Environmental Management) confirmed that full and proper appraisals would take place prior to implementing any option and that each service would be addressed individually taking into consideration all criteria.

The Head of Street and Green Care then referred to the Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE) Local Authority Parks Services Survey for 2012/13 and stated that 83% of the 112 Local Authorities that had participated in the survey, currently provided their services in-house and it was considered that this percentage would change significantly in the coming years.

He then highlighted to Members the ways in which performance management was measured and compared with other Authorities and referred to the array of monitoring of standards and accreditations obtainable. He referred to the issue raised at the previous meeting in relation to traded services for schools and some schools sourcing cheaper service providers and stated that Greencare provided a 3 star service and still maintained the majority of school grounds within the Dudley borough.

It was stated that the service reductions would be dependant on the severity of the budget cuts and the possible implications and impacts of these reductions were referred to.

At the previous meeting a discussion took place in relation to the possible income generation at parks. The Head of Street and Green Care referred to the APSE survey which identified what other authorities were currently doing and stated that there were potential areas that Dudley could explore and that this should be one of the recommendations within the final report.

Comments, questions and queries were then raised as follows:-

- That the two parks in the Dudley borough that had been awarded best grounds maintenance were Mary Stevens Park and Wollescote Park.
- It was requested that the percentage figure as to where Dudley sat in terms of cost comparison in relation to the results of the APSE survey be circulated to Members of the Committee by the Head of Street and Green Care.
- That discussions were currently taking place with Public Health and consideration was being given to funding options in relation to the future of the Healthy Hub park rangers, as current funding would come to an end in 2014.
- It was considered that any reduction in service standards, especially when an issue was highly visible such as grass not being cut, weed control, blocked drains etc, would generate an increase in complaints from the public.
- It was confirmed that the Healthy Hub equipment that had been installed in some parks throughout the Dudley borough, belonged to the Council and it was considered that this facility would remain free of charge for those residents who did not have access to private gym facilities.

The Project Development Manager then gave a presentation in relation to the development of a hierarchy of parks, nature reserves and open spaces and reiterated some of her comments made at the previous meeting.

She referred to the list of Town and Local parks and nature reserves document that had been circulated to Members and stated that under the Unitary Development Plan (UDP) policy, which is currently under review, Dudley was considered to have eleven town parks and forty-eight local parks and a considerable vast amount of countryside sites.

The Countryside Manager explained to Members the meaning of, and what, the Nature Conservation Designation and the English Heritage Designation represented. It was stated that there were sites of local, national and international importance in the Dudley borough and that more emphasis now needed to be made on improving the condition of the smaller surrounding sites.

Arising from a question raised by a Member, the Project Development Manager confirmed that the eleven town parks and the forty-eight local parks were what had been identified in the Unitary Development Plan (UDP) that was adopted in 2005 and not all area's that were considered to be a park were included.

She then referred to APSE which was a national benchmarking tool and would be used to establish a hierarchy of parks in the borough. APSE used a specific list of attributes to categories parks, but it was considered to be outdated and therefore additional options had been included to develop a more appropriate list for Dudley. In response to a query raised, the Assistant Director of the Urban Environment (Environmental Management) agreed that Dudley could try and influence Members of APSE to update their criteria and to take into consideration some of the options suggested by Dudley. This would be presented to Members at the West Midlands Forums and Natural England meetings where APSE representatives would be in attendance.

In response to a question raised it was stated that Green Flag was considered to be a good accreditation award scheme, however APSE would be a more scientific and robust tool for this particular exercise.

Catchment areas and buffers for Countryside and parks were explained to Members and identified on borough wide maps that were displayed at the meeting. Members had the opportunity to view the maps available and asked questions appropriately. It was stated that this exercise identified where there were gaps in the provision of green spaces and also identified areas of over-supply.

The Project Development Manager then referred to public engagement and provided feedback to Members received from Friends Groups that had attended the Greenspaces Forum on 22nd October. Friends Groups had been asked an array of questions in relation to the future of parks in the borough; what they would define as a park or nature reserve; the role of the Friends Group in the management of parks and how this could be developed in the future. Feedback received emphasised the need and importance of the advertisement and promotion of parks and that consensus from Friends Group was that they felt that they already provided as much as they could in relation to maintenance of their park and therefore would continue to require support from Council officers and would not feel comfortable taking on additional responsibility.

The Assistant Director of the Urban Environment (Environment Management) then summed up the presentation and reiterated that a further report would be submitted to the Committee in November. He outlined the next steps and the information that would be provided to the next meeting, building on recommendations associated with the Green Spaces Asset Management Plan.

Concerns were raised by a Member that an area of open space situated in a deprived area that currently had fewer facilities than others would be neglected by the Strategy. The Project Development Manager re-emphasised that it was essential that all residents had the same access and equality to parks or green spaces and that this would be fundamental to the Green Spaces Asset Management Plan which will encompass the hierarchy of parks, nature reserves and open spaces.

A Member asked if population, park usage, park access, bus and cycle routes could be included in the attributes criteria for consideration. It was stated that all criteria suggested had been considered, however it would be extremely difficult to determine and monitor the number of people that used each park.

A Member requested further information in relation to how the Council had benefited from Friends Group raising £232,000. He also stated that Friends of parks did a wonderful job, but sometimes it was only down to two or three of its members to carry out the work and therefore could not continue without the support from the Council. He also raised concerns in relation to areas that are currently disadvantaged and would continue to be and that this needed to be taken into consideration and that it was important to understand what works for Dudley and that proper option appraisals take place before making any decisions.

In response to a question raised in relation to surplus land it was stated that a consultation process would take place prior to any amenity land being sold or utilised for any other purpose.

RESOLVED

That the information contained in the report submitted, the detailed presentation, the information documents circulated and all comments made at the meeting, in relation to the development of a strategy and a hierarchy to guide both future investment and inform re-alignment of future revenue budgets, be noted.

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UPDATE ON THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE WORKING GROUP PROGRESS AND THE TRAFFIC REGULATION ORDER PROCESS

The Lead Officer to the Committee gave a verbal update on the progress of the Urban Environment Scrutiny Committee Working Group considering Support to Local Businesses and the virtual scrutiny review of the Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) process.

In referring to the virtual TRO process, he stated that the feedback received from Members to date had been useful and that a final report on the process would be submitted to the Scrutiny Committee in March 2014.

In referring to the Working Group and the work currently being undertaken in relation to support for local businesses it was stated that following the previous meeting with regard to Dudley Business Loan Fund and the presentation from Black Country Reinvestment Society, a letter of thanks had been written to the Chief Executive of the company on behalf of the Scrutiny Committee and that the further information that had been requested at that meeting in relation to bad debts was currently being produced and would be circulated to Members in due course. It was stated that a final report for this area would also be submitted to the Scrutiny Committee in March 2014.

The Lead Officer then referred to an email that had been sent to all Members of the Scrutiny Committee informing them of the change of date and time of the next meeting of the Committee.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the verbal update provided by the Lead Officer of the Committee in relation to the Urban Environment Scrutiny Committee Working Groups progress relating to Support to Local Businesses and the virtual scrutiny review of the Traffic Regulation Order process, be noted.
- (2) That Members be requested to note that the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee would now be held on 27th November, 2013 at 5pm in Committee Room 2.

The meeting ended at 8.40pm.

CHAIR