

Minutes of the Highways and Environmental Services Select Committee

Thursday, 21st March, 2024 at 6.00 pm
In Committee Room 2, The Council House, Priory Road, Dudley

Present:

Councillor E Lawrence (Chair)
Councillor P Miller (Vice-Chair)
Councillors D Borley, K Casey, K Denning, I Kettle, D Stanley, K Westwood and M Westwood.

Dudley MBC Officers:

N McGurk (Director of Environment), J Deakin (Head of Waste and Fleet Operations), L Whitehouse (Street Scene Group Manager), C Green (Street Scene Neighbourhood Manager), L Hopeton (Street Scene Neighbourhood Manager), D Rogers (Street Scene Neighbourhood Manager), R Shilvock (Street Scene Neighbourhood Manager), C Southall (Street Scene Neighbourhood Manager), J Wallader (Waste Operations Manager) and K Taylor (Senior Democratic Services Officer).

Also in Attendance:

Councillor D Corfield (Cabinet Member for Highways and Environmental Services) and Councillor C Bayton (Shadow Cabinet Member for Climate Change and Environment)

Two Members of the Public

M Smith – Local Democracy Reporting

36 **Introductions by the Chair**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and invited all attendees to introduce themselves.

37 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received on behalf of Councillors P Dobb and J Martin.

38 **Appointment of Substitute Member**

It was noted that Councillor D Stanley had been appointed as a substitute Member for Councillor P Dobb for this meeting of the Committee only.

39 **Declarations of Interest**

No member made a declaration of interest in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct.

40 **Minutes**

Resolved

That the minutes of the meeting held on 4th January, 2024 be approved as a correct record and signed.

41 **Public Forum**

A member of the public raised concerns with regard to traffic issues surrounding Dudley Town Centre and the potential collisions and accidents that could occur, and despite reporting the concerns on a number of occasions there had been no improvements or response.

In responding, the Cabinet Member for Highways and Environmental Services acknowledged the comments made and referred to the ongoing improvement works within Dudley Town Centre and gave assurances that the area was being continually monitored. He undertook to investigate further and respond directly to the member of public.

The Chair, on behalf of the Committee, thanked the member of public for their attendance and comments made, and requested that the response be shared with the Committee for information.

42 **Update on the Neighbourhood Approach**

A report of the Director of Environment was submitted on the current progress on matters associated with the new Neighbourhood Services approach. It was noted that the new Street Scene Team, with responsibility for street cleansing and grounds maintenance, was implemented on 1st November, 2023 as part of the directorate restructure. The Street Scene Group Manager and Street Scene Neighbourhood Managers (each covering one of the community forum areas) was in attendance at the meeting.

In presenting a summary of the report through presentation slides, the Street Scene Group Manager advised that the Street Scene functions were previously separated across two service areas namely, Green Care and Street Cleansing with two separate Service Managers covering individual areas and separate budgets. During the restructure, it was considered that the two areas should be amalgamated to create the new Street Scene Team, with a simplified and defined structure.

Members were advised of the progress made since the neighbourhood approach had been presented to the Committee in August, 2023, in particular that Street Scene colleagues were working closely with key community groups including stakeholders such as Housing and Waste.

Focus was being given to training and developing a multi-skilled workforce, by undertaking a review across the service area with each Neighbourhood Manager requested to create a matrix to understand staff skills and identify any gaps where appropriate. In acknowledging the aging workforce, further consideration was also being given to preparing for the future through apprenticeships, mentoring and training.

The Street Scene Group Manager provided an overview of the work that would be undertaken by the Street Scene Team including improving response times to Member enquiries by giving ownership, accountability, and delivery to the respective Street Scene Neighbourhood Managers. Each Manager would attend public meetings to identify issues and priorities within communities to help inform work programmes. It was noted that performance was now being monitored digitally with an analytics tool to help retrieve data immediately and identify any issues.

It was noted that job descriptions had been updated to ensure the workforce were clear on their wide-ranging responsibilities and empowered to undertake work that was required in their areas. Members were advised of the Directorate's strive to adopt a can-do attitude at all levels inspiring the workforce to take pride in the work they do for the residents of the Borough.

Members were advised of the volume of Street Scene's work over a typical two-month period and the wards covering each of the new 5 community forum areas together with the contact details of each respective Street Scene Neighbourhood Manager. Photographs showing examples of street scene improvement works was also displayed at the meeting.

Further work would be undertaken to improve the Streetscape by working closely with partners and stakeholders with particular focus on main entrances into the Borough. In order to maximise recycling, further consideration was also being given to introducing vape and street recycling bin provision. The need to ensure that all operatives and officers had clear targets and opportunities to develop further was also mentioned.

The collective aspirations and the direction that must be taken in order to develop a more modernised and efficient services was emphasised.

In concluding, the Street Scene Group Manager referred to communications and public perceptions and the need to work closely with the Communications and Public Affairs Team moving forward on any significant projects.

Following the presentation of the report, Members had the opportunity to ask questions make comments and responses were provided, where necessary, as follows:-

- a) The Chair commented positively on the presentation given and the significant progress made since the approach was presented to the Committee in August, 2023.
- b) Councillor D Stanley referred to comments made in relation to the aging workforce and queried whether employees had accepted the new ways of working.

Reference was also made to the new five community forum areas and any areas of concern that impacted neighbouring wards across different areas. Councillor Stanley referred specifically to improvement works required in streets bordering both the Gornal and Pensnett Wards in which he had reported on a number of occasions with no response or works undertaken.

Councillor Stanley also referred to an example of improvement works that had been undertaken and raised concern that this had resulted in a crack being exposed and therefore queried what improvement had been made. He also queried whether enforcement powers were available to the Local Authority in cases where works were required to properties and/or land that were privately owned.

- c) In responding to queries raised by Councillor D Stanley, the Street Scene Group Manager confirmed that as part of the restructure, a comprehensive consultation period was undertaken where colleagues, along with their trade union representatives, had the opportunity to raise any concerns or issues. Whilst it was acknowledged that some issues were raised, senior officers discussed in detail the reasons and benefits of the new ways of working which helped alleviate some concerns. It was noted that the vast majority of employees welcomed the proposed change.

The Street Scene Group Manager was disappointed to hear that there had been no response to reported issues and requested that Members contact him directly if any queries were not being responded to and he would investigate and redirect accordingly.

It was noted that the Street Scene Team were responsible for street cleansing and ground maintenance and that any other issues identified by operatives would be reported to internal colleagues such as Highways to be investigated further. Reference was also made on the collaboration work with waste enforcement colleagues in communicating with private tenants to address any issues that had been reported.

- d) Councillor D Stanley reiterated the importance of retaining experienced and skilled employees.

- e) With regard to works required in areas bordering a number of wards, the Chair queried whether there was an internal system that would allow the queries to be directed to the appropriate Neighbourhood Manager to respond to the relevant Councillor as needed.
- f) In responding to comments made, the Director of Environment confirmed that he would discuss the specific case with Councillor Stanley following the meeting. He emphasised that improvements to communications was the main purpose for the Neighbourhood model. The Neighbourhood Managers were in attendance to listen and show what the future model of the service would look like, and Members were assured that officers were committed to improve in order to deliver an innovative service and connect with communities. Whilst it was recognised that highways issues were a problem across the Borough, this was a national issue, and measures on addressing those through an Action Plan was presented to the Committee at a previous meeting.
- g) Councillor K Casey welcomed the report submitted and suggested that the success of the model would be determined by how it would be embedded and welcomed the proposed new way of working. The need to establish cross-directorate working in order to avoid duplication was mentioned. He also commented positively on the information reported on apprenticeships and success planning and emphasised the need for further work on future workforce planning in terms of recruitment, sustaining the service and developing the workforce maximising the experience and skills gained of existing employees.

Reference was made to the increasing litter of disposable vapes and the proposed provision of appropriate recycling bins. Councillor K Casey sought clarification as to whether this would be a separate waste bin and whether this could be achieved given the current spending controls that had been implemented by the Local Authority.

With regard to the use of technology, Councillor K Casey also queried whether this specifically related to performance management of work undertaken or introduction of technology to support the new ways of working. He also asked whether benchmarking information had been considered as to how other Local Authorities were operating and whether best practice had been shared.

It was also suggested that the proposed targets for operatives and officers could be considered by the Select Committee at a future meeting to provide an overview of overall performance.

- h) In responding to all queries raised by Councillor K Casey, the Street Scene Group Manager referred to the work with BMet College with four employees currently enrolled on the Street Scene Apprenticeships Programme. It was confirmed that a pilot for the installation of a small number of recycling bins for disposable vapes in Dudley was being considered, and that a grant funding application for £12,500 had recently been submitted specifically for recycling and disposable vape bins.

Reference was made to the mobile devices utilised by street cleansing operatives to assist in communicating with colleagues and notifications of any reported jobs through MyDudley to help streamline the process and avoid any delays. The introduction of the Whitespace Work Software reduced the reliance on paper and provided the ability to streamline and monitor workflows, retrieve accurate reports and improve customer service. Members were advised that discussions had been held with Derby Council who had demonstrated the software and shared lessons learned, and it was acknowledged that the software had been adopted by a number of local authorities.

With regards to setting targets for operatives and officers, the Street Scene Group Manager clarified that this predominately related to individual members of staff having specific targets in order for them to understand their roles and responsibilities.

- i) Councillor K Casey emphasised the importance of operatives being empowered to undertake and deal with any requests or immediate jobs required on inspection.

- j) Councillor K Denning commented positively on the accessibility of the report and presentation and the engagement he had experienced with the Street Scene Neighbourhood Manager for the Castle and Priory Ward. He welcomed the walkarounds undertaken which helped identify issues that required attention which gave a positive message to residents.

With regard to performance monitoring, he queried whether there were any plans to give the relevant Cabinet and Shadow Cabinet Member access to real time data to respond to any queries or complaints. Further information was also needed on enforcement and fines in terms of fly tipping and measures undertaken by the Local Authority for Elected Members to communicate and feedback to residents.

In responding, the Street Scene Group Manager welcomed comments made about engagement with the Street Scene Neighbourhood Manager and agreed that it was essential that strong relationships were established with communities to understand local issues and priorities. With regards to monitoring and taking a proactive approach on emerging trends including fly-tipping, real time information could be shared with Elected Members immediately on request. Any emerging trends was also reported at Cabinet Member and Shadow Cabinet Member briefings. It was noted that further information in relation to waste enforcement was available from J Scobie, Assistant Team Manager.

The Director of Environment also acknowledged comments made in relation to the importance of communication and that it had been recognised that further work was needed for the Local Authority to reconnect with communities. It was anticipated that the new neighbourhood model would address those concerns and breakdown any communication barriers by being able to respond to queries with real time information.

- k) Councillor D Borley welcomed and fully supported the new model, and referred to the number of alleyways throughout the Borough that required some improvement works in particular within the Lye and Stourbridge North Ward. Reference was also made to the flexibility of operatives attending various sites and a query was raised as to whether meetings were taking place with Street Scene operatives to discuss work programmes and Team Managers to ensure regular communication.

In responding, the Street Scene Group Manager confirmed that the Public Right of Way Team carried out works to alleyways across the Borough, however there was some flexibility to deploy other operatives to undertake any remedial work as needed.

It was noted that each Neighbourhood Manager would arrange a team briefing at individual depots on a daily basis, to ensure the team were clear on their duties for that day and allowed the opportunity to raise any concerns or questions as appropriate. Members were advised that the Street Scene Group Manager and the five Neighbourhood Managers met on a weekly basis to discuss all areas associated with street scene.

- L) Councillor M Westwood welcomed the report and referred to the recent restructure of the Environment Directorate and in doing so queried whether this had resulted in a reduction in leadership or operating team.

In responding, the Director of Environment confirmed that the leadership as a result of the restructure had grown, by the appointment of a Head of Energy, Sustainability and Climate Change. Whilst it was acknowledged that there were two vacancies within the senior leadership team, the restructure had bolstered the leadership and service areas. The need to reinforce different ways of working and increase efficiencies was a priority.

The Director of Environment undertook to circulate a copy of the structures across the Directorate to Members for information.

- m) In responding to comments made, Councillor M Westwood sought further clarification as to how the increase to the Leadership Team had been approved, given the current financial position faced by the Local Authority.

The Director of Environment confirmed that the commencement of the restructure had begun in late 2022 and the aim was to bolster the resident focused teams, including Street Scene, by recruiting in the majority of those roles totalling 187 employees. Following the restrictions placed in October, 2023, whilst there remained two Heads of Service vacancies, focus was being given to efficiencies in how services were being delivered.

- n) Following concerns raised by Councillor M Westwood in relation to hedge cutting that had been undertaken in Brick Kiln Lane, Gornal, the Street Scene Group Manager agreed to discuss further after the meeting.
- o) Councillor I Kettle hoped for success for the new model and considered that local knowledge would be extremely beneficial for people working within the authority. Reference was made to some challenging labour problems encountered at Wollescote Hall and clarification was sought as to whether this had now been resolved.

In responding, the Street Scene Group Manager acknowledged the concerns raised and confirmed that there were currently five vacancies at Wollescote Hall. The difficulties faced last year were resolved by appointing agency staff members which supported and allowed skilled operatives to focus on more skilled jobs. It was noted that across the board there was approximately 7 vacancies out of 187 roles, and although a fully resourced team would be preferred, this was not considered significant enough to impact the service moving forward.

The Chair thanked officers for their attendance and presentation given and the informative discussions undertaken during the meeting.

Resolved

- (1) That the information on the report submitted, and as reported at the meeting, on the current progress on matters associated with the new Neighbourhood Services approach, be noted.
- (2) That the Director of Environment be requested to circulate a copy of the structures across the Directorate to Members for information.

43 **Update on Green Waste Charging**

A report of the Director of Environment was submitted on matters associated with the introduction of a chargeable Green Waste collection service. It was noted that the Chair had requested that a report be submitted to allow the Select Committee to comment or raise any questions relating to the operation of the service.

In presenting a summary of the report, the Director of Environment confirmed that the proposal to charge residents for the collection of garden waste was ratified at the meeting of the Full Council on Monday 4th March, 2024. It was noted that to date, there had been approximately 30,000 subscribers that had opted into the service.

Members were invited to ask questions make comments and responses were provided, where necessary, as follows:-

- a) The Chair sought clarification as to what consideration had been given to the removal of old garden waste collected by residents that would not subscribe to the service.

In responding, the Director of Environment reported on the significant amount of work undertaken in developing the proposals submitted and confirmed that the Local Authority had previously offered an additional collection service over the winter period, which was utilised by approximately 2,000 residents. It was acknowledged that a longer time to prepare for the change would have been preferred however a variety of communications were issued and all systems fully implemented on Tuesday 5th March, 2024, following approval by Full Council. It was noted that the chargeable service costing £36 for 25 collections over a 50-week period was significantly lower than other Local Authorities.

- b) The Chair, although acknowledging that the winter collection service was available, suggested that residents were unaware of the impending charge and change to future garden waste collections, and therefore considered it unfair to those that could not opt into the service and was left with waste. He also sought clarification as to what would happen with bins at properties that had not subscribed to the service, and if they were to be collected, what would happen should there be any garden waste in the bins.

In responding, the Waste Operations Manager confirmed that bins would not be collected immediately in order to give residents sufficient time to subscribe to the collection service, however it was expected that bins would be recovered once an appropriate time had passed. Should the bins contain any excess garden waste then these would be collected as a 'one-off', it was hoped however that more residents would subscribe to the service near to the summer months.

- c) In responding to a question raised by the Chair in relation to the options available to new residents in a property where the previous tenant had not opted into the service and the bin was subsequently recovered, the Waste Operations Manager confirmed that on those occasions the new resident would be required to purchase a new garden waste bin.
- d) Councillor K Casey echoed the important points raised by the Chair and acknowledged that the proposal had been agreed by Full Council, however he considered that from a communication perspective, this had been poorly managed, with enquires continuing to be made surrounding the confusion of the operation of the service. Residents that collected green waste voluntarily to improve the area which was disposed in waste bins would be affected, and it was important to note of the possibility of unused bins being left on the kerbside. Reference was made to bins that had been lost or damaged at no fault of the residents, and should there be any surplus bins this should help alleviate the problem.

Councillor K Casey also sought clarification as to whether there were any further measures that could be adopted by the Local Authority concerning recycling green waste in order to become more commercially viable and generate income, which could then be reinvested back into services. It was suggested that there was a number of Local Authorities that had implemented a number of measures for recycling green waste to generate income.

- f) In responding to all queries raised, the Cabinet Member for Highways and Environmental Services referred to the unprecedented financial challenges faced by the Local Authority and although this was a difficult decision, the best proposal had been put forward. It was noted that a blanket collection across the Borough would have significantly impacted on the savings target of £1.3m, therefore further consideration had been given to the operation of the service. It was reiterated that the chargeable service for 25 collections over a 50-week period was significantly lower than other Local Authorities.

It was noted that the previous service offered 16 free collections with an option available for residents to pay £30 for an extra 6 collections. It was suggested that the change would provide a more comprehensive and cost-effective service, and that bins that had been collected would be cleaned and offered at a lower rate to residents if needed.

With regard to concerns raised in relation to communications, the Director of Environment acknowledged that further communication methods would be explored to ensure wider engagement across the Borough, and invited feedback by Elected Members on how communication can be improved for further consideration going forward. It was noted that methods that had previously been used such as circulating letters to all residents was no longer financially viable.

- g) The Chair suggested that promotion of the service and any future proposals could be included within the Council Tax bill that was circulated to all residents.
- i) In responding to comments made in relation to green waste recycling, the Waste Operations Manager confirmed that green waste was processed in an open windrow for composting at a cost. In order to produce our own composting would require a large environmental area, however there was no suitable areas within the Borough to support this function.

The Director of Environment also confirmed that the directorate was exploring options for generating income and delivering services efficiently by maximising existing resources.

- k) In responding to Councillor P Miller's concerns regarding the potential increase of fly-tipping of green waste as a result of the charge, the Director of Environment confirmed that following discussions with other authorities that had implemented the service for a number of years, there was no correlation between green waste fly-tipping and the charging for collections.

- l) Councillor D Borley echoed concerns raised with regard to communication to residents, and whilst it was acknowledged that the majority of residents had been informed through social media this had been missed by many elderly residents. It was essential that the Council operated flexibly during April when the new service commenced, as it was anticipated that there would be an increase in the number of complaints in view of the confusion.

In responding, the Director of Environment referred to the considerable amount of operational resource and time in preparing for this change within a short timeframe. It was understood that the usual methods of communication which had been undertaken previously had been used, however the comments made today had been noted and would be considered to improve future communications. The number of subscribers to the service to date had been positively received and permits were starting to be rolled-out.

- m) The Chair acknowledged the difficulties associated with ensuring communication to each household.
- n) Councillor D Stanley queried how many additional waste bins had been ordered and whether there was a charge for replacement bins that had been accidentally damaged by operatives during collections.

In responding, the Waste Operations Manager confirmed that residents could order multiple bins, and it was apparent that those that had brown lidded bins had ordered two permits, however there were no other reports to suggest that other bins had been purchased. With regard to damaged bins, the waste collections operations were automatically generated and sent directly to in-cab devices, through Whitespace Waste Software, for easy route planning. The technology also allowed operatives to record damages to bins during services, and a replacement bin would then be delivered free of charge.

- o) In responding to a request by Councillor I Kettle, the Head of Waste and Fleet undertook to provide a breakdown of the departmental costs for the green waste service to Members for information.

- p) Councillor K Westwood referred to the feedback she had received from residents that were willing to pay the £36 collection charge but not as a single payment and raised the question as to whether the charge could be added as an additional payment to the Council Tax bill as a monthly payment.

In responding, the Director of Environment confirmed that consideration had been given to all options available for the service, however it was noted that the payment could not be included within the Council Tax bill as the collection was not categorised as a statutory service.

- q) The Chair suggested that further consideration be given to payment options moving forward in future years. He did however consider that the service would be good value for money for those residents that subscribed.
- r) Councillor K Denning reported that Telford and Wrekin Council provided 26 free collections during the year, and echoed comments made by Councillor K Westwood with regard to payments. He raised concerns of the accessibility of the communications that had been distributed, in particular that visually impaired residents had not been considered, and therefore commented that further work was needed in this area. Councillor K Denning also supported comments made for the Council to become more commercially viable in order to generate more income, and further anticipated that there would be an increase in flytipping of green bins, holding green waste.

Councillor K Denning also requested whether residents could be subsidised for storing green bins at their property that had not subscribed to the service, if they were not being collected.

In responding to comments made, the Director of Environment acknowledged comments made with regard to communications and payments and agreed to consider subsistence payments further. It was acknowledged that the decisions made were difficult however there had been some positive messaging in relation to the number of collections and the delivery of the service. It was confirmed that efficiencies that were delivered internally would be invested back into services for residents.

Arising from the discussions undertaken, the Committee agreed to formulate a recommendation to the Cabinet Member for Highways and Environmental Services, in consultation with the Director of Environment, to consider future charging options for residents and maximising the recycling of bins that had been collected in order to be available to residents that wished to subscribe to the green waste collection service at a reduced rate, on request.

Resolved

- (1) That the information on the report submitted, and as reported at the meeting, on matters associated with the introduction of a chargeable Green Waste collection service, be noted.
- (2) That the Head of Waste and Fleet Operations be requested to provide a breakdown of the departmental costs for the green waste service to Members for information.
- (3) That the Cabinet Member for Highways and Environmental Services, in consultation with the Director of Environment, be requested to consider future charging options for residents and maximise the recycling of bins that had been collected in order to be available to residents that wished to subscribe to the green waste collection service at a reduced rate, on request.

44 Corporate Quarterly Performance Report – Environment Directorate – Quarter 3 (1st October, 2023 to 31st December, 2023)

A report of the Director of Environment was submitted on the Quarter 3 Corporate Quarterly Performance report of the 2023/24 financial year covering the period 1st October, 2023 to 31st December, 2023, which was aligned to the 2022-25 Council Plan. Further data relating to the directorate service delivery was included as appendices to the report submitted, focusing on the Environment Directorate.

Members had the opportunity to ask questions make comments and responses were provided, where necessary, as follows:-

- a) In responding to a question raised by Councillor K Casey relating to PI.322 - % of fly-tipping enforcement actions, the Head of Waste and Fleet Operations undertook to provide a breakdown of specific locations of fly-tipping enforcement actions to Members for information.
- b) In responding to a question raised by Councillor I Kettle relating to PI.2383 - % Highway Safety Inspections completed on time, the Director of Environment confirmed that the performance was not significantly under target, and reference was made to the number of defects within the Borough which impacted the ability to react within a suitable timeframe but assured Members that inspections were being completed. The significant improvements that had been made this year compared to previous years was also mentioned.

Resolved

- (1) That the information contained in the report submitted, and as reported at the meeting, on the Quarter 3 Corporate Quarterly Performance report of the 2023/24 financial year covering the period 1st October, 2023 to 31st December, 2023, be noted.
- (2) That the Head of Waste and Fleet Operations be requested to provide a breakdown of specific locations of fly-tipping enforcement actions to Members for information.

45 **Questions Under Council Procedure Rule 11.8**

There were no questions to the Chair pursuant to Council Procedure Rule 11.8.

46 **Comments by the Chair**

This being the final meeting of the Select Committee during the 2023/24 municipal year, the Chair expressed his thanks to Officers, Committee Members and the Cabinet Member for Highways and Environmental Services for their attendance, contributions and support.

The meeting ended at 8.01pm

CHAIR