

## **Meeting Of the Council – 10<sup>th</sup> April, 2006**

### **Annual Report of the Select Committee on the Environment – Supplementary Report**

#### **Purpose of Report**

1. To consider supplementary information to the annual report of the Select Committee on the Environment, arising from the meeting of the Committee held on 30<sup>th</sup> March, 2006.

#### **Background**

2. Further to the annual report, the following issues were considered at the meeting of the Select Committee held on 30<sup>th</sup> March, 2006;

#### **Sustainable Development and Decision Making**

3. Further to paragraph 7 in the Annual Report, a report back to the Committee was made on the initial evaluation of the draft Sustainability Appraisal Tool Kit within the Directorate of the Urban Environment.
4. The report indicated that feedback from initial pilots based on a range of projects had indicated that the tool kit was straightforward to use and 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 tool kit had included simplifying some of the questions and adding a table which helped assessors to prioritise key sustainability improvements.
5. The report suggested that further analysis of the tool kit would be beneficial in order to consider in more detail impacts of outcomes of projects in sustainability terms. This would give a clearer indication of where the tool kit could add value in terms of types of projects that would benefit from the process.
6. Following discussion on the issue, in which particular reference was made to the work of the Friends of the Park Groups, the Committee resolved to support further testing of the sustainability of the appraisal tool kit across projects and initiatives within the Directorate of the Urban Environment and requested a further report to be submitted to a future Committee giving consideration to the following issues:-
  - how the tool kit impacts on outcomes of projects/initiatives in sustainability terms;

- the level of projects/initiatives that should be subject to a sustainability appraisal;
- awareness raising and training requirements, including links into the project management training module.

### **Public Multi Storey Car Parks**

7. Further to paragraph 21 of the Annual Report, a report of the Director of the Urban Environment was submitted setting out the current position with regard to the 4 multi storey car parks in the Borough.

The report stated that, although the budget was limited, it was sufficient to maintain the 4 multi storey 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 resistance services. 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.

8. In noting strategies considered over recent years, the report confirmed that the current strategy 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 works to be undertaken to Pool Road Car Park, Halesowen, and Ryemarket Car Park, Stourbridge. It was considered that, by improving the parking environment, car park patronage would grow, making the two remaining multi-storey car parks sustainable.
9. In the discussion on this issue, the importance of sustaining the car parks was emphasised, in the light of the implications of easy access on town centre trade.
10. The Committee resolved to note the report and support current progress being made to the redevelopment and refurbishment of the multi storey car parks.

### **Plastics Recycling**

11. Further to paragraph 22 of the annual report, the Assistant Director of the Urban Environment (Environmental Management) reported on the visit of the Select Committee on the Environment (Recycling) Working Group to Lichfield District Council.
12. The Assistant Director was of the view 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.
13. 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.
14. In so far as the disposal of plastics was concerned, however, 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.

15. In receiving the report, the Committee resolved to reappoint the Working Group in the new municipal year with a remit to consider recycling feasibility options and to look further at the recycling of plastics.

### **Affordable Housing**

16. Further to paragraph 24 in the Annual Report, an oral report on Affordable Housing was given by the Assistant Director of Adult, Community and Housing Services (Housing Strategy and Private Sector) and the Principal Planning Officer (Planning Policy).
17. The report covered the definitions of Affordable Housing and relevant Planning Policy issues; the situation of Affordable Housing in the Dudley Unitary Development Plan (UDP Policy H5) and the Supplementary Planning Document in connection therewith. The supplementary planning document would be submitted to the Council for approval in June.
18. In discussing the Dudley Housing Strategy, the Assistant Director indicated that this was being updated in the light of Housing Needs Surveys and the Unitary Development Plan. Key issues on affordability were being identified, including working with Planning to increase the supply of affordable housing through planning gain; seeking to address shortages of affordable family and elderly accommodation; and seeking to reduce mismatch between supply and demand in housing for younger people. A range of other complementary issues to address housing problems had also been identified, e.g. the Decent Homes Standard, tackling 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.
19. 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 p.a. The current market 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.
20. The report indicated progress against targets in so far as affordable dwelling provision over the period from 2004 to 2011 was concerned. Regarding future policy making, to mitigate an anticipated affordability problem, there would be continued close working between officers within the Council and with external partners to maintain a regular review of policies, the needs of residents, respond to and facilitate change. This will be helped by the increased flexibility of the new planning system.
21. In the discussion on this 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 navigate the current requirements. The report was received and noted.

### **High Hedges Legislation**

22. A report on concerns expressed by the Brierley Hill Area Committee on five issues raised by that Committee on the Council's proposals for dealing with the high hedges legislation was submitted.
23. A lengthy discussion ensued in which particular reference was made to the use of the Mediation Service in the resolution of complaints. In this regard, it was clarified that, while the fee of £405 was chargeable at the stage of formal complaint, the Mediation Service was free.
24. In receiving the report, the Committee noted that a further report would be made to the September meeting of the Committee at which a meaningful assessment could be made, after 12 months operation of the service.

### **Grounds Maintenance on Housing Estates**

25. 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.
26. 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 10 local authorities.
27. 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 rose bed maintenance and the inspection and maintenance of play areas. These included the timings of grass cuts; the apparent spraying of chemicals irrespective of weather conditions; the manner in which litter was collected, which sometimes resulted in cans being left if they could not be picked up by the mechanical sweeper, and difficulties in collecting waste where vehicles were parked.
28. It was agreed that the issues raised by members would be considered by the Directorates concerned and that a further report would be made to the committee in due course.

### **Finance**

29. As stated in the Annual Report of the Select Committee on the Environment.

### **Law**

30. As stated in the Annual Report of the Select Committee on the Environment.

## **Equality Impact**

31. As stated in the Annual Report of the Select Committee on the Environment.

## **Recommendation**

32. (a) That the issues raised at the meeting of the Select Committee on the Environment held on 30 March 2006, and their outcomes, as reported in paragraphs 3-28 (inclusive) above be noted.
- (b) That the proposal of the Committee that further reports be submitted to the Committee in 2006/07 on the issues of the Sustainability Appraisal Toolkit, High Hedges legislation and Grounds Maintenance on Housing Estates be approved and included in the Work Programme of the Committee for 2006/07.



CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMITTEE