

Minutes of the Highways and Environmental Services Select Committee

Wednesday, 2nd August, 2023 at 6.00 pm
At Saltwells Education Development Centre, Bowling Green Road, Netherton

Present:

Councillor E Lawrence (Chair)
Councillor P Miller (Vice-Chair)
Councillors D Borley, K Casey, R Collins, K Denning, P Dobb and A Lees.

Officers:

N McGurk (Acting Service Director – Neighbour Delivery), J Deakin (Head of Neighbourhood Services) and K Taylor (Senior Democratic Services Officer).

Also in Attendance:

Councillor D Corfield (Cabinet Member for Highways and Environmental Services)

1 Comments of the Chair

The Chair welcomed everyone to the first meeting of the Highways and Environmental Services Select Committee and provided a brief introduction of his expectations for the Committee for the 2023/24 municipal year. Although the remit of the Select Committee may attract Members to discuss individual ward areas, the Chair encouraged the Committee to consider the overall picture whilst deliberating items during the year.



2 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors I Kettle and S Mughal.

3 **Appointment of Substitute Member**

It was noted that Councillor R Collins had been appointed as a substitute Member for Councillor I Kettle, for this meeting of the Committee only.

4 **Declarations of Interest**

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

5 **Public Forum**

No issues were raised under this agenda item.

6 **Programme of Meetings and Business Items for 2023/24**

The Committee considered the programme of meetings and items of business for detailed consideration by this Select Committee during 2023/24.

In referring to the suggested business items as outlined in paragraph 4 of the report submitted, the Chair, although acknowledging that there was some space within the schedule, considered that this provided the flexibility during the year to allow for any emerging issues and outstanding queries. It was noted that Working Groups could also be arranged during the year if necessary.

Following a request made by Councillor K Casey, it was agreed that an update on the Neighbourhood Approach be scheduled later in the municipal year.

Resolved

- (1) That the report on the programme of meetings and potential items of business for this Committee, be noted.
 - (2) That, subject to an update on the Neighbourhood Approach being scheduled for later in the year, the Committee confirm the programme of business as outlined in paragraph 4 of the report submitted, subject to the need for flexibility to reflect any changes that might arise during the municipal year.
 - (3) That the Lead for Law and Governance, following consultation with the Chair and Vice-Chair, be authorised to make all the necessary arrangements to enable this Committee to undertake its programme of scrutiny work during the 2023/24 municipal year.
 - (4) That the terms of reference for the Highways and Environmental Services Select Committee, as set out in the Appendix to the report submitted, be noted.
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7 Developing the Neighbourhood Approach

A report of the Acting Service Director – Neighbourhood Delivery was submitted on developing the neighbourhood approach in the Environment Directorate. It was noted that Elected Members had received a separate briefing in June, 2023.

The Acting Service Director – Neighbour Delivery advised Members that consultation on Phase 2 of the restructure of the Environment Directorate had commenced. Employees had been invited to individual or group consultation meetings to discuss the proposals and to obtain feedback, and it was reported that to date, the response had been mainly positive from operational workers who had welcomed the proposed change. It was noted that the consultation period had given the opportunity for senior managers to communicate with employees directly and identify various skills sets which could then be transferred across the Directorate.

It was suggested that a further update could be provided to the Select Committee in early 2024 on progress made and outcomes of the consultation.

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 referred to the key role of Elected Members in embracing changes within the suggested approach and that the Select Committee provided the opportunity for Members to present their experiences, feedback and suggestions as to how the proposed restructure could support and improve service delivery within the designated areas.
- b) Councillor D Borley commented positively on the proposed neighbourhood approach and queried whether consultation responses to date had suggested that any employees that were affected by the change proposals may leave the authority.

In responding, the Acting Service Director – Neighbour Delivery confirmed that sufficient time had been given to ensure that staff understood the neighbourhood delivery approach to delivering services within the Borough and that the current feedback from approximately 98% of 200 employees had been extremely positive.

- c) As Elected Members had extensive knowledge of their respective ward areas and communication with local residents, Councillor D Borley sought clarification as to the preferred method in reporting issues and assisting with prioritising works as appropriate.

In responding, the Acting Service Director – Neighbour Delivery acknowledged the significant improvements required to the existing Councillor Contact application for reporting issues, and the need for a robust mechanism to ensure effective communication and reduce reporting time. It was proposed that the restructure would create five Street Neighbourhood Manager posts, aligned to the Community Forum areas, with clear accountability and responsibility for the leadership and management of defined geographical areas of the Borough. It was anticipated that once the consultation had completed, a meet and greet session would be arranged between the five Area Managers and Elected Members.

- d) Councillor D Borley acknowledged that there would be some time needed to embed the new way of working and welcomed a further update to the Committee before the end of the 2023/24 municipal year. The need to have better communication across the authority in order to breakdown silos working was emphasised.

- e) The Cabinet Member for Highways and Environmental Services referred to the historical operation of the service and his aspirations for the Area Managers to maximise resources aligned to each neighbourhood working collaboratively with the Housing and Communities Directorate and external partners including West Midlands Police. It was anticipated that fortnightly walkarounds would be undertaken and that the model approach provided the opportunity for Elected Members to create thriving neighbourhoods and improve the quality of life reflecting local communities. It was reported that Elected Members would have a direct link to the dedicated Area Manager, who would also attend Community Forum meetings.

The Cabinet Member for Highways and Environmental Services further acknowledged concerns raised in relation to the Councillor Contact application and provided an overview of his objectives for implementing a proactive repair and maintenance programme. Members were also advised that £50,000 had been allocated to be utilised as a tools bank and arranging training sessions and events accordingly.

- f) The Chair emphasised the importance of involving Community Groups within the new model approach and also welcomed the opportunity to improve the Councillor Contact application.
- g) The Acting Service Director – Neighbour Delivery acknowledged comments made and referred to the significant number of queries raised across the Directorate which continued to increase on a weekly basis. He confirmed that the issues previously experienced with the Councillor Contact application were being reviewed and all backlog issues were proactively being addressed. Members were advised that incidents and queries could also be reported through the My Dudley Portal.
- h) In responding to a question raised by the Chair as to whether Area Managers would be supported and empowered to override decisions in order to address issues immediately, the Acting Service Director – Neighbour Delivery confirmed that the proposed neighbourhood approach aimed to provide customer focused services that were tailored to specific neighbourhoods, therefore each Area Manager would be awarded the autonomy for service delivery taking into account neighbourhood priorities with appropriate resources allocated.

The Cabinet Member for Highways and Environmental Services also confirmed that the proposed model would allow operatives the discretion to undertake any work deemed necessary i.e. grass cutting, subject to the correct equipment, at the time of viewing.

- i) Councillor K Casey commented positively on the proposed Neighbourhood Delivery model and welcomed the opportunity for Elected Member involvement, and queried whether other departments including the Directorate of Housing and Communities was supportive in working collaboratively in accordance with the approach.

In responding, the Cabinet Member for Highways and Environmental Services referred to recent meetings held with Dudley Federation of Tenants and Residents Association (DFTRA), Housing Managers and the Cabinet Member for Housing and Safer Communities who had welcomed the proposed changes. In order for the model to be a success it was essential that Housing Managers were proactive and worked collaboratively with Area Managers.

- j) Councillor K Casey emphasised the importance in collaborative working in order to prevent reverting back to old practices and ensure that Area Manager workloads were focused and targeted and were empowered with the resources needed to respond to queries and deliver services accordingly.

The Acting Service Director – Neighbour Delivery reiterated the intention in reducing lengthy communication processes and recognised that it would be a long-term process for the model and processes to be effective however the relationship between Area Managers and Elected Members would be a key element to the success of the model.

- k) The Cabinet Member for Highways and Environmental Services referred to the introduction of handheld electronic units to be used by operatives which would enhance and allow for a successful maintenance programme. He assured Members that the proposed approach was to respond to repairs and complaints in real time rather than solely delivering services according to a scheduled programme. The new software would identify location, the operatives name and allow for photos to be uploaded to the database to determine cleaning regimes as appropriate.

- l) Councillor K Casey suggested that a further understanding on the remit and role of the new Energy, Sustainability and Climate Change Team would be beneficial.
- m) In responding to a question raised by Councillor R Collins with regard to timescales for implementing Phase 2 of the restructure, the Acting Service Director – Neighbour Delivery confirmed that the process had been separated into factors and it was anticipated that areas such as Transport and Highways would be resolved earlier.
- n) Councillor R Collins referred to discussions held at the Public Health Select Committee in relation to the Life in Lye Programme and its approach to improving community cohesion and reducing health inequalities in Lye and the need to alleviate silos working. It was noted that L Whitehouse, Street Scene Group Manager had been assigned to support the programme and Councillor R Collins sought clarification that the support would not be withdrawn upon completion of the implementation of the Neighbourhood Delivery model.

In responding, the Acting Service Director – Neighbour Delivery confirmed that it was intended that support would continue beyond the consultation process which was expected to conclude in November, 2023 and that the predominant aim was in strengthening services that were delivered within the Borough.

- o) Reference was made to some wards that required more assistance and queries raised as to how the service would ensure that sufficient resources were dedicated to specific ward areas accordingly. The Acting Service Director – Neighbour Delivery acknowledged comments made and recognised the potential obstacles faced at the start of the process and further consideration would be needed for smarter processes including improvements to digital.

The Cabinet Member of Highways and Environmental Services reiterated that the proposed model together with a formal structure empowered operatives, and referred to discussions held with employees who were encouraged to make comments and suggestions.

- p) Councillor A Lees commented positively and welcomed the proposed changes and the opportunity to create autonomy amongst the Area Managers within the designated neighbourhoods.

- q) In responding to a question raised by the Chair in relation to investing in equipment, the Cabinet Member of Highways and Environmental Services assured Members that, subject to affordability, equipment that were no longer working would be replaced. Reference was also made to the recent introduction of quadbikes to be used by staff for weed maintenance across the Borough.
- r) The Cabinet Member of Highways and Environmental Services emphasised his commitment and aspiration in providing the best and efficient services to residents.

The Chair thanked the Acting Service Director – Neighbour Delivery and Cabinet Member of Highways and Environmental Services for the presentation and responses provided.

Resolved

- (1) That the report on developing the neighbourhood approach in the Environment Directorate, be noted.
- (2) That a further progress report be submitted to the Highways and Environmental Services Select Committee before the end of the 2023/24 municipal year.

8 Questions Under Council Procedure Rule 11.8

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

The meeting ended at 7.05pm

CHAIR