

ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Environment Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday 15 July 2020 (virtually).

PRESENT:

Cllr Phil Awford	Cllr Sajid Patel
Cllr Robert Bird (Chair)	Cllr Eva Ward
Cllr Dr John Cordwell (Vice-Chair)	Cllr Suzanne Williams
Cllr Kevin Cromwell	Cllr Keith Rippington
Cllr Stephen Hirst	

Officers in attendance: Colin Chick and Simon Excell

1. APOLOGIES

No apologies were received.

2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 4 March 2020 were approved.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

4. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT: ECONOMY, ENVIRONMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE

4.1 Colin Chick, Executive Director of Economy, Environment and Infrastructure, updated the Committee on current issues. In particular, members noted that:

- The team were still experiencing an incredibly busy period at the moment as they began to restart services.
- Highways Maintenance teams returned to carrying out inspections a few weeks ago and were trying to catch up on the backlog before continuing with the 2020/21 maintenance programme.
- It was highlighted that these same teams had been supporting the recent flood efforts in the county and had therefore capacity had been very stretched.
- The 2020/21 maintenance programme had changed slightly due to the challenges faced by the pandemic. The teams were prioritising those schemes which were doable at the moment, and those which presented more difficulty would be delayed for the time being.
- The Gloucester South West Bypass / Llanthony Road scheme was still awaiting a public enquiry hearing. It was due in May (2020) but

postponed due to Covid. The Planning Inspectorate had considered a virtual hearing initially but concluded it would be very complicated. This scheme was therefore still on hold and will experience delays in delivery.

- The team received 60 schemes back from the 6 district councils for the Department of Transport Emergency Active Travel Fund bid which officers have had to prioritise. There were currently 4 trial schemes being rolled out on Bath Road (Cheltenham), London Road (Gloucester), Tewkesbury High Street and Bourton on the Water.
- Gloucestershire overachieved on the Tranche 1 funding and was awarded in total, £320,000 which was 110% for what was bid for.
- Officers were now working towards the next funding tranche which had a fairly demanding set of criteria and will be a more competitive bid.
- Public Transport had been an especially challenging area for the Council and officers have had to act in advance of Government guidance becoming available in order to avoid a collapse of the sector.
- For home to school transport, following the 2 metre social distancing guidance has not been possible. In order to fulfil its existing capacity the Council would need a 10 fold increase in its bus fleet which simply was not accessible in this current climate. The compromise was agreed for as much distance to be achieved as possible within buses/taxis (normally 1-1.5 metres), with the addition of face coverings being provided by the Council for drivers and children.
- Bus services will aim to be completely restored by mid-August 2020.
- Parking enforcement had now been reinstated after being reduced during the peak of lockdown. This had moved inline with the traffic demand which had already returned to around 80% by July.
- After being awarded funding, the A417 scheme now faced a significant delay due to a late objection from the National Trust. The scheme was now subject to a full review.
- Phases 1 and 2 of the West Cheltenham scheme started on site in June 2020. Phases 3 and 4 were due to be in contract in January 2021 but following a Government announcement that they were only providing guaranteed funding for schemes that were in contract before September 2020, GCC accelerated the scheme and used a design build contract to ensure that Phases 3 and 4 were in contract and the funding protected.
- The adoption of the revised LTP had been delayed to early 2021 in order to take account of delays caused by the pandemic, plus the Government's decarbonising transport policy which was due in November.
- The MetroWest Phase 2 improvements for a 30 minute service into Gloucester were expected to be in place by May 2022 (there was a mistake in the report which stated December 2022).

- There is a significant backlog on birth registration due to the need for this to be done in person.
- To address the backlog in wedding ceremonies, there will be no new bookings allowed this year, to allow those who have cancelled to have their first pick on a revised date.
- There had been very positive feedback on the re-opening of the HRCs. There are now around 44,000 booking slots available a month to visit a HRC across the county.

4.2 The Chair opened member discussion by thanking the Director and their team for all their hard work throughout the pandemic, particularly on the active travel schemes. They were aware of how much work goes into schemes like this and they had all turned out brilliantly so far. This thanks and appreciation was echoed by other members of the Committee throughout discussions.

4.3 A member asked for further information on the A417 scheme objection. It was advised that as it was not a GCC scheme, officers did not have the full detail but understood that part of the project (the green bridge) had been proposed to be built on National Trust land. As they had now raised representations against this move, the scheme will need redesigning and re-consulting on. This could take anywhere between eight and twelve months potentially.

4.4 Some members stressed their disappointment with the delay caused and it was understood that the Leader of the Council had already written to the Chief Executive of the National Trust to share that disappointment. There had been very lengthy consultation on the scheme which made this last minute U-turn difficult to foresee.

4.5 On the DMMO report, it was questioned why the outreach post had been seconded to rather than recruiting an additional officer to fulfil the role.

ACTION: COLIN CHICK

4.6 A member raised the issue of parking enforcement returning to normal. It was highlighted that as a lot of people were still working from home, this was not viewed by the member as being 'a return to normal'. In response, officers advised they gave very serious consideration to what traffic enforcement would return to but they started to receive complaints about the lack of enforcement considering traffic levels were very quickly returning to pre-lockdown levels. There were issues with illegal parking effecting businesses, obstructing buses etc. A member suggested that it could be time for a parking review by the districts as the county was experiencing a new normal in its travel habits.

4.7 It was queried whether GCC were giving guidance to town and parish councils who had their own mini buses to supplement home to school

transport in their areas. It was reiterated that home to school transport had been one of the most difficult areas to bring back online. The government guidance had been particularly difficult to implement and had changed a few times. GCC was trying its best to provide as much of a service as possible under the current regulations and would of course advise and assist other councils in Gloucestershire if they needed it. Members were asked to refer any in need of advice to GCC's Integrated Transport Unit.

- 4.8 The Committee had a lengthy discussion on cycle lane provision and expressed the following concerns:
- Cars parking on cycle lanes which made lanes inaccessible or unsafe to use;
 - The location of some shared cycle/walk paths which can cause safety issues for residents using them;
 - Poor maintenance on cycle lanes which cause cyclists to move wider into the road and potentially cause altercations with drivers;
 - Overgrown vegetation which causes visibility and safety issues on lanes/paths; and
 - Unsafe cycling by users not using suitable lighting at night, coupled with a lack of police enforcement.
- 4.9 In response, it was advised that during the pandemic, an officer had been cycling routes across the county taking photographs and noting: maintenance issues, where lanes were not continuous, a need for remarking lanes etc. in order to review and improve the existing routes.
- 4.10 It was highlighted however that the very wet and then warm weather that we were experiencing at the moment did not help with the speed that vegetation grows back, it was difficult to keep completely on top of overgrowth. But, this was something that needed taking into account in future planning, for example, allowing more distance between a hedge and a cycle lane.
- 4.11 On the issue of shared cycle/walking space it was advised that these schemes were useful where cyclist were not as confident cycling on the road, as well as for families and young children. Residents were much more likely to get hurt cycling on the road than them harming a pedestrian whilst using a shared space.
- 4.12 To help reinforce cycle lanes, it was explained that there would hopefully be a move towards an increased use of solid white line, mandatory cycle lanes. These would however need to be backed up with waiting restrictions wherever possible to make these enforceable. The County has a good history of putting cycle lanes in but normally where it was relatively easy to do so. Cycle provision tended to be pushed down the priority list for parking outside shops for example, and at the very point a cyclist needed safeguarding the most.

- 4.13 Finally, members heard that the Council's Active Travel team continued to work with cyclists to encourage safe behaviour when cycling, such as using lights. The issue of lack of police enforcement on this was a known issue and the team would continue to keep raising it with the local forces.
- 4.14 A member questioned the staffing of the Highways Planning Department. The Committee were reminded that there had been an issue previously with officers being available to feed into planning applications on highways requirements. It was advised that as part of the 2020/21 budget, three additional transport planning posts were created. One of these had been recruited to and the others were being covered by senior officers in the interim.
- 4.15 Since the Committee was last updated on this, there had only been one instance where a county officer did not attend a planning meeting but for good reason. The Director believed the team was the strongest it had been for a while and there had been no complaints from district councils.
- 4.16 In response to a question regarding the backlog in birth registrations, it was advised that if there was an emergency circumstance such as passport registration for a new born, officers would act accordingly.
- 4.17 A member questioned when the Council planned to open public libraries, which would be particularly important in the school holidays. It was explained that the resources of the Council had been focused on opening council buildings and priority areas. Now the Government guidance had changed to allow libraries to open, each building needed to be reviewed to make sure they were Covid safe, a process to be in place to quarantine books after use, plus social distancing, staff protection and click and collect services. Turning services back on following the current guidance took an incredible amount of work behind the scenes.
- 4.18 Cabinet Member for Highways and Flood thanked officers for their hard work through the pandemic, particularly to the highways delivery team who had gone the extra mile to reach all key performance indicators, even with Covid restrictions in place. Members of the Committee were reminded to liaise with their Local Highways Manager about maintenance needs in their areas; the crews had a particular focus on vegetation at the moment.
- 4.19 Cabinet Member Environment and Planning also thanked officers, with particular thanks to the waste team who had continued their service, alongside the districts, throughout the pandemic and avoiding much distribution to the collection and disposal services. They highlighted Gloucestershire had a lot to be proud of for its work through the pandemic.
- 4.20 The Director asked a final question to the Committee. It was explained due to the current pressure on his departments, he requested a view from members on just him and another colleague attending the scrutiny meetings for the moment, and therefore allowing other officers to continue with other

things. It was stressed that this question was at no disrespect to the importance of the Committee's work and would not be a permanent change.

- 4.21 Members agreed that this would be an acceptable approach, and the Chair thanked the Director for all his detailed responses during today's discussion.

5. WORK PLAN

- 5.1 The Committee discussed the following points in relation to its ongoing work plan:

- The next meeting of the Committee will be the delayed Joint Scrutiny meeting with the Economic Growth Committee to focus on the Local Transport Plan Review.
- At full Council on 24 July 2020, the Climate Change motion 861 was passed and referred to this Committee for consideration. It was advised that officers were in discussion about a suitable timeline to bring this report. Members requested to tentative this report for the 24 November 2020 meeting.
- Members were due to consider an update report on GCC's highways contracts but this had to be delayed due to officer capacity. It was requested that a written report was shared with the Committee as soon as possible, via email, and DSU would co-ordinate any comments/questions from members into a summary report.
- Regarding the Single-use Plastics Task group, Cllr Ward as Chair of the group advised they were yet to restart post-lockdown. It was agreed that their first meeting would need to understand how much work was left to do and they would aim for a final report to share with the Committee by November. Due to the heavy work plan for the November meeting already, it was agreed that this report would be shared via email and DSU would co-ordinate any comments/questions from members into a summary report.
- At the previous meeting of the Committee, an action for DSU was to understand whether 'Motion 787: Footways' that was currently on the possible future items list needed to be considered again. Members were advised that when the motion was last considered in 7 March 2018, the Committee concluded that the best practise approach being used to maintain footways but they would keep an eye on its progress. Members

Minutes subject to their acceptance as a correct record at the next meeting

requested that a brief update be brought as an appendix to the Directors report at the November 2020 meeting.

CHAIR

Meeting concluded at 12:00