

# ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES** of the meeting of the Environment Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday 26 November 2019 commencing at 10.00 am at the Cabinet Suite - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

## PRESENT

Cllr Robert Bird	Cllr Sajid Patel
Cllr Dr John Cordwell	Cllr Eva Ward
Cllr Kevin Cromwell	Cllr Ray Theodoulou
Cllr Stephen Hirst	Cllr Keith Rippington

## 1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Cllr Suzanne Williams.

## 2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 July 2019 were approved and signed by the Chair subject to a minor typo on page 5.

The minutes of the joint meeting held on 18 September 2019 were approved and signed by the Chair.

## 3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

## 4. THE INCREASE IN COSTS OF RE-TENDERING PUBLIC TRANSPORT SERVICES

4.1 The Chair invited Tom Main, Transport Operations Manager, to present their report on this item.

4.2 The report was taken as read with the following points highlighted:

- The Integrated Transport Unit (ITU) is responsible for over 100 public transport delivery contracts and in the past 18 months, the Council has noted up to a 35% increase on retendering some of these contracts.
- This was coupled with the fact that around 75% of the total spend on public transport contracts were due to expire in this financial year.
- In order to avoid an overspend, ITU had to request additional funds for the 2019/20 budget to continue to offer the same level of service across the retendering and Cabinet agreed a review of expensive services to be carried out.
- ITU have identified a range of underlying causes leading to these rising costs which included;

- An increase in operating costs – insurance, fuel, employment and driver shortages;
  - Legislative issues – improving the standard of vehicles, adhering to emissions reductions and supply audio/visual equipment; and
  - Lack of competition restricting the market.
- It was advised that the risk of overspend has reduced significantly over this financial year. Whilst there were still obvious pressures on the operators, with 75% of the network now tended, the pressure had subsided.
  - A number of opportunities and issues were highlighted over the next 12 months.
- 4.3 A member highlighted that the opportunity of reviewing the use of rural public transport by developing demand-responsive transport was not a new idea; the Council won some funding for Stroud District to trial this a while back. It was questioned whether this was unsuccessful or if the funding ran out. It was advised that the money ran out for this particular scheme as it was time limited.
- 4.4 Concerns were raised that sometimes operators mitigate reduced contracts costs by changing bus timetables post-agreement, a member highlighted an example of this happening in their local area. In response, it was advised that this should not be the case and any request to change the service during the contract should be properly consulted on.
- 4.5 It was questioned how the Council can mitigate damage to highways/verges through operators using oversized buses. It was explained that on tendering contracts, a vehicle size/type can be stipulated. In addition if damage is caused, the Council will work with the operators to understand how/why the damage was caused as sometimes it can be something other than vehicle size. If this was the case, then a request for change can be made to a more appropriate sized vehicle. This will be handled on a case by case basis.
- 4.6 There was a discussion about carbon emission standards for public transport providers. It was advised that the current contracts comply with national regulations on emissions. As referenced in the report, ITU are currently developing a new Dynamic Purchasing System which was an online market place with various categories having their own Terms and Conditions. This will therefore allow a specific category on emissions to be created requiring any contractor to adhere to the criteria. The System will also be open over its lifetime and thus categories terms and conditions are flexible and open to change as time goes on. The Committee requested a copy of the new system's categories and accompanying terms and conditions.

**ACTION: TOM MAIN**

- 4.7 Noting the increase in costs experienced, a member questioned how the Council can protect itself from such high increases in the future. It was advised that in terms of requirements from legislation, if operators have to purchase new/low emission or electric vehicles the Council will bare the cost of these upgrades. In addition, due to the restricted market, there is a limited choice of operators.
- 4.8 However, an example was given of a contract that had increased by 345%. Clearly this was not a viable contract to renew so instead a temporary contract was tendered whilst a review of the service took place. If the Council was to experience this again, there are options that can be considered to mitigate overspend.
- 4.9 A member asked if it was a fair statement to make that the cost of providing public transport will increase in the future due to various demands on emissions, technology etc. In response, officers advised that it was clear public transport costs would see an increase but it would not be the same as seen in recent years. In addition, if there were particular requirements from central Government, a funding pot would usually be made available to support local authorities to make these changes.
- 4.10 It was questioned what the predicted cost of the pilot schemes would be and how they would be consulted on. It was explained that a cost model was currently being formed to see what would be viable. The idea is to focus on areas that do not currently have a service more than 1 day a week. If the schemes were successful, and there was demand to do so, weekend services may be considered in the future. The Council will consult as widely as possible in the local area concerned. These schemes are set to begin in the next 12 months.

## **5. CABINET FEEDBACK ON THE BIODIVERSITY TASK GROUP REPORT**

- 5.1 The Chair invited Kath Haworth, Lead Commissioner for Highways, to present the Cabinet's response to the Biodiversity Task Group report.
- 5.2 The Committee heard that this was a welcomed, detailed piece of work for officers and where they felt they could take some good steps forward for a positive change on biodiversity across the county. The report was taken as read and the item was opened for questions from the Committee.
- 5.3 There was a discussion about the future approach to verge cutting. It was advised that the highways team will be looking at pilots on grass cutting timings and potentially on taking cuttings offsite. It was not just a case of leaving the verges to grow but potentially looking at the effects of going to a bi-annual or other cutting cycle.
- 5.4 It was reiterated however, through research it has been evident that moving to a 'cut and collect' method was not an easy change to make at the moment. The technology hadn't yet caught up on how to remove and

dispose of the arisings. Officers have looked at a technology in Cambridge which vacuumed up cuttings on the back of tractor but which would only be suitable for larger areas and would be costly.

- 5.5 In addition, the task group report referenced a major issue of litter on the verges. If machines are being used to collect arisings that were full of litter this would a) cause issues for the machine and b) lead to contaminated arisings which would reduce the options for their disposal.
- 5.6 It was advised that GCC worked closely with the districts to combine resources on litter picking and often the county will provide highways support.
- 5.7 A member referenced a roundabout that had recently undergone maintenance but the opportunity wasn't taken to change the type of foliage growing on it and it had quickly return to coarse grass. In response, once the officers have reviewed the recent Plantlife guidance, the GCC highways biodiversity guidance will be updated and will then form part of the highways guidance on projects such as this.
- 5.8 A member questioned whether the Council welcomes farmers taking the initiative to help grass cutting in their local areas. Members heard that it was certainly welcomed by the Council, and they do in fact work with a significant number of parish and town councils who carry out grass cutting on the county's behalf. It was stressed however that all grass cutting should still be aligned with Council guidance.
- 5.9 Going forward, recommendation 8 will make sure that a good level of guidance is available for local groups to contribute towards the county's biodiversity efforts.
- 5.10 A member asked how highways were dealing with the problem of badgers digging setts under roads. It was explained that this was a particular issue in the Cotswolds which causes disruption and poses significant challenges. Members were advised if they knew of any activity to report it to their local highways manager
- 5.11 In relation to recommendation 2, a member was surprised the cost had come out higher and requested if a business case can be seen. Officers advised they were happy to meet with the Councillor to discuss this further.
- 5.12 On questioning, officers confirmed that they were still on course to update the GCC guidance and produce an information sheet to the deadline specified in the report.
- 5.13 The Cabinet member for Highways and Floods thanked the task group for their report and welcomed the very interesting details. It was noted that there would need to be good awareness around allowing verges to grow and move public perception away from neat grass cuts. It was also reiterated that

highways must continue to prioritise safety when it came to verge management.

- 5.14 The Cabinet member for Environment and Planning also thanked the task group and highlighted this was a good example of how a task group could work well. It was emphasised that the cabinet response showed a good degree of flexibility from highways to help implement some changes. They reiterated the point around good public communication and thought the information sheet would be a good start on this.
- 5.15 Members requested that the draft information sheet (recommendation 8) was brought to the March 2020 Committee meeting to allow members an opportunity to comment.

**ACTION: DEMOCRATIC SERVICES**

## **6. ELECTRIC VEHICLE INFRASTRUCTURE**

- 6.1 The Chair advised that due to the complex and fluid nature of the electric vehicles programme, officers have been unable to produce full report at this stage. It was accepted that in order to consider and scrutinise the item effectively, members needed to see a detailed report beforehand.
- 6.2 Apologies were given by officers for not being able to produce the report and it was agreed that following today's meeting an interim update would be circulated to the Committee via Democratic Services and the full item would be postponed until the January Committee meeting.

**ACTION: PHILIP WILLIAMS/DEMOCRATIC SERVICES**

- 6.3 The Cabinet Member for Environment and Planning reiterated the incredibly complex nature of planning to implement electric vehicle infrastructure, comparing it to the beginning of broadband implementation. It was advised that, as with broadband, the commercial sector were 'cherry picking' the most attractive opportunities to build the infrastructure, and thus leaving the public sector to intervene elsewhere.
- 6.4 In summarising, the Committee were advised that the report in January would explain the thought behind a proper procurement policy for implementing the infrastructure, the contrast between urban and rural areas of the county and the progress on funding opportunities.

## **7. GLOVER REPORT UPDATE**

- 7.1 The Chair invited Simon Excell, Lead Commissioner, to give a brief verbal update on the Glover Review Report.

- 7.2 Members were reminded that this was a national level review of designated landscapes which could potentially have significant implications for Gloucestershire, specifically in the Cotswolds and Forest of Dean.
- 7.3 The review was reported on 21<sup>st</sup> September 2019 and the Committee were advised that at this stage, there was no action needed from GCC as the Government now had to consider and respond to Glover's recommendations.
- 7.4 The proposals which affected Gloucestershire were outlined as follows:
- Cotswolds**
- The conversion of the existing AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) to National Park Status.
  - If implemented this would have significant implications for planning as the body overseeing the National Park would become the local planning authority.
  - It is likely that there would be an increase in tourism in the area.
  - It is likely that there would be a significant increase in house prices.
- Forest of Dean**
- The creation of a new AONB status – no area had been specified at this stage.
  - This would mean more restrictive planning policies, and the same in relation to increased tourism and house prices.
- 7.5 A member raised concerns about what the actual benefit would be of having National Park status. It was clear that the restrictive planning policy would simply push development outside the park boundary rather than reduce the need for it, reiterating also that the local authorities would lose control of development overall. It was advised that an advantage could be the increase in tourism for growth of the area
- 7.6 A member of the Economic Growth Committee advised through their local district meetings, some districts already struggled with the issue of expensive housing and many low-paid seasonal tourism jobs, both of which would likely be made worse by these proposals.
- 7.7 It was questioned whether there needed to be a review of the Minerals Local Plan in light of these recommendations. It was advised that GCC no longer have a role in forming this Plan as the consultation responses are with the Planning Inspectorate.
- 7.8 In conclusion, members were reminded that at this stage, the recommendations needed to be reviewed by Government and there was no timeline as to when this would happen. It was also referenced that at the next GCC Full Council meeting, members had a cross-party motion

submitted which would gain the view of the Council as a whole to these recommendations.

- 7.9 It was agreed that officers would keep a watching brief on this issue for now and update the Committee when next appropriate.

**ACTION: SIMON EXCELL**

## **8. DIRECTOR'S REPORT: COMMUNITIES & INFRASTRUCTURE**

- 8.1 Colin Chick, Strategic Adviser (Communities & Infrastructure), updated the Committee on current issues. In particular, members noted that:
- The department was currently dealing with a phenomenal work load for its size, including a growing strategic agenda for Gloucestershire's long-term vision.
  - Ringway's defect performance was steadily improving; it was still working on clearing the backlog from the previous contractor.
  - In order to improve staffing resource for the future, there were now 10 new apprentices in place across the highways team.
  - The A40 West Cheltenham remained on track with phases 1 and 2 being approved at Cabinet in November (2019).
  - A419 is due to completed in June 2020.
  - Officers were twin tracking landowner negotiations with a compulsory purchase order to make sure the southwest bypass scheme remained on target.
  - The Highways England Cycling Scheme was running 6 months behind its original schedule due to the funding criteria.
  - Junction 9 and 10 were awaiting decisions back from central government on their respective progress.
  - The first phase of Gloucestershire Rail Strategy had been commissioned.
- 8.2 A member raised a concern about the southbound approach on the A38 Cross Keys roundabout advising that road users were getting confused whether the left lane was a through road or not. It was advised that unless it was segregated, users should stop before continuing. In addition, the roundabout was shortly due its 3 month safety audit, which all schemes go through to ascertain any teething problems.
- 8.3 Expanding on section 3.4, it was advised that the first phase of the Gloucestershire Rail Strategy had identified quick, short-term improvements for the rail network which could be delivered outside the formal investment process. Members heard that it would be difficult to lobby for major capital investment from Network Rail at this stage as Control Period 6 did not expire until 2024. Phase 2 would then move on to lobbying for Control Period 7 and 8 funding and identify the larger scale projects.

- 8.4 The Committee also questioned what can be done about the Transport for Wales service deterioration. It was advised that it is very difficult situation to address due to it being under the responsibility of Welsh Rail.
- 8.5 On digital connectivity, a member asked whether it was normal for residents to make private arrangements with network providers to connect their property to the nearest broadband box. It was advised that, like with other utilities, the Council's responsibility with broadband was to take a connection to an area 'box', it is then for each resident to make contact with their chosen provider to connect to their local 'box' and pay for the service. The Council would only intervene outside of this if there was no commercial option available to a resident.
- 8.6 The Committee were advised that the public consultation on the A417 Missing Link closed on 8<sup>th</sup> November and an officer level response from GCC was submitted that day which was joint with Tewkesbury Borough and Cotswold District Council as the three planning authorities for the area.
- 8.7 In regards to the RIS2 announcement, this was expected in November 2019 and was now unknown when it would be received.
- 8.8 A member asked what the age range for the Climate Change Youth Panel was and identified a typo at the end of 4.5 which should have read 2019 not 2029. Members heard that the intention was 16-25 year olds but they received such passionate and knowledgeable applications that the age range is actually 13-26.
- 8.9 On section 4.6 of the report, members were advised that the Strategy action plan was being prepared to present at the Health and Wellbeing Board in January 2020, and now being supported county-wide.
- 8.10 There was a discussion about the Council's control over utilities work being carried out on the highway. It was advised that any works would need to be programmed in advance, and that the county is currently moving to a time limited permit scheme where companies would incur a charge if they take longer than specified.
- 8.11 It was explained that since the New Roads and Street Works Act, local authorities did not have as much power as they used to and now statutory companies take priority.
- 8.12 The street works team work very hard to keep control of the network through inspections and complaints follow up, but there can be hundreds of companies at work at any one time meaning it would be impossible to address all the issues. The real change would come when the permit scheme was implemented.

## **9. WORK PLAN**

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

The Committee noted the items scheduled for the next meeting and requested the additional item on the biodiversity information sheet for March 2020.

**CHAIRPERSON**

Meeting concluded at 12:47.