

# ENVIRONMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

**MINUTES** of a meeting of the Environment Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday 6 September 2023 at the Council Chamber - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

**PRESENT:**

Cllr Roger Whyborn  
Cllr Susan Williams  
Cllr Gill Moseley  
Cllr Alan Preest  
Cllr Sajid Patel

Cllr Dr David Willingham  
Cllr Chloe Turner (Chair)  
Cllr Emma Nelson (Vice-Chair)  
Cllr Wendy Thomas

**Cabinet Members:** Cllr David Gray (Cabinet Member for Environment and Planning) and Cllr Philip Robinson (Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Bus Transport)

**Apologies:** Cllr Vernon Smith, Cllr Brian Tipper and Cllr Dom Morris (Cabinet Member for Highways and Flood)

## 2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meetings held on 12 July 2023 were approved as a correct record.

## 3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

## 4. HIGHWAYS REPRESENTATIONS ON PLANNING APPLICATIONS

4.1 The Chair invited Jason Humm, Director of Transport and Highways, and Nathan Drover, Highways Development Manager, to present this report. The following points were highlighted:

- There were two teams in the Council that covered this area:
  - The Highways Legal Agreement team who reviewed and approved the design of new highways infrastructure and then supervised its delivery and adoption by GCC.
  - Today's report was about the Highways Development Management (HDM) team who were tasked with providing highways planning input prior to developers securing permission.
- Officers within HDM were required to provide input on the following areas:
  - The disitric authorities Strategic Plan (or Local Plan) making process as detailed at section 2.0 of the report.
  - Highways planning applications consultation responses as detailed at section 3.0.
  - Pre-application inquiries as detailed at section 5.0.

- Planning appeals and the planning enforcement processes as detailed at section 7.0.
- Section 4.0 of the report provided a short summary of the ongoing issues in relation to Community Infrastructure Levy payments, which was money that should be received by GCC from housing developers to mitigate the strategic impacts of their developments. The Committee looked at this issue in detail at their meeting in November 2022.
- The final section of the report explored performance and recruitment issues faced by the team.
- It was stressed that the more effective officers in this area were those who were able to build strong relationships with their local planning authority, but due to the incredibly challenging market conditions, this had been difficult to maintain. A lot of skilled individuals in this area were moving into contracting roles, rather than wanting to work for the public sector, resulting in a high turnover of agency staff.
- This was unfortunately an issue in many areas of public sector recruitment at the moment and GCC were working hard to address it by, for example, offering market rate supplements, upskill opportunities to retain staff and promoting the council as a good employer for the county.

## **Questions**

- 4.2 Impacts of construction traffic on the highway was raised as an issue. It was noted that large scale sites were much easier to secure a high-level agreement with as part of their access works to compensate any damage caused. It was less easy to do so with smaller-scale developments where, in the absence of an agreement, cost recovery would have to prove a direct link between the construction traffic and damage which was often incredibly difficult.
- 4.3 Highway officers did however meet with major developers regularly to discuss any ongoing issues and they have found this to be much more receptive way to address things such as HGV enforcement.
- 4.4 A member referenced to disingenuous claims from developers that a development was 'car free' and asked if there was anything that could be done to address this. Officers added their frustration on this issue, but they unfortunately only had an influencing role to suggest a condition be put in place to avoid pressure on existing residential parking. The Council had tried previously to introduce a restriction on permits for car free developments but were unsuccessful. It also had a duty support low parking schemes where appropriate for climate change objectives.
- 4.5 Concern was raised about the level of resource and attention being given to small scale development applications, which often ended up being far more problematic if not properly reviewed. It was suggested that the expertise of highway input was incredibly important regardless of the size of the development.

- 4.6 It was explained that a lot of local authorities had what's called 'de minimis advice' where they did not respond to minor application and simply asked planning officers to review them, which did lead to a lot of problems. GCC did not follow this practice however and would always give a written response to all applications.
- 4.7 It was added that sometimes the responses given to the local planning committees were very short and lacked a lot of detail or narrative as to how that professional reached their conclusions. The officer felt this was unfair to those being asked to give their view on an application and that it needed improving. This was something he was implementing within the HDM team.
- 4.8 A member questioned whether there was a mechanism in place which would allow deviation away from the usual 'statistics-based approach' when there was an overwhelming number of public objections and local planning committee opposition to a highway alternation. An example was given of an 'accident waiting to happen' scenario but because the KSIs and road safety evidence did not exist, there was nothing the highways consultant could evidence to make an objection.
- 4.9 Officers advised that KSI statistics were very linear in correlation between their severity. For example, if there was 1 fatality on a junction, officers know there will also be 10 severe and 100 slight injuries. It was very difficult for highway officers to object where there was not a level of identified risk, but they could lobby and support district in finding a better solution where concerns were raised.
- 4.10 The Gloucestershire Road Safety Partnership were also looking at ways to gain a better understanding of unreported accident and 'near miss' situations, this was the sort of data that would help identify those 'accident waiting to happen' scenarios. This could potentially be done by collecting data from connected vehicles, for example, on speed, harsh breaking etc.
- 4.10 A member referred to paragraph 3.13 of the report and sought clarification on whether the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) gave any guidance to help officers to define what an 'unacceptable impact' would be. Members were concerned this was a very subjective or qualitative phrase and in order to successfully objective, officers were required to give a quantifiable answer.
- 4.11 It was advised that many local highway departments had tried to define the phrase, but when challenged at appeal, the review of their objection always remained qualitative. The team at GCC had examples of things that might be considered as 'unacceptable' such as blocking a shop junction or bus route, but essentially individual professionals would approach the definition slightly differently.

- 4.12 The officer confirmed he would expect his team to visit any site in person which required an alteration to the public highway before giving their response to the application.
- 4.13 It was summarised that a lot of today's questions related to district responsibilities, GCC was only a consultee to the planning process and was not always listened to if a concern was raised. The decision-making power sat with the districts and officers worked very hard to feed in, challenge and lobby, and member support on this was always very welcome.

## **5. GREEN ENERGY**

- 5.1 The report was taken as read and officers Kelly Osbourne, Sustainability and Engagement Officer, and Matthew Flack, Interim Strategy and Programme Manager, gave a short summary of its content.
- 5.2 In response to a question, officers confirmed that the LED street lighting had a lot of functionality to allow appropriate tweaking and dimming, providing a balance with community need, environmental impacts and things such as street safety.
- 5.3 A member raised whether there had been consideration of installing air source heat pumps, for example, where schools had large fields. It was advised when identifying the right solution for the right building, a lot of progress was hampered by cost. The cost of designing low carbon heating solutions alone can often cost more than the boiler it was looking to replace. Feasibility and design of these solutions took up a huge amount of budget, which then limited the number of projects that could be completed.
- 5.4 It was added that the [Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme](#) would only grant funding for a project that resulted in an energy cost saving for the council. This therefore limited what the council could invest in. Recent officer recruitment in the sustainability team was welcomed, particularly to provide focus on progressing this area.
- 5.5 Identifying that some windows on the council estate, for example, had not yet been retrofitted, it was queried where the council was in reviewing its buildings for 'quick win' efficiency improvements. It was acknowledged that a balance always had to be struck between the level of capital investment the Property Management team could make at any one time, but a lot of progress had been made in recent years. The Chair highlighted with members that the next Corporate Scrutiny Committee was considering an update on the council estate.
- 5.6 In relation to 3.2 of the report, officers advised that a major stumbling block for solar installation was panels could not be installed unless the roof was replaced. This therefore created an increased budget implication for the council and limited the amount of scope it had to drive installations forward at pace. The team were currently working with Property Management to identify

recent roofing works where panels could be easily installed and working out from there.

- 5.7 A member raised concern about the lack of visible progress, when compared with other local authorities, on community initiatives such as community energy schemes. It was advised that Climate Leadership Gloucestershire (CLG) had a thematic work stream on green energy and were currently in the progress of finalising their proposals. The Group had representatives from all local authorities plus key organisations so their future work would be very focused on what more can be done in this area with partners. It was added that the officers group supporting CLG were currently understanding the detail of a very recent £10m funding announcement from Government to help support community energy bids.

## **6. GYPSY, ROMA AND TRAVELLER SERVICES**

- 6.1 Louise Broughton, Manager for the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller Services, was invited to present this report. Members noted the following points:

- GCC has a small Gypsy and Traveller Service Team which consisted of 3 members of staff who were tasked with managing the Council's residential traveller sites and dealing with unauthorised encampments on Council land.
- The Council managed 4 sites in the county, it was under no duty to do so but had chosen to provide this option where possible. 3 of the sites were in Tewkesbury and 1 in the Cotswolds.
- The licence agreements for these sites were similar to social housing tenancy agreements. Residents paid a weekly rent in return for a site pitch and access to a utility block which is maintained by the Council.
- Approximately 80 families were currently residing on council sites and were supported by the team where needed to access appropriate services etc.
- The team also operated a waiting list for families wanting to reside on a council site, of which there were currently 25. Plots were allocated using a priority points system as explained at 4.5 of the report. It was understood that a lot of private sites were closing down and leaving a shortage of locations for families to live.
- The team also dealt with around 30 unauthorised encampments per year on council land such as highway or schools. The majority of these were very small camps, but some could be quite large communities. The team were not responsible for enforcement but often found, through a multi-agency approach, most incidents were positively resolved without the need for formal action. Further detail on the process followed can be found at section 5 of the report.
- The Service had an annual revenue base budget of £143,389 for 2023/24 to cover staffing costs.
- The team worked hard to deliver a complex and varied service. The rest of the Service was solely reliant on raising revenue from site income (rents, water & electricity payments).

- Section 6 detailed several areas of joint work with stakeholders, which was especially important during the pandemic.
- 6.2 In response to 5.7 of the report and noting that the majority of unauthorised encampments were very small groups, a member questioned why the county had not considered designated stopping places for 1 – 2 vehicles to be used when in transit through the county.
- 6.3 It was advised that the response to stopping places had a mixture of views across local authorities, with the main issues being how they were managed and by who. If these areas were council designations, there may be requirement to provide facilities, for example, which would need to be maintained. Officers agreed to raise this point with the wider county group for further discussion.
- 6.3 It was reinforced that the council had no duty to provide sites but chose to do so and any future provision of sites and land identification would fall to district responsibility. GCC worked closely with districts in this area and would provide assistance with site design, for example, should land be acquired for new sites. Officers offered to share the recent accommodation assessment which included extensive information around private sites etc.

**ACTION: Louise Broughton**

- 6.4 A member raised, particularly noted in Stroud, there had been a recent uptake of people who, due to circumstance such as homelessness or financial pressures rather than choice, had become new aged travellers. The team confirmed they were aware of this increase and if identified around the county, would do all they could to work with these residents and support them with access to appropriate services etc. It was agreed an action would be taken to report this concern to the wider Corporate Leadership Team to understand how other council services were involved in supporting residents in these circumstances.

**ACTION: Jason Humm**

**7. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT: ECONOMY, ENVIRONMENT & INFRASTRUCTURE**

- 7.1 The report was taken as read and the Chair invited members to ask questions.
- 7.2 A member questioned the reference to Bus Service Improvement Plan+ (BSIP+) in the report, as they were under the impression that no further government monies were presently expected for bus provision. It was advised that BSIP+ funding was a separate fund to the previous BSIP (capital) fund, which the Council had been unable to secure through its recent bid. The '+' scheme was a revenue stream aimed at promoting and supporting bus use over the next couple of years. A Cabinet report was due

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in September and the link would be shared with the committee. Officers were still working on a future bid for the BSIP capital fund.

**ACTION: Democratic Services**

- 7.3 A member asked for an update on the Enhanced Partnership consultation with stakeholders and bus operators. Several members confirmed they had not received any consultation information during August as the report suggested.

**ACTION: Philip Williams**

- 7.4 A member was concerned to see a red performance indicator against road safety and enquired how many of the over 200 applications to the Community Speedwatch programme had been completed and whether there was enough resource to sufficiently support it. It was advised that a huge majority of the work had been completed or signed off but there was work left to do. Regular updates were provided to the Lead Cabinet Member and officers would consider how these could be summarised and shared with members.

**ACTION: Jason Humm**

- 7.5 Recalling strong opposition to the extended parking zone scheme in Kingsholm, a member enquired how the now implemented zone had landed with residents. It was advised that the opposition had massively reduced since implementation. The scheme was an extension to an existing zone and allowed 4-hour visitor parking between the hours of 8am and 8pm, with visitor vouchers available for longer use. Parking schemes often worked a lot better in practice than residents feared they would, often a case of 'fear of the unknown'. It was incumbent on the council however to have good communication plans to reduce these fears before implementation. It was added that zones were only ever considered if there was a want within the community.

**8. WORK PLAN**

A member requested an item on post-evaluation of highway initiatives such as parking schemes, road safety measures etc.

**CHAIR**

Meeting concluded at 12:45.

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For a full overview of this meeting, please use the following link to access the recording <https://gloucestershire.public-i.tv/core/portal/webcasts>