

Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday, 19th January, 2011
6.00 - 7.55 pm

Attendees	
Councillors:	Penny Hall (Chair), Jacky Fletcher, Rob Garnham, Sandra Holliday, Helena McCloskey, Charles Stewart, Lloyd Surgenor (Substitute) and Paul Wheeldon
Also in attendance:	Councillor John Rawson (Cabinet Member Built Environment), Councillor John Webster (Cabinet Member Finance and Community Development), Councillor Roger Whyborn (Cabinet Member Sustainability), Andrew Powers (Accountant) and Rob Bell (Assistant Director - Operations)

Minutes

1. APOLOGIES

Councillors Britter (substitute Councillor Surgenor), Hibbert and Bickerton had given their apologies.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST FORM

None declared.

3. MINUTES

The minutes of the last meeting had been circulated with the agenda.

Councillor Garnham highlighted two spelling mistakes to be rectified.

Upon a vote it was unanimously

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on the 24 November 2010, once amended, be approved and signed as an accurate record.

4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

None received.

5. MATTERS REFERRED TO COMMITTEE

No matters were referred to the committee.

6. CABINET MEMBER BRIEFING

The Cabinet Member Sustainability advised that having recently undertaken carbon monitoring he was pleased to report that the reductions within Council buildings were on target.

On the waste side, there were various scheme changes including, garden, food and alternate weekly collections. Things were going well and were on target for each of the timescales set.

It was difficult for him to talk about parks and gardens without going into too much budget detail, which was scheduled later on the agenda. What he would say was that he envisaged having to make major cuts (public toilets, cutting of verges, etc).

Following the last Council meeting and debate of the Imperial Gardens petition, a stakeholder meeting had been held. A full report was scheduled for discussion at the next meeting of the Environment Committee and would cover directions of travel.

The following responses were given by the Cabinet Member Sustainability to questions from members of the committee;

- The brown bin (garden waste) option was available borough wide and Officers were currently looking at alternative options for residents that couldn't take advantage of the conventional garden waste scheme.
- The old garden waste scheme would cease at the end of January. It had been hoped that 16,000 residents would have signed up to the new garden waste scheme and to date there were 3,000 plus, though orders were mounting.

Cabinet Member Built Environment invited questions from members and with input from Andrew Powers, Accountant, offered the following responses;

- The snow had impacted car parking income by between £20k and £40k.
- He was happy to raise on-street parking concerns with the County Council and stressed the aim was to create a joint strategy between the Borough and County Councils in an effort to avoid issues that had been encountered in the past.
- The closure of some toilets would leave redundant buildings which could continue to fall victim to vandalism and graffiti. Boarding them up would not be a long term solution but this was an asset management issue which would need to be resolved in the future.
- A New Homes Working Group had been established and he apologised, formal feedback should have been provided to the committee. The Councils response to the government consultation included brown field over green field and incentives for bringing back void properties. He found the process useful and thanked the Assistant Director – Built Environment and Members for their involvement, within what was a very short timeframe.

The Chair thanked both Cabinet Members for their attendance and updates.

7. INTERIM BUDGET 2011/12

The Cabinet Member Finance and Community Development introduced Andrew Powers, the Accountant for Environment and report as circulated with the agenda.

He hoped that all members recognised the difficult circumstances being faced by all authorities in Gloucestershire.

The settlement had been worse than anticipated and as such some cuts affecting services had been necessary.

The funding gap for 2011-12 was £2.94m and the budget papers outlined the proposals for bridging that gap.

Some decisions taken last year would go towards this, as well as some other measures which included, a freeze on staff wages, a reduction of 5% to Cabinet allowances and member allowances frozen for 4 years.

32 jobs would be lost this year, with more next year, though these were restructuring redundancies and the focus was service resilience.

Power Perfector equipment would reduce energy costs over a period of time. As an estimate it would require £19k investment at the leisure centre in 2013-14, but this would not be built into the budget until the savings were clear. This would be capital investment.

The move to sustainable planting at Berkley Mews and Oxford Gardens would only generate a saving of £22k and as consultation had clearly identified that planting was important to the town, it was regrettable that these cuts were required. His personal feeling was that the flower beds were in keeping with the regency buildings and drew visitors to the town and his hope was that residents in the area could help. Members were assured that the sustainable planting would still provide some colour.

The aim of the increased allotment charges was to achieve a cost neutral service. Despite the increased charges, allotments in Cheltenham still offered good value, the Council would be making investment and management of sites could involve the Allotment Association at some point in the future.

In the past, green waste collections had formed part of the Council Tax charge. However, given the large expense associated with the service, an alternative approach needed to be taken and this had resulted in an additional charge.

Public toilets had been mentioned earlier in the meeting. Four would remain open, Royal Well, the external toilet at the Town Hall and those in Pittville and Montpellier Park. Whilst these would remain open, the opening and closing times and cleaning regime would change.

Many of those toilets being closed posed safety issues and some were actually a rather poor advert for the town. When originally built they were the only option to visitors to the town centre, however, with shops, cafes, etc, this was no longer the case.

He accepted earlier comments about vandalism to redundant toilets, stressing that the buildings would be secured and options would be discussed in the future.

Over-grown verges could inhibit drivers and obscure signage but reducing the number of cuts from 15 (10 of which were subsidised by CBC) to 5 (the number funded by the County Council) would save £110k.

An alternative regime would need to be put in place and crucially, discussions held with the County Council about funding, which at the current level was simply not enough.

Members could take solace from the fact that car parking charges had been frozen, in order that CBC weren't priced out of the market. £250k investment had been identified for car parks in the town in acceptance that not doing so could cause more lost revenue.

The removal of the free dog bag facility would save the Council £12k and had only been kept as part of last years budget as Cabinet had been led to believe that they were biodegradable, which they were not and ultimately, would have gone to landfill.

The Cabinet Member Finance and Community Development highlighted that a balanced budget had been achieved and without the closure of a major service. He asked that if members were apposed to any of the proposals that they offer an alternative.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member for his introduction and welcomed the remarks about sustainable planting, she too, felt formal beds were right for the architecture in Cheltenham.

The following responses were given to questions from members of the committee;

- Charges at the cemetery and crematorium were increased last year and remained the lowest in the County.
- The loss of the Urban Designs Projects Officer would impact the ability of the service to support Civic Pride. Civic Pride was largely capital funded and capital would need to be used to support the programme.
- The proposals did not include any changes to the way in which weeds were addressed in the town. This would remain wholly funded by the County Council next year.
- Power Perfectors would show significant savings over time. All energy initiatives had a payback period and would eventually pay for themselves, so there was a commitment to reduce the Councils carbon output.
- The scale of landline bills were such, as those doing operational jobs needed to be in contact with Managers and vice versa.
- Evening allowances did not form part of staff terms and conditions and proposals like this demonstrated the desperate financial situation the Council were in.
- The £719k Housing & Planning Delivery Grant (HPDG) had been taken as capital as it was not ring fenced, in fact, none of it was now. If the HPDG had been used to build staffing levels and the grant was then withdrawn by the government, it would not be sustainable for the Council. As such, it was put into the base budget and can therefore be used as the Council agrees necessary.
- Concessionary fares was always meant to be funded by the government, however, CBC used over £900k of local tax payer funding to compliment the operational period between 9am and 9.30am. This

was now being transferred to the County Council and central government had taken the difference from CBC by top slicing their grant. Government would be increasing the entitlement age from 60 to 65 and across Gloucestershire the service would operate from 9.30am, which would affect those in rural areas the most. The recession could be seen as the greenest thing to hit the carbon reduction efforts.

- The Disability and Pensions Forums previously had budgets of £500, this was being cut to £250, though there was talk that the Disability Forum may be disbanded.
- Every year £125k was taken from revenue accounts and transferred into the Planned Maintenance Programme budget. This would not happen in 2011-12 and had been justified by the saving of £400k from the closure of most public toilets.
- A number of first aiders did not claim the allowance. At present there were 2 Health & Safety Officers and in 2013/14 this would reduce to 1.5 as one intended to reduce their working hours. These posts were vital for the Council, especially at the depot.
- The commissioning structure would be an amalgamation of numerous services and the structure was currently being discussed.
- The proposed support for the Warm and Well scheme would be for next year only and discussions were ongoing.

The Cabinet Member Finance and Community Development noted the same themes were being raised and he would endeavour to look at each of them.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member Finance and Community Development and Accountant for their attendance.

8. PROPOSED TRAFFIC ORDER

The Cabinet Member Built Environment introduced the discussion paper as circulated with the agenda.

He wanted to be clear that the proposal to trial more relaxed cycling restrictions around the Promenade and other identified areas, was not his but one of Gloucestershire Highways.

It was important for CBC to be involved in the consultation process and equally important that the Environment Committee consider the issue.

Cheltenham was in an impractical position, permitting cycling in some areas and not others. This posed an enforcement issue to the Police and was confusing to both cyclists and pedestrians.

This issue had not been discussed by CBC for some years, but over this time had formed the view that it would be better to allow cycling in pedestrianised areas making it easier for police to take action against anti-social cyclists.

Gloucestershire Highways sought a response from CBC and were hoping to arrange a meeting of interested parties in February 2011 and undertake the trial some time in March 2011.

In his personal view, not as a Cabinet Member or Liberal Democrat, he was sympathetic to the trial but felt that clarification on a number of issues in respect of the new traffic order was required.

CBC would need to be satisfied that Gloucestershire Highways had undertaken a full risk assessment and would need assurances from the Police that they could and would take action against anti-social and dangerous cyclists in the pedestrian areas. He also felt that CBC should be involved in the monitoring of any trial to satisfy itself that the trial was working as intended.

He suggested that the committee should take a view on how they wanted to approach this, whether they established a working group or asked Gloucestershire Highways to make a presentation to members, etc.

Comments from members of the committee included;

- If the trial was to go ahead, a full risk assessment would need to be undertaken. There were 25,000 registered disabled in Cheltenham who would be at risk from irresponsible cyclists, not to mention small children. In the current climate, would the Police have the resources to monitor the situation on a daily basis. It appeared that Gloucestershire Highways intended to consult mainly cyclists, but it would need to be broader and include the Pensions Forum, etc.
- Research undertaken by a member of the committee during his time as the relevant Cabinet Member had identified that most cyclists were considerate and slowed down for pedestrians. More often than not, pedestrians were not aware of the cyclists and the issue was inconsiderate and dangerous cyclists, which only enforcement would address. People in Cheltenham were being encouraged to cycle and it could be perceived as giving mixed messages if cyclists were sent around the one way system rather than being permitted to pass through the town centre.
- Shared space was government policy and members should not confuse cycling in pedestrian areas with cycling on pavements, which was against the law. The initiation of discussions by Gloucestershire Highways should be a welcome one to all members.
- Rather than judge it before seeing the results it was felt that the committee should support the trial. Civic Pride proposals would see more of Cheltenham pedestrianised and would effectively close the town centre to cyclists. It was accepted that some cyclists acted in an irresponsible manner.

The Cabinet Member Built Environment was unable to answer the question of enforcing and whether PCSOs had the power to do so.

The Chair moved to consider what approach members wished to take and following discussion it was agreed that Gloucestershire Highways would be provided with a copy of the committee minutes for their consideration and discussions undertaken with the Police to establish how the trial would be enforced.

The Cabinet Member Built Environment had found the discussion very useful and thanked members for their contribution, confirming that he would provide

Gloucestershire Highways with a copy of the committee minutes and pursue the issue of enforcement with the Police.

A member of the committee highlighted the recent article in the Gloucestershire Echo which seemed to imply that all cyclists posed a risk to pedestrians. Whilst clearly not the case for all cyclists, it compounded the perception of some that they were a menace.

The Chair thanked the Cabinet Member Built Environment for his attendance.

9. CABINET WASTE WORKING GROUP UPDATE

Councillor Fletcher introduced herself as a member of the Cabinet Waste Working Group.

She confirmed that members had received a briefing on the 10 January which had summarised the achievements of the working group.

Members were advised that a leaflet explaining the alternate weekly collections would be despatched to residents on the 07 February, but stressed that these could take up to a week to arrive.

She was aware that some property types in Cheltenham would struggle to contain the increased number of bins and members were assured that Officers were looking into alternative options. She was confident that a solution could be found, though these properties may not be included until the issues were resolved.

In response to a question from a member, the Assistant Director – Operations acknowledged that 20% of Cheltenham residents were not included in the plastic waste scheme, as a smaller collection vehicle was required. No firm timescale for the replacement of the vehicle could be given.

He also took the opportunity to thank members for their valuable input, scrutinising the communication plan.

The Chair was pleased that Officers had appreciated member involvement given that a member of the Environment Committee had requested that the group continue. She noted that the majority of queries and complaints she received from residents in her ward related to waste.

Councillor Surgenor commented that the first green waste collection had been made in his street earlier in the day and his advice to individuals who felt that alternate weekly collections were too often for them personally, could share the service with neighbours.

Members were unanimous in their thanks to Officers for their hard work throughout the snow. The Assistant Director – Operations confirmed that Officers were out every day, including Boxing Day, checking various streets and whether it was safe to undertake collections. Officers had been very dedicated and he would pass on the thanks of the committee.

The Cabinet Member Sustainability explained that the working group would now focus on narrow streets in the town and whether alternate weekly collections were viable in them.

10. ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY WORK PLAN 2010-2011

The Chair referred members to the work plan as circulated with the agenda.

She highlighted the number of items scheduled for discussion at the next meeting (02 March 2011), this was a result of increased consideration of the forward plan and the addition of items from it, to the committee work plan.

The suggestion was that none of the items could be deferred and as such it was proposed that the meeting be scheduled to start at 5:30pm rather than 6:00pm.

Members agreed with this approach. The start time of the meeting would be amended on the website and communicated to members as soon as possible.

The Chair advised members that a meeting had been scheduled for the 14 March. Herself and the Vice Chair would meet with relevant Officers and in consideration of the Corporate Strategy, draft the 2011-12 committee work plan. This would then be considered by the committee at their meeting on the 11 May.

It was agreed that the Green Space Strategy would be scheduled on the work plan for the 11 May 2011 meeting.

11. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting was scheduled for the 02 March 2011 and would start at 5:30pm, rather than 6:00pm.

Penny Hall
Chairman