

Cheltenham Borough Council Overview & Scrutiny Committee Minutes

Meeting date: 21 October 2024

Meeting time: 6.00 pm - 7.30 pm

In attendance:

Councillors:

Tabi Joy (Chair), Jackie Chelin (Vice-Chair), Graham Beale, Stan Smith, Chris Day, Richard Pineger, Juan Carlos Garcia Clamp, Sandra Holliday, Frank Allen, Cathal Lynch, Mike Collins and Peter Jeffries

Also in attendance:

1 Apologies

Apologies were received from Cllrs Chandler and Allen.

2 Declarations of interest

Cllr Pineger stated that at agenda item * his wife was mentioned in the report.

3 Minutes of the last meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on the 9th September 2024 were signed as a true record.

4 Public and Member questions, calls for actions and petitions

There were none.

5 Cabinet Briefing

In the absence of the Leader who was attending the LGA conference, the Deputy Leader addressed the committee.

He reported that the Leader and the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny had been approached to attend a scrutiny meeting with Gloucester City Council with regard to the sale of Gloucestershire Airport. It was thought that as it was jointly owned, it would be better to have a joint scrutiny committee.

The Chair then commented as a point of clarity that she had been approached by Gloucester City Council for a joint scrutiny committee. The sale of the airport is a sensitive area and the two sets of objectives need to be considered. This is a sensitive area and there are lots of economic opportunities. The Council needs to ensure that they are as responsible as possible. She was hopeful that there will be a meeting before Christmas.

The responses to Member questions were as follows:

- The joint scrutiny committee concerns the sale of the airport.
- The sale has always been happening as far as Cheltenham have been concerned.
- The airport is currently not on the market.
- There has been political change at Gloucester City Council post elections which has complicated the issue.
- There are questions at the moment about how the committee will work and what it will look like.
- The Council and GCC are both shareholders of the airport and the matter should be looked at as one piece of work.

6 Matters referred to committee

There were none.

7 Biodiversity Duty First Consideration Report

The Director of Planning introduced the report and stated that the team had been working on the report before the Overview and Scrutiny invite. Javier (Planning Policy Officer) and Malcolm (Community Parks Development Officer) have done a huge amount of work in preparing the report by gathering information on biodiversity-related actions across the Council. They hope that it's a comprehensive report. Javier and Malcolm wanted to set out the context for the committee.

Javier and Malcolm made the following points:

- The definition of the biodiversity duty is in page 3 of the report, we have a duty to conserve biodiversity, which was strengthened with the Environment Act 2021, now we have a duty to conserve and enhance it, specified in three obligations: Consider what we can do to conserve and enhance biodiversity; Agree policies and specific objectives based on our consideration; and Act to deliver our policies and achieve our objectives.
- This 'first consideration' report is the baseline, thus in practice report 'zero', with the first full report on our biodiversity duty to be completed before January 2026.

- The report at the committee has many actions, for instance, the partnerships with community groups are mentioned on pages 17 and 18.
- Local nature recovery strategy is being delivered by the Gloucestershire County Council either at the end of October or the beginning of November. This will form the cornerstone for our further biodiversity actions.
- Cabinet have brought things forward regarding the Cotswold Beechwoods, to progress in the form of an emerging Action Plan based on its Mitigation Strategy.
- About green space, it was explained that the Council works with partners and volunteer groups to protect and enhance biodiversity.
- There are already a lot of things being done with regards to biodiversity within the council – the Long Garden planting is going to be an annual scheme to improve biodiversity.
- Best practice for grass mowing is being looked at.
- The Council is currently looking at producing leaflets and documentation for staff, volunteers, and members of the public to educate people with regards to biodiversity.

The Chair then thanked the speakers and asked Members if they had any questions. Cllr Chelin confirmed that she had no other questions other than the ones that had already had a response published.

Members then spoke and made the following points:

- There could have been some sort of vision statement included in the report.
- There also could have been more expansion on the volunteer group, there are 18 groups across the parks and rivers.
- In terms of biodiversity the biggest problem is food and diet and there is nothing in the report refers to that.
- There could be a mention to Local Green Space and their process.

The responses to Member questions were as follows:

- With regard to the lease of the land at Milton Avenue and when that lease is up – the Green Space Officer offered to take that as an action as he didn't have the answer to hand.
- The Council is reviewing its health and safety policies so that may assist with supporting volunteers.
- Javier explained that within the process of the emerging Strategic and Local Plan there is the opportunity to look at new Local Green Spaces designation. It is important to the process that every space is assessed and supported by evidence using the criteria within the planning guidelines, such as wildlife richness, recreational activities, and community value.
- Malcolm explained that we are planting native and non-native trees to encourage biodiversity. Native trees are definitely given the priority, but non-native planting (trees from Europe) is being carried out as we are getting hotter weather here.

The Cabinet Member then addressed the committee and thanked the team for their report and stated that the team are passionate about what they do. The report is not a finished article, and any comments or contributions were welcome. He also stated that nothing is done by community groups without the permission of the team.

The Chair thanked everyone for taking part and added that Cllr Allen could not attend the meeting and thus she read some questions from him, the responses from officers were as follows:

- There is an Ash dieback management plan – the link has since been provided by the Director of Community and Economic Development and is here: <https://democracy.cheltenham.gov.uk/ieDecisionDetails.aspx?ID=3207>
- Information can also be found on the trees section of the councils website under the [Tree Protocol](#) and [Ash dieback management plan](#). Further information on how to spot ash dieback can be found [here](#).
- There are elements of Ash in lots of areas in the town, but Ash dieback is not as bad as it could have been. There is a plan relating to it and there is a budget – no more funds are needed at the moment.
- Nature recovery SPD is in the corporate plan and they are working on a brief from that piece of work, they are holding back on that at the moment to ensure that it is dealt with in the correct way to avoid duplication with other nature-related pieces of work, such as the emerging Gloucestershire Local Nature Recovery Strategy.

The item concluded with the chair stating that this was no decision needed but if anyone had any feedback that would be helpful.

8 Grants Policy

The Director of Governance and Customer Service introduced the Grants Policy and made the following points:

- As a Council we are proud of our community grants funding.
- We are trusted with public funds and need to make sure that we can account for its spending
- The policy makes sure that we will have a robust governance structure in place.
- There will be a grant tool kit which will show at an operational level what needs to be done and when, providing examples and templates.
- Moving forward there will be a bigger piece of work that looks at what we do with grants in the future.
- In the future there will be a more panel based decision group to look at how the money is distributed.
- The policy will be going to Cabinet for approval at the end of November.

Councillor Chelin had no further questions to add other than the published questions that were submitted prior to the meeting.

The responses to Member questions were as follows:

- There was clarification that some grants are from the Councils resources.
- The Council has a community grant pot of £30,000, plus annual grants that are allocated.
- There is a potential for the Council to be exposed to risk and the policy is being bought in to provide relevant protections.
- This policy is being bought in with consultation from internal audit and the counter fraud team.
- It was confirmed that if a volunteer group has not got a bank account and they are given a grant the Council could potentially hold the money for them.
- The Council is oversubscribed with people applying for its community pride grants.
- There are not independent members of the public on the panel but we try to represent everyone, for example some from the voluntary sector is often asked to assist.
- The point was made that we don't want grants to be seen as method to long term sustainability.

The Chair concluded the item stating that there was no decision to be made and encouraging Members to feedback any suggestions.

9 Scrutiny Task Group Tackling Multiple Deprivation - Progress report

The Head of Communities, Wellbeing and Partnerships introduced the report and apologised for the length of the training.

He addressed the committee and made the following points:

- It is timely to review where we are with the report as it last went to the Overview and Scrutiny committee 15 months ago in June 2023.
- The cost of living is still an issue for many residents, assistance that was set up for people during Covid is still being used by people.
- Health data points to a 10 year life gap between less and more well off communities.
- No Child left behind commissioned a piece of work and the results show that children in certain parts of the town are living in poverty.
- There was also findings that showed that young people are concerned with safety in the town. There is also much concern from both parents and young people with regard to online safety.
- Housing colleagues are working really hard to help people with their benefits, and there are good working relationships with the teams especially now that housing has been brought back into CBC
- The report brings to life what we do in partnership with other organisations and the work that we do around health.
- No Child Left Behind brings lots of partners together who have a focus on child poverty – and NCLB can create innovative solutions to how we address the challenges of child poverty.

Members then made the following points:

- One of the important things is keeping the conversation going with the Cabinet.
- The report is very informative – the member highlighted the data from Citizens Advice that , with regards to how many families are living with a negative household budget.
- It was noted that as an authority we award 100% off Council Tax for those who need it.
- Cheltenham has a reputation of being a wealthy town and this is just not the case.
- There is a responsibility of the Council to carry on coordinating the work of the different partners who have an interest in supporting people in our communities
- Whilst the report sets out the availability of data to monitor the situation with regard to deprivation, there is a need to evaluate the impact of different interventions to understand what works best but this can be expensive.

The responses to Member questions were as follows:

- The rise of home schooling and young people being taken out of education is an issue as they can then drop off the radar as far as Gloucestershire County Council are concerned and potentially end up a statistic.
- The strategy in how to respond to the issues of deprivation going forward lies with the Cabinet.
- With regards to schools exclusion and suspensions, there has been an uptick in the numbers absent from school post pandemic. there .
- As an action the chair requested that there was more information provided to the committee with regards to school attendance and another Member requested that the information be split between primary and secondary schools.

10 Feedback from other scrutiny meetings attended

The reports were noted for information.

11 Updates from scrutiny task groups

There are currently no scrutiny task groups.

12 Review of scrutiny workplan

There was nothing further to add, although the Chair stated that there is always an option to put something forward to go on the plan.

13 Any other item that the Chair determines to be urgent

There were none.

14 Date of next meeting

The date of the next meeting is 25th November 2024.