

MINUTES

STRATEGIC PLANNING & ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

2 NOVEMBER 2021

Present:

Members:

Councillors: Beauchamp
Birnie (Chairman)
England
Harden
McDowell
Rogers
Silwal (Vice-
Chairman)
Stevens
Taylor
Timmis
C Wyatt-Lowe

Officers:	James Doe	Assistant Director - Planning, Development and Regeneration
	Layla Fowell	Corporate & Democratic Support Officer
	Mark Gaynor	Corporate Director - Housing & Regeneration
	Nigel Howcutt	Chief Finance Officer (S151)
	Melanie Parr	Climate Emergency and Sustainability Programme Lead
	Craig Thorpe	Group Manager - Environmental Services

Also Attendance:

The meeting began at 7.30 pm

1 **MINUTES**

The minutes from the previous meeting were agreed by the Members present to be signed by the Chair. There were no matters arising.

2 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies were received from councillors Wilkie and Hearn, and from officers Emma Walker, Richard Le Brun and Fiona Williamson.

3 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

4 **PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

There were no items of public participation

5 **ACTION POINTS FROM THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

There were no action points from the previous meeting.

6 **CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO CALL-IN**

None

7 **Q2 BUDGET MONITORING REPORT**

NH presented the report, noting £1m of financial pressure on SPAE at the end of Q2, of which £700k is Covid-related and is budgeted for with the economic recovery reserve, and the remaining £300k is considered business as usual and will need to be mitigated before year end. NH confirmed an overspend of just over £700k for SPAE, a significant amount of which comes from the neighbourhood delivery service and waste services. Looking at Q1 versus Q2, NH noted the emergency payment allocation to help retain HGV drivers. On capital, NH advised that a large portion of this is on the neighbourhood side and delivery of vehicles, of which there has been a shortage, and the focus is on supplying waste and Clean, Safe and Green services.

Cllr Birnie asked for further clarification on AFM as referenced on page 6 of the report. NH explained that this is the Alternative Funding Model, stating that Hertfordshire County Council paid a bonus to district councils for delivering less waste, which stopped during Covid due to the increased amount of household waste. NH explained that the bonus helped promote recycling and that he hoped to see it return.

In response to a comment from Cllr Birnie on whether fly tipping clearance costs are offset by successful court action, NH advised that the cost of the service is reimbursed and then any surcharge goes to the enforcement service and that the service is therefore cost neutral.

Responding to a question on if there was positive slippage into next year given that £1.5m had not been spent on vehicles this year, NH explained that the slippage has allowed them to redefine what vehicles they want and make them futureproof but that they will inevitably incur more maintenance costs.

The report was noted by the Members.

8 **Q2 PLANNING, DEVELOPMENT AND REGENERATION PERFORMANCE**

JD presented the report, noting the new format due to the new software system, and confirmed that of the 12 performance measures, 5 are red, 2 amber and 5 green.

JD confirmed that planning fees and land charges remain strong, though a little down on Q1 due to the quarter being exceptionally strong. Service still has a buoyant level of searches though it is amber due to being just over the 10-day target. Current management performance is good although minor applications have slipped back into amber, and major applications are at target for the quarter. The quarter saw 9 appeals, compared to 21 in Q1, of which 7 were allowed and 2 dismissed.

Looking to the validation of applications, JD reported that there are now 77% of cases validated within 3 days of receipt. JD noted that enforcement are struggling with the large workload caused by the backlog as a result of lockdown and that indicator will remain low for the rest of this year while the team works through this.

On recruitment, JD noted that progress has been made with Philip Stanley appointed interim group manager for the whole development management, and that his role has been filled by Ed Arnold. Recruitment for the assistant team leader role remains the most challenging and an advert will be going back out to market.

Cllr Timmis noted the enforcement backlog and that many of these were in existence before Covid hit, adding that she did not feel the wait was acceptable given that buildings are going up. JD responded that 400 cases is the likely level they will hold at any one time and that he appreciated the difficulties. JD explained that they are looking to put in a budget proposal to extend the role put in for this financial year and that councillors were welcome to raise any particular case with the team to look into further. Cllr Birnie commented that there was a lack of information on how cases are prioritised and that the issue is with buildings being started or altered without permission. JD advised that a triage system is in place for any new cases and that there are 3 priority levels in place with 1 being the most severe, which is usually as a result of unauthorised work to a listed building.

Cllr Birnie asked if Members should bring cases to the team's attention. JD stated that the team will look at cases where there is local concern. Cllr Timmis commented that 2 enforcement officers have left this year and that they need to look at incentives to keep people in post. JD agreed, adding that they have to work within the constraints of the budget.

Cllr Birnie commented on a particular case regarding an ex-constituent who was visited by an enforcement officer due to a garden shed and that he would assume this was low priority. JD stated that he was unable to comment without the details on that particular case.

Cllr Birnie noted the 7 allowed appeals and asked if there were any trends seen in these cases. JD commented that inspectors may be more lenient on issues around design and overlooking. JD added that there is also an issue with being unable to demonstrate a 5-year land supply due to having such high housing targets that were set by central government. JD advised that inspectors are allowing large developments on the green belt due to the local authority being unable to meet the 5-year land supply issue and that this will be kept under review.

Cllr Birnie asked if the Long Marston land could be considered as part of the land supply even if there are no intentions to build there, given the lack of roads and other infrastructure. Inclusion of this area could well mitigate such inspector's decisions as the Wilstone appeal, where the number of buildings allowed increased from 15 to 28. JD advised that they are currently reviewing the content of the local plan and looking at more regeneration opportunities, particularly in the Hemel Hempstead area to meet numbers. On Long Marston and Wilstone, JD noted there are a number of issues due to a lack of services, but that there is also no active landowner or development putting in a viable proposal. JD added that the land is unconstrained by the green belt but it would be a significant change to the landscape so a proposal would have to show it was deliverable and could meet sustainable development tests. JD noted that, given the lack of infrastructure, they could be creating a community reliant on private car travel. Cllr Birnie asked if an advert could go out to the Marston area asking for landowners to come forward with a proposal. JD confirmed that a further call has gone out and that he would speak to Cllr Anderson about this separately.

There were no further questions. The report was noted by Members.

9 Q2 ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES PERFORMANCE REPORT

CT presented the report, particularly noting the challenge of retaining drivers and that they have 90% of drivers choosing to stay. CT confirmed that 4 loaders have now successfully trained as LGV drivers and that 8 environmental operatives are now being trained. Recruitment for Clean, Safe and Green continues and is hoped to be complete in the next 3-4 weeks. Preparations have commenced for seasons with 82 nameplates replaced and the grass cutting schedule completed for the year. CT reported that they recently met with Hertfordshire County Council to assess the impact of ash dieback on the public highways with a view to renegotiate the contract, given that more is being spent on traffic management rather than tree maintenance.

The new Canal Fields park has been built and refurbished and the tender for the play area has been completed with a view to finish work by spring. The Educational Awareness team have been out in the community and recently spent the day at Tree Hill to encourage residents to look at donating, selling or reusing items. Caddies were delivered into schools with children encouraged to decorate them.

CT reported that the local Vauxhall supplier has pulled out of supplying cage tippers and smaller vehicles and they have therefore moved to Ford, though the lead time for new vehicles has increased from 6-9 months to 12-24 months, which will mean maintenance of current vehicles is critical.

CT provided an overview of the resources and admin team, noting that 9,360 calls were received in the period, of which 560 were bulky item requests, 340 for fly tip reports, and that Clean, Safe and Green received a total of 1,483 requests, and 1,068 vehicles were manually weighed in.

Cllr Wyatt-Lowe thanked CT and the team for their work during such a challenging period and noted that while she has received no complaints about the service, there are issues regarding lorries unable to access roads due to poor street parking. CT acknowledged the issue, which has increased over recent years, and that they are looking at smaller vehicles to combat the problem. CT added that stickers and

hangers are used to inform residents that the road had to be missed. In response to a further question from Cllr Wyatt-Lowe regarding the impact of longer lead times for vehicles, CT advised that he was unsure of the cost implications as no orders have been placed at the time of reporting though maintenance costs are likely to increase.

Cllr Timmis praised the report and commented on the positive impact of decreased grass cutting in encouraging rewilding. In response to a question from Cllr Timmis regarding ash dieback, CT advised that the whole stock will be affected but they do not yet know the full extent of the issue. Looking at tree management, CT stated that they have the budget to plant trees but not for maintenance, adding that a number of trees had not survived this year due to bad weather and vandalism. Cllr Timmis suggested that the issue was down to trees being stored incorrectly, which CT refuted stating that he was unaware of any issues regarding their storage.

Cllr England commented on the vandalism of trees at Acre Field, noting that this is a cherished ski slope area and wondered if an alternative solution should be considered. In response to a query from Cllr England regarding why all Street Champions have not picked up their equipment, Cllr Birnie suggested that a written reply be given.

Cllr Stevens asked if tree maintenance will be included in next year's budget. Cllr Birnie advised that the provision could be recommended if there was general concurrence amongst the committee.

Cllr Harden commented on the trees that have failed to survive and that this will need to be taken into consideration if planting more trees is an action in relation to achieving net zero. Cllr Birnie suggested that this be included within the education programme. Cllr Barret provided reassurance that tree planting is a concern for all and that issues are being taken on board.

Cllr Birnie queried the item regarding Dundale Woods. JD advised that this is a privately owned space that has a proposal for a small residential development on the condition the land was transferred to Dacorum Borough Council as an open space. JD noted that they are currently working through legal issues on this.

It was noted the tree contract with the county for maintenance of trees is commercial and Cllr Birnie requested that negotiations ensure that the borough breaks even or makes a profit.

In noting the report, Members recommended to cabinet that sufficient budget be put in place next year for the maintenance of trees.

10 **Q2 ENVIRONMENTAL AND COMMUNITY PROTECTION**
PERFORMANCE REPORT

It was noted that Emma Walker was not present to give the report and that it would therefore be taken as read with CT taking questions from Members.

Cllr Wyatt-Lowe commented on item 2.2 in the report regarding 88% of noise complaints being closed within 60 days and asked for more information on why cases are closed. CT confirmed that he would ask EW to respond to this directly.

Looking at fly-tipping under item 5.4, Cllr Wyatt-Lowe suggested that the fine of £200 is too low to act as a deterrent. CT confirmed that the council does not set the fine as this falls under central government and they only put together additional surcharges covering investigation and cleaning.

In response to a query made regarding the length of time before a decision was made on whether a vehicle was actually abandoned, CT stated that a response would be given outside of the meeting.

Cllr Birnie noted that 87% of fly-tipping reports are visited within 3 days and asked what the longest delay was, commenting that visiting as soon as possible was essential to catch perpetrators. CT advised that the team visit sites quicker if they are likely to obtain evidence of the perpetrator.

Cllr Birnie referred to item 4.4 in the report regarding the use of The Forum and asked who decides the policy. CT explained this is discussed by chief executives, the senior leadership team and EW's team. In response to Cllr Birnie's suggestion that Members should also provide input, it was noted that a number of presentations are made to the committee and cabinet to allow for input, but most of the discussion is with management and the health and safety team.

The report was noted by the Members.

11 CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCY ACTION PLAN

MG presented the report, noting the proposed strategy is currently in draft form ahead of being taken to cabinet and to work on it further with Communications to ensure the layout is as effective as possible. MG commented on the timeliness of the report alongside COP26 and that it looks at the council's pledge on achieving net zero as well as work with the community on achieving its targets by 2050. MG advised that the report looks at high-level actions rather than noting all details, with the main focus being on the council's own pledge and work that will impact the community.

MG outlined the challenge in costing the plan given that the plans are to be delivered by 2030-2050. MG advised that the government's direction on vehicles and air source heat pumps is yet to be defined, and there are supply chain issues in delivering what is currently required. Costings are therefore provided as an estimate with more details to be set out on immediate actions and what will follow. MG stated that the focus is on meeting the necessary challenges and ensuring that actions are taken in the right order and that bids are made on all possible opportunities.

Cllr Wyatt-Lowe noted the list of consultees within the report and asked if this should be widened out, commenting that she would expect the scope to broaden throughout the process, particularly to bring in participation from the general public. Cllr Wyatt-Lowe noted the success of the recent carbon literacy training and that she would like to see this being offered to residents to help increase engagement. MG agreed, confirming that engagement will broaden as the strategy develops and that the public will be vital in shaping the strategy going forward. MP added that they have focused on reaching out to experts to help guide the strategy, such as with the Energy Saving Trust. MP also noted that the Dacorum Climate Action Network was recently set up with 30 organisations and over 130 residents already signed up and they will be

looking to expand this further. MP agreed on the need for training and that they will be looking to train Members of the public to enable them to carry out training sessions. MG added that including parish and town councils will be imperative in ensuring local engagement with initiatives.

Cllr Birnie commented on the academic work currently being done in this area, such as the work at Sheffield University on heat pumps and housing insulation, and that he would hope to see these references included within the report.

Cllr England remarked that he found the report lacking in measurable activity and that, given the report was delayed in July due to Covid and the decision to wait until nearer to COP26 when government guidance was likely to be updated, he was surprised there was nothing in the report pertaining to this. Cllr England commented that while he understood the difficulty in including figures in the strategy, he felt the plan needs to clearly demonstrate stages of delivery to demonstrate actions to residents. Cllr England added that residents need to be aware of the costs associated with insulation and to mitigate this by informing them of the cost saving benefits.

In response to Cllr England's comments, MG stated that they have set out the plan to a degree of detail to demonstrate their approach on taking high-level actions to meet their 2030 targets and that he felt it would be improper to contain numbers for a budget that is yet to be set. MG noted on the insulation of council housing that the number of properties that falls below the standard cannot be solved by the council alone and that government and homeowner investment will be critical. MG added that there is a reasonable understanding that a large level of funding will be required but the current focus of the plan is to be clear on what they are looking to deliver.

Cllr Birnie commented that they should be able to set out the costs for insulation. MG confirmed that the report states that insulation and new heating systems for council housing will cost £150-175m over the period. Cllr Birnie suggested that residents should be informed how much it will cost on average for each council house to be reinsulated effectively and that Members need to understand the average cost per unit. MG responded that this would be difficult to clarify given the difference in types and ages of council properties.

Cllr England commented on the opportunity posed by COP26 and that he felt the report needs to speak to residents more on the coming years with expected costs for the next financial year. Cllr England added that he felt the target for fabric first should be 100% rather than 90% and that he was uncomfortable with the referencing to offsetting, stating that it needs to be clear that offsetting is a last resort to help increase progress. MG explained that offsetting is being used to mitigate the issue that some buildings will be impossible to make net zero and instead we will be looking at investment in renewables.

Cllr Silwal requested that the report be updated to reference COP26. MG explained that the report was completed in advance of COP26 and that key government documents were not released in time to be included.

Cllr Harden acknowledged the difficulties in creating a climate report for a local council when compared to the large impact of countries, but that he was concerned about the message that it will take 10-20 years to deal with the climate emergency.

Cllr Harden requested a year-on-year plan over the next 10 years on what the council intends to do and to also make clear how it will impact the council's capital schemes. MG advised that they would take an approach that looks at the value of carbon reduction as well as items in the general fund. MP added that the intention is that the strategy is a public-facing document and that the action plan will act as a live document. MP stated that she felt it more sensible to have the action plan separate and that more detail will be provided once there is more information on funding and direction from the government. MG added that the plan would not crowd out other capital spending already agreed but that Members would need to be aware that spending on this in the future would mean less capital elsewhere. NH commented that the expectation is that legislation will be set out that certain buildings need to meet particular criteria and that they are therefore looking to be ahead of this and make it part of the capital programme.

Cllr Taylor recommended that they be more ambitious in their targets regarding electric vehicles and that a vision needs to be set out regarding making charging points available, particularly to those without access to off-street parking, and to combine this with the business strategy. MP agreed that electric vehicles is an issue to be tackled but they are currently constrained by a lack of guidance from government for local authorities and that County is also yet to finalise its strategy. MP noted that Field Dynamics have suggested that 700 charge points are required in Dacorum to meet the target of 30k electric vehicles by 2030. MP advised that they are able to put charge points on council owned land and they are applying for ORCS funding. MP added that they are also working with BP Chargemaster on where charge points can be located but this has been delayed due to all local authorities doing the same. Cllr Birnie commented that, as a public-facing document, the strategy should be clear on the council's aims regarding charging points but that they are currently constrained by Hertfordshire County Council and the government.

Cllr Timmis stated that she felt the report provided more detail on council action and less on public involvement. Cllr Timmis noted her own involvement in a local climate change awareness group and that these groups are getting very little support from Dacorum. Cllr Timmis then looked to the information on emissions on page 49 of the report, noting that flight emissions should also be noted. In response to Cllr Timmis' comments, MP stated that air emissions are not included by the government due to flights being shared between countries. On Dacorum Climate Action Network, MP advised that this was only launched last month and that they are looking to expand this so as to support other groups.

Cllr Stevens commented on the late submission of the report and asked that reports be made available to allow Members enough time to prepare ahead of meetings. Cllr Birnie agreed and asked that such long reports be made available before the statutory 2 week notice period.

Cllr Stevens noted the strapline of 'discover, define and deliver', commenting that they are through the discovery stage, they are defining the scope of the problem and they are yet to look at how it can be delivered. Cllr Stevens suggested a separate document for short-term action points and the aspirations for medium and long-term to demonstrate to the public that actions are being taken as quickly as possible.

Cllr McDowell commented that he found it difficult to support the plan in its current state as he was not confident that the strategy could deliver net zero by 2030 for

Dacorum. MP clarified that the plan for 2030 is for the organisation to be net zero, not the borough.

In response to a comment from Cllr McDowell on the suggestion that they would be unable to replace fossil fuel heating until 2030, MG stated that the UK supply chain doesn't currently have the capacity to deliver this and will take longer. Cllr McDowell stated that the council controls the maintenance of its housing stock and suggested that they look to train their own staff to provide insulation, adding that the plan should be looking at how it overcomes hurdles to deliver action within the limited timeframe.

Cllr Birnie noted the lack of control over third parties and asked why there is no attempt by the council to impose conditions on developers to ensure all new housing complies with standards. JD stated that there are limits on what they can impose as building regulations are not under their control, and they are instead looking at charging points and other sustainable measures that they are able to build in. Cllr Birnie stated that the report therefore needs to specify that they are unable to control third party emissions but that they would look to impose regulations to ensure new houses meet the necessary standards where possible. MG stated that the Future Homes Standard will help improve sustainability though it will not reach net zero.

Cllr England commented on the need for urgency to respond to the climate crisis and that he was concerned at the tension between being sensible and what the reluctance to do more could result in. Cllr England acknowledged the difficulties presented but that they need to be mindful of the impact of inaction. Cllr England recommended that item 7 regarding insulation and fabric first be made item 1 and that the pledge to insulate all properties by 2030 be made a priority, adding that the council needs to make a clear pledge on the percentage of properties it aims to improve each year for the next 5 years.

MG explained that the strategy references the intention to have more detailed actions for 2022-23 and beyond and that high-level actions are set out to be completed by 2030. MG stated that the target insulating all council properties by 2030 was deemed a more realistic achievement and that changing this to 100% would be for cabinet to consider. MG noted the comments made regarding the strategy and explained the need to take available resources into consideration.

Cllr Birnie suggested the following proposal to Members; whilst the report is noted, the committee feels it should be treated as an interim report and feels it lacks sufficient detail on costing. The committee also recommends that insulation of council property should be made a priority.

Cllr Wyatt-Lowe agreed that the report should be treated as an interim report rather than looking to include targets that may become unachievable and that the report will be developed going forward. Cllr Wyatt-Lowe objected to the second part of the proposal. Cllr Rogers supported Cllr Wyatt-Lowe's comments given the lack of direction around electric vehicles or air source heat pumps at present.

Cllr Stevens requested that the proposal also state that actions are expected to arise from the interim report. Cllr Birnie stated that this would be self-evident given the nature of an interim report.

Cllr Birnie proposed the following recommendation; “whilst the report is noted, the committee feels it should be treated as an interim report and therefore it lacks sufficient detail on costing”. Cllr Wyatt-Lowe and Cllr England both stated that they would prefer ‘lacking’ to be removed to make the wording more positive.

The final wording agreed was; “Whilst the report is noted, the committee feels it should be treated as an interim report and therefore looks forward to further detail on costing becoming available in due course.”.

12 WORK PROGRAMME

JD requested to add an item on a new supplementary planning document for skills to the 11th January meeting.

JD requested that the stewardship policy item be removed from the 24th November meeting, advising that further work still needs to be completed on the final document and that he was currently unsure of when it would be brought back as an agenda item.

The Meeting ended at 10.25 pm