

MINUTES

Dacorum Borough Council

Strategic Planning and Environment Tuesday 6 Dec 2022

Councillors: (14)

Neil Harden (Chair)
Jane Timmis
Anne Foster
Garrick Stevens
Adrian England
Stewart Riddick
Rob Beauchamp
Nigel Taylor
Rosie Sutton

Also in attendance:

Officers: (6)

Alex Robinson – Assistant Director Planning
Trevor Pugh – Assistant Director Neighbourhood Delivery
James Doe – Strategic Director – Place
Philip Stanley – Head of Development Management
Sara Whealan – Head of Hemel Place Strategy *
Clare Demspey – Financial Planning Team Lead
Emma Walker – Head of Environmental & Community Protection

1 MINUTES

The minutes from the last meeting were approved and signed by the Chair.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Anderson, Wilkie, Wyatt-Lowe and Banks

3 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

There was no public participation.

5 CONSIDERATION OF ANY MATTER REFERRED TO THE COMMITTEE IN RELATION TO A CALL-IN

None.

Chairman

6 ACTION POINTS FROM THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Chair advised that all actions were complete.

It was noted that the Housing and Community Overview and Scrutiny meeting was not quorate and Cllr Wyatt-Lowe was asked to move the Housing meeting.

Cllr Wyatt-Lowe left the meeting.

7 BUDGET

TPugh presented the Environment Overview, noting that the two most significant areas of the budget are garden waste and depot transformation. On garden waste, it was noted that Cabinet approved the move to a subscription-based service for 2023-24 with an assumption of an initial 30% take-up and that customers will be charged £46 per annum, resulting in an income of around £650k in the next financial year. The subscription will go live at the beginning of January on the DBC website and communication will be sent to residents. The garden waste service starts on 27th February 2023 and collections will only be taken from those who have subscribed and paid the fee.

Looking at depot transformation, TPugh noted the £134k reduction in costs that is projected for next year, which is made up of salary and transport costs through a focus on route optimisation as this was last reviewed in 2014 and a significant number of changes since then. Proposals for new rounds are being discussed with supervisors to ensure these are being sense-checked before going into more formal proposals. There will be several phases to the transformation and work will also include Clean Safe and Green as well as Commercial services to help better improve income.

The Chair asked if the depot transformation would be coming to Scrutiny. TPugh stated that he was unsure though he understood that it had been previously discussed at Scrutiny.

The Chair asked for further clarification on how the £134k saving would be achieved. TPugh advised that optimising would ensure they run fewer rounds and run rounds more efficiently with fewer vehicles and crew. Given that a number of the crew are agency staff, this will provide an opportunity to reduce the number of agency staff hired.

Cllr Taylor suggested it would be better to optimise rounds once the garden waste subscription scheme has been brought in. TPugh advised that they will operate the same garden waste rounds initially until they understand take up, and towards the end of the garden waste season, an assessment will be completed on demand and expectations for the following year before making round optimisations.

Cllr Timmis noted that a number of residents have already commented on the garden waste subscription and asked if residents can pay a pro rata payment if they want to start using the scheme later in the year. It was confirmed that this would not be offered.

Cllr Timmis confirmed that residents in receipt of benefits would receive a £10 reduction on the garden waste subscription and would therefore pay £35 per annum.

It was noted that whilst residents can sign up to the garden waste at any point of the year, the cost will remain the same. The Chair stated that this should help incentivise residents to sign up at the beginning of the year.

Cllr Timmis referred to comments from residents and asked if St. Albans offer a collection all year round. TPugh stated that he was unsure and that other authorities he has worked for would typically pause the service over winter.

Cllr Foster noted the expectation for a 30% take-up of the garden waste service and commented that the reports state a 60% take-up will require further investment. TPugh stated that further investment would not be required.

Cllr Foster commented on the giveaway compost and asked if this could be commercialised and sold to residents. TPugh advised that this is done with the county and is therefore aligned to their scheme though this could be looked at further.

Cllr Foster noted that residents who don't wish to use their green bins have asked how to dispose of them. TPugh stated that they would be initially asking residents to keep their green bins and then, after a period, they will consider how to collect them if they are still not required.

Cllr Taylor asked if the garden waste subscription fee would be charged upfront or on a monthly basis. TPugh stated that it would be upfront. Cllr Taylor queried why it was not charged throughout the 6 months of the collection period. It was noted that this would be costly to manage. Cllr Taylor advised that this is already being done for council tax, to which it was noted that council tax is a much higher sum and administrative costs for this are therefore more cost-effective.

Cllr England noted that some residents have smaller green bins and asked if there would be standardisation of the bin size. TPugh suggested that there should be only one size but would look into this further.

Cllr England commented that whilst the contribution of the green waste subscription service to the budget is significant, he felt they were introducing the scheme too quickly and that they may find some areas more complex.

Cllr England noted the charges in the list are around 10-11% though there is no increase in planning fees. It was noted that planning application fees are set nationally by central government, though an increase is being discussed. On discretionary services, it was noted that they were increased in the last round in excess of 10% and it was felt that that they would remain at the current rate as they are embedded. Increases have been brought in as costs did not meet the staff costs to implement the service.

Cllr England asked if there is likely to be an announcement with regards to an increase in planning fees. It was stated that some correspondence has been received from the Secretary of State regarding a consultation in the new year, though this is yet to be fixed. Cllr England asked what impact there would be on budget if an inflationary increase was applied to planning fees. It was stated that this was unknown though they currently bring in £1.3-1.4m per annum so a £200k increase could be expected.

The Chair noted that the nationally-set fee is not currently enough to cover the work.

Referring back to Cllr England's questions on the size of the green bins, TPugh noted the FAQs that state green bins were provided for smaller storage areas and that the introduction of the service won't change this and that the same price will be applied regardless of the size of the bin. Cllr England commented on the perception of value, to which TPugh stated that costs are calculated on the cost of collection.

A question was raised regarding the consultation on planning fees and it was asked if this was just on fees or also on future planning matters. ARobinson stated that this was unknown and that they have only been informed of a consultation on fees, though there may be further consultations regarding wider aspects of the planning system in the new year. It was noted that the Secretary of State is due to consult on national policy frameworks around local plans though they are unsure when this will take place.

Cllr England commented on the waste transformation strategy and referred to the £1.4m savings over 2 years, noting that this was not highlighted in the presentation. It was stated that this is the saving on costs as there are current pressures on agency spend as well fuel and transport costs, and therefore there will be a saving of £134k on budget rather than actual cash spend.

A comment was raised regarding the suggestion that they would not spend on new wheeled bins until 2027. It was confirmed that there is already a rolling £100k programme on new bins and this is just adding in the fifth year.

Cllr Beauchamp referred to the roll out of the green bin charging structure and suggested that messaging may be lost given that the current focus will be around Christmas rather than garden waste and asked if reminders will be sent out to residents regarding the process. TPugh confirmed that there will be comprehensive communication, including a mail out, advertising on the side of refuse vehicles and via social media. The Chair asked when letters will be sent out. TPugh confirmed that these would be sent out in January and that a pack will be sent to residents once they have signed up and paid for the scheme.

Councillor Timmis commented that some residents have raised concerns on how they sign up to the green bin payment scheme and asked if the letter will provide a manual process for those unable to use IT. It was noted that whilst they don't wish to encourage this, it is possible to sign up by calling the customer contact centre. It was stated that the budget has allowed for additional resourcing to support this. The Chair commented that the online form could also be accessed via libraries and community centres.

Cllr Sutton asked if four houses signed up together if they would share one bin. It was confirmed that it would be up to households to arrange this.

Cllr Foster referred back to the report and the suggestion that a take up of over 60% for the garden waste subscription would require additional investment. TPugh confirmed that the budget is based on a 30% take up.

The Chair asked what level of take up has been seen in areas that have already implemented the garden waste subscription. TPugh confirmed that the 30% take-up rate is based on what has been seen in other areas.

Cllr England commented on the capital bids for the adventure ground improvement programme in appendix C, noting that there is a lot of spending considered for next year with no further spending in the following years and asked if they had considered delaying this. It was confirmed that this was already in the budget and had been realigned having already been delayed.

Cllr Stevens referred to the technology reserve and asked how the digitisation programme is coming along. It was noted that those who could comment on this were in the Finance and Resources meeting. It was confirmed that there is a strategy for this and that there are options to bring this forward. It was also noted that this item links up with mapping.

The Chair commented on the rolling budget for CCTV and asked if this is required. It was stated that this is to replace equipment over time.

Cllr England noted the fleet replacement programme and asked for clarification on the fluctuation in numbers. It was stated that this is due to the rolling programme as there have been delays in the market with some vehicles they intended to purchase this year delayed into next year. Cllr England asked if they are making a less environmentally optimal purchase due to a need to replace vehicles. It was advised that they do not buy vehicles unless it makes sense to do so and the most environmentally beneficial vehicles are purchased to ensure that new vehicles are of a better standard than the ones they are replacing. It was noted that they are not yet in a position to replace current vehicles with electric refuse vehicles, though this is an aim for the future. The Chair asked what the current lifecycle is of a refuse vehicle. It was noted that it is around 7 years.

Cllr England asked if replacing vehicles at the optimum time reflects the difference in reliability of different vehicles. It was stated that it this is a judgement call for the fleet manager. In response to a question regarding what happens to vehicles once they are replaced, it was confirmed that they are sold on.

Cllr Beauchamp referred to appendix G regarding the budget for the Water Garden fencing and asked for further clarification on what this fencing is required for. It was confirmed that it is for the benched areas by the Italian beds to replace the temporary and older fencing. Cllr England asked if there was a possibility for an application of SIL funds for this, to which it was stated that they would do this if possible.

The Chair thanked the officers for their attendance and councillors for their contribution.

8 WORK PROGRAMME

The Chair noted the size of the programme for January. It was advised that the KPI item may be moved to February.

In response to a report on the digital strategy, it was noted that a report was not planned. The Chair advised that this would go through Finance and Resources. It was advised that there are a number of work streams that sit beneath the transformation and digital strategy, and whilst some relate to planning, they are primarily related to software and making systems more efficient so there was no intention to bring a report to the Committee. It was agreed a general update on the work underway as part of this strategy could be provided. The Chair asked if this would be included under the quarterly performance update. It was agreed that the work could be expanded upon as part of the digitalisation update in the quarterly report. It was stated that an update on how this will affect the core areas covered by the Committee would be beneficial. It was confirmed that this is not yet on the Finance and Resources Work Programme and it was agreed that the item would be looked at further. The Chair added that councillors could also attend Finance and Resources meetings and that any items of relevance could be brought to the Committee. It was stated that strategies under the master strategy should highlight how officers will drive a better or more efficient service.

Cllr Timmis referred to her request at the last meeting regarding acronyms and asked if they could also include items on climate change given that the Committee also focuses on the environment. The Chair confirmed that each report should have its own set of acronyms listed. LFowell confirmed that she could include the words when officers provide the Work Programme.

Cllr Beauchamp commented that he had attended the Water Resources South East Board as chaired by Affinity and Thames Water where he asked if they would be prepared to speak to borough councils. Cllr Beauchamp confirmed that he would send details of key contacts once the minutes have

been released so that the Committee can invite them. The Chair confirmed that if there is capacity for this subject then they can be included within the Work Programme.

Cllr England asked if there is a regular way to discuss recycling over the years, noting that there is not an annual recycling assessment. Cllr England referred to a previous request from Cllr Hobson on an investigation into recycling. It was noted that councillors went on a tour to see what happens to recycling and that it would be useful to know what is now happening to recycling.

The Chair stated that he is keen for the Work Programme to include items that members want to cover and that he is happy to speak to officers to look into this further.

There being no further business, the Chair closed the meeting at 8:56pm.

ACTION: Further update on digitalisation to be included as part of the quarterly report.