

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 3 October 2023 at Shire Hall, Warwick at 6.00pm.

Present: Councillor Milton (Chair); Councillors Armstrong, Barton, Collins, Day, R Dickson, D Harrison, Kohler and Redford.

Also Present: Patricia Tuckwell (Civic and Committee Services Manager), Graham Leach (Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer), Zoe Court (Neighbourhood Services Manager), Steve Partner (Head of Neighbourhood and Assets).

37. **Apologies and Substitutes**

- (a) Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Browne, Luckhurst and Sullivan; and
- (b) Councillor Kohler substituted for Councillor Payne and Councillor R Dickson substituted for Councillor Russell.

38. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest made.

39. **Minutes**

The minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 20 July 2023 were taken as read and signed by the Chair as a correct record, subject to an amendment for them to be sequentially numbered.

40. **Waste Contract Review**

The Committee considered a report from Neighbourhood Services which provided an overview of the first year of operation of the 123+ waste management contract. Appendix 1 to the report provided visual representations of missed collections, Appendix 2 to the report provided visual representations of the different waste amounts collected throughout the year and Appendix 3 to the report provided financial graphs.

The joint waste contract with Stratford-on-Avon District Council, known as "123+" (1 for weekly food waste collections, 2 for fortnightly recycling collections, 3 for 3 weekly refuse collections and + for 'optional garden waste collections) started on 1 August 2022. After this date garden waste bins without permits were not emptied. This contract was specified and let during the period of merger talks between the two Councils.

Stratford-on-Avon District Council (SDC) had a Contact Centre, and a decision was taken that even though the merger was no longer taking place, they had the required resource to deal with the expected high volume of enquiries. Therefore, SDC took all waste related enquiries, including phone calls, emails, webforms, and payments for containers, bulky waste collections, garden waste permits for Warwick District Council (WDC) at first point of contact by diverting relevant calls and emails from

WDC to the SDC team. Escalations were passed onto the Business Support Team in WDC Contract Services. This was based on an annual recharge to WDC and was set out in the report.

The Business Support Team within WDC Neighbourhood and Assets consisted of one Team Leader and 3.8FTE Officers. They took all enquiries relating to grounds maintenance, street cleansing, corporate building cleaning and parking (including Penalty Charge Notice appeals). They had previously dealt with waste related calls up until the end of the previous waste contract with Suez, that finished at the end of July 2022.

Prior to the 123+ 'go live date', all street level properties needed to be provided with a food bin, a kitchen caddy, and a blue lidded wheeled bin for co-mingled recycling collections. In addition, all households apart from those on communal collections required an information pack on the new collections including a collection calendar, as a one off, for the first year. It should have been noted Warwick District Council had stopped distributing calendars several years ago due the cost.

Both WDC and SDC also introduced a new phone app called 'Cloud 9' which allowed users to receive alerts on which containers to put out for collection, find out what items could be recycled and allowed the Councils to send notifications by ward, street etc. for any specific disruptions (i.e. collections running behind schedule) and general reminders e.g. 'you can now renew your garden waste permit'. WDC had over 30,000 residents using the app, with over 23,500 residents signed up for notifications. Feedback on the app had been good and additional features were being added.

Unwanted red boxes, white bags and green bins were collected free of charge from November 2022 – January 2023. These were all collected for recycling with the income from these sales, after consultation with the Chairman of the Council, donated to Myton Hospice. From February 2023 any household wanting to get these items collected had to do so by booking and paying a small fee via the SDC contact centre. There had been various communications to encourage residents to reuse and/or give away to neighbours.

In almost all areas, the new contract had produced the expected levels of service and had increased recyclable materials collected. However, there was a specific issue in a few areas, specifically parts of Leamington Spa town centre which were predominately areas comprising flats and shared accommodation and with concentrations of students in residence. These areas previously had a weekly black bag collection, but the view originally taken was that the 123+ cycle of collections would work in that area. However, it had not, and significant resources were required to clear weekly fly tipping on the street. There had been understandable complaints from residents in these areas with concerns about the health and visual impact. There was a case to review collections in those limited areas with the possibility of a return to weekly collections, albeit at additional cost to the contract. This was being reviewed by officers, with the Portfolio Holder, and any proposals would be brought through alongside the 2024/25 budget setting process.

In terms of the Governance arrangements, there was a monthly Contract Operations Meeting chaired by SDC, as the lead authority, with SDC and WDC officers and Biffa in attendance. Monthly KPIs were discussed, including any repeated missed collections, H&S, vehicles, and any other issues including forthcoming communications (for example, Christmas).

In addition to the monthly meetings, there were quarterly Partnership meetings which included the relevant SDC and WDC senior officers, Heads of Service and senior Biffa managers to enable more strategic discussions and decision making to take place.

With the previous waste contract with Suez, the Council received income from the sale of the collected recyclate as this was separated at the kerbside. However, the decision was made by Cabinet to change these arrangements for the new contract to co-mingled recyclable material. The Council also became a shareholder of the new Sherbourne Materials Recycling Facility (MRF) that was being built at the time in Coventry.

As part of the initial project, before the MRF was completed, recyclable waste was to be taken to the Pure Recycling facility at Ettington, Stratford-upon-Avon, but this facility was very badly damaged by fire in July 2021. As an alternative until the Sherbourne facility was completed, recyclable waste from both SDC and WDC was taken to Tom White Waste at Coventry, but this incurred additional cost and loss of income to both Councils. For WDC, this impacted on the 2023/24 waste budget and was reported in the Quarter One finance report to Cabinet. Now that the MRF at Sherbourne was effectively open and taking the comingled recyclable waste, this should have resulted in a return to income for 2024/25 as envisaged by the joint project.

WDC agreed to pay circa £240,000 for 2023/24 to SDC as part of a Inter Authority Agreement. This agreement included the provision of the Contact Centre service and contract management. Officers were requesting reports from SDC to review the call volumes now the contract was established and what resources were required in the future, and this would form the basis of discussions on the recharge for 2024/25. Appendix 3 to the report showed a table of the monthly costs of the Waste Contract. Members noted that the MRF was not operational until mid-August 2023 so temporary arrangements needed to be made and a contingency budget was agreed. Some income from the sale of the recycling at the MRF would resume. However, caution was advised because income depended on contamination levels and income was paid three months in arrears.

Appendix 4 to the report showed a table of income related to the Waste Contract; almost 40K garden waste permits had been sold for 2023/24, which equated to £1.6m income, and was in line with the budget as revised in December 2022, following an initial forecast of £1m / 25,000 permits being sold in 2023/24 when the service was initially launched. To try to avoid some of the issues around the sale of green waste permits for next year, officers would look at making these available earlier so there was a longer period over which they could be purchased prior to commencement.

Appendix 5 to the report showed the forecast income assumptions from the MRF arrangements. These needed to be considered cautiously as this was a new arrangement still in the commissioning phase. Further updated and more confident forecast would be developed for the next financial year.

When thinking of lessons learnt, the delivery of the bins did not run as planned and caused a spike in complaints and customers chasing for updates. For any future similar exercise, deliveries would need to start much earlier (up to six months ahead of 'go live'), and tape the bins shut with a 'do not use until X date' on it, or alternatively, to have a phased roll out across the District, rather than in one process.

Any major collection changes that required a new calendar would be mailed out directly. Relying on a bin distribution company to deliver the right calendar to the right property was challenging and slowed the delivery crews down considerably.

The report was for information only and there were no alternatives suggested.

In response to questions from Members, the Neighbourhood Services Manager the Head of Neighbourhood and the Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhood, explained that:

- the tonnage of recyclable waste was expected to continue to grow as property numbers were increasing. With the recent opening of the Materials Recycling Facility (MRF), the amount of plastics that could be recycled would increase, including soft plastics. From November 2023, coffee pods for machines such as Nespresso and Tassimo would be recycled at kerb side;
- a review of contract arrangements was underway as complaints were still being received regarding reporting missed collections to SDC;
- the WDC app had already stated coffee pods could be recycled. Currently, these were being collected and taken to the (MRF) to be separated, and depending on what the pods were made of, they would be recycled accordingly. Unfortunately, the Council could not guarantee 100% of coffee pods were recycled but from November, coffee pods would be sent to Podback and 100% would be recycled;
- a date that softer plastics could be recycled had not yet been confirmed;
- an open day had been organised for 19 October 2023, and a visit for Members could also be arranged;
- service development within the WDC app was underway aiming to include a variety of Council services to be available via the app and an officer had been recruited to develop this further;
- green waste permits were expected to exceed 40,000 by the end of the year and the team aimed for 42,000 by the end of next year;
- WDC was one of the top Councils in terms of recycling. An extensive process was undertaken to ensure value in the contract costs, but further work could be undertaken to understand where the Council benchmarked in contrast with surrounding areas. A review would be undertaken at the end of the financial year to show what income

- had been made over the course of the year and what it had costed, and this benchmark could be included in that review;
- a report was due to come to Committee around processes that were being created to deal with fly tipping issues and officers were working together to do this;
 - a heat map had been created to show areas where fly tipping was most prevalent - the majority was in Royal Leamington Spa town centre;
 - a further answer would be provided after the meeting around data for missed assisted bin collection targets being so different to missed bin collection targets;
 - there was an increase in fly tipping during Covid and these numbers were yet to decrease. The spike could be linked to the 123+ change but the heat map provided evidence of where fly tipping was highest. Fly tipping in rural areas might take longer to be cleared;
 - the majority of fly tipping found in Royal Leamington Spa town centre was household waste, when 123+ collections were implemented, the collections changed from a weekly collection to a bi-weekly collection and the properties in the centre might not have sufficient space to store the build up of waste causing more frequent fly tipping. This issue was being investigated. Rural fly tipping was usually builder's waste, or larger items;
 - education would take place in town centres to ensure that residents were aware of how waste should be disposed of and investigation into streets in which the most waste was found would happen in order to create appropriate solutions;
 - communication was vital to this project as it was a major change to the way waste was collected. WDC communicated this change to the best of the Council's ability at the time, for example via the app and media releases;
 - the contract stated the bins should be returned to where they were presented. If any instance of bins being returned in an alternative place, this could be reported as a complaint and the crew would be spoken to and CCTV on the van could be reviewed. Importantly, the issue could not be looked into if it had not been reported to the team; and
 - data was received regarding calls which would be reviewed along with the current arrangement. This would be requested on a monthly basis.

Councillor Day congratulated the team for the work they had done in launching the project, which had been largely well-received by residents.

Resolved that:

- (1) the report be noted; and
- (2) a further report be brought forward to the Committee's meeting on 23 January, to review if the terms agreed are still advantageous for the Council, and implications in the forthcoming budget.

41. **"No Mow May" Review**

The Committee considered a report from Neighbourhood Services which provided the conclusions of the working group that had been set up to review No Mow May 2023. There were four appendices to the report which visualised feedback from the survey, provided visual references of seasonal grass growth, and provided experience and feedback from other Councils who took part in No Mow May.

The scheme was generally well received by the public, with over 60% of residents who had completed the survey in support of No Mow May (NMM), but it was recognised that there were lessons to be learnt from the first year of operation.

The review concluded that the Council should scale back the areas to be included in 2024 to reduce the 'catch up', to plan timing and resources based on lessons learnt and for communications to raise awareness ahead of May, including the benefits.

For 2023, the Council was one of a significant number of local authorities that took part in the first wide scale introduction of 'No Mow May' which was a campaign organised by Plant life, a registered charity.

By suspending grass cutting throughout May, almost two million square meters of grass and wild plants in Warwick District were able to grow and flourish, which equated to 52pprox.. 266 football pitches.

Over 700 species of wildflowers grew on road verges in the UK, nearly 45% of the total flora. Just eight dandelion flowers could produce enough nectar sugar to meet an adult bumble bee's baseline energy need.

Additional benefits of longer grass such as helping to alleviate flooding were listed in section 2.6 in the report.

Officers had established a small project team to look at taking part in No Mow May 2023, including officers from: Neighbourhood Services, Green Spaces, Climate Change and Idverde to review how the Grounds Maintenance/Street Cleansing contracts could add value to the Council's commitment to address Climate Change.

In March 2023, the team sought approval for the Council to take part in the national No Mow May campaign as its first piece of work. This request was supported by all Group Leaders, after consultation by the Chief Executive.

In response to questions from Members, the Neighbourhood Services Manager and Councillor Roberts, Portfolio Holder for Neighbourhood explained that:

- WDC wanted to commit fully to No Mow May, in line with its climate change and biodiversity action plan. A project team had been set up and no concerns regarding catching up had been raised by idverde. In hindsight, WDC had been perhaps too ambitious;

- the review was a learning experience - there were areas WDC could keep longer and areas WDC might not cut at all to increase biodiversity, this therefore fed into the Biodiversity Action Plan;
- mowing schedules had been affected - had the team known the electric mowers would not cope, better ones could have been hired in time. However, by the time the Council tried to hire these, they were all leased out. Idverde worked incredibly hard to catch up, including evenings and weekends. The Council had learnt from this and this would be taken into account in next year's planning;
- a more strategic approach should be taken, and areas should be left uncut with wildflowers next year. Play areas and housing sites would not be included in No Mow May to allow children to play in the summer months;
- a mapping system should be included on the Council's website and a colour coded system would be implemented to clearly show which areas would be included in No Mow May;
- No Mow May had not been a cost saving exercise, and the contract had not been amended, with it being a WDC initiative;
- in relation to sports grounds, the team was considering mowing a path through grass that was being left to make it easier if a ball had been lost within the long grass;
- a media communication strategy would be drafted. Results of the survey were yet to be publicly available, but this information would be shared. The proposed promotion plan was for a leaflet to be included in the Council Tax Statement that was sent annually to all residents;
- the team recognised the verges around junctions should be cut back for safety reasons and a meter strip should be mowed into some verges to act as a path or mow just one side if the verge was narrow;
- bigger areas obviously provided better benefits but if there was a safety concern, WDC would mow where necessary;
- following the cutting of long grass, sweepers were employed to prevent the blocking of drains and therefore any flooding. The grass should be shorter next year so it should be less of an issue; and
- Idverde had gathered information to ensure best practice. Tweaks would be made to ensure catch up did not run into July as it had done this year; and
- the Idverde team was developing their own mapping system, which would link with the WDC system, but at the time of the meeting, this had not yet happened and information was being shared using spreadsheets.

Whilst Members recognised that it might take three to five years to measure the impact of No Mow May on biodiversity, the Committee asked that in future, more communications about the positive difference it was making would be beneficial for residents.

The Chair thanked the Neighbourhood Services Manager for responding to the large volume of emails and queries, and hoped that it would be a smoother process in May 2024.

Resolved that the report be noted, including the changes planned for 2024.

42. **Corporate Strategy**

The Committee considered a report from Governance Services which outlined the draft Corporate Strategy of 2023-2030 brought forward by the Cabinet and sought comments on it, in line with the proposed timetable.

The finalised 2023 to 2030 Corporate Strategy would set out the Council's corporate aims and ambitions for the next seven years, in the same way as the current business strategy. It would underpin every project and initiative developed and implemented by the Council's Service Areas that set out how to deliver services over the next seven years.

The draft strategic goals were currently subject to consultation and were considered by the Committee on 19 September. The comments made by the Committee and the response to these comments were set out at Appendix 1 to the report.

The initial draft of the Corporate Strategy including proposed vision and values and was set out at Appendix 2 to the report. The Cabinet wanted to provide an early opportunity to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee for its views.

The draft strategic aims had been revised based on initial feedback and these formed Section four of the draft Corporate Strategy.

Members were reminded that with the ambitious timetable for adoption, the Corporate Strategy was very much a living document at this time, with regular changes and updates being considered. With this in mind, the Committee noted that only the Vision, Values and Strategic Aims were included. This was to enable the Committee to focus on these core strategic parts at this time.

The timetable for the delivery of the new corporate Strategy was as set out in the report under paragraph 1.6.

The Committee had the opportunity to provide feedback to help develop the Corporate Strategy and key points the Cabinet might wish to consider. Equally, the Committee needed to start to consider how it might wish to scrutinise and monitor delivery of the strategy.

In terms of alternative options, the Committee could decline to comment on the draft Corporate Strategy and await the final document.

In response to questions from Members, the Head of Governance and Monitoring Officer and Councillor King, Portfolio Holder for Place, Arts and Economy explained that:

- achieving carbon neutrality by 2025 would be hugely difficult as there was no extra resource expected to help achieve this on time. However, the goal remained the same and WDC would continue to push this, though it was not specifically mentioned;

- WDC was not doing pulling back from its ambitions, rather, it was being realistic of timelines as 2025 was approaching fast and the aims were far from met. Feedback given had been taken on board;
- the strategy had looked at critical areas, such as retro fitting etc. There were so many variables within the framework that target setting became an issue, the financial element to the strategy was a massive factor in limiting achievements as well as the statutory requirements in housing.
- active feedback from staff had been received following an email regarding the strategy including the importance of underlining WDC's climate change efforts, ensuring emphasis was based on residents' health, using plain English to communicate the strategy and highlighting the importance of partnerships and stakeholder relationships;
- data collection should happen across the Council and the importance of measuring and benchmarking has been highlighted in a recent peer review group;
- another draft would be taken to Cabinet in November 2023, before a finalised version was taken to Council. The strategy was changing daily because of ongoing dialogue. The new Chief Executive had taken ownership of this strategy and was working with Heads of Service to implement feedback received from Cabinet. As the strategy covered the next six and a half years, exactly how the aims would be achieved might not be explained, but reports received in following years would state how they linked back to the corporate strategy;
- service area plans contained performance measures, and the aim was to publish these quarterly, so they would be available to both Members and the public. These could be used as a tool for scrutiny, matching up targets against data and how to see how trends had progressed; and
- a new Office for Local Government had been created, which set measures and benchmarks across local Councils. This would enable Councils to compare data across the UK.

Members were keen to review the Strategy on a yearly basis, in the same way that the annual governance statement came through scrutiny to make sure the Council was properly governed. More specifically, the Committee would like to see an annual strategy progress update, looking at the big picture and how the Council was working towards its goals and values.

Resolved that:

- (1) the response from the Cabinet on 20 September in response to the comments from this Committee, on 19 September 2023, on the draft Strategic Goals, as set out at Appendix 1 to the report, be noted; and
- (2) the Strategy be reviewed on a yearly basis. The Committee would like to see an annual strategy progress update, looking at the big picture and how the Council is working towards its goals and values.

43. **Work Programme, Forward Plan and Comments from the Cabinet**

The Committee considered its work programme for 2023/24 as detailed at Appendix 1 to the report. The Comments from Cabinet appendix would be part of the 31 October meeting agenda.

The Chair explained that the Future High Street fund report had been scheduled to be considered at this meeting, however, it had been agreed to move this item to a meeting later in October 2023.

The Digital Strategy update had been moved, with it being a Cabinet report in December. When this item would be taken to Cabinet, the Committee could choose whether to call it in for scrutiny or not.

The resident engagement strategy had been agreed for 12 months update as opposed to six months as previously. This would be to allow for data to be collected and analysed.

Resolved that

- (1) appendix 1 to the Work Programme report be noted;
- (2) the future High Street Fund report be moved to the 31 October 2023 meeting;
- (3) the Resident Engagement Strategy report be changed from six months to 12 months, to allow for further data collection regarding details on progress, value for money and the benefits to residents;
- (4) The Waste Enforcement Update report be brought to Committee on 23rd January meeting.

(The meeting ended at 8.00pm)

CHAIR
23 January 2024