

DONCASTER METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

COMMUNITIES AND ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

MONDAY, 20TH JANUARY, 2020

A MEETING of the COMMUNITIES AND ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL was held at the COUNCIL CHAMBER - CIVIC OFFICE on MONDAY, 20TH JANUARY, 2020, at 1.00 pm.

PRESENT:

Chair - Councillor Mark Houlbrook, Vice-Chair - Councillor Jane Cox

Councillors Nigel Cannings, Mick Cooper, David Hughes, Ian Pearson and Sue Wilkinson

14 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Tosh McDonald and Kevin Rodgers.

15 Declarations of Interest, if any.

A declaration of interest was made by Councillor Mark Houlbrook and Councillor Jane Cox by virtue that they attend the Climate Change Local Commission in a observing and non-voting capacity.

16 Public Statements.

There were no public statements made.

17 Climate Change Local Commission and Development of the Environment Strategy

The Panel was provided with a report and brief presentation updating them on what was taking place by the Climate Change Local Commission and around the development of the Environment Strategy.

It was explained that a refreshed Environment Strategy was being produced and progress was at the stage of data collections and evidence gathering. This would be done prior to an analysis being undertaken and in addition to the development of costed proposals for proposed activities. Members were informed that the strategy was expected to be finalised around the start of the financial year to coincide with the development of a new Borough Strategy.

The presentation covered the following issues;

- Local Commission – who and purpose
- Environment Strategy; and
- Strategy interrelated with refresh of the Borough Strategy.

There was a discussion held and the following issues were raised;

Targets and Steps Going Forward - A Member commented that they had previously raised a number of concerns and was fearful that the Council would not be ready to meet its 2030 targets. It was also believed that the Council was already in possession of a range of useful data and needed to be as forward thinking as other local authorities in meeting their own 10-year targets.

Other concerns included planning brownfield site developments in areas causing pollution through additional traffic.

Members were assured that real action was being undertaken and work was taking place with Leeds University, who had experience around this subject. It was explained that the Commission would help set out what the next 10 years would look like.

It was acknowledged that there was a real opportunity presented through Doncaster's new Borough Strategy, which would help set the tone going forward alongside a 10 year Environmental Strategy and provide an opportunity to embed it in the wider policy agenda.

A Member commented that more could have been done to involve residents to make small changes in the 4 months since the emergency was declared. It was felt that although this may only make a small difference, it would help residents feel more empowered. It was acknowledged that effective and immediate action already undertaken to date had involved trees, peat bogs and rewilding. It was explained that making most of our natural assets would be moved forward over next few weeks through working with the Doncaster Nature Alliance.

It was recognised that to enable small changes, the right resources needed to be in place without limiting ambitions. It was noted that the strategy needed to take account of investment opportunities and that effective communication with residents was important.

A Member expressed their desire to gain more confidence that what was outlined in the COSSHH document (that had been available since 2012) would be taken forward.

Concern was also raised around what was not being done by Streetscene to support this agenda.

Achievements - It was explained that recognising and celebrating what the Council was already achieving would form part of the strategy. As an example, Members were reminded about the massively reduced landfill that had been achieved through the facility offered at Manvers. A Member also noted the success story where 3 and 5% landfill was being undertaken.

Businesses – It was questioned what businesses were providing towards climate change as they had to a point, contributed towards it. It was acknowledged that there was a whole range of activities and commitments from Doncaster's Business Community and that avenues would be agreed through the Doncaster Chamber (who were represented on the Climate Commission). It was noted that 90% of business were micro businesses and that any changes in the short term may adversely affect productivity and taper out expectations. It was noted that the Council itself was one of the largest business organisations in the Borough and recognised that this was an issue for everyone.

Planning – Concern was raised about approved new housing development sites in Finningley and the adverse impact this would be having on climate change.

It was discussed whether planning would be involved in looking at issues such as how green will new houses be and it was felt that something would be needed in planning agreements to ensure that buildings were sustainable. It was also commented that there should be more green spaces. It was noted that discussions were taking place about what implications there were for the future and it was believed that this was something the Commission may want to take forward.

It was also queried whether the authority was reviewing its planning policy in respect of topping off tip sites. Members were assured that this would be taken back to planning.

A Member raised their concerns over an area situated in Balby, due to it being contaminated land that had been used for landfill (and was full of methane burned off for over a period of 30 years). It was questioned how much methane there was in that land, how many other landfills were there and would this be continued. Officers offered to provide a response to these questions outside of the meeting. In respect of whether methane could be utilised as a resource, it was responded that different options would be considered. It was commented that landfill sites would form one of the topic areas within the strategy alongside other options and considerations. Regarding the effect of peat extraction, it was acknowledged that Doncaster was the third highest (in the bottom three) in the country of carbon emissions release.

In terms of the local plan and where it stands with the emerging Environmental Strategy, it was explained that there were planning policies in place. A Member stated that they had previously raised the issue of solar panels as part of planning consideration and this had not been implemented as it was not national policy. It was commented that there was opportunity for the Commission to lobby, better and wider national standards.

Resources – It was stressed that there needed to be accurate financial planning and assurances were sought that the necessary finances would be in place to deliver the proposals as part of the Strategy. Members stressed that there needed to be a realistic environmental programme with the right people driving it forward.

In terms of the necessary resources being made available, it was explained that the strategy was currently at a stage of ideas, proposals and prioritising. It was recognised that certain proposals would be easier to deliver than others and that there would be a mixture of what was in the authority's control and what was not. It was also recognised that difficult decisions may need to be made with the possibly of a reallocation of resources. It was acknowledged that the strategy's aims, objectives and resources needed to be clear and transparent.

It was noted that the additional standards that might make a difference, would require increased costs and there would always be a certain amount of conflict. Members were reminded that there was also a range of economic growth aspirations in place as well. In response, a Member commented that this might reach a stage where there was no choice, in light of the fact that there had been an emergency declared.

Tree Planting – It was felt that tree planting did not have the required budget in place and it was expressed by a Member that this was an issue that should be taken back to the Commission. It was recognised that tree planting was very important in tackling climate change and would form part of the Commission’s final report.

There was a discussion around what landowners could do in contributing towards this issue by planting the most appropriate trees in the right areas. A Member explained that although trees needed a minimum of 9 metres clearance of drainage ditches as they could not be obstructed to reduce the risk of flooding.

Communication and Engagement were considered as very important going forward and it was suggested that a Members Seminar would be very useful. Members were also informed that there was the Team Doncaster Summit, website pages and further public engagement to take place.

Reference was made to the recent incident in America and in response to whether this could also occur here. In response, it was explained that it was illegal to dump fuel and a Member requested that this be verified outside of the meeting. It was confirmed that there was representation from the Airport on the Commission.

A Member requested that they would like to see the background and qualifications of all those on the Climate Commission. Members were assured that they had appropriate experience and expertise and that this information was available to view on the Doncaster Team website.

The Chair thanked officers for presenting and encouraged Members to contribute to the strategy.

RESOLVED that the Panel;

- Note the progress outlined in the report; and
- For a Members Seminar event to be arranged around the work being undertaken on climate change.
- For the Communities and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel to receive as part of their workplan for 2019/20;
 - An in-depth updated report in conclusion with the findings of the Climate Commission in May 2020.
 - An update on the Environment Strategy

18 Street Scene Rapid Improvement Plan Update

The Panel was provided with a report and a verbal update about the Street Scene Rapid Improvement Plan by the Director of Regeneration and Environment (in the absence of the Assistant Director of Housing). It was noted that due to the floods that had occurred mid-November 2019, the work had been paused in order to deal with them and mobilise the longer-term recovery (resulting in a significant backlog). It was reported that following a review of achievements and priorities, the improvement plan was recommenced earlier this month.

The Chair informed the Director of Regeneration and Environment that it would have been helpful to have had a written report prior to the meeting.

The Director of Regeneration and Environment explained how over Summer 2019, grass cutting and litter picks had not met with the appropriate standards. As a result, a full strategic service review was being undertaken called the Rapid Improvement Plan (RIP).

It was also noted that a significant amount of work had already taken place and involved targeted site interventions in the midst of an independent Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE) review. It was explained that the outcome of this review would be due February 2020 and would help provide an independent view and steer on areas of focus for improvements. It was added that the APSE review would help identify the optimum method of working, relevant performance indicators and the steps required to be an industry exemplar of best practice.

It was also reported that governance arrangements had been established and a commitment had been made to ensure the deliverability of a number of key actions and accountability to the Executive.

There was a discussion held and the following issues were raised;

APSE Review - Concern was raised around the use of a consultancy (APSE) and the costs incurred from the independent review. Members were informed that APSE had experience from predominantly working within the public sector and formed a good understanding of the practice.

Recruitment and Qualifications - Members were informed that recruitment had been an issue in filling vacancies. Concern was raised around what impact the Councils recruitment problems was having on current productivity. It was confirmed that there were presently 17 vacancies going through a recruitment exercise. It was felt that more needed to be done to make employment in this area more attractive and to maintain staff in those posts. It was noted that staff had commented that working in the locality model would be better, with greater knowledge and commitment and would therefore provide better job satisfaction.

Members were informed that both internal and private recruitment routes had been used (of which both had experienced minimum success) and the latest recruitment drive had returned better applicants. It was stated that more was being done to drive training down and enable those better qualified to rise through the service. A Member questioned how performance management was being addressed through appraisals, although it was acknowledged that they had been impacted by staff shortages.

A Member commented that they believed a lack of horticultural skills/qualification had contributed to some of the issues. That Member later added that employees should also be trained in fine turf in order to respond to the particular requirements of bowling greens.

Service Standards - A Member raised their concerns that the service was not up to standards and therefore not meeting its targets. It was commented that non-senior officers were attending meetings. It was also questioned whether the service was undertaking what it should be doing and therefore meeting the requirements of the European Protection Act.

In particular, the following points were raised;

- Concerns about specific issues such as litter picking taking place prior to waste collections in certain areas.
- Charging for the disposal of fridge freezers and whether it was cost effective and successful. Members were informed that some localities did not charge and fridge freezers were still continuing to be disposed of.
- A recognition that litter tended to concentrate in certain area and it was briefly considered what could be done, for example, in areas where there was a high number of parked cars such as in close proximity to the Doncaster Royal Infirmary.
- That high quantities of cannabis were being planted in rural areas.
- That the highest number of complaints took place during the Spring/Summer season.
- Where the responsibilities of cemeteries came under?

Members were informed that the Council was waiting on the outcomes from the APSE review and the Rapid Response Programme that would provide an improvement programme for the service. It was explained that the review would also consider looking at whether the Council had the right resources in place and was achieving best value.

Businesses - It was questioned whether a litter tax could be placed on local businesses (that may have contributed to littering). It was questioned what powers were in place that could be applied to businesses or whether as a minimum, some form of dialogue could be undertaken. Members were informed that there had been some success in the immediate locality. It was commented that some organisations had a litter strategy and that some sponsorships were in place i.e. at Sandall Park. It was noted that as a local business operation, McDonalds had provided a strategy for litter clean-ups around its locality. Reference was made to other local authorities litter policies such as that of Birmingham City Council.

Resources – A Member questioned the resources that would need to be invested against the reductions that had been earmarked for budget allocations. It was recognised that reductions had made an impact and acknowledged that further investment was required. It was considered that this was a high priority within communities and a service that needed to be delivered correctly.

Members were assured that work was taking place with the Executive to review what funds were available that could be allocated to providing additional resources.

It was commented that there was a desire to ensure that the right performance measures were in right place. Members were assured that this was now taking place and filtering down to Managers and Team Leaders.

It was also recognised that the service should be tailored to the specific needs of the Borough and it was anticipated that the findings of the APSE review would inform this further. It was felt that the review would lead to a more intelligent led service although some Members were of the opinion that there was inconsistency across

Neighbourhood Teams. It was also acknowledged that Members held a great deal of knowledge regarding their wards and within their communities.

Looking at whether preventive measures were better than being reactive, the Director of Regeneration and Environment stated that it would require a significant amount of resources to be able to offer a more proactive service across the Borough,

It was questioned whether action weeks and concentrating staff to identified areas were cost effective solutions. It was responded that those actions had been effective in term of remedying problems within targeted areas.

A Member commented that they felt previous revisions to Streetscene depots in addition to the standard of quality machinery available had resulted in a negative impact on the service.

It was observed by a Member that certain public and private systems had the potential to operate more efficiently.

A Member also questioned whether certain services should be placed under the same portfolio.

RESOLVED that the Panel receive an update on the outcomes of the APSE review and update on the Rapid Response Programme (including a breakdown of complaints) as part of the Communities and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Workplan 2019/20.

19 Overview and Scrutiny Work Plan and the Council's Forward Plan of Key Decisions.

The Senior Governance Officer presented the 2019/20 Scrutiny Work Plan for consideration and informed Members of the current Forward Plan of key decisions. The Panel was reminded about the annual meeting of the Panel as the Crime and Disorder Committee and that meeting would be taking place on the 13th February 2020.

RESOLVED that the Panel note the report.

CHAIR: _____

DATE: _____