

ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 5 July 2018

Present: Councillor T Jones (Chair)

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| Councillors | S Foulkes | S Jones |
| | B Berry | B Kenny |
| | A Brame | C Muspratt |
| | K Cannon | T Smith |
| | T Cottier | A Sykes |
| | G Ellis | RL Abbey (In place of W Ward) |
| | A Hodson | M Jordan (In place of T Cox) |

In attendance: Councillor M Patrick, Cabinet Member Environment

10 MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST / PARTY WHIP

Members were asked to consider whether they had any disclosable pecuniary interests and/or any other relevant interest in connection with any items on the agenda and, if so, to declare them and state the nature of the interest.

Members were reminded that they should also declare whether they were subject to a party whip in connection with any items to be considered and, if so, to declare it and state the nature of the whipping arrangement.

No such declarations were made.

11 GRASS CUTTING AND WEED CLEARANCE PROGRAMME

Following receipt of a requisition for a special meeting of the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee from three members of the Conservative Group, *'to discuss the Council's problems with the grass cutting and weed clearance programme resulting in areas of our Borough resembling uncared for and derelict wasteland'*, a special meeting was arranged, following consultation with the Chair and Party spokespersons. A summary report had been prepared that provided initial information on weed control and the mowing of highway verges to assist Members of the Committee in their consideration of issues, as follows:

Weed control:

“A new contract for hard surface highway weed control started in May 2018. Both Spot and Schedule Monitoring are in place. The contractor is working to a schedule and reports progress each day using a table template. This information is going to be placed on the council’s website grass cutting and grounds maintenance page so that members of the public can identify where the contractor has got to. The glyphosate herbicide leads to signs of weed dying ten to fourteen days after application. If an area is missed, or the spray applied has not taken due to rain, the contractor is required to re-treat the area.

“There were some initial mobilisation issues which are being resolved through Contract Mobilisation/Monitoring meetings. The Terms of the Contract are that the contractor will not be paid for phase one (the May/June round) until after end of June and this is dependent on evidence of phase one (May/June) being satisfactorily completed, with evidence of weed death 10/14 days after application.

“Unfortunately due to very wet ground conditions in April and early May spraying was delayed whilst weeds grew strongly.

Mowing of highway verges:

“The grass cutting of highway verges is currently scheduled to take place as follows:

“Urban verges are cut every three weeks from mid-March to October, except during May to June when the cut occurs every four weeks due to work load from extra growth. The longer period between cuts in May and June is a reflection of the extra time it takes to complete the ‘round’ at this time of year, due to the fast grass growth at that time of the year. A small number of urban verge areas are cut four times a year.

“Rural verges are cut once a year (mid-July to mid-August, subject to flowering conditions and weather conditions. Semi-rural verges and rural verges at road junctions and along established rural road pedestrian pathways are cut four times a year between March and October, to keep view lines clear and enable the paths to be used”.

The Chair invited signatories to the requisitioning of the meeting - Councillors Adam Sykes, Bruce Berry and Andrew Hodson - to summarise their concerns.

Councillor Sykes informed that he had been approached by many residents regarding the state of verges and roadside weeds, and provided an anecdotal example of a location where delivery drivers were unable to see road signage. He asked for an update on what was being done to address the situation, adding that excuses about ‘the weather’ (which happens every year), and political excuses ‘blaming the tory government cuts’ would not suffice.

Councillor Bruce Berry added that the same situation regarding the issue of weeds had occurred last year, and the explanation had been 'the weather' and 'strength of the weed killer'. He added that the problem existed across the borough and that a permanent solution was required to tackle the problem once and for all. He understood that the Council had provided a second team to support the current contractor, but questioned why the Council would be paying extra to supplement a service that was already contracted.

Councillor Mathew Patrick, Cabinet Member: Environment responded stating that, yes the situation was not good enough, but it had not been necessary to convene a meeting of the Committee to receive a response he would quite happily have provided information on the subject, but none of the Members had contacted him.

Councillor Patrick continued, stating that Officers were taking action in priority areas and that some parts of the borough were requiring 2nd and 3rd spraying to ensure the problem was being tackled efficiently. He added that he would not be 'blaming the government for the weather', adding that some elements of the contract were confusing, but the contractor was being held to their contracted service. In terms of actually getting the job done i.e. weed clearance, this was the Council's first priority.

David Armstrong, Corporate Director for Delivery Services also responded to Members, apologising for the current position, re-iterating that Officers were working hard to deal with the issue. He explained that there had been variations in the recent past regarding past external contracting, in-house servicing and now an external contract that had meant that procurement and implementation of the contract had started later than expected. Issues regarding the use of casual workers, who when trained would leave the service added to the issues faced in delivery of the contract.

Members were apprised that some areas of the borough suffered due to the inefficiency of using mechanical sweeping (due to parked vehicles) and this too was being reviewed. The recent spell of hot, dry weather had actually helped the Council make up lost time, and the contractual verge cutting was now almost back on track. Mr Armstrong also stated that the Council was working with the contractor, jobs were being monitored and payments would not be made for work that was not completed.

Members thanked Councillor Patrick and Mr Armstrong for their honest and frank responses to questions raised.

Members provided a variety of examples of issues facing specific localities, questioned officers of the Council's approach to particularly virulent weeds i.e. Japanese Knotweed where infected areas border publicly owned land / open

spaces, involvement of MPs, uninformed or inappropriate comments in the press, and the focus on getting basic services right.

Councillor Sykes responded to a Member comment stating that he and other Members had been in contact with Officers regarding this matter, but had not been able to direct queries to the Cabinet Member, due to the fact that a summary list of the revised Cabinet Portfolios had not been made available until recently.

The Chair summarised the discussion and thanked the Cabinet Member and Officers for what was a positive report on actions, prioritisation of works and a pragmatic approach to tackling the issue utilising the resources available.

Proposed by Councillor Steve Foulkes

Seconded by Councillor Ron Abbey

“We thank the Officers for their full and frank report and notes the difficult circumstances in which they operate.

We welcome the Leader’s and Cabinet Member’s comments about getting basic services right as a priority this year. Weed control and grass cutting are some of the much valued basic services.

However poor performance is detrimental not only to the visual environment but also causes drainage issues for residents. We would encourage public engagement and self-help.

We look forward to working with the Cabinet to improve this much valued service”.

An amendment was submitted, as follows:

Proposed by Councillor Adam Sykes

Seconded by Councillor Bruce Berry

Following the final paragraph, insert the following:

“Committee notes the positive progress made so far, but also notes that weed growth is now so prevalent and strong Committee does not believe that spraying alone will have the desired effect of ridding our streets and open spaces of the weed growth, and requests that further action be taken to ensure weeds are removed.

Committee requests that updates on grass cutting and weed control be brought as a standing item to this committee’s cycle of meetings”.

Following a short debate and Councillor Steve Foulkes having replied, the amendment was put and lost (6:8) (One abstention, the Chair).

The original motion was then put and carried (14:0) (One abstention, the Chair).

Resolved: That

The Environmental Overview and Scrutiny Committee thank the Officers for their full and frank report and notes the difficult circumstances in which they operate.

We welcome the Leader's and Cabinet Member's comments about getting basic services right as a priority this year. Weed control and grass cutting are some of the much valued basic services.

However poor performance is detrimental not only to the visual environment but also causes drainage issues for residents. We would encourage public engagement and self-help.

We look forward to working with the Cabinet to improve this much valued service.