

ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE EMERGENCY AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 30 November 2022

Present: Councillor EA Grey (Chair)

Councillors S Foulkes H Gorman
T Smith N Graham
A Gardner O Osanlou
L Fraser C Davies (In place
V Wilson of S Percy)

In attendance: Councillors J Williamson
T Cox

39 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

The Chair welcomed attendees and viewers to the meeting and reminded everyone that the meeting was webcast and retained on the Council's website for two years.

40 MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Members were asked to declare any disclosable pecuniary interests and any other relevant interest and to state the nature of the interest. There were no declarations of interests.

41 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Sue Percy who was deputised by Councillor Chris Davies. Councillor Tony Cox was also in attendance.

42 MINUTES

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 20 October 2022 be approved and adopted as a correct record.

43 PUBLIC AND MEMBER QUESTIONS

43.1 Public Questions

The Chair indicated that 6 questions had been received, a number of which were in relation to agenda item 6 – Hoylake Beach Management – Approval of consultation report and final consultation outcomes.

Anne Ardern submitted a question about why the “do nothing” option has been discounted from the beach management scheme.

Lorna Humphreys sought clarification on whether spending large sums of money raking parts of Hoylake beach was appropriate given the unprecedented level of debt the Council was facing.

Charlotte Smith attended the meeting and queried why an option for an amenity beach had not been put forward, she emphasised that as someone who was disabled and had suffered from mental health issues, she felt excluded from accessing the beach as it was.

A supplementary question was asked about the working relationship between Wirral Borough Council and Natural England and whether Natural England had visited Hoylake Beach to assess the serious public safety risks that the beach posed to both humans and wildlife. The Chair agreed to provide a written response.

The Chair responded to all the above questions that a motion was to be put forward during the consideration of the Hoylake Beach Management item that she felt would answer all their questions.

Julian Priest asked a question about the method of plant removal in the pioneer zones and whether this involved raking or digging which would only disrupt and exacerbate the spread of vegetation

The Chair sought clarification from the Senior Manager of Flood and Coastal Risk Management who stated that the method of vegetation removal advocated through the management options was by mechanical means.

A supplementary question was raised on the legality of this option given that this would exacerbate the spread of vegetation.

The Chair outlined that the Council would take legal advice and refinements from Natural England to ensure no illegal action was taken on the beach.

Ruth Molyneux asked a question regarding pedestrian safety on New Chester Road and why safety railings had not been provided at one crossing on the road.

The Chair responded that an independent safety audit had been carried out on the layout during the residential development in 2017 and that this had not identified the requirement for guardrail which was there to direct pedestrians

to cross at safe locations rather than to protect pedestrians from errant vehicles. The collision data records for this location had been reviewed and indicated no pedestrian or cyclist injury collisions recorded at this junction within the last 5 year study period.

43.2 Statements and petitions

No statements or petitions had been received.

43.3 Questions by Members

There were no questions by Members.

44 HOYLAKE BEACH MANAGEMENT - APPROVAL OF CONSULTATION REPORT AND FINAL CONSULTATION OUTCOMES

The Chair welcomed the officers from Natural England, who were the governments advisors for the Natural Environment, who had attended the meeting to assist Members with any queries they had.

The Assistant Director of Parks and Environment introduced the report of the Director of Neighbourhood Services which provided Members with the results of the initial consultation exercise relating to Hoylake Beach Management and also proposed two beach management options for further consultation. The report set out the process and results from the initial consultation and this along with ecological and geomorphic studies and discretionary advice from Natural England was used to develop a range of management options.

Members sought clarification on refinements that Natural England may make on the proposed options in order to give assent and these included things such as development of a vegetation management plan and consideration of implementation of board walks and designated walking paths to protect existing and emerging vegetation amongst other refinements.

In response to queries from Members regarding the possibility of an option of a portion of the beach being raked into an amenity beach whilst still maintaining a natural area, Natural England outlined they would not be able to say whether that would gain assent or not but that proposals would be assessed and considered against the environmental tests which must determine there would be no adverse effect on the integrity of the site.

Councillor Liz Grey proposed a motion, seconded by Councillor Steve Foulkes that -

Committee requests the Director of Neighbourhoods to work closely with NE and MEAS to refine as appropriate the following two options, which ECET committee feels better reflect the consultation findings and the strength of feeling among the local population while keeping within the law. Committee requests that both options be costed and include a thorough review of potential drainage improvement works that might be needed:

1. An option to work with natural processes along the entire beach but with a focus on greatly improved access for all and clearance of slipways.
2. An option, similar to the Royal Haskoning Report of 03 November 2022, reference PC2553-RHD-ZZ-XX-RP-Z-0001" option 3, but with reduced vegetation clearance. This could involve 'do nothing' from Red Rocks to Trinity Road and 'do everything' from Trinity Road to the RNLI station.

Committee urges officers and NE to consider the protection of nature but also the need to heal a sorely divided local population. Any options proposed for final public consultation must meet NE full approval.

Committee appreciates the scientific evidence that shows clearly that beach levels are rising and that this facilitates the growth of vegetation on what is now essentially dry land most of the time. Committee understands the rich diversity of plants growing in this location and the degree of national and international legal protection this habitat is given. Having no wish to break the law or jeopardise the natural world and the benefits this offers the local community, including economic benefits, Committee requests the Director of Neighbourhoods to explore with NE the possibility of best enabling as many people as possible to appreciate this beach, however they may currently understand the term "beach", while the Council and its partners continue the process of engagement and education with all stakeholders.

Committee's concern for the wellbeing of the local community matches our concern for best practice in beach management and long-term protection of nature. Committee believes that it is in the best interests of community cohesion and wellbeing if some vegetation removal could be considered alongside that which may need to be considered for the proper use of the RNLI hovercraft to save lives at sea. Committee also believes that in removing some vegetation, the remaining vegetation would be far better protected from the misguided and illegal activities of which we have been notified in recent years, including in recent weeks. This has included reports of diggers and strimmer's being taken onto the beach as well as the spraying of chemicals, all without permission. People have also bragged on social media of their efforts to remove vegetation by hand. Committee believes that such behaviour would cease were a small "amenity beach" to be provided, with vegetation removed to the promenade wall. Should the level of protection afforded to any species of plants there become a barrier to this, then a buffer zone could be created to protect specific plants or habitats without highlighting individual examples, removing the necessity to completely reject vegetation removal per se.

Committee accepts the need to prepare a mitigation plan with expert advice and for this to be monitored with experts and we request that officers work

closely with NE and other local environmental experts, including MEAS, to assess how and where this might be possible and appropriate and Committee requests that the Director of Neighbourhoods works closely with NE and any other relevant bodies to assess the drains that empty onto the beach and arrange for any remedial or diversion works, if needed and as appropriate.

Following a debate on the motion, the meeting adjourned at 20.08pm.

The meeting resumed at 20.26pm.

Councillor Andrew Gardner moved, seconded by Councillor Tony Cox that –

Given the overwhelming support on Wirral for a compromise, all options that have been democratically put forward by elected representatives on Wirral, be presented by officers to Natural England for negotiation and a report brought back to the Committee on the outcome of those negotiations.

The Committee moved to a vote on the motion put by Councillor Liz Grey where it was carried (6:4) (1 abstention).

The Head of Legal Services outlined that as the second motion was wider than the motion that had just carried, it then fell.

Resolved (6:4) (1 abstention) – That

Committee requests the Director of Neighbourhoods to work closely with NE and MEAS to refine as appropriate the following two options, which ECET committee feels better reflect the consultation findings and the strength of feeling among the local population while keeping within the law. Committee requests that both options be costed and include a thorough review of potential drainage improvement works that might be needed:

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Committee urges officers and NE to consider the protection of nature but also the need to heal a sorely divided local population. Any options proposed for final public consultation must meet NE full approval.

Committee appreciates the scientific evidence that shows clearly that beach levels are rising and that this facilitates the growth of vegetation on what is now essentially dry land most of the time. Committee understands the rich diversity of plants growing in this location and the degree of national and international legal protection this habitat is given. Having no wish to break the law or jeopardise the natural world and the benefits this offers the local community, including economic benefits, Committee requests the Director of Neighbourhoods to explore with NE the possibility of best enabling as many people as possible to appreciate this beach, however they may currently understand the term “beach”, while the Council and its partners continue the process of engagement and education with all stakeholders.

Committee’s concern for the wellbeing of the local community matches our concern for best practice in beach management and long-term protection of nature. Committee believes that it is in the best interests of community cohesion and wellbeing if some vegetation removal could be considered alongside that which may need to be considered for the proper use of the RNLI hovercraft to save lives at sea. Committee also believes that in removing some vegetation, the remaining vegetation would be far better protected from the misguided and illegal activities of which we have been notified in recent years, including in recent weeks. This has included reports of diggers and strimmer’s being taken onto the beach as well as the spraying of chemicals, all without permission. People have also bragged on social media of their efforts to remove vegetation by hand. Committee believes that such behaviour would cease were a small “amenity beach” to be provided, with vegetation removed to the promenade wall. Should the level of protection afforded to any species of plants there become a barrier to this, then a buffer zone could be created to protect specific plants or habitats without highlighting individual examples, removing the necessity to completely reject vegetation removal per se.

Committee accepts the need to prepare a mitigation plan with expert advice and for this to be monitored with experts and we request that officers work closely with NE and other local environmental experts, including MEAS, to assess how and where this might be possible and appropriate and Committee requests that the Director of Neighbourhoods works closely with NE and any other relevant bodies to assess the drains that empty onto the beach and arrange for any remedial or diversion works, if needed and as appropriate.

45 POLLINATOR STRATEGY

The Strategic Manager of Parks and Countryside introduced the report of the Director of Neighbourhood Services which sought the approval of the Wirral Pollinator Strategy which supported the Council’s biodiversity commitment.

The strategy had been developed to ensure the Council and its residents, businesses and landowners were provided with information to help to protect and increase pollinator populations. The strategy spoke to the national strategy and addressed the recent Environment Act 2021 which placed a duty on Local Authorities to enhance biodiversity and to protect and encourage pollinators.

Members thanked officers for their work and noted the report contained a lot of interesting information and captured the context of why the Council needs a Pollinator Strategy.

Councillor Andrew Gardner proposed a motion, seconded by Councillor Tony Cox that –

Committee resolves that recognised official and affiliated park groups to the Council can be impacted in their work by “No Mow May” and such groups can apply for exemption from “No Mow May” providing that they produce a pollinator policy that will describe how they will otherwise prosper pollinators in lieu of “No Mow May”.

A discussion ensued where officers outlined that “No Mow May” had two purposes, one to promote pollinators and second was that budget options agreed included reduced grass cutting with certain exemptions. It was reported that officers were in the process of meeting with the parks friends’ groups to see what mitigation could be done.

The Committee moved to a vote on the motion from Councillor Andrew Gardner, it was put and lost (4:7).

On a motion by Councillor Liz Grey, seconded by Councillor Tony Smith it was –

Resolved (unanimously) –That the Wirral Pollinator Strategy be approved, and officers and their partners, Wirral Wildlife, MEAS and New Ferry Butterfly Park be thanked for their hard work on this excellent report.

46 WEED CONTROL

The Strategic Manager of Parks and Countryside introduced the report of the Director of Neighbourhood Services which provided an overview of the appraisal exercise undertaken to consider options for future weed control across the borough. The Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee approved the Council’s Weed Control Measures options appraisal in September 2021 for a one year contract with a further one year extension, this report sought approval for the one year extension to further investigate and action alternative methods of weed control.

In response to a Member query on how much weeding officers expected to undertake with machinery, it was reported that this was something still be worked upon, officers were keen to use machinery in alleyways where there was a reduced risk of stone chips causing damage, from this officers could identify how quickly the machinery could work through an area depending on weed density, this would then be scaled up and applied across the Wirral to find this figure.

On a motion by Councillor Liz Grey, seconded by Councillor Steve Foulkes, it was -

Resolved – That

- (1) the current weed control contract with ManCoed Ltd at a cost of £260,000 for one year be extended.**
- (2) the continued exploration of alternative options for weed control be endorsed, including the provision of an ‘in-house’ multi-disciplinary service and a further report including options and costs be brought to a future committee.**
- (3) the Director of neighbourhoods be requested to engage residents in relation to the issue of ideas for controlling weeds.**

47 **UPDATE - WIRRAL ALLOTMENT PARTNERSHIP STRATEGY**

The Strategic Manager of Parks and Countryside introduced the report of the Director of Neighbourhood Services which provided an update on the progress against the recommendations of the report brought to the Committee in October 2020.

The Wirral Allotment Partnership Strategy reviewed Wirral Council’s Allotment provision with the intention of providing allotments throughout the borough in the most cost-effective manner. The report detailed the number of people on the waiting list for an allotment, capital programme sites under development and raised beds that had been developed.

In response to queries from Members about how the Council intended to meet the demand for allotments it was outlined that the strategy aimed for 1000 units, there were sites under development and the possibility of half plots on the larger plots was being explored and that work with Community, Voluntary and Faith sector organisations was encouraged to increase allotment provision.

Resolved – That the update report and progress made be noted.

48 **ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE EMERGENCY AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE PERFORMANCE REPORT**

The Director of Neighbourhood Services introduced the report which provided a performance update in relation to Environment and Climate Emergency and Highways and Infrastructure. As part of the previous item, Members had asked for a breakdown of allotment provision by ward, and this could be included in the performance report going forward.

Members queried the capital spend in highway maintenance, it was reported that most activity in this area takes place during the summer months so although the report showed that there was significant underspend in this area, work that had been undertaken was being processed by finance currently.

Further information was requested on pavement conditions across the borough and future reports would incorporate more information on this subject.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

49 **QUARTER 2 BUDGET REPORT**

The Senior Finance Business Partner introduced the report of the Director of Neighbourhood Services which set out the financial monitoring information for the Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee as at quarter 2 of 2022-23. As at the end of September 2022 (Quarter 2), the forecast outturn position for the Environment, Climate Emergency and Transport Committee was £2.434m adverse against a budget of £63.907m. £0.560m of this relates to an adjustment for the proposed 2022/23 pay award. The report gave a summary of progress on the delivery of 2022-23 savings with £1.555M either delivered or on track to be delivered.

Members noted the energy efficiency capital programme was forecast to underspend and queried whether there was an energy efficiency strategy for each of the Council's assets. It was reported that there was a decarbonisation plan for buildings that were not efficient, and officers recognised that the asset strategy was building focussed and there was more work to be done on changing behaviours around energy efficiency.

Resolved – That

- (1) the forecast revenue position presented at Quarter 2 be noted.**

(2) the progress on delivery of the 2022-23 savings programme at Quarter 2 be noted.

(3) the forecast level of reserves at Quarter 2 be noted.

(4) the forecast capital position presented at Quarter 2 be noted.

50 **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chair introduced the report which provided the Committee with an opportunity to plan and review its work across the municipal year.

In response to a query from a Member, the Director of Neighbourhood Services clarified that there would be risk workshops scheduled in the new year.

The Chair requested that biodiversity training for elected members be added to the work programme and suggested this could go beyond the committee and all elected Members could be invited.

Resolved – That the Environment Climate Emergency and Transport Committee work programme be noted.