

Communities and Neighbourhoods Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on 11 December 2007

Present:

Councillor Flanagan - In the Chair
Councillors Ankers, Barnes, Bracegirdle, Cameron, Carroll, Karney, Longsdon, Loughman, McCulley, N. Murphy and Risby.

Also Present:

Councillor E. Newman – Executive Member for Neighbourhood Services
Councillor Swannick - Executive Member for the Environment
Councillor Pagel, Lead Member on disabled issues

CN/07/40 Minutes

Decision

Subject to the inclusion of Councillor Loughman in the record of attendance, to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 13 November 2007 as a correct record.

CN/07/41 Accessible Neighbourhoods – footpaths and highways

The Chair welcomed Paul Singh and Derek Taylor to the meeting representing older people's groups, and invited them to highlight issues that the Committee could consider as part of their scrutiny of this matter. Mr Taylor asked that the legal position in relation to cyclists cycling on the footway needed to be established, and Mr Patel highlighted concerns in relation to the display of goods outside retail premises and encroaching on to the footway often forcing pedestrians with prams or wheeled walkers onto the highway.

The Committee then received a report and presentation from the officers covering the range of programmed works and specific initiatives within the city to improve and safeguard the access rights of pedestrians.

Councillor Pagel acknowledged the clear programme of action being pursued and the achievements that had been made over the years to improve access for disabled people in the city, but he suggested that the Council and its partners were losing the battle to defend footways from progressive incursion by vehicles parked on the footway, and by commercial incursions beyond the immediate curtilage of retail outlets. In the city centre and many district centres he contended that the proliferation of obstructions on the footway, including street furniture, A-signs, bus shelters etc impeded free pedestrian access to an unacceptable degree, often to an extent where pedestrians were forced on to the highway. He indicated that there was a need to reclaim the streets of Manchester for pedestrians and to this end supported the idea of promoting a By-Law to outlaw pavement parking city-wide.

Other members referred to the importance of maintaining standards in footway surfaces, specifically following disturbances by utility companies. The Head of Engineering Services indicated that random sampling of resurfacing of public utilities was undertaken and where necessary action was taken to require utility companies to return to complete further works, and he undertook to review the way that the management and enforcement of street works was managed. Members also highlighted the problems created by tree root disturbance of the footway in many areas of the city, and about damage caused to kerbs and surfaces by pavement parking. The Head of Engineering Services indicated that a wholesale ban on pavement parking would create insurmountable difficulties for residents in many parts of the city such that it would be unfeasible to enforce, but he suggested that there was a deal more that could be done in terms of brokering more sensible local management of pavement parking and engendering respect for all users of the footway.

Turning to explore the issues raised in relation to cycling on the footway members raised wider issues about the absence of cycle lamps and bells as means of alerting other users to the presence of cyclists, and about the use of disabled 'scooters'. Officers indicated that it remained unlawful to ride cycles on pavements but enforcement was not accorded high priority by Greater Manchester Police, and he outlined the work that was being done in schools to promote safe and responsible cycling. The Committee acknowledged that there were also serious safety issues involved in relation to young people cycling on the city's busy highways, and suggested that the way forward lay in a compromise that respected the needs of all users of the footway in a shared use of the facility. The Director of Neighbourhood Services indicated that he would take this issue up in the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership.

Consideration was given to the City's Rights of Way Improvement Plan and the aspirations to promote greater use of public rights of way for recreation, including public footpaths, canal towpaths and linear parks, and some members questioned the extent to which these ambitions were consistent with the Council's policies in relation to the widespread gating of rear passageways. The Executive Member for Environment indicated that gating proposals were only brought forward in circumstances where local people requested them as an effective means of improving safety and reducing crime, and that most only related to rear shared access paths rather than quality routes, and that whilst there always had to be a balanced consideration between access and security, few proposals actually involved significant disadvantage to pedestrian access.

Decision

1. To thank the community representatives and the officers for their useful contribution to the Committee's consideration of the issue; to recognise the good work that has already been done in terms of promoting access issues but to accept that this needs to be built upon further with the Council taking a much more pro-active approach to enforcement particularly in relation to the proliferation of A-boards and to better consultation with Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Executive in terms of the location of bus shelters

2. To request the officers to report further on the issues raised in relation to cycling on the footway where there are no alternative facilities for cyclists, and the measures that might be taken to safeguard the interests and safety of pedestrians where shared use is proposed.
3. To note the views expressed about pavement parking, to acknowledge the need for pavement parking in locations where there is no feasible alternative subject to this being properly managed so as to ensure safe access for pedestrians with prams/wheelchairs, and to this end to support the promotion of a By-Law that would ensure that the Council and its partners had the powers to effectively control pavement parking in designated areas.
4. To agree to return to scrutinise issues in relation to the reinstatement of highways/footways following disturbance by utility companies at a future time.

CN/07/42 Road Safety – safer routes to schools

Members considered a report and presentation on the integrated range of measures targeted at schools that aim to reduce casualties and congestion and improve accessibility to schools by non-car modes, and evaluating the effectiveness of those measures. The Committee noted that the implementation of the safer routes to schools in 61 schools had secured a reduction in the number of child casualties occurring around those schools by 59% and secured a reduction in car journeys by 7%. These were accepted as being encouraging trends.

Members sought clarification about the criteria involved to secure yellow lines outside schools. The Executive Member for the Environment indicated that there was a budgetary constraint involved in looking at requests for traffic regulations orders for schools but consideration was also given to casualty statistics as a means of directing available resources where the problems were most acute. The Head of Engineering informed the meeting that the potential for casualties was also part of the overall consideration so that the process was pro-active to emerging situations rather than simply reactive to past incidents. It was agreed that the criteria and process involved should be circulated to members so that consideration could be given to this being an agenda item for a future meeting.

Members also questioned whether the creation of more 20mph zones around schools would assist in reducing traffic conflicts. Officers indicated that other measures around schools to slow traffic were probably as effective as 20 mph zones which tended to be used in street situations where the street layout or topography dictated suitability, but these zones were not policed as it was not possible to provide valid speed tests at such low speeds.

Decision

To thank the officers for the report and the measured outcomes of improved safety of children travelling to and from school.

CN/07/43 Waterways

Officers from the Green City team attended the meeting and gave a presentation on the strategic approach to the improvement of Manchester's waterways.

The Committee also heard from a representative of the King William IV Angling Club in relation to their work to improve the quality of local fishing waters and to encourage people of all ages to experience angling.

In a wide ranging discussion about various waterways in the city reference was made to three sections of the Ashton Canal that had recently been drained revealing extensive dumping of materials, and local members were concerned that when works to the locks had been concluded the canal water would be restored without the canal floor being cleared as this would be potentially deleterious to the re-establishment of canal based wildlife. Officers indicated that discussions were on-going with British Waterways to establish their intentions. Members also referred to the Rochdale Canal where on-going investment by local anglers in building up fish stocks was often lost due to pollution emanating from the upper courses of the Canal, and to frustration with British Waterways in terms of them identifying and dealing effectively with those responsible for pollution outbreaks.

Turning to consider the sustained improvements in water quality in rivers, canals and other watercourses evidenced by the increasing species of wildlife being observed members referred to the difficulties involved in establishing responsibility for the maintenance and cleaning of river and canal banks resulting from the multi-ownerships of the land along their courses and members suggested that it was important that reliable information in relation to the riparian and fossian ownerships on the Manchester stretches of waterways was established so that responsibilities for maintenance and clearance were clear and unambiguous. Noting that some work was already done to clean up riverbanks and canal towpaths as part of the 100 Days Campaign a member proposed, and it was agreed, that the officers should be requested to report on the cost implications of mounting a progressive clean-up of land along the course of all the city's watercourses, and for this to be considered when relevant business plans and budgets for 2008/9 were scrutinised.

Decision

1. To welcome the sustained improvements being achieved in the water quality of Manchester's watercourses, to recognise that more needs to be done by the Council and its partners, and, to this end, to invite the Chief Executive of British Waterways to attend our next meeting to explore approaches to the various issues of concern regarding the stewardship of our waterways raised during this meeting.
2. To request the officers to report on the cost implications of mounting a progressive clean-up of land along the course of all the city's watercourses, and for this to be considered when relevant business plans and budgets for 2008/9 are scrutinised.

(Councillor Bracegirdle declared a personal interest as a member of Northenden Riverside Park)

CN/07/44 Business Plans

Decision

To agree that the following business plans should be considered by the Committee –

Library and Information Service
Planning and Building Control
Transport Services (including Engineering)
Environmental Services
Housing Services

CN/07/45 Regional Centre Transport Strategy

The Committee considered a report of the Head of Transport.

In discussing the report members highlighted that (a) the transport problems in the city centre were a manifestation of the success of the city centre and of the Council's policies over the past decade to ensure that it remained vibrant and vital with world class conference and entertainment facilities (b) bus networks within Wythenshawe would need to improve if the tram was to be the primary transport mode to the city centre, and (c) the success of the Strategy depended in large part on the Authority being able to exercise greater direct control over bus operators.

Responding to these issues the Head of Transport indicated that the further development of the regional centre over the next 10-15 years and the further economic advances and job creation associated with this demanded a significantly improved transport infrastructure; work was already underway to plan for the overhaul of local bus services in Wythenshawe to secure maximum connectivity with the tram as the means of accessing the regional centre, and that the Local Transport Bill would provide the base for a new relationship with bus operators, by agreement if possible, but through quality contracts if necessary.

Decision

1. To note the consultation report on the Regional Centre Transport Strategy, prepared by Greater Manchester Passenger Transport Authority/Executive in close consultation with the City Council, appended to the report submitted.
2. To determine not to make any input into the consultation exercise on the report.
3. To note that the final version of the Regional Centre Transport Strategy will be finalised and launched in Spring 2008 subject to approval by the Executive.
4. To request an annual update on delivery of the priorities set out in the Regional Centre Transport Strategy.