

# **Communities and Neighbourhoods Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

## **Minutes of the meeting held on 2 February 2010**

### **Present:**

Councillor Flanagan - In the Chair  
Councillors Ankers, Barnes, Bracegirdle, Curley, Helsby, Isherwood, Karney, Loughman, McCulley, E. Newman, O'Connor, Rahman and Lianne Williams

Councillor Andrews, Executive Member for Neighbourhood Services  
Councillor Cowell, Executive Member for Environment  
Councillor Priest, Executive Member for Finance  
Jakub Malaj, Highways Agency

### **Apologies:**

Councillors Chohan and Ryan

## **CN/10/04            Urgent Business**

The reports on the Communal and District Heating Charge and Drainage were submitted as urgent business

### **Decision:**

To agree to the Communal Heating Charge and Drainage reports being submitted as urgent business.

## **CN/10/05            Minutes**

### **Decision:**

To approve the minutes of the meeting on 5 January 2010.

## **CN/10/06            Highways Agency Maintenance**

The Committee welcomed Mr Jakub Malaj from the Highways Agency to answer questions from members about how land bordering highways was maintained, with particular reference to examples in Northenden and around Princess Parkway. Mr Malaj informed members that these specific areas had been cleaned on 1 February 2010. Members were provided with photographs before and after they were cleaned.

Members outlined their concerns for each of the two areas. Littering was highlighted as a serious problem in both areas. They were concerned that there was no specific cleaning schedule in place and that the area was cleaned only when repeated requested were made.

Mr Malaj told the Committee that the Highways Agency cleaned all areas twice a year as a matter of course, and hotspots were cleaned four times a year. They also responded to requests to clean specific areas, aiming for completion within 28 days of the initial report. They had also carried out an extensive publicity campaign to encourage people to put their litter in the bin. He added that the areas identified by the Committee had now been classed as a hotspot and systematic cleaning would be carried out four times a year.

A member asked whether there was anything that could be done to make motorways more attractive, particularly in Northenden, where they dominated the area. Mr Malaj said it was not easy to make changes to their appearance because such measures often masked structural problems and health and safety was paramount.

The Committee felt that the 28 day target to respond to cleaning requests was much too long, particularly for residential areas. Mr Malaj said this was a target, and in practice the areas were usually cleaned much more quickly. The length of time it took to complete requests also depended on whether the Agency was required to close roads as part of the cleaning process.

Members felt that the Highways Agency should consult with local communities on their maintenance schedule to identify hotspots as a matter of course, particularly in residential areas. A member suggested that members would be able to identify hotspots via ward coordination. Mr Malaj informed the Committee that funds were always an issue regarding maintenance.

Members were also concerned with the problem of identifying who owned sections of land and who was responsible for maintenance. They thought that there should be a clear way of identifying who was responsible for each area, and in areas where it was not clear who was responsible, the Agency and the Council should assume joint responsibility. The Committee asked how long land that had been handed over to the Agency for development that remained undeveloped was the responsibility of the Agency before being handed back to the Council. The representative from the Agency informed members that he would clarify this with Highways Agency officers and report back to the Committee.

The Committee discussed communications between the Council and the Highways Agency. Members asked if they could be provided with contact details of a specific named person within the Highways Agency to whom they could refer issues. Mr Malaj agreed to this, but urged members to always call the Highways Agency Information Line (HAIL) first, because calls were always logged with a reference number to enable them to track their request. He added that members could escalate specific queries to him where they felt that their request had not been resolved.

**Decision:**

1. To ask the Highways Agency to work with the Council to identify a means of communication for members to specify requests for maintenance and report back to the Committee in six months time.

2. To request that the Committee's Support Officer circulate to all members of the Committee, the contact details for the Highways Agency Information Line and a named individual within the Highways Agency where they can escalate specific issues which are not resolved through the initial route.

## **CN/10/07 Information and Overview Report**

A report of the City Solicitor was submitted providing information about the Committee's work programme and relevant issues affecting the Committee's remit. Members were asked to agree the work programme and note the responses to the Committee's previous recommendations.

### **Decision:**

1. To note the report.
2. To agree the work programme.

## **CN/10/08 Accommodation Issues for Gypsy Traveller Community**

This item was withdrawn from the agenda.

## **CN/10/09 Winter Services Update**

The Committee received an oral report from the Chair of the Committee on the progress with the road gritting issues identified at the previous meeting. It was agreed to set up a subgroup with the following terms of reference:

- To review the existing winter services and road gritting arrangements in place;
- To look at the location and availability to grit bins, including information for residents on how to access and use grit bins, availability of grit and the security measures in place to prevent theft of grit for inappropriate use;
- To review the impact of severe weather conditions on schools, emergency services, transport, local economy and vulnerable people and whether there was anything the Council and partners could do to improve the contingency arrangements for occurrences of severe weather conditions in the future.
- Look at how the Council provides information for residents on how to access council services in severe weather.

Members made the following suggestions of addition to the terms of reference of the subgroup:

- To look at the feasibility of arranging for the clearing of ice and snow to be carried out as community services.

- To look at how communications can be improved, including the dissemination of legal advice regarding responsibility for clearing snow and ice.
- To look at the most effective way of stockpiling grit and the best places to keep grit bins.
- To look at mobilising the council workforce more efficiently in response to future severe weather.

The Strategic Director of Neighbourhood Services updated the Committee on the continuing efforts to recover from the damage caused by the adverse weather conditions. A rapid response team had been set up with the aspiration to repair all new potholes caused by the adverse weather conditions by the end of March. The Executive Member for Environment said that some money had been identified from the reserves that would be used to fund the repairs.

The Highway Maintenance & Improvement Manager said that pothole inspections on roads normally took place every six months and one third of the city would have been inspected already as a matter of course. The intention was to have an accelerated programme, which would include additional inspections being carried out over weekends. The Executive Member for Environment also urged anyone to contact Environment on Call if they knew of any specific problems, caused by the weather conditions in order to make sure that everything was reported.

A member asked if the programme would affect any repair and maintenance work that had already been planned as part of the Capital Programme. The Highway Maintenance and Improvement Manager replied that planned work would not be affected.

**Decision:**

1. To set up a subgroup to review the lessons learned from the severe weather conditions in December 2009 and January 2010, with a view to making the recommendations as to how the Council can prepare for extreme weather conditions in the future.
2. To appoint Councillors Ankers, Curley, Flanagan, Karney, E. Newman and O'Connor to the subgroup
3. To agree that the interim findings of the first meeting of the subgroup to report back to the March meeting of the Committee.

**CN/10/10            Communal Heating Charge**

The Committee considered a report of the Director of Housing and the City Treasurer on the proposals for the Communal and District Heating Charges for 2010 - 2011. The report sought approval from the Executive to implement the annual change to the price of energy supplied to tenants and residents with shared or communal heating systems. Members of the Committee were invited to comment on the proposed changes before the Executive considered them on 10 February 2010.

The Head of Housing Investment informed members that the Council was responsible for setting the weekly heating charge for many social housing tenants where there was a communal heating system. The Council currently negotiated gas prices for approximately 12 months. He added that the Council had been able to purchase gas at a reduced price this year and the weekly heating charge for tenants across the city could be reduced accordingly. Members were asked to agree an average decrease in the weekly heating charge across communal heating schemes of 27.7%.

The Committee welcomed the proposed reduction in the weekly heating charge. They were particularly pleased that the reduction had been passed on to tenants, especially when it was forecast that gas and electricity prices would rise this year for general households.

Some members were concerned at the fluctuation of gas prices over the previous two years, referring to the previous year where the weekly heating charge had increased for all tenants by a flat rate of 31%. Members asked whether there was any scope for negotiating the gas charges over a longer period of time in order to minimise the impact for residents of potential increases in the weekly heating charge. The Executive Member for Finance and Human Resources said that the current practice was to negotiate the price of gas over a twelve-month period. If the gas price had been negotiated over a longer period, gas suppliers would have to speculate the potential for significant increase in the future and factor this into the price paid for gas by the Council. This approach was unlikely to benefit tenants in the long term, as the weekly heating charge would also increase.

Members asked whether there were any incentives offered to tenants with communal heating to economise. They were particularly concerned that some tenants were paying for more gas and electricity than they used. The Head of Housing Investment informed members that the cost of installing individual heat meters was approximately £700 per home. He added that the cost of providing individual boilers was approximately £2000 per home. The Council was currently seeking external funding to install heat meters and pre payment meters within each home to enable tenants to monitor individual use.

**Decision:**

To endorse the recommendation to the Executive to agree the reduction to the weekly heating charge to tenants with shared or communal heating systems.

**CN/10/11                      Summary of Consultation Responses to the Local  
Development Framework Core Strategy Proposed  
Option**

The Committee received a report of the Head of Planning, which outlined an initial analysis of the responses from the consultation for the Local Development Framework Core Strategy proposed options. He explained that as the consultation had only finished in January, it was too early to provide a full analysis of all responses. A total of 800 separate responses had been received from 97 individuals.

Members expressed concern over the low numbers of respondents, and asked if many members had responded. The Head of Planning said that some members had responded and their concerns had been addressed. The Executive Member for Environment emphasised that the document was groundbreaking on energy planning and if they had got it wrong there would have been thousands of responses.

The Committee was asked about the timescale for implementing the LDF. The Head of Planning said that the full analysis would be published and that they estimated implementation would begin in 2011.

**Decision:**

To note the report.

## **CN/10/12 Home Ownership Target Update**

The Committee received a report from the Director of Housing, which provided an update on whether and how the Local Area Agreement (LAA) target for home ownership should take account of the economic downturn in the long term. The original target had been to achieve an owner-occupier figure of 60% Manchester by 2015, with an interim target of 50% by 2011. The Head of Housing explained that the 60% had been an aspirational target, set during a period of economic growth, and that this target remained.

The Government Office of the North West (GONW) had asked the Council to revise its LAA2 target for net additions to stock. The new target was 4575 over three years (2008 - 11), reduced from 10500 the same period. The revised target had been submitted, and they were waiting for ministerial approval.

Members felt that the emphasis on the target for home ownership had changed from it being achievable to aspirational and that doing so had undermined the target. The Head of Housing said that the home ownership target was part of the Community Strategy, and emphasised that home ownership was something that people aspired to.

A member said that the Council should aspire to reflect the needs of the community. Members stressed that housing needs across the city were different, with more social housing needed in the south of the city, and more private housing needed in the north. A member was also concerned with the problem of people being unable to afford mortgages and stressed the need for support.

Members also pointed out the problem of private estates having been built with the expectation of the properties being occupied by their owners, only for the properties to have been left empty or bought by private landlords to rent out. The Committee asked what methods were used to measure levels of home ownership and rates of landlords buying to let. The Chair also asked how this would be monitored in the future. The Head of Housing said that he would look into the monitoring process and report back to a future meeting of the Committee.

**Decision:**

To request that the Director of Housing clarify how home ownership is measured, with reference to how the Council identifies whether occupiers own their own homes, and how they have measured the changes in home ownership since Home Ownership Target was set.

**CN/10/13            Drainage**

A report of the Head of Highways Services was submitted, which provided the Committee with an overview of the current highway drainage maintenance processes. It also outlined the way that the highway network was managed when restrictions were imposed on it as a result of planned or emergency works, and the additional drainage responsibilities that had been proposed in the Draft Flood and Water Management Bill.

Members were not happy with the system as it currently worked. In particular, they felt that the repair rate of 50% on the number of problems reported was too low, and the change of the repair cycle from 14 months to 21 months was a marked deterioration in service.

The Executive Member for Environment agreed with these criticisms and noted that they were all in the report. He explained that he was negotiating with the Treasury to determine the level of funding to be allocated to the Highways department, and were stating their need strongly. If the capital were secured, the department would underpin the funds with a proper plan to improve the drainage repair system. The outcome of these negotiations was not yet known.

A member asked about the responsibility that developers had to fix any damage they caused to the drains. He had been informed that there was no facility to do this. The Head of Highways Services explained that as long as contractors use trucks that weighed less than 40 tonnes, the roads should not be damaged. Highways Services checked the roads before and after developments and if the developer had broken the rules, the department could force them to rectify the problem.

A member asked whether priority was given to areas that affected pedestrians more, such as roads with pavements. The Head of Highways Services answered that they were, and said the problem was with assessing what can be done in order to carry out the work rather than identifying the areas.

The Chair summarised that the service being provided was inadequate, particularly regarding the percentage of reported problems that had been dealt with. He also felt that the situation regarding the funding of drainage repairs needed urgent clarification and requested that the Head of Highway Services report this back to the March meeting of the Committee.

**Decision:**

To request that the Head of Highway Services clarify the funding position for drainage repairs to the March meeting of the Committee.

## **CN/10/14 Street Lighting Private Finance Initiative (PFI)**

A report was submitted of the Head of Highways Services, which provided the Committee members with an update on the Street Lighting PFI contract with Amey. The Initial Investment Capital Programme had been completed and, overall, the quality of lighting and the standard of maintenance had improved.

Members agreed that across the city lighting had improved, but that there were still some isolated problems. In some areas where there were a lot of trees the lights had been positioned so that the foliage prevented full illumination. The Street Lighting PFI Contract Manager said that Amey would cut back trees if asked. Members were not entirely happy that with this solution, and preferred that one be found that minimised damage to the trees.

There were also a number of areas where lamps had only been positioned on one side of the street. The overall light levels met the standards set in the PFI contract, but one side of the street was left in darkness. The terms of the contract also allowed Amey to only replace a percentage of the bulbs in streetlamps, rather than all of them, as long as the overall light level met the standard. This meant that certain spots were left in darkness. This could be a particular problem for partially sighted people, who often found navigating using street lamps easier than in daylight, and removing particular bulbs made this more difficult.

The Head of Highways agreed that because the PFI contract was written a certain way, Amey were able to interpret the conditions of the contract to a certain extent. They were still fulfilling the contract, but the Council could not ask them to address individual problems. Amey would carry out the work at an additional cost, but that funds for this purpose were limited. He also confirmed that any savings were made by Amey, although the Council saved on energy costs.

The Executive Member for Environment noted the section of the report regarding innovation and pointed out that such measures would only be implemented through carefully planned and assessed pilot schemes.

Members asked how the lighting in private estates fits into the PFI. The Head of Highway Services explained that for many private estates, the Council did not have responsibility for lighting, but that the Council worked with the developer to take over management of the lights when they are ready.

A member explained that there was a scheme in place in some parks in Manchester in which a company provided lighting at a lower cost than the lighting provided by Amey. The Executive Member for Environment said that he would look into the feasibility of working with this company to provide additional street lighting where it was needed.

The Chair said that overall the deal was a good one, and the report reflected that. The problems raised by members were isolated, but important and the Committee would continue to monitor them.

**Decision:**

To request that the Executive Member for Environment look into the feasibility of using an alternative company to provide additional lighting in isolated areas.