

Communities and Neighbourhoods Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of the meeting held on 8 January 2008

Present:

Councillor Flanagan - In the Chair
Councillors Ali, Ankers, Barnes, Bracegirdle, Cameron, Hall, Helsby, Lewis, Longsdon, Loughman, McCulley, N. Murphy, Risby and Royle.

Also Present:

Councillor E. Newman – Executive Member for Neighbourhood Services
Councillor Swannick - Executive Member for the Environment
Councillor Kane – Executive Member for Leisure
Councillor S. Newman – Executive Member for Children's Services
Councillor Amesbury – Assistant Executive Member for Leisure
Councillor Cowell – Assistant Executive Member for the Environment

CN/08/1 Minutes

Decision

To approve the minutes of the meeting held on 11 December 2007 as a correct record.

CN/08/2 Bereavement Services Improvement Project

A report of the Strategic Director of Neighbourhood Services was submitted informing members of progress made against the Bereavement Services Improvement Project and specifically providing information in relation to vandalism with respect to grave memorials, particularly that of a racist or homophobic nature. The report outlined the benefits accruing from the transfer of cemetery maintenance from an external contractor to an in-house team and the stepped improvements being achieved in the visual environment in each cemetery. Improvements were also being made in several aspects of services to customers, including retaining a physical presence in cemeteries during the early evenings in summer months; increased flexibility in relation to burial times, and improved signage, all of which have been well received by visitors. The Committee was advised that no incidents of racial or homophobic vandalism to grave memorials had been reported since 2003.

Reference was made to the action being taken to address drainage problems at Blackley Cemetery and officers agreed to investigate a suggestion by member that the introduction of mesh matting between graves could address many of the difficulties encountered by people visiting graves. Members welcomed the physical improvements made at Southern Cemetery, especially the clearance of shrubbery which provided clearer sight lines and improved personal security, but urged that speed signs were introduced to counter the speed of vehicles within the cemetery, and that more resources were needed to restore fallen grave memorials. Officers

reported that speed signs would be in place shortly and that a report would be brought back to the Committee identifying the scale of the problem in relation to fallen memorials and the likely timetable for completing restoration works with existing resources. The Chair indicated that whilst the Committee accepted that the responsibility for the maintenance of grave memorials rested with the grave owners, it also recognised that many individuals would experience difficulty in funding the costs for the restoration of memorials estimated at £35, and the Executive Member agreed to look further at the issue and report back to a future meeting.

Members also referred to the Manchester Funeral Plan established in the mid 80's which offered a basic funeral at a pre-tendered price, and enquired whether this was still available. It was agreed that the Executive member and officers would review what was offered under the Manchester Funeral Plan and what arrangements were currently in place to assist people with limited means, and would report back to the May meeting of the Committee.

Members were also concerned about the 50-year lease arrangement for graves and what happened at the end of the lease period, and officers were asked to report further on this point.

Decision

1. To thank the officers for their report and presentation, to recognise the huge improvements being made to the visual amenity of the Council cemeteries and the important contribution that this is making to personal security considerations for visitors, and to give encouragement to the officers to continue this work.
2. To request the officers to report further in relation to –
 - a suggestion that the introduction of mesh matting between graves at Blackley Cemetery could address many of the difficulties encountered by people visiting graves due to current drainage problems;
 - the scale of the problem in relation to fallen memorials at Southern Cemetery and the likely timetable for completing restoration works with existing resources;
 - the position in relation to the 50-year lease of graves;
 - the difficulty that many people may experience in funding the costs for the restoration of grave memorials estimated at £35, and
 - the service previously offered under the Manchester Funeral Plan

CN/08/4 Plastic Bags Pilot – Chorlton-cum-Hardy

The Committee received a report in relation to the pilot in Chorlton by Sustainable Chorlton where a number of retailers were issuing re-usable bags, or biodegradable bags, with 15 of 40-targeted shops having so far signed the pledge to ban plastic bags. A number of jute bags and customised paper bags were in circulation in the area, with a school in Didsbury designing a bag, and some local shops had their own reusable bags, which were being sold to shoppers. The report also outlined action in response to the terms of the Motion adopted by the City Council on 5 December

2007, to capitalize on public interest in alternatives to plastic bags during the 100 Days campaign, highlighting that an estimated 85 million plastic bags are issued to Manchester residents every year.

The report also highlighted the national perspective that eighty towns and villages had introduced or were considering a ban on plastic bags and that all the 33 London Councils were promoting a private bill in Parliament [the London Local Authorities (Shopping Bags) Bill] to ban the supply of certain shopping bags (with a few exemptions) by retailers in the London Boroughs.

Councillor Sheila Newman expressed some concern that more local retailers had not agreed to participate in the pilot, though she still believed that the pilot was delivering a powerful message to the people who shopped in Chorlton and that more could be achieved by education and promotion than by a ban on plastic bags, and particularly through the education of young people who had been directly involved in aspects of the pilot.

Helen Star-Keddle of Sustainable Chorlton then addressed the Committee in terms of the various actions that had been undertaken as part of the pilot. She indicated that some of the shopkeepers not participating in the pilot supported the aims of the pilot but were constrained by the economic cost of providing alternatives (10p) to plastic bags (1p).

Members suggested that the provision of a Manchester bag as an alternative to plastic could provide the best means of connecting with the public's consciousness, and that this was best promoted as a key element of the 100 days campaign. Members recognised the importance of the pilot in terms of raising the awareness of shoppers and retailers to the environmental impacts of the use of plastic bags, the provision and promotion of alternatives was important but initially the principle of re-use was equally important as an interim measure. Member accepted the contention that education and persuasion achieved more than an outright ban

The Executive Member for the Environment welcomed the important lessons that had already been learned from the pilot in Chorlton, he indicated that he had written to congratulate those traders that were already participating, and also to those who were not, encouraging them to support the initiative.

Decision

1. To support the Chorlton pilot and to congratulate Sustainable Chorlton on what has already been achieved.
2. To recognise the importance of promoting strong messages to young people and of building on the pilot as part of the 100 Days Campaign.
3. To request the officers to report on actions in response to all aspects of the Motion adopted by the Council on 5 December 2007; to track the parliamentary progress of the London Bill, and to advise the Committee of any emerging issues.

CN/08/5 Business Plans

The Committee considered the draft 2008/9 Business Plans in respect of –

Library and Information Services

Members asked about progress in relation to the national procurement scheme and officers reported that consideration was currently being given to feasibility reports on the establishment of a Greater Manchester scheme. Interest was also expressed in terms of the proposal to merge Records and the Greater Manchester County Records Office. Officers indicated that whilst still at feasibility stage, the concept here was that of a one stop shop bringing together in one place all the records that were regularly accessed by the public and creating a facility that would also be a visitor feature for the city.

Planning and Building Control

Reference was made to Section 106 agreements with developers and a member enquired if there were any proposals that would provide greater involvement for local members in determining local priorities. The Executive Member for the Environment reported that a comprehensive report had recently been made to the Resources and Governance Overview and Scrutiny Committee that tracked each agreement and identified the outcomes that had been achieved. Officers reminded members that the scope of works that could be done under such agreements was subject to specific constraints and suggested that the best way that local members could influence the process was in terms of their involvement in the determination of Ward Plan priorities.

Members referred to the enforcement process and invited the Head of Planning to comment on the effectiveness of the process and the adequacy of resources. He responded by reminding members that the process itself was a protected one but that the dedicated team now established had a stronger focus than ever before in terms of pursuing cases to completion but he acknowledged that there was a need to refine the process by which local members were kept in the loop in terms of progress being made on individual enforcement cases.

Members also referred to the importance of a close interface between Planning and the Licensing Unit in relation to the operating hours of premises. The Head of Planning reminded the Committee that the two processes were operating under quite distinct legislative requirements but, that apart, there was a significant level of joined up and collaborative working between the two services to find the best solutions to problems within the legislative requirements that both services had to observe.

A member expressed concern that there was nothing proactive within the Business Plan in relation to climate change. The Head of Planning indicated that the Service's response to climate change issues were mainstreamed within the work profile of the service rather than being considered as an add-on, and that the service saw itself as a pacesetter in terms of its work with developers to promote sustainable developments. The Executive Member for the Environment indicated that the Manchester Development Guide and Design Standards were both seen as powerful

tools to this end, with developers taking examples of good practice away to use on developments in other areas.

Transport Services (Engineering)

Responding to issues regarding accident trip claims, the Head of Engineering reported that previous investment in footway maintenance was now being reflected in reduced numbers of claims. Reference was made to traffic congestion around Crown Square often involving Prison vehicles being stacked up prior to entering the court complex. Officers indicated that these problems had been investigated and action taken to resolve the problem, but the matter would be revisited.

Reference was also made to the need for the Plan to have a greater focus on the encouragement of cycling as an alternative to vehicle journeys. Officers indicated that this would be an integral outcome of the Council's TIF bid by reducing the volume of vehicles on the highway and freeing space for use by cyclists

Environmental Services

A member suggested that the Plan needed to be clearer about the Council's role in encouraging commercial participation in recycling initiatives alongside the strong emphasis already given to the promotion of domestic recycling. Member also encouraged the officers to use whatever powers existed to persuade householders not to keep wheeled bins outside the front of their property.

Officers also responded to requests for information about complaints regarding rat infestation

Housing Services

Decision

To note the Business Plans at this stage subject to the foregoing comments.

CN/08/6 Information and Overview Report

The Chair informed the Committee that he had requested that the Manchester Airport Green Plan was circulated to members in advance of consideration of an item at the February meeting to allow members sufficient opportunity to identify issues that they wished to raise with officers. He also reported that he had added an item to the agenda for the March meeting in relation to the Council's emergency plan and the manner in which elected members were involved in that plan.

Decision

To note the report and the action taken by the Chair.