

SCRUTINY BOARD (ENVIRONMENT, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES)

THURSDAY, 21ST MARCH, 2024

PRESENT: Councillor S Golton in the Chair

Councillors P Stables, B Anderson,
J Akhtar, P Grahame, A Maloney,
A McCluskey, A Rontree, S Seary, A Khan,
N Harrington and M France-Mir

92 Appeals Against Refusal of Inspection of Documents

There were no appeals against refusal of inspection documents.

93 Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

There were no exempt items.

94 Late Items

There were no late items.

95 Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

96 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

Apologies were received from Cllr A Hannan and Cllr J Tudor. Cllr M France-Mir attended as a substitute for Cllr A Hannan.

The Scrutiny Board also noted apologies from Liz Jarmin (Head of Locality Partnerships) and Cllr M Harland in respect of item 7, and Cllr M Rafique in respect of item 8.

97 Minutes - 22 February 2024

RESOLVED: The minutes of the meeting that took place on 22 February 2024 were approved.

98 Matters Arising

Referring to several requests detailed in minute 88 the Chair noted that information relating to void properties, damp and mould, and repairs had been circulated to members.

99 Community Committee Review

Draft minutes to be approved at the meeting
to be held on 20 June 2024

Those in attendance for this item were:

- **James Rogers** (Director Communities, Housing & Environment)
- **Paul Money** (Chief Officer Safer, Stronger Communities)
- **Rachel Marshall** (Localities Programme Manager)

Paul Money introduced this item, noting that Cllr Harland had asked him to thank members for their engagement with this review.

Paul provided an overview of the key themes of the review and the proposed timeline for progressing various aspects of the associated programme of work. He noted that progress would be informed by the outcome of work carried out by three task and finish groups, involving both officers and elected members.

The Scrutiny Board was updated about the outcome of three member workshops that took place during 2023/24. Those workshops focused on Community Committee Champions, Delegated Budgets and Community Engagement and Empowerment. Members were informed that a further recent workshop addressed delegated functions. The outcomes from that session are still being analysed.

The Board noted that the review is moving into a secondary phase focused on the implementation of initial recommendations. However, wider work will be ongoing through 2024 and 2025.

Members welcomed the debate about the role of community committee champions. It was recommended that consideration is given to introducing both a new induction programme for champions and an enhanced training offer. Paul Money and Rachel Marshall confirmed that these issues are being explored.

Members advocated the use of technological solutions to enable meetings to be live streamed from community settings. Paul confirmed this is being explored with colleagues from IDS.

Community engagement was identified as a priority and a challenge for some community committees. The Scrutiny Board considered how meetings are advertised and how residents can be encouraged to attend. It was noted that the perceived formality of meetings, and limited opportunities for the public to interact with Board members on matters of interest, can be a barrier to public attendance.

The Scrutiny Board recognised the diversity of communities represented by community committees and agreed that taking 'one size fits all' approach would not be appropriate. However, members proposed that the sharing of best practice could strengthen local arrangements. Paul confirmed that members will be consulted on what works well in their areas and what might therefore be transferable good practice.

Members queried whether formal matters such as the approval of grant funding could be streamlined to allow more time within meetings for the discussion of issues identified as priorities by residents. Rachel noted that some committees have 'pre meetings' to consider issues relating to financial approvals so as to be more efficient in public meetings.

Clarity was sought as to whether corporate communication resources could be used to support enhanced publicity around community committee meetings.

The engagement of elected members to date was welcomed. Officers were asked how the lived experience of residents could also be captured to ensure community committees are designed to effectively respond to local priorities.

Members were also assured that officers from the communities' team work with lots of people who are very active in their communities, despite them not necessarily attending community committee meetings.

The Scrutiny Board advocated more effective interaction between community committees and the third sector, particularly where community anchors are in place.

It was noted that an introduction to the community anchors network would be useful for new members. Rachell suggested that this could be considered at a future Community Committee Chairs Forum with a view to scheduling introductions for members.

Members explored the challenge of engaging with 'hard to reach' communities including those who are new to the city and/or have English as a second language.

Members sought clarity about the offer for council officers in relation to ABCD training. Rachel confirmed that she is exploring the current offer for services to identify where there may be gaps in the provision.

11.04 Cllr Akhtar left the meeting

RESOLVED:

Members noted the report and

- a) Supported the review of Community Committees and their constitutional role in helping to shape and influence place.
- b) Provided their endorsement of the recommendations and accompanying work programme, as set out in appendix 1.
- c) Requested that further updates are provided in 2024/25 in line with proposed timelines in appendix 2.

100 Parks & Green Spaces Strategy - Annual Update

Those in attendance for this item:

- **James Rogers** (Director Communities, Housing & Environment)
- **Polly Cook** (Chief Officer, Climate, Energy & Green Spaces)
- **Emma Trickett** (Parks Technical Manager)

Emma Trickett introduced the item, noting that the update is the second since the original publication of the Parks and Green Spaces Strategy, which was agreed by Executive Board in December 2021.

Emma advised members that the accompanying report covered progress towards the goals set out in Parks and Green Spaces Strategy during 2023. Emma highlighted significant investment in play equipment over the year and asked members to note the new actions detailed at 3.1 of the report.

Members were advised that new actions within the strategy include:

- delivering new habitats through Biodiversity Net Gain funding
- embedding new guidance about access to parks and greenspaces for women and girls
- switching to electric vehicles and machinery where practicable.
- developing and implementing a Green Spaces Play Strategy

The Scrutiny Board requested early engagement in the development of the Green Spaces Play Strategy and asked that this be reflected in the 2024/25 work programme.

It was noted that a masterplan is being created for Tropical World and as such previously agreed actions in relation to the site are not currently being progressed.

It was also confirmed that several completed actions – such as supporting Leeds 2023 – will be removed from future version of the strategy.

Members sought clarity about action being taken to address the challenges of the “shrinking and aging” workforce. In response Polly Cook informed members that the service is looking to reintroduce an apprenticeship programme and is considering opportunities to use tools such as flexible retirement to ease transitions and enable knowledge and skills to be shared.

Further to member queries, Polly informed the Scrutiny Board that five new officers have been recruited within forestry and some proactive tree management will be part of their role.

Concern was raised about the choice of accessible play equipment available to members looking to invest in new play equipment. Polly noted the benefits of purchasing equipment through a single supplier – e.g., availability of spare

parts – but confirmed that equipment can be sourced from other suppliers if specific options are limited.

Concern was raised about the environmental impact of artificial pitches. It was noted that many community pitches in Leeds are waterlogged during the winter and matches are often cancelled as a result. There is therefore a need to balance the means to enable people to engage with physical activity all year round with the potential adverse environmental impacts of such surfaces due to the microplastics contained within the rubber crumb.

The Scrutiny Board will be updated via Polly Cook about ongoing correspondence between the Council and Sports England with regards to this matter.

Polly confirmed the department would not install 3G pitches due to the cost. However, it is anticipated that several 3G pitches will be installed in the city through planning agreements.

Emma Trickett confirmed that regional recommendations regarding the safety of women and girls are informing the design and management of greenspaces. It was further confirmed that the Leeds Quality Parks standard takes into account enhanced national criteria in this area and staff are being trained accordingly.

Emma further confirmed that following previous recommendations from Scrutiny Members guidance regarding the safety of women and girls has been shared with parish councils.

The Scrutiny Board considered the way in which the service manages its relationship with volunteers such as the 'friends of' and 'in bloom' groups, and those keen to get involved in specific activities such as tree planting. The Board was informed that the Parks and Countryside service currently works with over 100 Friends groups, 30 in bloom groups and 600 sports clubs – this provides a vital additional resource for the service given increasing financial pressures.

The Scrutiny Board considered how more volunteers can be encouraged to help support their community greenspaces. Polly informed members that work is ongoing to assess whether there is a robust business case for extending the ranger team to attract more volunteer hours.

Concern was expressed about the financial sustainability of the service and the changing landscape for S106 and CIL payments.

Polly Cook acknowledged the significant financial challenge facing the service. She confirmed that the team continues to seek new opportunities for income generation such as secondary sales through shops and kiosks. The service continues to develop its commercial structures and to explore new funding streams such as Biodiversity Net Gain funding. The new playground

at the Arium was cited as an example of investment to improve the visitor experience with a view to increasing income.

It was also noted that damage caused through anti-social behaviour can not always be addressed due to the financial pressure on service.

Members sought and received reassurance that income raised through investment in destination attractions can support the development of community greenspaces across the city.

The Chair questioned whether there are further routes through which councillors, as convenors of community activity, can support the process of auditing parks. Emma Trickett noted that since the last Scrutiny Board meeting the audit process has been accelerated and a volunteer recruited to support that process. However, it was noted that the service would continue to welcome any introductions via elected members to other volunteers who could assist with progressing the accessibility audits.

A member welcomed the use of British Sign Language Boards in Meanwood Valley park to improve inclusivity. Officers confirmed that they are currently exploring the city's broader approach to BSL Boards in greenspaces.

A member of the Board queried whether the Council received any income from hosting the WOW Barn during Leeds 2023. This will be confirmed by Polly Cook outside of the meeting.

The varying status of leases for individual bowling clubs was noted.

Members considered whether infrastructure such as band stands could be reflected in a 'plan on a page' for a park with a view to enabling more events to take place in local greenspaces.

The Scrutiny Board discussed growing demand for allotment provision in some areas of the city. The Chair noted that he is also the vice president of the Leeds Allotment Federation. Responding to a colleague on the Board, he advised that where a parish council is in place, it is the responsibility of the parish council to deliver allotment provision, rather than the city council.

Polly confirmed that that support would be considered if local people wish to establish community food growing in parks.

RESOLVED:

- a) Members considered progress so far with delivering the goals and actions set out in the Leeds Parks and Green Spaces Strategy.
- b) Scrutiny endorsed the proposed changes to the actions set out in the Strategy as outlined in section 3.1 of the accompanying report.

- c) Members requested early engagement in the development of the Green Spaces Play Strategy and asked that this is reflected in the draft 2024/25 work programme.

101 End of Year Statement

The Chair noted that at the end of each municipal year, every Scrutiny Board publishes an end of year summary. The statements are published on the Council's website and feed into the Annual Report on Scrutiny, which is considered at July's Council meeting.

RESOLVED: Members noted the draft summary and approved its publication.

102 Work Schedule

RESOLVED: Members noted the draft 2024/25 work programme included at appendix 1 and agreed to advise the Principal Scrutiny Advisor of any further requests.

103 Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next public meeting of the Scrutiny Board will take place on **20 June 2024 at 10.30am**. There will be a pre-meeting for all board members at **10.00am**.