

SCRUTINY BOARD (ENVIRONMENT, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES)

WEDNESDAY, 23RD OCTOBER, 2024

PRESENT: Councillor S Golton in the Chair

Councillors A Maloney, A Hannan,
A McCluskey, N Harrington, S Ali,
L Cunningham, L Farley, K Haigh,
Z Hussain, C Anderson and R Jones

44 Appeals Against Refusal of Inspection of Documents

There were no appeals against refusal of inspection of documents.

45 Exempt Information - Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

There were no items excluded from the public domain.

46 Late Items

There were no late items.

47 Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of pecuniary interests.

However, Cllrs Cunningham and McCluskey asked that the following non-pecuniary interests be noted:

- Cllr Lou Cunningham is a member of Friends of Armley and Gotts Park.
- Cllr Adrian McCluskey is a member of Friends of Wortley Rec and Friends of Western Flatts Cliff Park

48 Apologies for Absence and Notification of Substitutes

Apologies were received from the following Scrutiny Board members:

- Cllr Barry Anderson – Cllr Caroline Anderson attended as a substitute.
- Cllr Mohammed Iqbal – Cllr Raymond Jones attended as a substitute.

49 Minutes - 19 September 2024

RESOLVED: The minutes of the meeting that took place on 19 September 2024 were agreed as a correct record.

There were no matters arising.

Draft minutes to be approved at the meeting
to be held on Friday, 6th December, 2024

50 Community Committee Review Update

Those in attendance for this item were:

- Cllr Mary Harland (Executive Member)
- James Rogers (Director, Communities, Housing & Environment)
- Paul Money (Chief Officer, Safer, Stronger Communities)
- Liz Jarmin (Head of Locality Partnerships)

The Scrutiny Board was reminded that in June 2023 the Executive Board recommended a full review of community committees should be carried out. The Scrutiny Board has received updates on the progress of the review in the intervening period with the appended report setting out progress to date and the recommendations that have emerged following member engagement.

In his introduction, the Chair highlighted an ambition to establish a community committee structure, which enables residents and members to have more influence over local decision making.

Cllr Harland welcomed the engagement from the Scrutiny Board and elected members who have taken part in various workshops and consultation meetings. It was noted that there would be a further member engagement opportunity on 13 November 2024.

Cllr McCluskey welcomed the development of a job description that had been produced for the role of Children's Champion. It was confirmed that a profile for the role of Community Committee Chair is also being developed.

Members highlighted the importance of ensuring a role profile for a committee chair does not inadvertently constrain the work of chairs seeking to tailor the activity of their respective committees to meet local needs or aspirations.

The Executive Member reassured the Board that the review recognises the differences between community committees. The role profile for Chairs will provide clarity about the responsibilities of the position and is intended as a guide to support members who are new to the role.

Cllr Golton queried whether a similar document will set out how Executive Members and key officers will be expected to respond to the conclusions, recommendations and requests developed by community committees.

Cllr Harland acknowledged the important role of Executive Board members in supporting the work of community committees in their respective portfolio areas.

The Scrutiny Board was advised that the key aim of the review is to improve public engagement with community committees. Members welcomed this focus.

The Scrutiny Board explored the challenge of improving local engagement with community committees. Members identified several barriers to engagement including:

- Time and location of committee meetings.
- A lack of opportunities for public interaction.
- The perceived formality of meetings.
- Access to technological solutions such as webcasting.

It was suggested that committees consider engagement activity taking place outside of formal committee settings. This may provide an opportunity for the committee to better connect to existing community-based activity.

Liz Jarmin also highlighted the extensive consultation activity carried out across the city by other Council services and noted the opportunity to bring that work together in localities to achieve a richer overall sense of communities.

Members considered ways in which to reduce the perceived formality of community committees, including changing the name.

Members highlighted the knowledge and support provided by the localities team.

Members shared their experience of holding meetings in different locations. Several members expressed a desire for more meetings to be webcast so that local people can access them a time and location to suits them. Members were advised of the challenges around security, buildings and staff availability required to webcast public meetings. Members requested consideration be given to alternative solutions to corporate webcasting including the use of Facebook Live.

It was noted that the report highlights challenges regarding the capacity of the communities team and wider council services to drive progress and change, given the number of service reviews currently underway in response to immediate financial pressures.

Liz Jarmin and Paul Money acknowledged the challenge of developing and delivering a programme of change for the community committee network given this current context.

While there is an ongoing commitment from services to support change to the community committees, the Scrutiny Board was advised that discussions about the delegation of functions to localities have been paused to allow service reviews to complete. The current focus of the community committee review is therefore primarily on structures and taking engagement activity out of formal meeting settings.

James Rogers reiterated the importance of locality working in Leeds and that there remains a commitment to work closely with communities in future, including through community committees.

James also confirmed that many staff within his directorate work outside a standard '9 to 5' pattern.

The Chair welcomed efforts to increase the transparency of local decision making and to improve levels of local community engagement.

RESOLVED:

Scrutiny Board members noted the content of the report and agreed to:

- a) Support the review of Community Committees and their constitutional role in helping to shape and influence place.
- b) Provide their endorsement of the recommendations and accompanying work programme, as set out in appendix 1.

51 Playful Green Spaces Plan

The Chair began by welcoming the early engagement on the future development of a Playful Greenspaces Plan.

Those in attendance for this item were:

- Cllr Mohammed Rafique (Executive Member)
- James Rogers (Director, Communities, Housing & Environment)
- Polly Cook (Chief Officer, Climate, Energy & Greenspaces)
- Vicki Marsden (Parks Technical Manager)

Cllr Rafique set out an ambition to improve access to nature-based play environments in the city's greenspaces. He highlighted the range and extent of parks and greenspaces looked after by the Green Spaces Service, and advised the Board that a future Playful Greenspaces Plan will seek to provide play opportunities for young people of all ages and abilities.

It was further noted that the plan will support the priorities set out in the Play Sufficiency Report, previously agreed by the Executive Board in December 2023, and the city's Child Friendly ambitions.

The Scrutiny Board acknowledged that this plan will focus on creating playful natural spaces rather than the provision of fixed playground equipment.

Members welcomed the development of the plan and the early engagement with Scrutiny.

Cllr Farley shared the success and learning that has emerged from the positive experience in his ward of the of the Playbox initiative. He also

highlighted the need to ensure any future plan considers opportunities for play for older children and teens.

Polly Cook noted that the outcome of community consultation will inform the final plan. However, she anticipates that recent consultation feedback regarding the perceptions of women and girls about safety in parks and greenspaces will also influence its development.

The Scrutiny Board was advised that the plan will provide a set of principles which can be applied to greenspaces. Where funding opportunities are subsequently identified the Council will then be able to act quickly to deliver more playful opportunities within greenspaces.

Members expressed concern about the ownership of land being a potential barrier to delivering improvements in areas that have the least access to greenspaces. They sought further clarity about how officers will work with colleagues to ensure that housing land, for example, is included in the approach.

Polly Cook set out the importance of taking a partnership approach to this work – citing the example of working with Wades Charity with regards to the Playbox programme.

The Scrutiny Board explored the importance of community engagement. It was also noted that increasing the use of parks can reduce anti-social behaviour in these locations.

It was acknowledged that some areas of the city have very limited access to greenspace and the planning service is seeking to address that challenge through the Local Plan.

Members noted that an audit process was developed to assess parks in terms of accessibility and the safety of women and girls. Officers were asked to consider whether a similar audit could be developed to identify current opportunities for play and the age groups associated with those opportunities – so as to inform future decision making about improvements.

The valuable role of local volunteer groups was highlighted, including the 'friends of' groups and their relationships with local rangers.

Cllr Cunningham shared her positive experience of intergenerational work in parks in her ward and the importance of involving teenagers in developing local greenspaces.

Members queried whether a revised approach to monies received through the Community Infrastructure Levy could help address imbalances in access to opportunities to play in some areas of the city.

Members discussed the enhanced benefit of a local neighbourhood plan in securing CIL monies and the associated challenges for some communities in developing such a plan.

The Chair noted that the Play Sufficiency Strategy addresses the broader challenge of opportunities to play in urban areas. He also highlighted the impact of increased traffic on the ability of some young people to play safely in their immediate localities.

The Scrutiny Board highlighted links to the approach to grass cutting with the ability of communities to use some areas of limited greenspace for play.

It was noted that members would appreciate conversations based on the geography of their wards and the potential opportunities for play within their local landscapes.

RESOLVED:

The Scrutiny Board agreed the recommendations of the report, namely:

- a) For Environment, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Board to support and endorse the development plans and outlined consultation process for the creation of a Playful Green Spaces Plan.
- b) For Environment, Housing and Communities Scrutiny Board to provide feedback of the process outlined in the report and to suggest areas for continued data gathering and research.
- c) Note the contents of the report and future development of a Playful Green Spaces Plan.

52 Grounds Maintenance Contract for Leeds from January 2027

The Chair welcomed the opportunity for early engagement in relation to a replacement Grounds Maintenance Contract from January 2027.

Those in attendance for this item were:

- Cllr Rafique (Executive Member)
- James Rogers (Director, Communities, Housing & Environment)
- Polly Cook (Chief Officer, Climate, Energy and Green Space)
- Simon Frosdick (Head of bereavement Services)

Cllr Rafique provided introductory comments about the current contract arrangements. He also highlighted the financial pressures facing the organisation and the impact this would have on the specifications within the new contract.

Members requested further information about current arrangements for contract management and quality assurance. Members also sought further

detail about the process for pursuing those who create obstructions that prevent operator access to council owned land to carry out maintenance.

Simon Frosdick set out the current contract arrangements including the types of land that are maintained. The majority land holding within the current contract is associated with Housing Leeds properties and residential areas. However, highway verges are also maintained. He noted changes to the current contract over its lifetime including the introduction of more relaxed mowing to support biodiversity and the removal of sight line mowing to in house delivery.

Simon outlined the contract management processes in place, which include a daily cut report and site checks to assess quality and the nature of obstructions that have been identified by operators (e.g. fly tipping).

In response to member queries, Simon advised members that a 10% sample of sites will be checked, along with sites where the team has received complaints from councillors or the public.

Reflecting on the seasonal nature of a significant proportion of this work, the Scrutiny Board considered the impact of a high staff turnover on the quality of work carried out. The Board was advised that the Council has taken steps to provide opportunities for sufficient work from November to January to support the retention of employees and to reduce the need to use seasonal operatives.

Members acknowledged the challenge of particularly wet weather over the last year.

Simon noted that daily cut reports could be shared with members. He also advised the Scrutiny Board that the current contractor – Continental Landscapes Leeds – provide a real time mapping tool that is publicly accessible and shows cut information for council owned land.

Members sought more information about sight line maintenance being delivered in house. Simon advised the Board that this enables the Council to have more control on timing of these cuts and maximises the use of the Council's own equipment.

The Scrutiny Board highlighted the importance of communicating the benefits of relaxed mowing to the public. Simon confirmed that relaxed mowing has been successful in terms of increasing biodiversity but acknowledged that this relies upon native plants such as ivy and dandelions, which the public perceive to be weeds.

The Scrutiny Board discussed whether wildflower meadows could be achieved in some areas through a change in approach to cutting combined with the sowing of wildflower seeds.

Simon confirmed there has been some colourful planting on roundabouts to replace traditional bedding. However, native plants are prioritised on verges through relaxed mowing. He outlined the communication strategy associated with relaxed mowing, including public signage.

The benefits of enabling the involvement of local volunteer groups in the maintenance of greenspaces was explored.

Members asked for more information about the revenue raised through the sponsorship of public signs relating to relaxed mowing, as compared to the costs of the signs. Polly agreed to provide the information after the meeting.

It was confirmed that social value would form part of the procurement assessment.

Members requested that more information is provided to the Scrutiny Board as the details of the future contract are progressed.

RESOLVED:

Members considered and noted the information provided to them.

53 Work Schedule

The Principal Scrutiny Advisor presented the work schedule for 2024/25, noting that a budget consultation working group has been scheduled for 12 December 2024.

RESOLVED: The draft work programme was noted.

54 Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Scrutiny Board will take place on **Friday 6 December at 10am**. There will be a pre-meeting for all members of the Scrutiny Board at **9.30am**.