

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

16:35 to 18:00

22 June 2017

Present: Councillors Wright (chair), Brociek-Coulton (vice chair following election) Bogelein, Bradford, Bremner, Grahame, Haynes, Jones (B), Manning, Malik, packer and Thomas (Va)

Apologies: Councillor Coleshill

1. Appointment of vice chair

Councillors Bogelein and Brociek-Coulton were moved as vice chair. Following a vote it was:-

RESOLVED to appoint Councillor Brociek-Coulton as the vice chair for the ensuing civic year.

2. Public questions/petitions

The following public question was received from Reverend Joy Croft:

"I have long assumed the Scrutiny Committee's function to be just that: scrutiny. I.e. that its purpose was to examine the Council's policies, priorities and projects, before they were enacted, to ensure that they were consistent with one another and with the law. As changes to the city's crossings, roads and walkways makes Norwich increasingly unsafe for those of us with registered visual impairments and the Committee does not intervene, I must conclude that my assumption is wrong. After all, these disabling changes do at least merit examination under current disability equality legislation.

So please, would the Convener explain what the Committee's actual function is, and how we registered disabled citizens can work with it in situations like this to keep Norwich from disabling us further?"

She was unable to attend the meeting therefore the chair read out the following response:

"Thank you Reverend Croft for your question.

The scrutiny committee is required to maintain an overview of the discharge of the council's executive function and has the right to scrutinise any executive decision made by the cabinet or by council officers, under delegated powers, or to review the council's policy-making or decision-making processes; or to undertake the work aimed at policy development within the council.

We are not a decision making body within the council, and cannot force through changes, but we do make recommendations to cabinet that are more often than not taken on board.

If a member of the public has an item that they would like the scrutiny committee to consider adding to our work programme, we have a form available for completion which would be returned to our scrutiny liaison officer for consideration for inclusion by the committee.

You comment that the 'changes do at least merit examination under current disability equality legislation'.

I quite agree, which is why at the meeting today we are considering the current status of the council's transportation and highways strategies as detailed in the report, and will be taking first-hand accounts of city access issues by a number of speakers representing different groups.

The follows on from an informal scrutiny committee walkabout, where some Norwich city councillors, officers and members of disability access groups took part in an access tour of Norwich to identify accessibility issues within the city area.

It is worth pointing out that we are, due to resources available, not able to look at every single aspect of the council's work but will seek to carry out scrutiny of any area of concern identified to us."

3. Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Minutes

Subject to noting that Councillor Manning was present at the meeting and including the date of the city accessibility walk as 30 June 2016 it was:-

RESOLVED to agree the minutes of the meeting held on 6 April 2017.

5. City accessibility

The chair introduced the item and said that he would be inviting guests to speak first and then members would be able to ask questions.

George Saunders, chair of the Access Group addressed the committee and listed issues that the Access Group wanted to highlight.

Smooth pavements – It was difficult and uncomfortable for wheelchair users or those with mobility issues to travel on uneven or cobbled pathways. Where smooth walkways had been installed, these were often blocked by bus stops and street furniture. He said that a scheme had been implemented in Barcelona whereby smooth pathways had been installed through cobbled areas.

A Board regulation – A Boards often forced wheelchair users off of the pavement and were a hazard for those people with visual impairments.

Blue badge parking – He said that this needed better enforcement including checking for fraudulent use.

Disability Discrimination Act – It had been 22 years since the Disability Discrimination Act had come into force but some businesses were still not accessible. Mr Saunders said that he would like to see the council make it a requirement that any planning applications for refurbishment or change also had to comply with Part M building regulations wherever possible.

Controlled Crossings – The Norwich Access Group whole heartedly opposed the removal of controlled crossings. He said that he could not emphasise enough how difficult the removal of these crossings made getting around Norwich. He said that he was aware of people who had stopped coming into the city centre for this reason.

Edward Bates (Norfolk and Norwich Association for the Blind) and Mike Wordingham (Royal National Institute of Blind) addressed the committee. Edward Bates said that the NNAB and the RNIB has been working together for a number of years as both groups had concerns around city accessibility. The Norwich Area Transport Strategy stated that the intention was to create good access for everyone. He said that he was frequently contacted by people with visual impairments who said that they could not independently access the city centre. He introduced a short video in which a number of visually impaired people gave information on difficulties they faced in the city centre

(The video can be viewed at this link <https://vimeo.com/222183086>)

Mike Wordingham said that Norwich City Centre was becoming a ‘no go’ zone for visually impaired people. He wanted to see controlled crossings reinstated on Cleveland Road and also on Rampant Horse Street, specifically at site H in the report. He said that kerb on Westlegate needed to be at least 60mm high and therefore needed to be heightened.

He would like to see a different way of working introduced with more thorough access audits being carried out by experts within this field. He felt that the equality impact assessment attached to the report was inadequate as the scheme disadvantaged visually impaired people and did not address the concerns raised by the NNAB. There was no mention of any mitigating factors being implemented. He suggested that these assessments could be put through a panel of disabled users as a second check.

He suggested that more robust consultation was needed to include blind and partially sighted people. Norfolk County Council had a list of groups representing different disabilities and Mike suggested that the council may want to think about the best way to consult with these groups. He said that the sensory team could be made

more use of (although he understood that there were cost implications with this) and tactile models could be made relatively inexpensively. He suggested exploring links with the local arts university for this.

He asked that the shared space scheme be halted before new guidance was developed in consultation with disabled people. The policy of turning controlled crossings into zebra crossings was diminishing quality of life for blind and visually impaired people.

He was interested in the idea of a street charter and said that he would be delighted to assist in the development of this. Such a charter would change people's lives.

Aliona Derrett, Chief Executive Officer of the Norfolk Deaf Association (NDA) spoke next. She said that controlled crossings were best for their users as lots of traffic noise made it very difficult to cross roads, especially with age and sight loss also. She said that electric vehicles could also be a problem as they were too quiet. She asked that more sound be put into crossings as some people were unable to see the green light to cross the road if there were people standing in front of them. Signs with crossing lights should be available on the front of the crossing and should also be easy to see in sunlight.

Pedestrianised areas were good but they were also used by cyclists who usually could not be heard so perhaps different areas for cycles could be thought about. She said that the NDA could always be approached for advice.

Susan Ringwood, Chief Executive of Age UK addressed the committee and presented comments that had been gathered at their recent AGM.

The bus services was regarded as being very good, however, the distance between bus stops was too far with too few stops having bench seating. A boards and street furniture were obstructive and she was not aware of a policy surrounding these. Pedestrianised streets were very good but there was nowhere to drop people off who needed to use the businesses in the city centre. She gave the example of the Post Office on St Stephens Street of this. She suggested an inner city hopper bus that circled the pedestrianised areas would be beneficial for not only older people but also for tourists. Older people would benefit from well signed drop off points, especially in the social and cultural areas of the city.

She said that she was aware of increased unauthorised blue badge parking but said that older people often felt too vulnerable to confront others about this.

Dr Katherine Deane of the University of East Anglia Accessibility Taskforce gave a presentation to the committee (available on the council's website). She said that twelve percent of UEA students had declared a disability and there was a corporate commitment to equal access for all. She said that some improved power assisted doors had been installed all new buildings on campus has hoist assisted toilets. She offered to share their accessible design guide.

She said that the students faced the barriers to accessing the city described by the previous speakers. Buses had ramps but the internal design of the vehicles needed some thought. With the implementation of new legislation around equal taxi fares she had concerns that taxis with wheelchair space could be lost. She would like to see it be mandatory for a certain percentage of taxis to be wheelchair accessible.

The chair thanked all the speakers and invited questions from members of the committee.

In response to a member's question, the principal planner (transport) said that the assumption was not that zebra crossings were safer than controlled crossings. This was always dependent on location and each individual location was subject to an assessment and national best practice guidance was followed. He added that with defunct crossings, each would be looked at on its own merits and a decision would be made on the type of crossing to be installed within the limit of resources. He referred to the crossing at Cleveland Road and said that the intention was to replace the controlled crossing once funding became available.

The principal planner (transport) said that the £500,000 cost for a crossing referred to in the report was the approximate cost of a full trafficked junction and not just a pedestrian crossing. Other types of crossings would cost less and subsequently more could be installed.

In response to a question from a member, the city agency manager (Norfolk County Council) said that a wide range of schemes were planned across the county with Norwich having a specific budget allocated to it. He acknowledged that Norwich was a key location in the area and understood the need for crossings but projects were always limited by available resources.

Members discussed the assessments for crossings and the consultation on these. The principal planner (transport) said that visits were undertaken to locations to observe those using the area and consultations were undertaken on every project. Proposals and changes to the projects were advertised to the public and stakeholders were written to for comment. He added that people were involved in the process at an early stage but a proposal had to be worked up to consult on. When beginning a project, a wide range of groups were engaged. Edward Bates of the NNAB said that he understood there were difficulties; they would like to be consulted at an earlier stage in the process. Dr Katherine Deane said that the UEA design guidance had helped with their response to consultations as it gave an expected status quo for new designs. With regards to a disability champion sitting on the Norfolk Highways Agency Committee, the principal planner (transport) said that issues faced by disabled people were already discussed extensively.

In response to a member's question the principal planner (transport) said that shared space scheme had been through a safety audit and there was an acknowledgement that light controlled crossings were needed. However, Rampant Horse Street was a heavily pedestrianised area so light controlled crossings in particular may not be the answer in that location.

The principal planner (transport) addressed member's queries regarding the raising of kerb height on the Westlegate scheme, the policy on A boards and the priority of replacing the light controlled crossing on Cleveland Road. He said that Westlegate was a pedestrian area the use of kerbs was not appropriate. However, margins had been put down to provide some differentiation between areas to each side of the street and areas which service vehicles were expected to use to minimise potential conflict. With regards to A boards, there had been some staffing issues within the team that would implement the policy. These had been rectified and a letter would shortly be going out to all city centre businesses giving them one month to comply with the new policy. He confirmed that a copy of that letter would be going to councillors and stakeholders.

The city agency manager (Norfolk County Council) added that there was the intention to put a light controlled crossing on Cleveland Road and a feasibility study had been commissioned to understand the costs involved. Work was being undertaken on identifying funding but there was a commitment to identify the work needed.

A member raised concerns around the channel shift to online consultations and how these would be made accessible to visually impaired people. The city agency manager (Norfolk County Council) said that they encouraged people who were having any difficulties to contact officers who would deal with their needs on a case by case basis.

Members discussed the idea of a charter around city accessibility and agreed that the street charter from Hull city council was a good statement of intention.

In response to a member's question, the director of customers and culture said that cabinet would be considering a report covering a motion to council around city accessibility and recommendations around the mention of city accessibility in the corporate plan. The strategy manager reminded members that there had not been any changes to the corporate priorities; instead the mention of city accessibility could contribute to the narrative to contextualise the priorities.

The city agency manager (Norfolk County Council) informed the committee of the work that Norfolk County Council had undertaken with 'Opening Doors' which represented those with less visible disabilities. Safe journey cards had been developed for bus users with hidden disabilities such as clear speech, anxiety and mobility issues.

The chair thanked all of the speakers for their participation.

RESOLVED to:

- (1) Ask Norfolk County Council's Environment, Development and Transport committee to review the same evidence presented to this meeting to inform their work going forward; particularly in relation to their work with bus stops and bus companies,
- (2) Improve stakeholder representation earlier in the design process of new transport schemes, potentially with a champion to sit on relevant committees or a stakeholder panel to be established,
- (3) Ask relevant officers to ensure that any new signage be evaluated in terms of accessibility
- (4) Ask the Norwich highways Agency Committee to consider formally pausing the use of shared space schemes,
- (5) Ensure the A Boards policy is easily accessible on the Norwich City Council website,
- (6) Extend consultations to groups not represented at the scrutiny meeting, especially those with hidden disabilities,

- (7) Ask cabinet to consider ways to more robustly enforce the engine switch off policy for buses within Norwich,
- (8) Consider ways to increase awareness of the telephone number to report misuse of blue badge parking,
- (9) Ask the chair of the licensing committee to consider receiving a report on the sufficient supply of wheelchair accessible private hire vehicles,
- (10) Ask relevant officers to approach the Business Improvement District (BID) to explore ways of improving city center retail access for those with mobility issues, such as more drop off points and a mini bus 'hopper' service; and
- (11) Consider the formation of a task and finish group at the work programme setting meeting of the scrutiny committee to progress the idea of a city accessibility street charter

CHAIR