

Housing and Community Services Scrutiny Panel

Wednesday 16 July 2025

PRESENT:

Councillor Finn, in the Chair.

Councillor Gilmour, Vice Chair.

Councillors Allison, Coker, Cuddihee, Freeman, P.Nicholson (Substitute for Councillor Loveridge), Penrose, Poyser, Simpson (Substitute for Councillor Dingle) and Stevens.

Also in attendance:

Councillor Cresswell (Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Apprenticeships), Councillor Stephens (Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning and Transport), Andy Sharp (Interim Service Director, Street Services), Hannah Chandler-Whiting (Democratic Advisor), Kat Deeney (Head of Environmental Planning (Virtual)), Kevin Northcott (Highways Maintenance Manager), and Phil Bellamy (Head of Plymouth Highways).

The meeting started at 2.02 pm and finished at 3.50 pm.

Note: At a future meeting, the Panel will consider the accuracy of these draft minutes, so they may be subject to change. Please check the minutes of that meeting to confirm whether these minutes have been amended.

1. Appointment of a Chair and Vice-Chair

The Panel noted the appointment of Councillor Finn as Chair, and Councillor Gilmour as Vice Chair for the 2025/26 municipal year.

2. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest made.

3. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 16 April 2025 were agreed as a correct record.

4. Chair's Urgent Business

There were no items of Chair's Urgent Business.

5. Grit Bin Policy Review

Councillor John Stephens (Cabinet Member for Strategic Planning and Transport) introduced the Grit Bin Policy Review report and discussed:

- a) Grit bins were intended to support communities in managing icy conditions on public roads and pavements not covered by primary gritting routes;
- b) Bins were typically located on unclassified roads with steep inclines, sharp bends, or near schools and elderly care homes;
- c) The importance of strategic placement to mitigate ice formation and ensure cost-effective maintenance;
- d) A citywide review had been undertaken to assess current bin locations and identify areas requiring provision.

Phil Bellamy (Head of Plymouth Highways) discussed:

- e) The aim was to determine bin locations based on engineering principles, while allowing for subjective considerations;
- f) All bins should be recorded, stocked, and maintained under Highways ownership;
- g) The review had been undertaken using a set methodology and rationale however, the team welcomed feedback.

Kevin Northcott (Highways Maintenance Manager) discussed:

- h) The review was prompted by an unprecedented number of grit bin requests following an unusually cold winter in December 2022;
- i) A formal scoring system had been developed to assess new and existing bin locations rather than relying on subjective case by case assessments;
- j) The winter gritting period ran from 01 October to 31 March each year, but was monitored beyond these dates if required;
- k) Grit bins were not a statutory duty and were intended for public highway use only;
- l) Green bins (councillor requested) were not maintained unless specifically requested, while yellow bins were maintained by Highways;
- m) The review included 480 known bins, with 25 requiring ownership clarification;
- n) Following discussions with other authorities as part of the Southwest Regional Winter Services Group, the team had developed a criteria to assess existing provision and future requests for grit bins;
- o) Criteria included road gradient, proximity to junctions, accident history, nearby premises, the location of other grit bins, and vulnerable populations;

- p) The review recommended retaining 368 bins, removing 112, and adding 81 new bins;
- q) It was proposed that all bins would be standardised as yellow, with a numbering system for reporting;
- r) Ownership of bins on non-highways land would be reviewed further;
- s) A separate review would be conducted for city centre bins;
- t) The process would be dynamic and allow for ongoing updates.

In response to questions, the Committee discussed:

- u) The need for ward councillor involvement in reviewing bin locations and communicating changes to residents;
- v) The importance of local knowledge in assessing bin necessity, especially in areas with vulnerable populations;
- w) Climate adaptation considerations and the unpredictability of future cold snaps. Gritting routes were reviewed on an annual basis, and there were three weather monitoring stations in the city;
- x) The cost implications of bin relocation and maintenance, with an annual maintenance budget of £4,000–£5,000, potentially rising to £10,000–£20,000 for the current year;
- y) The rationale behind the scoring threshold of 125 and the flexibility to consider bins below this score;
- z) The need for clear communication and labelling to avoid reputational damage;
- aa) A proposal to consult ward councillors within a three-week timeframe regarding bin removals and relocations in their wards;
- bb) The importance of transparency and community engagement in implementing the policy;
- cc) The significant work that had been undertaken by officers to assess existing provision, consult with other authorities and design an engineering-based policy.

Action: Highways officers to consult ward councillors within three weeks regarding proposed grit bin removals and relocations, and to provide ward-level breakdowns of bin locations.

The Committee agreed:

1. To support the proposals outlined in the report with the following amendment to 'Recommended Action 4':

Those grit bins where ownership is in question (not on Highways Maintainable at Public Expense (HMPE) land) will be resolved and retained or removed from the network as appropriate, following consultation with all ward councillors;

2. To recommend that all ward councillors be given a set time period (three weeks) to consult with their communities and provide feedback on proposed bin removals, relocations, or additions for grit bins located on Highways Maintainable at Public Expense (HMPE) land.

6. **Central Park Ponds Project - Scrutiny Update Report**

Councillor Cresswell (Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Apprenticeships) introduced the Central Park Ponds project update report and discussed:

- a) Councillor Briars-Delve had sent apologies due to a pre-arranged commitment;
- b) Fish within the central park ponds, although not part of the original plans, had proven popular with families and provided a learning opportunity for children and young people;
- c) Delays to the project had occurred due to extremely wet weather in March 2024 and the need to change contractor earlier in 2025;
- d) Councillors were understanding of the frustrations caused by delays to the project and of the valuable community asset that the park offered;
- e) A new contractor was now on site, with soil movement and playing pitch completion expected before the end of summer, followed by landscape works including field seeding and tree planting at the appropriate time of year;
- f) Following the Panel's previous recommendations, monthly communication updates were now provided on the Council's website, with QR codes placed in the park to direct users to the latest information, which had been tested and found accessible;
- g) Additional updates had been shared with local community stakeholders and councillors;
- h) A comprehensive communications plan was now possible due to the availability of a detailed construction programme, which was summarised in the report;
- i) New signage had been installed in the park and project milestones would be shared in line with the construction programme;

- j) The project had faced challenges, but key issues such as weather and contractor changes were outside of the Council's control;
- k) The project was now back on track for completion by the end of summer and updates would continue to be provided.

Kat Deeney (Head of Environmental Planning), Phil Bellamy (Head of Plymouth Highways) and Andy Sharp (Interim Service Director for Street Services) added:

- l) A 12-week construction programme was in place and the contractor had already been on site for several weeks. The project remained on track for an end-of-summer finish, with only tree planting scheduled beyond that period;
- m) Field seeding would follow the completion of works, and tree planting would take place in autumn to ensure success;
- n) The drainage issue at the bottom of Ford Park Road was part of a separate programme, likely caused by utility works, and options were being reviewed. A report had been received outlining options for managing water in that area, and further updates could be provided at a later date;
- o) A specific construction phase plan was in place, compliant with CDM regulations, and included welfare facilities, diversion routes and notification extensions;
- p) A formalised programme of work was being delivered and officers were happy to share the construction phase plan with the Panel.

In response to questions, the Panel discussed:

- q) Concerns were raised regarding contract management and the lack of a clear schedule, with calls for greater transparency, accountability and inclusion of risk planning;
- r) The public perception of the Council's handling of the project was poor, with reputational damage noted;
- s) The need for a clear schedule of works with key milestones was emphasised, including earthworks and final tree planting;
- t) Challenges keeping to schedule had been caused by uncontrollable variables including adverse weather and the loss of a contractor;
- u) The park had already seen positive public engagement with the ponds and wildlife;
- v) The scheme had received cross-party support;
- w) The need to ensure lessons were learnt and the importance of contract clauses in future projects;

- x) The potential to include tree information and planting schedules in the park's educational signage and existing QR code resources.

Action: Officers to provide a schedule of works with key milestones, including landscaping and tree planting timelines, and respond to public questions raised during the meeting.

The Panel agreed:

1. To note the report and the update on the Central Park Ponds project;
2. To request that a schedule with key milestones be provided to members.

7. **Work Programme**

Lee Finn (Chair) introduced the work programme item and discussed:

- a) A new approach was proposed whereby each future meeting would include a “hot topic” subject for focused discussion;
- b) The October meeting would begin with a discussion on city centre car parking capacity, in light of the relocation of 4,000 Babcock staff to the area and the redevelopment of the Civic Centre;
- c) The aim was to ensure scrutiny remained responsive to emerging issues and community concerns.

Members discussed:

- d) The need to manage time effectively and prioritise previously identified items such as the public toilets review and the bus shelter contract;
- e) The public toilets item had been requested and was awaiting scheduling;
- f) The need to ensure pre-decision scrutiny across Council committees. This would be raised at the next Scrutiny Management Board meeting.

8. **Action Log**

Hannah Chandler-Whiting (Democratic Advisor) introduced the action log and discussed:

- a) Democratic Services would liaise with officers to confirm when the Public Toilet Strategy and Bus Shelters Contract would be ready for consideration;
- b) The three items currently marked “to be scheduled” would be circulated in an updated work programme to members ahead of the next meeting.

The Panel agreed to note the action log.