

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE FOR ECONOMY, TRANSPORT AND ENVIRONMENT

MINUTES of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee for Economy, Transport and Environment held at County Hall, Lewes on 18 March 2013.

PRESENT: Councillors Richard Stogdon (Chairman), Terry Fawthrop (Vice-Chairman), Jon Freeman, Philip Howson, Pat Rodohan and Barry Taylor.

LEAD MEMBER: Councillor Matthew Lock (Lead Member for Economy).

ALSO PRESENT Rupert Clubb, Director Transport and Environment;
 Karl Taylor, Assistant Director Transport and Environment;
 Roger Williams, Head of Highways
 Andy Arnold, Team manager, Environmental Advice
 Geoff Mee, Assistant Director, Environment.

Scrutiny Manager: Paul Dean

32. MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

32.1 RESOLVED – to approve as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 20 November 2012.

33. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

33.1 Apologies were received from Councillor Godfrey Daniel and Councillor Carl Maynard (Lead Member for Transport and Environment).

35. REPORTS

35.1 Copies of the reports referred to below are included in the minute book.

36. WINTER SERVICE: UPDATE ON THE 2012/13 OPERATION

36.1 The Committee considered a presentation by the Director of Economy, Transport and Environment providing an update on the 2012/13 winter service operation:

- The 2012/13 winter maintenance budget was £1.48m.
- The winter of 2012/13 was exceptionally mild until the first week of February 2013. There was heavy snowfall overnight on 4 February; and a further period of heavy snowfall and blizzards from 10 – 12 March.
- Salt levels were increased this year to 10,000 tonnes from 8,000 tonnes at the start of the previous winter.
- Secondary gritting routes now include all bus routes and depot access roads.

36.2 The Committee made the following observations in response to the information provided in the presentation:

Winter preparedness

- Since 2009, communications by the County Council about winter preparedness have improved year on year. The use of social media, especially 'Gritter Twitter' ([@escroads](#)), has been particularly effective and popular.

- The response by individual residents and businesses to keeping the pavements outside their premises clear of snow and ice was disappointing.

Media reporting

- Whilst Roger Williams appeared extensively on local TV and radio during the extreme conditions, the media seemed to focus excessively on criticising the Council for 'failing to send out the gritters'. The evidence shows conclusively that the gritters were out doing their job.
- Most attempts to highlight the importance of greater driver care and responsibility through the media appeared to be blocked. There was also little evidence in the media of appropriate police safety messages to motorists.

Grit expectations

- Many members of the public have unrealistically high expectations about the effect of salt treatment in sudden and heavy snow conditions, especially when accompanied by strong winds. Even where conditions are much less severe, salt is ineffective if traffic is stationary.

Drivers

- Overall, there appeared to be a poor level of public preparedness for and response to the winter driving conditions. For example, most drivers do not use winter tyres on their vehicles.
- High levels of poor driving were witnessed. Many motorists were driving too fast or inappropriately for the conditions; some displayed extraordinarily dangerous behaviours such as tailgating on ice.
- Many of the traffic blockages and significant delays were caused by drivers getting into difficulties, especially on hills, due to poor preparedness or responding inappropriately to deteriorating conditions.

Public response

- Public frustration, probably exacerbated by the critical media reporting, triggered an exceptional number of abusive comments from the public to contact centre staff and senior managers, directly and through Twitter.
- The Highways Agency, a critically important partner, appeared to have failed to communicate effectively with the Council or the public.

Potholes

36.3 The number of potholes in East Sussex roads has proliferated during the recent winter weather. Some 400 are currently being filled every day by 24 'gangs' working across the county.

36.4 The Committee expressed concern as to whether the Council or contractor are coping adequately with current pothole levels arising not only from this year but also from the legacy of previous years' winters.

36.5 Officers reported that they had modified the existing policy for prioritising and repairing potholes since January to try to manage the situation.

36.6 RESOLVED – to endorse the following actions:

- Convey the Committee's gratitude and thanks to staff in the highways teams for their continuing hard work and for successfully dealing with the recent bouts of extreme winter conditions and associated challenges.

- As soon as practicable, provide a ‘live’ gritter position map on the Council’s website to counter the widespread accusation that the Council does not send out gritters.
- Continue to address the challenges of managing public expectations of the winter service, and promote self help.
- Promote ‘zero tolerance’ of abuse from the public.
- Check to see whether any further changes to the potholes policy are needed during extended periods of extreme weather conditions; and, whether the developing Asset Management Plan could target the problem of potholes over the longer term.

37. SCRUTINY REVIEW OF STREET WORKS ON THE HIGHWAYS OF EAST SUSSEX

37.1 The Committee considered a report by the Chairman of the Scrutiny Project Board presenting the findings and recommendations of the Scrutiny Review of Street Works in East Sussex.

37.2 Comments on the report had been received from representatives of: Willingdon and Jevington Parish Council, Ringmer Parish Council, and Herstmonceux Parish Council. The comments reflected the same concerns that the review had set out to address.

37.3 RESOLVED – To endorse the report and submit it to Cabinet (on 11 June 2013) for comment and County Council (on 16 July 2013) for approval.

38. SCRUTINY REVIEW OF DUTCH ELM DISEASE IN EAST SUSSEX

38.1 The Committee considered a report by the Director of Economy, Transport and Environment which set out a proposed strategy for the future management of Dutch Elm Disease in East Sussex. This report addressed the final outstanding issue from the Scrutiny Review of Trees and Woodlands Policy that reported to the committee in March 2012.

38.2 Table 1 in the report attached to the agenda contained minor errors in some of the numbers of elms felled but the cost figures were correct. The corrected version is as follows:

Approach	Total elm population over 10 years	Total elm population over 25 years	Number of elms felled over 10 years	Number of elms felled over 25 years	Cost of programme over 10 years	Cost of programme over 25 years
No control	7,000	6,000	5,210	5,210	£1,228,050	£1,228,050
Historic	13,000	12,500	7,500	18,750	£638,900	£1,597,250
Prioritised	14,000	14,500	6,500	16,250	£591,100	£1,477,750

38.3 After considering the detailed scientific evidence, the Committee endorsed a new ‘prioritised approach’ whereby known, dead, infected elm trees are cut down if they are judged to have died recently enough to be suitable for beetles to breed in, whilst trees that have been dead for longer are ignored.

38.4 RESOLVED – (1) To endorse the draft strategy involving a ‘prioritised approach’ for the future management of Dutch Elm Disease as a means of maintaining a significant population of English elm, at least cost to the County Council; and
(2) That the County Council seeks financial contributions from key stakeholders towards the costs of delivering the programme.

39. RECONCILING POLICY, PERFORMANCE AND RESOURCES

39.1 The Committee considered a report by the Chief Executive which reviewed the Committee’s input into the Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources process during 2012/13. The Director outlined Cabinet’s decisions in response to the specific scrutiny recommendations.

39.2 The Cabinet has decided to retain a £490,000 budget for highways grass cutting, and to reduce the budgets for Planning, Trading Standards and gully emptying as indicated in the report:

- Planning: the proposed savings derive from a review of the service. The position remains flexible; the proposed savings could be reversed if demand for the service increases.
- Gully emptying: a targeted approach towards prioritising gullies for treatment is now in place and is designed to ensure that savings can be made whilst maintaining an appropriate level of gully emptying.
- Trading Standards: has been examined carefully during the budget setting process and a clear steer provided so that the service can move forward.

39.3 RESOLVED – (1) to include an overview of the impact of budget reductions on Planning, gully emptying and Trading Standards in the future scrutiny work programme (in addition to grass cutting as previously recommended), and (2) to consider an overview of both the capital and revenue budgets.

40. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

40.1 The Committee considered its work programme and recommended the following issues for inclusion from June 2013 onwards:

- (1) An overview of capital and revenue budget allocations
- (2) Highways grass cutting and weed spraying
- (3) Highways maintenance contract (using the ongoing Member scrutiny reference group)
- (4) Gully emptying can be included in the Member reference group on the Highways Contract or as a stand-alone issue
- (5) Trading Standards: new approaches and managing the budget savings.

40.2 The Committee highlighted the following issues for possible inclusion at a later date:

- (1) Street lighting – impact of the new restricted lighting policy on: energy use, community safety, economic/budget factors
- (2) Supported bus network: challenges faced as a consequence of the budget decisions that will impact from 2014/15.
- (3) Road safety (ongoing) – especially with new concerns raised about the impact of winter weather on driver behaviour, a factor underpinning both winter maintenance and road safety scrutiny matters.

(4) Planning – impact of the savings identified during Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources.

41. FORWARD PLAN

41.1 The Committee considered the Forward Plan for the period March to June 2013. Members were reminded of the need to monitor the Forward Plan when published online to identify any queries or concerns early. Requests for information should be raised with the listed contact officer, and any scrutiny issues with the Scrutiny Manager.

42. NEXT MEETING

42.1 The meeting ended at 12.30pm. The next meeting of the Committee will be held on Wednesday 19 June 2013.

42.2 The Chairman thanked the Committee Members and supporting officers for their active contributions to the work of the committee over the previous four years.

CLLR RICHARD STOGDON

Chairman