

## 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 19 June 2013.

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PRESENT: Councillors Richard Stogdon (Chairman), Michael Pursglove (Vice-Chairman), Claire Dowling, John Hodges, Pat Rodohan, Rosalyn St Pierre (substitute for Councillor Steve Wallis) and Barry Taylor.

LEAD MEMBERS: Councillors Karl Maynard (Lead Member for Transport and Environment) and Rupert Simmons (Lead Member for Economy).

ALSO PRESENT Rupert Clubb, Director Transport and Environment;  
Karl Taylor, Assistant Director Transport and Environment;  
James Harris, Head of Economic Development, Skills & Infrastructure  
Lucy Corrie, Head of Trading Standards (for item 5 Trading Standards)

Scrutiny Manager: Paul Dean

### 1. MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

1.1 RESOLVED – to approve as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 18 March 2013.

### 2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

2.1 Apologies were received from Councillor Steve Wallis.

### 3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

3.1 Councillor Maynard declared a non-prejudicial interest as Leader of Rother District Council in respect of all the agenda items.

3.2 Councillor Claire Dowling declared a non-prejudicial interest as Deputy Leader of Wealden District council in respect of item 5 (Trading Standards).

3.3 Councillor Pat Rodohan declared a non-prejudicial interest as an officer of the Federation of Small Businesses in respect of item 5 (Trading Standards).

3.4 Councillor Barry Taylor declared a non-prejudicial interest in respect of his involvement in the care industry – item 5 (Trading Standards).

3.5 Councillor Richard Stogdon declared a non-prejudicial interest as a fruit grower in respect of item 5 (Trading Standards).

### 4. INTRODUCTION TO THE ECONOMY, TRANSPORT AND ENVIRONMENT DEPARTMENT

4.1 The Committee received an overview of the Economy and Transport functions of the Economy, Transport and Environment department by Rupert Clubb, Director Transport and Environment, Karl Taylor, Assistant Director Transport and Environment and James Harris, Head of Economic Development, Skills and Infrastructure. Several points of discussion emerged:

### *Economic development*

- Economic development activities have become increasingly proactive with an emphasis on attracting prospective businesses to East Sussex through loans and incentives; a successful bid to the Regional Growth Fund will support new infrastructure developments.
- Super-fast fibre optic broadband is being introduced across East Sussex and its arrival at the commercial developments associated with the Bexhill–Hastings Link Road needs to be timely.
- Infrastructure that supports growth is a key priority using our management of the Local Transport Plan to support the growth potential in district and borough Local Plans.

### *Transport and operations*

- The current Highways Maintenance contract runs till September 2015 at which stage a new contract will be awarded. The contract is valued at approximately £30m (see work programme item below for scrutiny's input into this project).
- Grass cutting: the current County Council policy provides for five 'cuts' per year in urban areas and two in rural areas; this year there has been three (in rural areas); parish and town councils supplement the cost of any additional cuts they require (see work programme item below).
- Highways Stewards: The 12 Stewards covering East Sussex are now established in high regard by Members; the committee emphasised the importance of Members properly understanding the role of Stewards and communicating effectively with the Department, through the right channels, to ensure the best possible outcomes.
- Potholes are an ongoing issue of concern for many Members; a common current complaint is that some potholes are being left unrepaired whilst only those nearby that have been reported are filled. Officers explained that this happens because of the limits to materials that repair vehicles can carry ie. generally only sufficient to deal with the reported defects. A key role for Members is to continue to actively report potholes online or via the contact centre.

#### 4.2 RESOLVED – to

(i) welcome the presentations, and

(ii) defer the introductory overview of the *Environment* functions of the Economy, Transport and Environment department to the next meeting.

### 5. MODERNISATION OF THE TRADING STANDARDS SERVICE – A NEW APPROACH

5.1 The Committee welcomed Lucy Corrie, Head of Trading Standards, who presented a report of the Director of Economy, Transport and Environment that set out the ideas behind a proposed restructuring and 'modernisation' of the Trading Standards service.

5.2 Whilst the changes are designed to achieve the savings required of the service (£277,000 over three years), many of the proposals will result in an improved service. A number of issues emerged from the discussion:

#### *Protecting the vulnerable*

5.3 The Committee fully endorsed the new, risk-based approach for Trading Standards that takes us away from providing 'routine advice to people who are able to help

themselves' towards a focus on protecting the vulnerable. This raised further questions about how the Service will ensure that it reaches *all* the most vulnerable people, and that genuinely vulnerable callers would not be deterred. Reassurance on these points derived from:

- the positive results so far experienced in the 'intelligence-led approach' of targeting 'hotspots' by the Rapid Action Team (RAT) in a pilot in Rother; and
- the assurance that no individual who accessed the service would be turned away.

5.4 The Committee considered that it would be helpful for the Service to keep contacts with carers groups and other advocates of vulnerable people to ensure that it reaches as many *potential* victims as possible; many elderly scam victims or people coming out of hospital, in Members' experience, are rarely likely to come forward for help automatically.

#### *Impact on partners*

5.5 The proposals would require many of the more routine elements of the Service to be provided by other bodies such as Citizens Advice. Discussions have taken place and Citizens Advice is signed up to the approach. However, at this stage is uncertain as to how caseloads would be affected.

5.6 RESOLVED – to:

(i) Welcome and endorse the approach outlined in the report to restructure and refocus the work of the Trading Standards Service; in particular, to support the fundamental changes proposed for *No Cold Calling Zones* and the use of *Super Stickers*.

(ii) Request the Trading Standards Service to maintain contacts with carers' groups, patient groups and other advocates of vulnerable people to ensure that it best achieves its aim of 'protecting the vulnerable'.

(iii) Recommend that Trading Standards actively includes elected Members in its information network, promoting their role as community 'eyes and ears', in particular: a) to solicit their suggestions in identifying 'hotspots' for the targeted approach treatment; b) to identify vulnerable businesses that may require Trading Standards advice; and, c) to promote the new approach to *No Cold Calling Zones* when it is ready for implementation.

(iv) Request further updates to scrutiny, if required, as the change programme unfolds, especially if caseloads of either Trading Standards or our partners exceeds planned levels or capacity or if new unexpected issues emerge from the consultation.

(v) Arrange a scrutiny visit to meet the Trading Standards team in due course and take a tour of the Trading Standards department.

## 6. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

6.1 The Committee identified the following issues for potential scrutiny work:

(1) Highways grass cutting and weed spraying: this issue affects all three tiers of local government in East Sussex and is a matter of considerable public and local interest. As a scrutiny topic, it could potentially be approached from various angles, including:

- whether the contractors undertaking grass cutting / weed spraying are fulfilling their obligations and providing the best possible value for money
- whether the level of 'devolution' for this function between local government tiers needs to be reconsidered in the light of the considerable variations and expectations of the service from area to area, and the increasingly challenging financial situation faced by all councils
- whether there would be benefits in clarifying and perhaps extending the role that individual householders and businesses could play in maintaining grassy areas in their streets.

Councillors Claire Dowling, Michael Pursglove, Barry Taylor and John Hodges expressed an interest in exploring the potential of this topic.

(2) Highways maintenance contract: a 'scrutiny reference group', comprising the whole committee, has been in existence for two years. The group has reviewed several highways contract models and has visited authorities that have developed innovative approaches to their highways contract re-procurement in recent years. It is proposed that the reference group continues to meet, and provide comments and recommendations, until the re-procurement of the East Sussex highways contract is complete in 2015.

(3) Street lighting: the impact of the County Council's relatively new street lighting policy that is being introduced in different areas of the County will be reviewed by the scrutiny committee in September 2013. The report will include an assessment of the impact on: energy use, community safety, economic and budgetary factors.

(4) Supported bus network: significant challenges are being faced by the County Council in response to the budget decisions required to be in place from 2014/15. A report to the committee in September will outline a proposed plan for the future of the 'supported bus network' ie. those non commercial services that require a degree of financial support from the Council to keep going.

(5) Road safety: previous work by the scrutiny committee will return for further consideration at some stage.

(6) Further consideration needs to be given to developing scrutiny work around economic development and environment issues in due course.

## 7. FORWARD PLAN

7.1 The Committee considered the Forward Plan for the period June to September 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.

## 8. NEXT MEETING

8.1 The meeting ended at 12:50pm. The next meeting of the Committee will be held on Wednesday 19 September 2013.

CLLR RICHARD STOGDON  
Chairman