

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 11 June 2014.

PRESENT: Councillors Richard Stogdon (Chair), Mike Pursglove (Vice Chair) Claire Dowling, John Hodges, Pat Rodohan, Rosalyn St. Pierre and Barry Taylor.

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

ALSO PRESENT: Rupert Clubb, Director Communities, Economy and Transport; Karl Taylor, Assistant Director Operations; Geoff Mee, Assistant Director Environment; Roger Williams, Head of Highways; Rebecca Newby, Senior Policy Officer.

Councillors: John Barnes and Francis Whetstone.

Scrutiny Lead Officer: Martin Jenks

1. MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

1.1 The minutes of the meeting held on Monday 17 March 2014 were agreed.

1.2 RESOLVED – to approve as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 17 March 2014.

2. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

2.1 No apologies for absence were received.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

3.1 None declared.

4. URGENT MATTERS

4.1 None notified.

5. HIGHWAYS VERGE CUTTING – REVISED GRASS CUTTING PROGRAMME FOR RURAL AREAS

Current service provision

5.1 The current budget for Highway grass cutting is £622,386 per annum, excluding the Borough Councils of Eastbourne (£98,252 p.a.) and Hastings (£77,281 p.a.) who undertake highways grass cutting on behalf of East Sussex County Council. A breakdown of expenditure is shown in paragraph 1.1 of the report.

5.2 The Council does not have a statutory duty to cut highways grass but does so mainly for safety reasons. Grass cutting also helps to reduce damage to footways and prevents drainage ditches and channels from becoming blocked. In urban areas the grass is cut five times a year and in rural areas twice a year, with one cut being made back to the boundary of the highway.

5.3 The current specification for grass cutting is quite detailed and requires the contractor to cut grass to a height of 75mm in rural areas and 30mm in urban areas. Grass cuttings are swept or blown from adjacent roads or pavements. However, grass cuttings are not collected and removed from site as it is five times more expensive to do so. Special arrangements are in place for cutting wildflower verges. Highway Stewards do look at the standard of the contractors work, but the Council is reliant on members of the public to report problems where there are insufficient staff resources.

5.4 The Council could reduce the amount of grass cutting undertaken, but this may not produce savings in the long term. Vegetation would still need to be cut back around signs and to prevent it from encroaching onto pavements and roads.

Grass cutting complaints

5.5 The Highways Contact Centre took approximately 3000 calls last year concerning highways grass cutting. The volume of calls has been higher in previous years when weather and growing conditions have resulted in excessive grass growth. A reduction in grass cutting will lead to increased complaints from the general public and may lead to reputational damage for the Council.

5.6 Although the Council does not have a duty to cut highways grass, it would be difficult to stop people making complaints about it. Dealing with complaints requires staff time and there is a cost associated in dealing with them. Most complaints are received by telephone which has a higher cost than complaints received via email or the Council's web site. A reduction in the cost of handling complaints would not justify an increase in the number of grass cuts.

Work in partnership with other Councils

5.7 A number of Parish, Town and Borough Councils cut grass in their areas on behalf of East Sussex County Council (ESCC). Under these arrangements ESCC provides the funding based on what it would cost ESCC to do the work using the current Highways contract. Ultimately ESCC is responsible for carrying out highways work, but the Parish, Town or Borough Council concerned is responsible for the quality of the contractors work under these devolved arrangements.

5.8 There is an opportunity to involve Parish Councils further in the delivery of this service, which may enable local people to become more involved in supervising/monitoring the work. It would be helpful to have a cost per Parish if Councillors become involved in talking to Parish Councils about undertaking grass cutting as part of a community self serve initiative.

Concluding comments

5.9 The Committee concluded that reducing grass cutting in rural areas would be counter productive, but there is room for improvement in the way the work was carried out by the contractor in some areas. Councillor Barnes reported that there were some problems with the execution of the contract in his constituency, especially around Etchingham.

5.10 A request was made for more information about the specification for grass cutting in Eastbourne (Councillor Taylor) and Hastings (Councillor Hodges). The schedule for grass cutting outside these areas is provided in the bulletins sent to Councillors by the Highways Team.

5.11 RESOLVED: - It was resolved:

- 1) Not to recommend a change to Highways grass cutting in rural areas;
- 2) To request that an option be included in the re-procurement of the Highways contract to devolve grass cutting to other bodies such as Parish, Town or Borough Councils.

6. SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME

6.1 RESOLVED: To amend the scrutiny work programme to include the following items:

SEPTEMBER 2014 MEETING

Highways Resource Allocation

As lead in to the Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources (RPPR) process, the Committee requested a report on how resources are allocated to the different work areas within the Highways budget, together with details of substantiated insurance claims made against the Council (this follows the consideration of claims and management of risk at the Audit, Best Value & Community Services Scrutiny Committee on the 10 June 2014).

Economy and Regeneration

A report outlining what is happening in the County to include the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty; Education and Skills; the superfast Broadband project; the Local Economic Partnership (LEP); Rail Strategies; and the Small and Medium sized Enterprise (SME) Commission.

Flood Risk Management

A further report requested at the 17 March 2014 meeting on food risk management responsibilities; new Sustainable Urban Drainage Scheme (SUDS) responsibilities; and feedback from the Letwin Review on the winter flooding issues.

NOVEMBER 2014 MEETING

Safer Streets

A report on the Safer Streets initiative led by the Public Health department and the links to the Killed and Seriously Injured (KSI) performance targets and wider road safety issues.

POTENTIAL FUTURE ITEMS

6.2 The Committee discussed the following as subject as a potential future item for inclusion in the work programme:

Hydraulic Fracturing – Fracking

6.3 Councillors will need to be well briefed on this issue and have factual information should the Council be approached through it's planning responsibility.

6.4 It would be a good idea to look at the facts, as there are a lot of myths and confusion about this issue. Organisations such as the Department for Energy & Climate Change (DECC), the Environment Agency (EA), the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) and the UK Onshore Operators Group could be invited to present information and give evidence. There is also the wider context of other options for future energy generation.

6.5 As large areas of the High Weald have been identified as areas for potential future exploration, there is a question of how to deal with the issue of hydraulic fracturing. It may be better to have a whole Council Forum on this matter, so that all Councillors are involved.

7. FORWARD PLAN

7.1 The Committee considered the Forward Plan for the period 1 July 2014 to 16 December 2014. 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. URGENT ITEMS

8.1 No urgent items were raised for discussion.

9. NEXT MEETING

9.1 The meeting ended at 11:10am. The next meeting of the Committee will be held on Wednesday 10 September 2014.

COUNCILLOR RICHARD STOGDON
CHAIR