

PLACE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Place Scrutiny Committee held remotely via Teams and CC2, County Hall, Lewes on 23 September 2020.

PRESENT Councillors Bob Bowdler (Chair) Councillors Godfrey Daniel (Vice Chair), John Barnes, Martin Clarke, Chris Dowling, Nigel Enever, Darren Grover, Pat Rodohan, Stephen Shing, Andy Smith and Barry Taylor

LEAD MEMBERS Councillors Nick Bennett, Claire Dowling and Keith Glazier

ALSO PRESENT Philip Baker, Assistant Chief Executive
Kevin Foster, Chief Operating Officer
Rupert Clubb, Director of Communities, Economy and Transport
Stephanie Everest, Project Manager – Highways Funding and Development
Pippa Mabey, Service Development Manager, Contracts Management Group
Dale Poore, Contract Manager Highway Infrastructure Services

1 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

1.1 The Committee RESOLVED to agree the minutes of the meeting held on 20 November 2019 as a correct record.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

2.1 There were no apologies for absence received from members of the Committee. Apologies were received from the Lead Members, Councillors Bill Bentley and Rupert Simmons.

3 DISCLOSURES OF INTERESTS

3.1 Councillors John Barnes and Stephen Shing declared a personal, non-prejudicial interest in item 5 Reconciling Policy Performance and Resources (RPPR) as they are Conservators of Ashdown Forest which is referred to in the savings plan under this item.

4 URGENT ITEMS

4.1 There were none notified.

5 RECONCILING POLICY, PERFORMANCE AND RESOURCES (RPPR) 2021/22

5.1 The Assistant Chief Executive introduced the report. He outlined that the State of the County report in July was a key milestone in setting out the current position, but due to the ongoing financial uncertainty, it has not been possible to articulate a revised Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) at that stage. Cabinet will receive a further report on 2 October 2020

updating them on the Council's financial position and a Whole Council Forum will be held on 28 September 2020. A review of the priority service delivery outcomes and the Core Offer is being undertaken and they will be amended in the light of the response to the Covid19 and the financial uncertainty. Councillors will continue to be kept up to date with the financial position and Scrutiny will have the opportunity to comment on the revised MTFP when becomes available.

5.2 Members of the Committee discussed the financial situation and the challenges for this years RPPR financial planning process. The comments made by the Committee are summarised below.

5.3 The Committee commented that due to the uncertainty around the Council's finances and the large number of unknown factors it is very difficult for the Scrutiny Committee to contribute to the RPPR process at this stage. It would be helpful for the Committee to know how they can best work with officers over the coming months and to have an indicative timetable of when more detailed financial information is likely to be available.

5.4 The Committee understands that the Council will be compensated by Government for the additional expenditure incurred due to Covid19 and for the loss of income. However, it would like to know if the Council has been fully compensated.

5.5 The existing savings planned for services within the remit of the Committee were noted. Some Committee members commented that they would not be comfortable with cutting services further at this point in time as Covid19 has made people more dependent on the Council's services. It would be helpful to know if further savings are required, for example due to loss of income from Council Tax or not being able to deliver existing savings, and the areas of search for any new savings.

5.6 The Committee asked if there is any scope for further efficiency savings to be made by reviewing office accommodation and through office automation with the use of new technology such as Artificial Intelligence (AI). The Chief Operating Officer explained that a review of office accommodation with respect to buildings and office space requirements is underway. The Council has made large savings over the last ten years in back office systems through office automation and consequently there is limited scope to make further savings. A briefing paper or report can be prepared for the Committee outlining the work that has been done in this area.

5.7 It was noted that the lateness of the announcement by Government of the Financial Settlement for local government also presented challenges, together with the speed of other announcements regarding funding and the postponement of the Fair Funding Review. There are a number of other issues such as Brexit and the Devolution White Paper which add further challenges to financial planning. It was clarified that no indication as yet had been given on the future funding levels for Public Health.

5.8 The Assistant Chief Executive outlined that modelling work is being undertaken to assess the impact of the loss of income and other changes. There is a regular response meeting which examines the impacts of any changes on the Council's financial position. Any changes will be reported through the quarterly Council Monitoring reports and updates will be made throughout the RPPR process.

5.9 The Committee discussed and agreed to form an RPPR Board to provide comments to Cabinet on the RPPR budget setting process. It was agreed that the membership of the RPPR Board will be Councillors Bob Bowdler, Godfrey Daniel, John Barnes, Chris Dowling, Stephen Shing and Andy Smith.

5.10 The Committee RESOLVED to:

- 1) To note the difficulties in providing accurate financial estimates for the MTFP at this stage in the RPPR process due to the exceptional circumstances created by a number of factors;
- 2) Request information on the need for any further savings, and any changes to the existing savings plans; and
- 3) Form an RPPR Board comprised of the members of the Committee listed in paragraph 5.9 above.

6 SCRUTINY REVIEW OF ROAD MARKINGS

6.1 Councillor Godfrey Daniel, Chair of the review board, introduced the report. Councillors Barry Taylor and Stephen Shing comprised the other members of the review board, which examined the renewal and maintenance of road markings across the County. There was a general recognition by East Sussex County Councillors that road markings in some places needed renewing and the review examined the current position. Councillor Daniel thanked all those involved in the review which is an excellent example of scrutiny working collaboratively with officers, the Lead Member for Transport and Environment and Councillors.

6.2 Councillor Daniel outlined the six recommendations of the report. Recommendation 4 recommends that road markings are given greater priority for funding, which has been recognised through the allocation of an extra £165,000 of funding. Recommendation 5 recommends recharging the cost of renewing parking enforcement road markings to the parking budget. This is consistent with the way in which the other costs of operating a Civil Parking Enforcement (CPE) scheme are funded. This will then free up money for the maintenance of highway road markings. Recommendation 6 looks at future areas of funding and members of the Committee are engaged with the re-procurement of the Highways Maintenance contract which can address this need (recommendation 6c).

6.3 The members of the Committee discussed the report of the review board. It was clarified that the £24,000 that would be recharged to the parking budget if recommendation 5 is agreed, would be used on other road marking work and makes logical sense given the way other CPE costs are charged. The Director of Communities, Economy and Transport added that this would also reduce the parking surplus available to carry out other transport schemes.

6.4 Members of the review board and Committee commented on the positive improvement they had seen in the condition of road markings in their Divisions since the additional road marking team had been working across the County. The Committee noted the thoroughness of the review and supported the recommendations contained in the report of the review board. The Committee agreed the report of the review board and resolved to make recommendations to Cabinet and Full Council.

6.5 The Committee RESOLVED to endorse the report and make recommendations to Cabinet for comment, and Full Council for approval.

7 HIGHWAYS HISTORIC INTEREST STREET FURNITURE AND MATERIALS - POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

7.1 The Project Manager, Highways Funding and Development introduced the report. The current approach, with the exception of the 18 streets listed in the policy, is to replace street furniture with modern materials that have a longer asset life that are easier and more cost effective to maintain. The Department does not have a specific budget for the maintenance or replacement of items of street furniture of historic interest on a like for like basis. Therefore, funding has to be found from the existing highway maintenance budgets or other sources.

7.2 Currently, the Council shares planned maintenance and replacement programmes with Conservation Officers, who can then raise issues or consult wider on any proposed changes. A

review of the existing policy has been carried out together with the Conservation Officers from the District and Borough Councils. A new policy has been developed as outlined in the report and the Scrutiny Committee is invited to comment on the proposed new approach.

7.3 The Chair drew the Committee's attention to the written comments submitted by Councillor John Ungar on the report and outlining some of the issues experienced in his Division on this subject. The Committee discussed the report and the proposed new policy. A summary of their comments is given below.

7.4 The Committee commented that it was timely to look at the policy and approach to street furniture of historic interest. In many areas, such as historic villages and older parts of larger settlements, the condition of heritage assets has a direct impact on tourism and the attractiveness of these areas which needs to be considered. The preservation of the historic character of these areas will bring benefits to the County. The Project Manager, Highways Funding and Development explained that the team do explore other areas of funding, such as the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) where possible and the use of embellishments to make modern replacements more in keeping and sympathetic to the character of local areas.

Maintenance and Utility Reinstatements

7.5 It was noted that inappropriate maintenance such as the use of jet washing and road sweepers can damage surfaces and historic features such as stone setts and pavements. Also, there is a problem with Utility Company re-instatement work not replacing materials like for like and therefore damaging the appearance of areas, including the newly constructed Eastbourne town centre scheme. The Director of Communities, Economy and Transport responded that Utility Companies can be challenged on the quality of re-instatement works, but they do have the ability to make temporary reinstatements following emergency works and then follow up later with a full reinstatement. The Contract Manager, Highway Infrastructure Services explained that street sweeping and cleaning is the responsibility of District and Borough Councils, but the team do liaise with them on maintenance issues.

Cast Iron Heritage Light Columns

7.6 It was clarified that the way in which cast iron lamp posts are unsafe is due to the cast iron material used in their construction and their location at the front edge of the pavement where they can more easily be struck and damaged by vehicles. The re-use of historic light columns elsewhere is done at the cost of other authorities (e.g. Borough, District, Town and Parish Councils). They need to be refurbished and made safe before they are re-installed in another location.

7.7 Cast iron is a brittle material and it is not possible to test the structural integrity of cast iron columns in situ in the same way as steel columns. It is very costly and impractical to send old cast iron columns away for safety testing. When they reach end of life, it is not possible to ensure they are safe with any certainty. Consequently, they are replaced to steel columns located at the rear of the pavement. When old columns are relocated to parks and other locations they are in positions where they are less likely to be hit by vehicles and therefore pose a lower risk.

Summary

7.8 In general, the Committee supported the new policy approach, but were clear that local County Councillors must be given prior notification of any works or proposals that affect street furniture of historic interest. This would give them time to speak to residents and research alternative sources of funding if there is a desire to retain more ornate or historical items of street furniture. In that respect the proposed new policy needs strengthening so that County Councillors are notified.

7.9 The Committee recommended that the flow chart on page 133 of the report be amended to reflect this and consideration be given to involving Parish and Town Councils, who may be in a position to fund alternatives to modern replacements. For example, through the use of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding or through their precept raising powers. The Director of Communities, Economy and Transport agreed to amend the flow chart and policy accordingly.

7.10 The Committee RESOLVED to:

- 1) Recommend that the proposed new policy and flow chart be amended so that County Councillors are notified in advance of works or changes to items of street furniture of historic interest; and
- 2) Endorse the proposed new policy approach that moves away from a focus on the 18 streets and takes a broader view of street furniture features that have historic interest and contribute to the character of local areas.

8 WORK PROGRAMME

8.1 The Committee discussed the work programme and the reports for the forthcoming Place Scrutiny Committee meetings. It was agreed to defer the update report on the Scrutiny Review of the Effectiveness of School Travel Plans from the November meeting to the meeting to held on 17 March 2021.

8.2 It was agreed to add a report to the Committee's work programme on the use of office automation and AI in back office systems, as discussed in paragraph 5.6 of the minutes.

8.3 The Committee discussed the progress of the various projects to introduce temporary measures to promote walking and cycling under the Active Travel Scheme. It was noted that an announcement had not been made on the proposals made under tranche 2 of the scheme. The Committee discussed whether to add a report on this topic to a future meeting agenda. It was agreed that the Director of Communities, Economy and Transport would provide a verbal update to the Committee at the meeting on 25 November 2020 under the work programme item.

8.4 The Committee RESOLVED to amend the work programme in accordance with paragraphs 8.1, 8.2 and 8.3 above.

The meeting ended at 11.28 am.

Councillor Bob Bowdler (Chair)