

PLACE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Place Scrutiny Committee held Remotely via Teams and CC1, County Hall, Lewes on 25 November 2020.

PRESENT	Councillor 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, Bill Bentley, Claire Dowling and Rupert Simmons
ALSO PRESENT	Philip Baker, Assistant Chief Executive Kevin Foster, Chief Operating Officer Ian Gutsell, Chief Finance Officer Nigel Brown, Assistant Director Property Nicky Wilkins, Head of Strategy & Engagement Rupert Clubb, Director of Communities, Economy and Transport Andy Arnold, Environment Team Manager Karl Taylor, Assistant Director Operations Dale Poore, Contract Manager Highway Infrastructure Services Ruby Brittle, Stakeholder and Engagement Manager

9 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

9.1 The Committee RESOLVED to agree the minutes of the meeting held on 23 September 2020 as a correct record.

10 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

10.1 There were no apologies for absence.

11 DISCLOSURES OF INTERESTS

11.1 Councillor Godfrey Daniel declared a person non prejudicial interest in item 6 on the agenda as he is a Blue Badge holder and this item refers to the Blue Badge application process.

12 URGENT ITEMS

12.1 There were none.

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

13.1 The Assistant Chief Executive introduced the report. He outlined that there was still considerable uncertainty around the Government's Spending Review which was due to be announced later in the day. It was likely that the Council would not receive full details of the financial settlement of funding from central Government until later in December.

13.2 The Committee discussed the report and commented on several aspects. A summary of the points raised is given below.

Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP)

13.3 The Committee noted the projected budget deficit of £11.548 million for 2021/22 in the updated MTFP and the scenarios outlined in the report. It asked for further details of some of the larger budget pressures described in the table on pages 39 and 40 of the report namely:

- Looked After Children (LAC) placement costs (MTFP reference Z)
- Adult Social Care (ASC) future demand modelling (MTFP reference AD); and
- Council Tax collection fund deficit (MTFP reference AF)

13.4 The Chief Finance Officer explained that the financial planning process keeps budget pressures under review during the course of the year. Some of the cost pressures identified through the MTFP are related to increased costs due to Covid19. The approach to the current year's budget (2020/21) is to identify Covid19 costs and non Covid19 costs separately and they will be reported through Council Monitoring reports. It is assumed that the Council will be compensated by central Government for the majority of Covid19 related expenditure.

13.5 The growth in LAC placement costs reflects the situation that a number of children are being placed in settings due to Covid19 that are more expensive and that this cost pressure will reduce over time. The ASC future demand modelling takes into account an anticipated increase in the percentage of people being discharged from hospital with care needs that will become the responsibility of the Council initially (around 60%). The Council is working with the District and Borough councils to understand the impact on Council Tax collection rates. It is anticipated that there will be a downturn in collection rates as the number of people claiming support increases.

13.6 The Council is seeking financial certainty after the announcement of another one year financial settlement in the Spending Review 2020. The Council would like to see a return to longer term financial settlements where the Government announces revenue funding for three financial years and capital funding for four financial years.

Covid19 costs and current year deficit

13.7 The Committee asked if there was a Covid19 expenditure funding deficit at present. The Chief Finance Officer outlined that around £40 million has been paid so far to the Council in Covid19 expenditure payments from central Government. The Council has also submitted a claim for the loss of fees and charges totalling £1.6 million for the first four months of the year and there will be opportunities to make further claims. It was confirmed that the financial situation is manageable, and any funding deficit will be reported through the quarterly Council Monitoring reports. The funding gap reported in quarter 1 was around £2 million, which can be covered by reserves if necessary. This is the only potential draw on reserves in the current financial year.

Reserves and Contingency

13.8 The Committee asked if there was a major budget shortfall whether the level of reserves held is sufficient to cope with the financial pressures placed on the Council. The Council has a robust reserves position and holds £10 million as a general contingency reserve in line with the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) guidance. It holds a total of around £100 million in reserves, the majority of which are ringfenced for specific purposes (e.g. schools, public health, waste contract, capital programme and insurance reserves). Around £32 million is available as financial management reserves. In addition to reserves, there is a budgeted contingency of 1% (around £3.9 million) built into the revenue budget to manage in year changes in expenditure and savings.

13.9 The Chief Finance Officer added that a number of scenarios had been modelled for the MTFP, such as the continuation of an ASC precept. The exact impact on the budget will not be known until details of the Council's funding settlement are available. Consequently, the need to draw on reserves to manage the predicted budget deficit in the next financial year may be lower.

Savings Plan

13.10 The Committee noted the savings target for the Library and Information Service contained in the savings plan and commented on the important role that libraries play in providing access to the internet and information technology support. It asked whether the savings would mean further library closures. The Lead Member for Communities and Safety clarified that there are no plans for further library closures and there would be no library closures in the next financial year. The planned savings will be achieved from other areas such as the book stock fund where demand for physical books has reduced and e-books increased.

Core Offer and Priority & Delivery Outcomes

13.11 The Committee made a number of comments on the updated Core Offer, Priority Outcomes and Delivery Outcomes.

- Social care and health integration. East Sussex County Council (ESCC) is working with partners to integrate social care and health services but this positive work is not referred to specifically.
- Public Health. Whether there is sufficient prominence given to Public Health in the updated Core Offer in the context of work involved in dealing with Covid19.
- Increased reliance on the internet and Information Technology and whether this is reflected in delivery outcomes.
- Working with the community and voluntary sector. In the wording of the 4th bullet point after "As one Council we will..." in the Core Offer, it would be preferable to use the word 'minimise' instead of 'avoid' so that it would read:
We will:
 - *work effectively with the community and voluntary sector, including to minimise the need for statutory services;*
- Archives & Record Service. The Core Offer should allow the Council to continue to receive archive material even if it is not possible to catalogue and make it available immediately, otherwise there is a risk of damaging the historic record.

RPPR Board

13.12 The RPPR Board meeting will be held on Tuesday 22 December 2020 and it was noted that Cllr Rodohan will join the RPPR Board. The Chair invited other members of the Committee to join the RPPR Board should they wish.

13.13 The Committee RESOLVED to note the information in the Cabinet RPPR report of 2 October 2020 (appendix A) and the updated Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP).

14 USE OF OFFICE AUTOMATION AND ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) SYSTEMS

14.1 The Head of Strategy & Engagement IT&D introduced the report. It was outlined how the use of Robotic Process Automation (RPA) software technology and virtual assistants can increase efficiency, accuracy and productivity. The Corporate Management Team (CMT) has approved the proof of concept work on a virtual assistant Chatbot for the Blue Badge application process, which is one of the top five pages accessed on the Council's website. The application process has a lot of repetitive steps which are suitable for automation.

14.2 CMT has also approved the business case for a software platform to enable other teams across the organisation to use process automation RPA technology on a service needs basis. There is a four stage plan for the development of new automated processes. A number of candidates for automated processes have been identified by services, including an application within the Social Services team for payments.

14.3 The Committee thanked officers for a very interesting report and discussed various aspects of the use of automated systems. It was confirmed that the intention is to use these systems to make better use of the resources we have now and to improve efficiency. The guiding principle is to use automated systems such as virtual assistants in situations where they work well, thereby freeing up human resources for the processes that people do best.

14.4 The Committee observed that it was important to retain the facility to be able to speak to someone where people need to access a service that way or need help at that point in the process. It was clarified that the automated applications are service led and are designed in conjunction with services so they will be tailored to their needs. They are not intended to take away the option of being able to speak to someone or to make them impersonal. There will always be 'hand off' points in the automated processes where it will be possible to speak to a human operator. By automating some processes, the intention is to give staff more time to deal with the more complicated enquiries. The use of virtual assistants is intended to enhance residents' experience by allowing them to search across different sources of information.

14.5 The Committee commented that the use of office automation is a welcome development and area that scrutiny should continue to keep an overview of. There are clear advantages and the ability to bring together various sources of information on one place is very useful.

14.6 The Committee RESOLVED to note the update on the Council's work to utilise automation to ease demand and increase efficiencies to support the Core Offer.

15 SCRUTINY REVIEW OF BECOMING A CARBON NEUTRAL COUNCIL

15.1 Councillor Martin Clarke, Chair of the Review Board, introduced the report. The review is structured around the Council's Climate Emergency Plan examining the actions necessary for the Council to become carbon neutral in its own operations. The Review Board makes a number of recommendations which fall into three categories:

- Recommendations where the Council has direct control to make the necessary changes;
- Recommendations for specific projects to show what can be done and to act as examples of best practice; and
- Recommendations where the Council can influence others, or to lobby for policy changes and resources to tackle climate change.

15.2 The Review Board is conscious of the financial pressures the Council is under and the cost implications of implementing the recommendations should be assessed through the Council's Reconciling Policy, Performance and Resources (RPPR) budget setting process where the long and short term economic, social, environmental and carbon impacts can be taken into account. The Chair of the Review Board thanked the witnesses and officers involved in the review and the Lead Members for their comments on the draft report.

15.3 The Committee discussed the report of the Review Board. The Committee commented that there are fast moving changes in technology and policy in this area, and it will be important that the outcomes of the review allow flexibility in response to these changes. The review is one of the first to be undertaken using remote meeting technology which worked really well, enabling the Review Board to speak to a wide range of witnesses and cover a lot of material in a short space of time. It was noted that where the Council is seeking to move away from the use of fossil fuels for heating and vehicles, there is some overlap with the requests the Council receives to divest the East Sussex Pension Fund from investments in fossil fuels.

15.4 The Director of Communities, Economy and Transport commented on the fast moving policy environment and drew the Committee's attention to the Government's recently announced Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution which echoes some of the topics explored in the review. The Ten Point Plan covers areas such as:

- Advancing the development of off-shore wind power;
- Driving the growth of low carbon hydrogen;
- Stopping the sale of petrol and diesel vehicles by 2030;
- Investment in green public transport, cycling and walking;
- Greener buildings; and
- Protecting the natural environment.

15.5 The Committee commented that it welcomed the report of the Review Board and wished to endorse it.

15.6 The Committee RESOLVED to endorse the report of the Review Board, and make recommendations to Cabinet for comment, and County Council for approval.

16 SCRUTINY REVIEW OF ROAD REPAIRS - MONITORING REPORT

16.1 The Contract Manager Highway Infrastructure Services introduced the report. The report is an update on the implementation of the recommendations of the scrutiny review. The review focussed on issues to do with potholes, carriageway repairs, drainage and pavements. Some of the actions have been completed whilst others are ongoing in nature. Significant progress has been made on drainage and in particular work on flooding hotspots and mapping the drainage network. A system of advisories and a velocity patcher have been used to undertake wider pothole repairs. The Team has completed a survey of all the pavements and is developing a plan of works based on that information.

16.2 The Committee discussed the update report and made a number of observations. The comments made by the Committee are summarised below.

Unclassified roads

16.3 Some members of the Committee commented that the reported 14% of unclassified roads requiring maintenance does not correlate with the condition of most roads (with the exception of the principal roads) that the public see which require some work. It was clarified that the percentage of roads requiring maintenance is a national measure as reported to the Department for Transport (DfT) which refers to roads in a 'red' condition requiring immediate repair. There is a large proportion of other roads classified as being in 'amber' condition which need some work. The original Review Board examined the prioritisation and classification of roads based on the annual survey information. The Director of Communities, Economy and Transport added that previously 25% of unclassified roads were in need of maintenance and work had been carried out on over 140 miles of road. Unclassified roads account for over 1,000 miles of the road network in the County and their condition has been improved.

Pavements

16.4 The Committee welcomed the completion of the condition survey of pavements (also known as footways) and the development of a three-year improvement plan. It noted that the condition of pavements has been an issue with residents, and it is encouraging to see where improvements have been made. This is an example of the Council doing what it says through scrutiny action. The Committee discussed funding for pavements, and it was clarified that the existing £1.6m budget would be used to prioritise those pavements in the worst condition. At this stage it is not possible to estimate the level of funding that will be required to reduce the 18% of pavements that are classified as being in 'red' condition (in need of repair).

16.5 It was noted that having pavements in good condition is key to encouraging people to walk more and focus should be given to walking routes to school and town centres. Avoiding falls on pavements is also important in terms of peoples' health and the impact falls have on the National Health Service and Adult Social Care services.

Kerbs on concrete roads

16.6 The review examined the issue of damaged 'stick on' kerbs on concrete roads where kerbs are constructed on top of the concrete road surface. The Committee asked what action had been taken to fund repair work for these kerbs. It was outlined that there is a small repair programme each year to tackle this issue, but it can be costly and complex to replace these kerbs. Often the kerbs have to be reset behind the existing road edge if there is enough space and utility service cables and pipes are not in the way (which would have to be moved). There is a small programme of works planned for next year, but it is difficult to balance the competing demands on the available budget to make this programme larger. The Contract Manager Highway Infrastructure Services offered to speak to any councillors with concerns about this issue outside the meeting.

Verges

16.7 On some rural roads large potholes develop in the verge where vehicles leave the carriageway to pass one another. This can lead to the edge of the road surface being damaged and undermined. Officers outlined that it might not be possible to repair all damaged verges within the budget available, but the service will endeavour to respond to any serious issues.

Quality of work

16.8 The Committee commented that ensuring the consistent quality of repair and re-surfacing work is an ongoing issue and asked how the Council could improve the work done by some gangs. The Contract Manager Highway Infrastructure Services responded that the Team is working hard to ensure the quality of work is to a high standard. The Team inspects a sample of all works and supervisors are checking 100% of carriageway resurfacing and pavement works. The Team have picked up a number of defects that will be rectified and the number of defects has been reduced overall.

Public perception and prioritisation

16.9 The update on the improvement in the performance measures for roads requiring maintenance is welcome, but it does not deal with the public perception that roads are in need of repair. This is the most common issue raised by the local community and through case work. Some roads are seen as more important locally, such as routes to work and arterial roads (e.g. the A259 and the C7) and have been the subject of social media campaigns for improvements. The Committee asked how the Council can respond to these sorts of issues when prioritising work.

16.10 The Contract Manager Highway Infrastructure Services outlined that the system used for prioritising repair and re-surfacing work is explained in the Members guide which was updated following the review. There is a strategy and plan that the Council is working to which is based on asset management principles, road condition (assessed by laser scanning and photographic surveys) and the road network hierarchy. This plan is adjusted regularly to deal with any unexpected deterioration in road condition. At present the Team has an annual budget of £15 million for this work, but the estimated cost of repairing all roads assessed as being in the 'red' condition category which require maintenance is £300 million.

The A259

16.11 There is a recognition that the A259 is an important route and it has been designated by the DfT as part of the Main Road Network (MRN) which recognises its strategic importance. There are plans for works to the stretch of the A259 between Newhaven and Brighton in future years, and work is co-ordinated with Brighton and Hove City Council where possible. There is work planned for next year to the circulatory road system in Newhaven and additional funding has been applied for to stabilise the section of the A259 that is slipping downhill at Rushey Hill between Newhaven and Peacehaven.

Advisories and jet patching

16.12 The Committee asked if the increased use of 'advisories' to repair wider areas around potholes had been successful and whether this approach would be used further in future. It also commented on the appearance of jet patched repairs and the debris left behind after the works. The Contract Manager Highway Infrastructure Services outlined that advisory repairs will continue to be undertaken as part of normal working practices where the budget permits. The jet patching product specification has changed. It is a better product, the appearance of repairs is better, and it is a very successful preventative maintenance treatment which can be used year-round even in winter.

Website and reporting problems

16.13 The Committee noted the low number of ESCC Councillors who were using the online reporting facility on the updated East Sussex Highways website. It was recommended that training on the highways reporting facility be included in the induction training for all new Councillors and its use is promoted to all Councillors as it is the best way of getting issues reported and resolved. The Committee commented that it would be helpful to have a simple to use app to enable people to report highway issues using their phone or other device. The Lead Member for Transport and Environment commented that she is keen to get Councillors using the website as the first option for reporting issues and there are plans to develop an app in the future.

Summary comments

16.14 Overall, the Committee recognised the good progress that has been made on implementing the recommendations of the scrutiny review. However, there are still some issues such as ensuring the consistency of the quality of work that need some further work. Some of these will be included within the work undertaken by the Highways Contract Reference Group on the future highway maintenance contract. The Lead Member for Transport and Environment commented that she is really pleased to see the progress that has been made and was part of the Review Board before becoming the Lead Member.

16.15 The Committee RESOLVED to note the updates to the recommendations and action plan set out in the report.

17 WORK PROGRAMME

Updates

17.1 The Committee received a number of updates related to previous requests and work programme items.

Emergency Active Travel Fund

17.2 The Director for Communities, Economy and Transport gave an update on the Emergency Active Travel Fund which is an allocation of Government funding to support walking and cycling during the Coronavirus pandemic. The timescales attached to the funding meant the bids for the first tranche of funding had to be put together very quickly and with minimal public consultation. Schemes had to be put on the ground quickly, although the Council did try to consult local communities and interest groups where possible. A number of neighbouring authorities have withdrawn some of the temporary schemes. The temporary scheme on Hastings seafront has subsequently been removed, but the scheme in Bexhill remains in place.

17.3 The Government has announced the second tranche of funding and the bid made by the Council has an emphasis on improving the footway network. The second tranche of funding has strict criteria, especially on timescales for delivery, which has been divisive for local communities. The Committee noted that the community blame the Council for the lack of consultation and the haste with which the schemes were implemented, when in fact the situation is a result of the criteria imposed on the funding by Government. The community would rather the money was not spent on poor schemes. A full list of the proposed schemes totalling £1.8 million funded under the second tranche has been published on the Council's website ([About the Emergency Active Travel Fund – Emergency Active Travel Fund – East Sussex County Council](#)).

17.4 The Council is also consulting on the Walking and Cycling Strategy for the County which is a longer-term piece of work which allows fuller consultation. The Committee noted that it would be better to consult with all user groups within the community, not just the existing cycling and walking groups, including those who do not currently cycle to avoid this issue becoming divisive. The Director for Communities, Economy and Transport confirmed that views on the Strategy are being sought from all groups, and having a Strategy is the best approach to this issue.

Countryside Access Strategy

17.5 The Committee asked for an update on the transfer of Seven Sisters Country Park to the South Downs National Park (SDNP) as part of the implementation of the Countryside Access Strategy. The Lead Member for Transport and Environment confirmed that approval had been granted from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and approval is expected shortly from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Councillor Chris Dowling, who is the ESCC appointed representative on the SDNP Board, confirmed that this is an important project for the SDNP and outlined that there is a lot of energy and enthusiasm on the Board for the projects to take advantage of the opportunities managing Seven Sisters Country Park presents.

Work programme items

17.6 The Committee discussed the potential items for inclusion in the work programme.

East Sussex Road Safety Programme

17.7 The Committee requested a progress report on the East Sussex Road Safety Programme be presented at the next Place Scrutiny Committee on 17 March 2021.

Business continuity and emergency planning response to the Covid19 pandemic.

17.8 The Committee noted the great work that had been done in response to the Covid19 pandemic not just in IT systems and business continuity, but all the work carried out by the Emergency Planning Team with the Sussex Resilience Forum (SRF). The Committee would like to review the lessons learnt and the way contingency budgets and business continuity plans have changed in response to the pandemic.

17.9 The Committee considered that it would be helpful to have a report on the lessons learnt and the impact on business continuity planning and resilience from the Emergency Planning Team as they support all the departments across the Council and work closely with the SRF. It would be helpful if any changes in working practices that are needed could be highlighted in the report as well as changes to business continuity plans and risk registers.

17.10 The Committee agreed to request a report to review business continuity and the emergency planning response to Covid19 to be presented to the Committee in the summer of 2021.

Glover Report on the Landscapes review: National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB's)

17.11 The Committee discussed the Landscapes review: National Parks and AONB's led by Julian Glover to consider the next steps for National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) in England and what the implications might be for East Sussex. There is also a reference to the designation of AONB's in the Government's Ten Point Action plan on the Green Industrial Revolution under the point on the Protecting the Natural Environment. A Government announcement in response to the independent review is expected in the New Year.

17.12 The Committee agreed to form a group to hold an initial scoping meeting early in the New Year to examine the implications of the Glover report (see link to the full report [Landscapes review: National Parks and AONBs - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/92442/Landscapes_review_National_Parks_and_AONBs_-_GOV.UK.pdf)).

17.13 The Committee RESOLVED to amend the work programme in line with paragraphs 17.7, 17.10 and 17.12 above.

The meeting ended at 12.30 pm.

Councillor Bob Bowdler (Chair)