

## PLACE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Place Scrutiny Committee held at Council Chamber, County Hall, Lewes on 20 March 2025.

PRESENT Councillors Matthew Beaver (Chair), Julia Hilton (Vice Chair), Ian Hollidge, Eleanor Kirby-Green, Philip Lunn, Steve Murphy, Paul Redstone, Stephen Shing, David Tutt, Trevor Webb and Brett Wright

LEAD MEMBERS Councillor Penny di Cara

ALSO PRESENT

Philip Baker, Deputy Chief Executive

Rupert Clubb, Director of Communities, Economy and Transport

Ros Parker, Chief Operating Officer

Karl Taylor, Assistant Director - Operations

Craig Lamberton, Team Manager – Passenger Transport Team

Andrew Turner, Head of Service Highways

Martin Jenks, Senior Scrutiny Adviser

## 32. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

32.1 The Committee RESOLVED to agree the minutes of the meeting held on 13 March 2025 as a correct record.

### 33. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

33.1 Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Chris Collier (Councillor Trevor Webb substituted).

## 34. DISCLOSURES OF INTERESTS

34.1 There were no disclosures of interests.

### 35. URGENT ITEMS

35.1 There were no urgent items.

### 36. RECONCILING POLICY, PERFORMANCE AND RESOURCES (RPPR) 2025/26

36.1 The Senior Scrutiny Adviser introduced the report which set out the Committee's engagement in the RPPR process for 2025/26. The Committee were invited to review their input in the RPPR process and suggest any changes to the process. The report also provided an opportunity to identify any RPPR related items for inclusion in the work programme.

36.2 The Committee discussed the report, and a summary of the questions and comments is given below.

36.3 The Committee commented that it would like to include something about the progress towards Local Government Re-organisation (LGR) in the work programme, how LGR affects decision making and how it will be reflected in the RPPR process over the next three years.

36.4 The Deputy Chief Executive outlined that Full Council had earlier agreed to add Devolution and LGR to the Place Scrutiny Committee's remit, and the Council would be setting up a scrutiny Board together with members of the People Scrutiny, to provide scrutiny input into this area of work. He acknowledged the point about how to incorporate the impacts of LGR into the RPPR process going forward.

36.5 The Committee RESOLVED to:

- 1) Review the Committee's input to the RPPR process; and
- 2) Identify any potential areas for inclusion in the Committee's future work programme on services or issues within the Committee's remit.

### 37. REVIEW OF THE FLEXIBUS SERVICE

37.1 The Team Manager, Passenger Transport Team introduced the report and gave a short presentation. He outlined the Bus Service Improvement Programme (BSIP) funding allocations which included the Digital Demand Responsive Transport (DDRT) Flexibus Service. The Flexibus Service covers over 90% of the County and over 1,500 Kilometres of roads in mainly rural areas. Flexibus also provides coverage in areas outside of East Sussex including Burgess Hill, Haywards Heath, East Grinstead and Tunbridge Wells providing connection to services in these towns and with rail services (including the Brighton mainline services). It has around 30,000 passenger trips per year. The Service does not cover Eastbourne or Hastings where bus services are provided by commercial bus operators.

37.2 The Flexibus Service has been in operation for almost two years and supports a high number of passenger trips. It has improved access to services in rural areas with 76% of residents within 30 minutes of the nearest town (this would be 9% without the Flexibus service) and 87% of residents of rural areas now within 30 minutes of the nearest GP surgery (this would be 44% without the Flexibus service). Following the Department for Transport (DfT) Transport

Analysis Guidance (TAG) it was found that the overall Benefit to Cost Ratio (BCR) for the Flexibus Services was a BCR of 3.02 (high value for money).

37.3 The Committee discussed the report, and a summary of the questions raised, and comments made is given below.

#### Bus services in urban areas

37.4 The Committee observed that there are still challenges with bus services in urban areas such as Eastbourne and Hastings as the commercial operators continue to withdraw and reduce services on the grounds of financial viability. The Committee asked if there were opportunities for the Flexibus Service to support residents in these areas. The Team Manager, Passenger Transport Team responded that although passenger numbers in these areas had gone back up to pre-Covid levels, commercial operators were struggling with cost pressures. The Council continues to provide funding for supported bus service routes across the County and has allocated BSIP funding to support conventional scheduled services.

#### Views of the Service and cancellation of booked journeys

37.5 The Committee observed that most residents thought the Flexibus Service was very good, and this was reflected in the customer satisfaction levels reported for the Service. However, one issue that has been raised involves the cancellation of booked journeys before they take place, which may deter some people from using the service if they cannot reliably get to where they need to go to, especially where the journey may be time constrained (e.g. to attend a GP appointment or catch a train etc.). The Committee asked if it would be possible to have some figures on the number of cancellations as this was often raised by Parish Councils.

37.6 The Team Manager, Passenger Transport Team outlined that when the Service first started it was the first large scale DDRT service to be launched, and no other local authority had previously provided such a scheme at that scale. In the beginning there were a number of complaints which the Team have worked hard to address and would be happy to work with Parish Councils on any remaining issues. Overall, customer satisfaction is extremely good for the Service, but it does still receive some complaints. In regard to cancellations, there have been some issues with cover for drivers and vehicle reliability, but these have largely been addressed. Although over 85% of trips involve only one person, this is not the reason for cancellations. Data on cancellations and accessing train stations by using the Service can be shared with the Committee (Action: Craig Lamberton).

37.7 The Service has introduced a taxi policy for cancelled journeys, and those people who have had their booked journeys cancelled will be contacted and offered a taxi journey. A copy of the taxi policy and information about when it was introduced and how often it is used can be provided to the Committee as well as data on the number of cancellations (Action: Craig Lamberton). The Team Manager, Passenger Transport Team added that reliability is key, and the Team are working to improve reliability (information on delays has been provided in the report). However, it should be noted that an on-demand service such as the Flexibus Service, will not have the same level of punctuality as a scheduled bus service. The Team has been looking at whether a new IT platform for the booking system could improve journey aggregation that allows more passengers to share the same vehicle/journey. The Team has been looking at using smaller vehicles, electric vehicles and taxis to improve the Service.

#### Market and advertising the service

37.8 The Committee commented that many East Sussex County Council (ESCC) councillors are very supportive of the Flexibus Service, but there were some concerns that the Service was not advertised widely enough. The Team Manager, Passenger Transport Team outlined that the Team have been working on advertising and has produced posters, hard copy leaflets and social media advertising materials. The Team have also produced an animation to promote the Flexibus Services which will be used in the coming months. The updated version of the report

circulated to the Committee has details of the marketing activity that is being undertaken, and the BSIP programme also has its own dedicated marketing officer.

37.9 The Committee asked if there is a 2-4 page summary document of the Flexibus Service which Councillors could use and give to Parish and Town councils to promote the Service. The Team Manager, Passenger Transport Team acknowledged that advertising is crucial, and the Team is working on a 2-4 page summary of the Service that could be used with residents, Parish and Town councils. There will also be another leaflet drop to residents in June/July and improvements will be made to the information on the website.

#### Funding

37.10 The Committee noted that funding for the Service has been provided until the end of the new financial year in 2025/26 and asked whether it will be continued and whether the need to fund the Exceat Bridge will have an impact on the Flexibus Service funding. The Committee also asked how much funding or increases in passenger numbers would be needed to make the Service sustainable if the BSIP funding ceased. The Team Manager, Passenger Transport Team clarified that funding the Exceat Bridge improvements will not affect the Flexibus Service funding. A further announcement from the DfT is expected later in the year on DDRT services which is likely to provide further funding for the Service. This will probably be for three years revenue funding and five years capital funding as with the existing funding. The current funding allocated to Service is £1.2 million per year and if further funding is received the Flexibus service will be continued. The Team Manager, Passenger Transport Team outlined that there are no commercially self-sustaining DDRT bus services nationally and it is highly likely that any future service will need some financial support.

#### Passenger demographic usage figures and deprivation

37.11 The Local Transport Plan 4 advocates inclusive transport and the Committee asked if there was any passenger usage data that looked at deprivation and financial exclusion, and whether people had access to a vehicle or were able to drive. The Team Manager, Passenger Transport Team responded that at currently demographic information is not collected for passenger journeys, but this is something that could be looked at especially if it would support the measurement of the benefits of Service and future funding applications. Existing analysis of the impact of the Service has shown it reduces loneliness and social isolation, which has been a key issue.

#### Service operating hours

37.12 It was clarified that the Flexibus Service operates six days a week, Monday to Saturday excluding Bank Holidays, from 7.00am until 7.00pm.

#### Service capacity

37.13 The Committee asked what the future capacity of the Service could be for East Sussex and whether there were any targets for the future Service which could help with future funding. The Team Manager, Passenger Transport Team outlined that the Team is working to increase sign-ups to the Service as well as working to encourage existing users to use the Service more often. The number of passengers per trip is one of the key performance indicators and the Team is trying to find an IT system that would enable more passenger aggregation. In terms of what good looks like, it is difficult to say what this is for the Service, but the more people that use the service then the cost per trip reduces. The target that is set out in the report is to achieve a 50% increase in passenger numbers by the end of the 2025/26 financial year. The aggregation of passenger trips will be key in achieving increased passenger numbers and this is dependent on the booking software.

#### BSIP Board membership

37.14 The Committee asked who sits on the BSIP Board and what the arrangements are for democratic representation on the Board. The Team Manager, Passenger Transport Team

explained that the Director of Communities, Economy and Transport (CET), the Assistant Director Operations, Stagecoach and representatives from other local bus operators sit on the BSIP Board. The Director of CET outlined that these are Operational Boards and that the democratic accountability for the BSIP is through the Lead Member for Transport and Environment. There is also oversight of the Programme by the DfT which ultimately has ministerial oversight. The Team Manager, Passenger Transport Team added that there are also quarterly stakeholder engagement sessions which involve the District and Borough councils and other stakeholders in the BSIP.

37.15 The Committee RESOLVED to note the report in Appendix 1 and the progress that has been made in the delivery of the Flexibus Service.

### 38. SCRUTINY REVIEW OF POTHOLE MANAGEMENT - POTHOLE MANAGEMENT REVIEW UPDATE

38.1 The Head of Service Highways introduced the report. He set out that of the thirteen recommendations contained in the Scrutiny Review of Pothole Management all but one of the recommendations had been implemented, and only recommendation 1 remained to be completed. This was around the asset management approach for highway drainage, which is currently being worked on, with completion anticipated to be in July when a report will be submitted to the Lead Member.

38.2 The Head of Service Highways outlined that the work on the asset management approach had been expanded to include the updating of other asset management plans including those for carriageways, footways, cycleways, and soft landscaping as well as the one for drainage. Work has started on reviewing these plans and it is expected to have a final draft ready for April/May time, with a view to presenting them to the Lead Member in July. There will be a second phase of work which will review asset management plans for lighting, traffic signals, signs and lines, carriageway skid resistance and structures which is due for completion in December. It was clarified that the Committee has seen a response to the letter written in regard to recommendation 2 regarding utility company regulation and re-instatement work.

38.3 The Committee discussed the report, and a summary of the questions raised, and points made is given below.

#### Drainage asset management review

38.4 The Committee commented that it would be useful to have a bullet point summary of what the review of the drainage asset management plan is covering. The Head of Service Highways outlined that it would be possible to provide a bullet point summary of what the drainage asset management plan will cover (Action: Andrew Turner). He considered it important that residents and the Committee have a clear understanding of what level of service can be delivered within the budget and capacity available. This will be included in the information about the drainage asset management plan.

#### Pothole safety defect repair flexibility

38.5 The Committee observed that recommendation 9 refers to the Council taking a flexible approach to repairing safety defects and that if repair gangs find other safety defects that meet the intervention criteria, they should have the flexibility to repair them at the same time as those that have been reported. Residents still question why the Council does not repair all safety defects at the same time and this inconsistency is a key issue for residents.

38.6 The Director of CET responded that the scrutiny review had explored the reasons why it was not possible to repair every pothole if they do not meet the intervention criteria. The Council has a limited amount of funds for pothole repairs, and it should be noted that safety defect

repairs are paid for via a lump sum in the contract which remains the same even if all the safety defects are not repaired at the same time. If the Council fixed all potholes at the same time, it would be financially challenging. However, Highway Stewards do have the ability to raise advisory requests for larger patching repairs where they consider the road surface is likely to deteriorate and more defects are developing.

38.7 The Head of Service Highways reiterated that the Council has adopted a risk-based approach to pothole repairs and the contractor is empowered to take action on safety defect repairs. The Committee members asked the Head of Service Highways to remind the Highway Stewards that they do have some flexibility and discretion, as this was not always evident in the approach that they were taking. This especially applied to when there were safety defects of different categories such as category 2, five-day repairs and category 3, twenty- eight day repairs in the same location. Often by the time the 5 day repair was carried out the category 3 defect had become a category 2 intervention level defect. This experience was echoed by a number of Committee members, where multiple repairs gangs visited the same location to repair safety intervention level defects. Councillor Kirby-Green also cited an example of a road with outstanding safety defects where a resident had reported one of them to the Out of Hours service thereby bypassing the Highways Steward. This was fixed as an urgent repair by 5.00am the next day, but the other similar safety defects in the same stretch of road were left un-repaired.

#### Additional DfT pothole funding performance criteria

38.8 The Committee asked for clarification on the performance criteria the Council has to meet in order to receive the full amount of the £1.9 million additional pothole funding from the DfT. The Head of Service Highways responded that as far as he was aware, the DfT had not yet provided the information on the performance criteria the Council is required to meet in order to receive all of the £1.9 million additional funding.

#### Reporting system portal

38.9 The Committee commented that they found being able to see all reported defects on the portal useful, but once a Steward has investigated a report and if no action is recommended, it is no longer visible on the system. This was seen as a problem and the Committee asked if such reports could remain visible. The Committee also commented that it would be helpful if the information on the website portal was a 'one stop shop' giving information on both what had been reported and what works are planned. The Head of Service Highways responded that it would be useful for the portal to be a 'one stop shop' to be able to look at what works are going on and to be able to log defects. The portal is a good way of reporting defects but requires some development to make improvements.

#### Balfour Beatty Living Places (BBLP) improvement plan

38.10 The committee asked when they would be receiving an update on the BBLP improvement plan that was put in place to improve contract performance. The Assistant Director Operations outlined that this will be covered in an upcoming Whole Council Forum that will take place in June.

#### Utility company reinstatement works

38.11 The Committee noted recommendation 3 on the levels of inspection for utility company reinstatement works and that many residents complain about the quality of reinstatement works. The Committee asked if the inspection levels were adequate and whether the Council should be taking a stricter approach. The Committee also commented that the communication about utility repair works could be improved. The Head of Service Highways responded that for any works that would have a significant impact, communications are sent out about the works by letter, but these are not always read by residents. The Team is working on a postcard notification and also the use of social media such as Facebook, X, Instagram and other communications channels to advise residents about works.

38.12 In terms of inspection levels, the Head of Service Highways commented that he was still forming a view and will track the issue regarding the performance of the utility companies and whether stricter measures are needed. He commented that he would be happy to leave recommendation 3 as open and ongoing which the Committee agreed (Action Andrew Turner). The Head of Service Highways also highlighted that the Lane Rental scheme starts in April, and this will provide a further tool to help manage utility company performance and re-instatement.

38.13 The Committee commented that it was disappointed with the response received from the previous Government to the letter sent regarding recommendation 2 and the regulation of utility company works. The Committee asked whether it was worth approaching Government again about this issue.

#### Concrete roads and kerbs

38.14 Councillor Shing asked if the maintenance of concrete roads and kerbs would be included in the work on the asset management plans. The Head of Service Highways outlined that concrete roads and kerbs will be part of the asset management plan for carriageways and footways.

#### Visibility of website information – recommendation 13

38.15 The Committee commented that not all pothole reports appeared to be logged on the reporting system and category 4 observations were not visible on the web site. There also appeared to be an issue when all the safety intervention level defects in the same location are not repaired at the same time. This sometimes results in some defects being marked as complete when they have not been repaired. The Head of Service Highways commented that there is a need to have greater visibility of the forward plan of works on the website to residents can see the works that are planned, with a high confidence one year plan, and then two year and five year plans. There is a need to deal with all reports and articulate what the Council is going to do about them, so what is being asked for can be matched against existing schemes.

38.16 The Committee RESOLVED to note the updates to the pothole review recommendations contained in the Appendix to the report.

### 39. WORK PROGRAMME

39.1 The Chair introduced the report, and the Committee discussed whether to make any additions to the work programme. It was noted that the work on Devolution and LGR may have an impact on the work programme and the capacity of officers and the Committee to undertake other scrutiny work. Committee members commented that it should be prepared to prune and delay topics for consideration on the work programme if the work on LGR takes up a lot of time.

39.2 Councillor Tutt suggested adding an item on roadside litter and the frequency of litter clearing, including which roads the County Council is responsible for. The Director of CET outlined that litter clearing at the side of roads and street cleansing is a District and Borough Council function and not the responsibility of ESCC.

39.3 The Committee discussed recommendation 4 of the report, which was to form a reference group, together with members from the People Scrutiny Committee, to provide scrutiny input into the proposals and arrangements for Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). Councillor Redstone suggested that the Committee should consider six points when considering this issue. They were:

- The need to be agile as things change.
- The broad scope of what the Committee will be looking at and what the needs are of conducting this piece of work. The Committee may need to split up the work into sub-

groups to work on different issues and then report back to an umbrella forum of the reference group.

- The workload of officials and officers due to LGR and to look at what papers, reports and information are already available or could be provided with minimal work. The reference group will probably want to meet with representatives from other local authorities in a similar position or who have gone through the unitarization process already/recently.
- Quite a few of the policies will be Government policies not ESCC policies, which are outside of scrutiny's remit or ability to influence.
- The reference group needs to be cross party and democratic, and to get people to work together on this issue.
- Often the Committee scrutinises things that are currently happening, whereas scrutinising LGR will require scrutinising things that are going to happen in the future, which will require a different mindset.

39.4 Councillor Hollidge added that as the report to Full Council on the changes to the Place Scrutiny Committee's remit suggested, the Committee will have insight on and oversight of the LGR process and the existing system. There will also be a need for officers to suggest areas where scrutiny input is needed, as well as the Committee outlining areas of interest. Councillor Wright commented that this work will involve scrutinising documents from Government and those prepared by officers.

39.5 The Committee RESOLVED to:

- 1) Agree the agenda items for the future Committee meetings, including items listed in the work programme in appendix 1;
- 2) Consider a scrutiny review topic for progression by the Committee;
- 3) Review upcoming items on East Sussex County Council's (ESCC) Forward Plan in appendix 2 to identify any issues that may require more detailed scrutiny for inclusion in the committee's future work programme; and
- 4) Agree to form a reference group, together with members from the People Scrutiny Committee, to provide scrutiny input into the proposals and arrangements for Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation.

The meeting ended at 2.55 pm.

Councillor Matthew Beaver (Chair)