

Extraordinary Overview and Scrutiny Committee



St Edmundsbury
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the **Extraordinary Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held on **Wednesday 31 October 2018** at **4.00 pm** in **Conference Chamber, West Suffolk House, Western Way, Bury St Edmunds IP33 3YU**

Present: **Councillors**

Chairman Diane Hind
Vice Chairman Mike Chester

Simon Brown
John Burns
Paula Fox
Paul Hopfensperger

Margaret Marks
Andrew Speed
Frank Warby

Substitutes attending:
Patricia Warby

By Invitation:
Mary Evans, Suffolk County Council (Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Rural Affairs)
Kerry Allen, Suffolk County Council (Principal Transport Planner)
John Clements, Suffolk County Council, (Head of Infrastructure Management)

Also in attendance:
Susan Glossop, Cabinet Member for Planning and Growth
John Griffiths, Leader of St Edmundsbury Borough Council
Julia Wakelam, St Edmundsbury Borough Council

257. **Substitutes**

The following substitution was declared:

Councillor Patricia Warby for Councillor Clive Springett.

258. **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Patrick Chung, Robin Pilley, Richard Rout, Clive Springett and Sarah Stamp.

Councillor Anthony Williams was also unable to attend.

259. Public Participation

There were no questions/statements from members of the public.

260. Suffolk County Council Highways Services - Progress Report

The Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee welcomed all those present, especially Councillor Mary Evans (Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Rural Affairs), Kerry Allen (Principal Transport Planner) and John Clements (Head of Infrastructure Management) from Suffolk County Council (SCC), who had been invited to the meeting.

The newly appointed Suffolk County Council Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Rural Affairs, Councillor Mary Evans had been asked to address the Committee on progress made in relation to the recommendations made at the Extraordinary Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 25 October 2017, and her achievements to date and aspirations for the future.

This meeting was a follow-up from last year when the then Portfolio Holder Councillor Jane Storey had attended, and members expressed their dissatisfaction with Highways generally at that time. The recommendations made to Councillor Jane Storey were outlined in Report No: OAS/SE/18/029 and all scrutiny members and substitutes had received a copy of her reply in January 2018. Some of the replies received were disappointing and as Chairman of the Committee, I responded to reiterate three particular points:

1. Completely denying Borough and town/district councils to build relationships with a Community Engineer was a mistake especially given concerns around a lack of communication;
2. The Committee was pleased that County Officers would now pay heed to our Master Plans but it begged the question why Highways had not done this previously especially as they had been involved in the Master Plan process from the beginning. The Planning system had to take account of local plans so why did not Highways automatically do the same?
3. Poor standard of work.

Councillor Mary Evans attended the meeting last year in her capacity as the Chair of the Suffolk County Council Scrutiny Committee and shared all of our frustrations with the performance of Highways. I welcome her again today in her new role, and look forward to hearing what improvements had been made and what she aspires to do for the future.

Finally, the Chairman welcomed Councillors John Griffiths, Susan Glossop, and Julia Wakelam who had been invited to the meeting as observers, before handing over to Councillor Mary Evans.

Councillor Mary Evans firstly thanked the Committee for the invitation and introduced John Clements who was responsible for operations and Kerry Allen

who was responsible for the strategy side of highways. She then acknowledged there had been some disconnection in the past in how highways had operated. However, since taking over the Cabinet post in late May 2018 with enthusiasm, a new Highways Improvement and Innovations Board had been established. Its first task was to look at the long standing issue of potholes. As part of that work the Board had identified a sample road with potholes and it was reviewing the process of reporting issues; the amount of time road gangs spent travelling to sites; and the number of pothole categories. It had been identified that the only way to gain efficiencies was to reduce the length of time spent on site by road gangs. Also the number of categories in repairing potholes had now been reduced down to three. The Board was also looking at:

- How to manage road closures more efficiently as over the summer months there had been more emergency road closures requested by Anglian Water than normal. Where road closures were in place, a notice should be displayed explaining who was doing the work.
- Permits for road closures which would mean utility companies would have to apply to SCC for a permit. (Essex County Council was being used as an example).
- Whether the public was receiving adequate advance notice of road closures and whether road diversions made sense; and
- The whole grass cutting process.

Everything being carried out by the Board was being fully researched, planned and executed.

Committee members then had an opportunity to ask questions and comment on what they had heard. Members discussed the new funding from central government; street lights; uneven roads; size of potholes; yellow boxes on roads; service level agreements with parish/town councils; the highways budget/how it was broken down; and a Chapter 8 initiative for working with parish/councils, to which comprehensive responses were provided.

In response to a particular question raised regarding what SCC paid out in insurance claims for car and pedestrian injuries, the Cabinet Member agreed to provide a written response following the meeting.

The following detailed discussions/questions were raised and responses were provided as follows:

(a) Potholes

The Chairman opened the questioning by stating that there were many reoccurring potholes and gave an example in Fornham Road, where there was a pothole which appeared at regular intervals and was patched up, then others appeared at the extremity of the patch. She questioned instead of keep patching up the hole, why not close the road and relay the whole area by machine as she felt it would be more cost effective, although initially expensive to carry out a comprehensive

re-surfacing of the whole area rather than keep revisiting to patch up the potholes.

In response the Cabinet Member stated that an element of the highways budget had been set aside to carry out full patching work.

John Clements (Head of Infrastructure Management), explained about the complex issues around potholes and how they created weaknesses where potholes reoccurred. Furthermore, each pothole cost Highways roughly £100 to fix.

Currently, Highways was trailing how it could use video data to capture potholes across the county as it wanted to be able to look at large areas to then plan for capital investment. It was also looking at how road networks performed. By looking at using artificial intelligence, Highways would like to be able to pick up road unevenness before potholes formed. It was constantly looking at different solutions/various ways of repairing potholes, and was about to trial "thermal" repairs. It was also looking at how defects were marked up by road teams.

Also, due to the severe bad winter last year, Highways was overwhelmed with potholes and had to carry out temporary fixes/repairs at the time on road safety grounds.

(b) Communication

Members raised concerns that the lack of communication was still prevalent, in particular when reporting issues via the Highways reporting system. Users received an initial thank you email when reporting an issue, but did not always receive any follow up communication.

In response the Cabinet Member acknowledged that there were still areas where communication needed to be improved. Rougham Depot had been understaffed in the past, and was now been addressed. A Community Engagement Officer was being recruited whose role would be to go out and meet with parish/town councils. Open days at the depots were being offered to parish/town councillors so they could talk to Highways staff.

Councillor Alexander Nicoll, Member with Special Responsibility for Highways Information wanted to send out the right tone of message and was looking at ways of improving the wording of the automated responses on the Highways reporting system.

All Suffolk County Councillors received the "Highways Matters" newsletter, which the Cabinet Member would like to see go to all parish/town councils as well as district/borough councillors and would discuss with the county communications team.

(c) Road Gangs

Members raised concerns about the workmanship of some potholes, which in some cases they felt was poor. A number of examples were provided, such as grouting around a manhole cover on Angel Hill/Abbeygate Street, which had been done numerous times and cracked within weeks. Members questioned how work carried out by road gangs were monitored.

In response members were informed that Highways were able to track which road gangs worked where. Highways was also looking at software run via GIS which would be able to look at data for particular roads and collect photos of potholes before and after work was carried out.

(d) Verge/Grass Cutting

The Chairman questioned why had there been a delay in cutting rural verges, and whether it was safe allowing verges to be cut under artificial light during the night/early hours of the morning.

In response, members were advised that Highways was encouraged to do more work at night as there was less traffic, and using artificial light at night was not an issue for cutting grass so long as traffic management crews (support vehicles) were in place.

Members also raised concerns about the lack of co-ordination between Highways and other organisations regarding grass cutting and questioned why not align contracts.

In response, the Cabinet Member agreed that Highways needed to work smarter and work better together with other organisations.

(e) Bury Town Centre Masterplan

Members questioned the need to integrate with Highways to now be able to deliver on the Masterplan.

In response, the Cabinet Member advised that Highways wanted to be involved, officers did comment on the plans, but would like a personal invitation to attend future meetings.

(f) Parkway Roundabout, Bury St Edmunds

Members raised concerns about the new roundabout (road layout) at Parkway, Bury St Edmunds as drivers approaching the roundabout were using the wrong lanes, and questioned what could be done to rectify the issue.

In response, the Cabinet Member informed members that new signs and white lines had been put in place directing traffic. However, traffic flow would be monitored.

(g) Invited observers

Invited observers also had an opportunity to ask questions and comment on what they had heard.

Councillor Julia Wakelam, a substitute member on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee asked a number of questions to which comprehensive responses were provided. In particular she raised concerns about the damage heavy lorries were causing to the roads in Bury St Edmunds and questioned whether a weight restriction could be put in place.

In response the Cabinet Member stated that heavy lorries had every right to use the roads through the town centre to make deliveries to businesses. She explained that it would be very difficult to put a weight restriction on a road and any restriction would be up to the police to enforce. Furthermore, the Highways Authority would not want to make it even harder for retail business to operate.

[Councillor Julia Wakelam (invited guest), left the meeting at 5.28pm].

Councillor John Griffiths, Leader of St Edmundsbury Borough Council wished to compliment the Cabinet Member on the work of the Highways Improvement and Innovations Board and her Highways presentation to the Committee. He then questioned how the West Suffolk Councils could help Highways in doing their job better; and also issued an open invitation for the Cabinet Member to be involved in future meetings of the Bury Town Centre Masterplan.

[Councillors Frank Warby and Patricia Warby left the meeting at 5.43pm, during the consideration of this item].

In response the Cabinet Member advised that once Civil Parking Enforcement was in place, that money would then revert back to the local authorities. Regarding the Bury Town Centre Masterplan, she reiterated that Highways did comment on the plans, and acknowledged the personal invitation given by Councillor Griffiths to attend future meetings. She then acknowledged that there was a need to find better ways of working together and would welcome the opportunity to meet with fellow Cabinet Members at the West Suffolk Councils.

Kerry reiterated that Highways officers were working with the West Suffolk Councils Planning and Economic Development Teams to formulate solutions together. Highways was working as best it could to deliver that vision.

[Councillor John Griffiths (invited guest), left the meeting at 5.45pm].

The Chairman wanted to reiterate earlier comments made by Councillor Griffiths on the work of the Highways Improvement and Innovations Board. Furthermore, there had been a definite improvement in the operation of Highways, and this was down to more direction, control, enthusiasm, and a more hands on approach by the Cabinet Member for Highways.

[Councillor Andrew Speed left the meeting at 5.50pm during the consideration of this item].

Councillor Mary Evans summed up by again thanking the Committee for the invitation and stated she had a really great team behind her who were committed in their work. Also during the meeting she had noted a number of local issues which had been raised by members, which she would follow up on, and reiterated if there were any other local issues which had not been followed up to please let her know outside of this meeting.

The Chairman on behalf of the Committee thanked Councillor Mary Evans, Kerry Allen and John Clements for attending the meeting. She then summed up the meeting by highlighting five areas where it was felt further improvement could be made:

- 1) By ensuring that officers follow the protocol for the reporting tool to ensure that replies reach the appropriate person;
- 2) Actively monitoring the poor workmanship of some road gangs;
- 3) Seek more combined working with District; Borough; Town and Parish councils.
- 4) SCC feeds back to the West Suffolk Councils the results of their monitoring of the new roundabout at Parkway, Bury St Edmunds;
- 5) The Cabinet Member for Highways to be specifically included as an attendee to all future Bury Town Centre Master Plan meetings.

With the vote being unanimous, it was

RECOMMENDED:

That the Suffolk County Council Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Rural Affairs be asked to give consideration to the following in that:

- 1) Highways officers follow the protocol for the reporting tool to ensure that replies reach the appropriate person;
- 2) Highways officers actively monitors the poor workmanship of some road gangs;
- 3) Suffolk County Council Highways seeks more combined working with District; Borough; Town and Parish councils.
- 4) Suffolk County Council Highways feeds back to the West Suffolk Councils the results of their monitoring of the new roundabout at Parkway, Bury St Edmunds;

- 5) The Cabinet Member for Highways, Transport and Rural Affairs to be specifically included as an attendee to all future Bury Town Centre Master Plan meetings.

Note: The Chairman of the Committee would formally write to the Suffolk County Council Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport and Rural Affairs recommending that consideration be given to the above recommendations.

The Meeting concluded at 6.10 pm

Signed by:

Chairman
