

Suffolk County Council – Scrutiny Committee

**Extract from the minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Committee
held on 27 July 2017**

10. Highways Services Integrated Teams

At Agenda Item 5 the Committee considered a report setting out progress with the development of new integrated team arrangements for the delivery of highways services.

The Chairman welcomed the following witnesses:

Councillor James Finch, Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport
Mark Stevens, Assistant Director (Operational Highways)
Jim Harker, Interim General Manager, Suffolk Highways
Peter Ingram, Head of Network Regulation, Kier Services
John Clements, Head of Infrastructure Management
Chris Graves, Service Manager, Resource Management
Jenny Wilson, Head of Strategic Services, Suffolk Highways

The Chairman also welcomed Councillors John Burns, Susan Glossop and Diane Hind, members of the St Edmundsbury Borough Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee who had been invited to observe the meeting since their Committee was considering undertaking scrutiny of highways services in West Suffolk.

Councillor Finch made some introductory remarks and Mark Stevens gave a presentation. Committee members had an opportunity to ask questions and comment on what they had heard.

Recommendation: The Committee agreed:

- a) To urge the Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport to lobby for better funding for local highways authorities from central government.
- b) To establish a “task and finish group” to meet with Councillor Alexander Nicoll, Member with Special Responsibility for Highways Information to consider:
 - i) how communications with residents and councillors on highways matters could be improved;
 - ii) mechanisms for managing customer expectations in relation to highways services, in the light of reducing resources;
 - iii) the wording of the automated responses on the highways reporting system and how these messages could be improved;

- iv) potential pro-active communications about how Suffolk Highways was planning for winter 2017/18.
- c) To recommend to the Assistant Director (Operational Highways), that all councillors should be proactively contacted prior to commencement of the new service on 4 September 2017 with contact details showing "who was who" at their local Service Delivery Centre, details of the role of the community engineer, how problems could be escalated, and information about what could be expected in terms of regular engagement going forward.
- d) To note the officer recommendations on page 19 (paragraphs 22 and 23) of the report at Agenda Item 5 and to express concern at the statement that it would take *"a number of months after [implementation on] 4 September 2017 for Suffolk Highways to begin to make the fullest impact on the delivery of the service"*.
- e) To recommend to the Corporate Management Team that the learning from the experience of the Highways Transformation Programme should be captured and used to inform future transformation work, particularly with regard to the need to ensure significant programmes of work could be adequately resourced from the corporate centre.
- f) To request information bulletins on the following:
 - i) the outcome of the work taking place with Cranfield University on value for money of highways services, including details of how Suffolk was performing;
 - ii) details of which aspects of the Council's highways responsibilities still sat within the County Council structure (rather than in Suffolk Highways), who was responsible and in which part of the organisation;
 - iii) details of how the County Council was responding to new technology in relation to highways services;
 - iv) clarification about the arrangements for encouraging communities to take on responsibility for certain aspects of highways work and what communities could do for themselves;
 - v) details of skills gaps within the new integrated teams and how these were being addressed;
 - vi) an update on local highways budgets, in order to consider whether to review this further.

Reason for recommendation:

- a) The Committee recognised that the money allocated to Suffolk County Council for highways maintenance was insufficient to meet the high level of demand which was the inevitable consequence of underinvestment over a number of years as a result of restrictions on public expenditure.

Members accepted that all other local highways authorities were in a similar position, and they wished to encourage the Leader and Cabinet Member to redouble their efforts to bring this problem to the attention of central government

- b) The Committee was pleased to hear that Councillor Alexander Nicoll was taking on special responsibility for Highways Information. Councillors wished to be actively involved in discussions with him about how communications could be improved, because they wished to ensure that when highways operations were planned, local councillors and local residents were given accurate information with adequate notice.

Members recognised that managing the expectations of the public was a significant challenge, as it was clear that the requirement for highways improvements far outstripped the resources available. Councillors often bore the brunt of complaints from local residents, therefore they wished to ensure that in its communications with the public, Suffolk Highways sent out messages which were sensitive to the concerns of residents, whilst at the same time giving a realistic response about whether or when defects could be rectified. In this respect, they had a number of criticisms about the current wording of the automated responses on the highways reporting system and they wished to suggest improvements.

Members were also aware that winter preparedness was a significant reputational issue for the Council, and suggested there was an opportunity for some pro-active communications on this subject.

- c) The Committee heard that from 4 September 2017 Service Delivery Centres would be managing the delivery of Suffolk Highways work. The intention was that community engineers would work with town and parish councils to understand local needs and assess competing demands. Members were pleased to hear that generic email addresses were already being made available to all county councillors, but they preferred to have a named contact, and therefore considered that before the new arrangements came into force each county councillor should be given the names of the officers they could get in touch with to discuss particular highways issues and problems needing attention within their division.
- d) The Committee was aware that the contract with Kier had been in existence since 2013. Whilst recognising that the process for implementing the new Suffolk Highways structure had been difficult and had required a great deal of effort, members regretted the length of time it had taken to bring about this organisational change. The Committee understood that the new arrangements were intended to rectify organisational problems which had built up over a number of years and therefore not all the benefits of the new arrangements would be felt immediately. Nevertheless, members considered that the new Service Delivery Centres should be fully operational by soon after 4 September 2017.
- e) The Committee heard that the original aim was to complete the reorganisation by 1 May 2017. This target had not been achieved, partly because the amount of time required for dealing with HR issues had been

underestimated. Although the Senior Leadership Team had received help from the HR team, much of the work had fallen to senior Highways officers, at a time when they had been also trying to continue with the "day job". Members were also aware that delays had occurred because of accommodation problems and IT issues. The relevant corporate HR, Property and IT teams had been supportive, but had been stretched as a result of reorganisations occurring simultaneously in other parts of the Council. The Committee expressed concern at the apparent lack of resource available from the corporate centre, and wished to ensure that the experience gained from the Highways Services reorganisation was used to good effect in any future transformation work.

- f) (i) Suffolk Highways was involved with work undertaken by Cranfield University to assess the value for money being derived from the Highways Services contract. The work would continue over the next 12 months, and the Committee wished to be kept informed about the findings.
- (ii) The Committee was aware that the organisational change under review affected all staff dealing with operational highways matters, and that other areas of highways work (such as strategic planning) remained within the County Council structure. Members wished to receive clarification as to where the various responsibilities now lay.
- (iii) The Committee heard that Suffolk Highways was keen to explore ways of taking advantage of new technology (for example through the use of drones). Members wished to know more about current thinking with regard to future innovation.
- (iv) The Committee was aware that Suffolk Highways was piloting a new information pack aimed at helping local communities understand what work they could do for themselves, such as cleaning signs or gritting roads. Members wished to receive further information about ways in which local communities were being actively encouraged to take on these roles.
- (v) The Committee heard that the Senior Leadership Team was in the process of identifying areas where there was currently a shortage of skills, with a view to filling any gaps as part of Phase 3 of the reorganisation, either by making permanent appointments or by providing appropriate training for existing staff. Members wished to receive an update on this work.
- (vi) County councillors were often called upon to consider allocating money from their local highways budgets to fund relatively minor works in their divisions. However, some councillors thought that this put them in an invidious position because of the high design costs involved, the demand for works to be done, and the limited amount available to each councillor (£6,666 per annum). Members wished to receive information about the effectiveness of the current arrangements.