

Extraordinary Overview and Scrutiny Committee



St Edmundsbury
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the **Extraordinary Overview and Scrutiny Committee**
held on **Wednesday 25 October 2017** at **4.00 pm** in **Conference Chamber**
West, West Suffolk House, Western Way, Bury St Edmunds IP33 3YU

Present: **Councillors**

Chairman Diane Hind

Vice Chairman Susan Glossop

John Burns
Mike Chester
Patrick Chung
Paula Fox
Margaret Marks

Richard Rout
Andrew Speed
Sarah Stamp
Jim Thorndyke
Anthony Williams

By Invitation:

Louis Busuttil, Suffolk County Council (Member with Special Responsibility for Highways Operational Performance)
Jane Storey, Suffolk County Council (Substantive Cabinet Member for Highways)
Chris Graves, Suffolk Highways (Service Manager)
Jenny Wilson, Suffolk Highways (Head of Strategic Services)
Simon Cole, Chairman of Forest Heath District Councils Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Mary Evans, Chairman of Suffolk County Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Also in attendance:

Brian Harvey, Forest Heath District Council
Ian Houlder, Cabinet Member for Resources and Performance
David Nettleton, St Edmundsbury Borough Council
Reg Silvester, Forest Heath District Council
Andrew Smith, St Edmundsbury Borough Council
Julia Wakelam, St Edmundsbury Borough Council

181. **Substitutes**

There were not substitutions declared.

182. **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Simon Brown, Paul Hopfensperger, Clive Springett and Frank Warby.

183. **Public Participation**

Agenda Item 4. (Suffolk County Council – Highways Services (Report No: OAS/SE/17/025))

Councillor Tom Murray, Member of Bury St Edmunds Town Council, addressed the meeting in respect of the above item and specifically raised issues regarding over 200 trips and falls on pavements in Bury St Edmunds; numerous pot holes marked yellow for repair and questioned what the timescale was for fixing pot holes once they had been reported to Highways.

In response, Cllr Jane Storey advised that the first point of contact for standard defect reports should be through the Suffolk Highways reporting tool, which gave a reference number once a report was made. Also on the Suffolk County Council website was the Highways Maintenance Operational Plan (HMOP), which set out the various categories of defects and timescales for repairs.

Agenda Item 4. (Suffolk County Council – Highways Services (Report No: OAS/SE/17/025))

Mr David Banbury, a resident from Hengrave, addressed the meeting in respect of the above item and specifically raised two issues:

- A damaged road sign along the A1101 which had been reported to Suffolk County Council over 12 months ago and had not been addressed; and
- recently the lack of notice provided to residents in Hengrave when Kier resurfaced only part of the pavements with drop kerbs and not all of the pavements as initially thought.

In response, Jenny Wilson advised that she would look into the issue regarding the sign along the A1101 near Hengrave and the resurfacing works of all the pavements in Hengrave. She also stated that there was an Engagement Plan in place for notifying residents on highways maintenance works.

The Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee thanked Town Councillor Tom Murray and Mr Banbury for their questions/statements.

184. **Suffolk County Council - Highways Services**

The Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee welcomed all those present, especially Councillor Jane Storey (Substantive Cabinet Member for Highways), Councillor Louis Busuttil (Member with Special Responsibility for Highways Operational Performance) from Suffolk County Council and Jenny Wilson (Suffolk Highways - Head of Strategic Services), who had been invited

to the meeting to discuss how communication could be improved between Highways and various tiers of local government for the benefit of all residents and Councillors in West Suffolk.

The Chairman also welcomed Councillors Simon Cole and Brian Harvey from Forest Heath's Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Councillor Mary Evans, Chairman of Suffolk County Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee who had been invited to observe the meeting. She then gave a brief introduction and set out the aim of the meeting, which was to learn how the new highway's regime was working and to see what improvements might be made in regard to all levels of local government working together. She referred to Report No: OAS/SE/17/025 and the attached Appendices (1 and 2), before handing over to Councillor Jane Storey, Councillor Louis Busuttil and Jenny Wilson.

Councillor Jane Storey firstly thanked the Committee for the invitation and explained that she was the Deputy Leader of Suffolk County Council and in the short term was acting as the Interim for Highways and Transport whilst the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport, Councillor James Finch was recuperating.

Councillor Storey gave an overview of the work which had been carried out; the Highways Transformation Programme which was launched in January 2016 and the various workstream priorities:

- Contract Management
- Integration
- Programme Management (looking at reactive work)
- Finance (reduction in commissioners; checking ordering and payment mechanisms)
- Asset Management (looking at a shift towards preventative maintenance and budgets through prioritisation)
- Communications (SCC and Highways working better with parish/borough councils.

The aim of the Highways Transformation Programme was the refocusing of contracts; relocation of staff; cultural changes; and Kier commercial organisation.

Suffolk County Council (SCC) produced a newsletter called "Highways Matters", which all SCC Councillors received, and advised that parish/town councils and district/borough councillors could be included on the mailing list to receive the newsletter.

The old area office system had many advantages, with a lot of local knowledge within those area offices, but the disadvantages out weighted the advantages:

- Local knowledge not being shared;
- No best practice;
- No consistency;
- No agreed county-wide prioritisation;
- Performance impacted due to staff turnover.

In the past there was one person who was the “go to person”, who became over burdened with work. However, with the new system there was one telephone number; a highways website reporting system which provided a unique reference number or you could call customer services. Local councillors could phone customer services to get a progress update. Borough/district/parish councillors could also escalate issues through their local county councillor up the change of command. SCC was very conscious that there were better ways of communicating information and this was being addressed. For example, some of the language used by the highways team was very technical and this was being addressed by looking at more user friendly templates for letters/emails.

Councillor Storey thanked the Committee for its time and summarised her presentation, as follows:

- Highways Matters Newsletter: non county councillors could be added to the mailing list;
- Regular highways reports were presented to Cabinet and Council;
- Online information was available on the county councils website;
- www.roadworks.org was a good source of information;
- Twitter, please follow Suffolk Highways;
- SCC would be evaluating the new working arrangements introduced in 4 September 2017;
- SCC had limited resources and was receiving less money from central government;
- Wanted the people of Suffolk to be proud of highways;
- Acknowledged that highways had an upward battle.

Committee members had an opportunity to ask questions and comment on what they had heard. In particular the following discussions/questions were raised and responses provided as follows:

(a) New Highways Team

The Chairman questioned whether the new Suffolk Highway’s team, which commenced on 4 September 2017 was now fully staffed?

Redundancies had been kept to a minimum, but there were still a number of vacancies to be filled. This was due to the refocusing the roles which had highlighted gaps in the skill sets required. Where possible agency staff were being removed and interviews were currently taking place to fill a number of posts still vacant. Training was also provided for all new staff through shadowing to ensure quality and consistency when inspecting highways works. SCC had limited resources

and one of the aims of the new structure was to have less office resources and more staff out on the roads.

(b) Community Engineers

The Chairman referred to the Suffolk County Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee held in July 2017, when the intention was made that community engineers would work with the town and parish, and presumably borough/district councillors to understand the local needs and competing demands, and questioned what steps had been made towards this?

In response members were advised that there were a number of Community Engineers who would be developing links with town and parish councils.

(c) Communication

Members raised concerns regarding communication, which it felt was extremely poor. Borough councillors advised that on 4 September 2017, when the new highways structure was launched they had received no communication on what was happening.

Jenny acknowledged that there had been a breakdown in communicating the new highways structure, and explained that the county councillor should be the point of contact going forward. Communication had not been brilliant and this was being addressed. County Councillor Alexander Nicoll, Member with Special Responsibility for Highways Information was looking at how communication with town/parish/district/borough councillors and residents could be improved; and the wording of the automated responses on the highways reporting system and how these could be improved.

Members were also concerned with the lack of communication with the town and parish councils. Parish and town councils wanted to work with SCC and they felt that smaller jobs could be passed to the parishes to carry out giving them more local responsibility, such as taking over certain categories of repair for potholes and pavements.

Members were informed that one of the aspects that highways was currently looking at was for town and parish councils to be able to carry small jobs. Highways was working on putting in place a pyramid of options for town/parish councils and would provide the necessary training such as health and safety; provide the equipment; personal protective equipment etc. Highways acknowledge that parish and town councils had a vested interest in their parishes.

The Chairman of the Committee suggested having service level agreements to enable town and parish councils to have the ability to buy-in labour for small jobs or enable the Town and Parish Councils to take over certain highways activities.

(d) Bury Town Centre Masterplan / Consultation

Several members raised points regarding the challenges relating to the Bury Town Centre Masterplan and the apparent disquiet about the Northgate roundabout, Tayfen Road and the consultation exercise undertaken, which was not listed on the SCC website as a consultation.

Councillor Storey advised that in Tayfen Road, traffic sensors would be put into the road, and significant works would be carried out on the Northgate roundabout and the pedestrian crossing would be moved. The works planned was not just about traffic lights, but making it better to travel.

The consultation exercise on changes started on 10 July 2017, with two events held in Bury St Edmunds. 181 responses were received and of those, 60% liked what was being suggested in the consultation. All responses were analysed and a lot of people wanted to walk and cycle along Tayfen road. Councillor Storey noted the Committee concerns and agreed to look at the basis of what was stated in the consultation.

Highways had a vital role in the Bury Town Centre Masterplan, and consultations with the public, including all tiers of local government was essential, and full consideration should be given to the views expressed. In response, Councillor Storey agreed to look into highways links with the Bury Town Centre Masterplan.

Members were concerned that residents needed to be properly informed and consulted with on works being carried out. In Tayfen Road residents were told what was going to happen, which was not consulting as no other options were provided.

In response, SCC recognised the perception and the disconnect between what was planned to take place and the link-up with the Bury Town Centre Masterplan. There was a problem with communications which SCC needed to address.

(e) Roadside Vegetation / Damaged Road Signs

Members raised concerns that last year vegetation had not been cut back and that damaged road signs, when reported were not being picked up.

In response, members were advised that SCC had limited resources. Unless the sign was a requirement of the Highways Act, then highways would only cut back vegetation if it was obstructing road safety signs. If it was purely a directional sign, it was classed as not being a priority.

(f) Civil Parking Enforcement

Members discussed car parking enforcement and raised concerns about double-yellow lines, and sought reassurance that all line markings would be completed before Traffic Regulation Orders were introduced to allow local authorities to enforce road restrictions.

In response, members were informed that Civil Parking Enforcement work was being carried, including H bar markings and surveys were being undertaken and renewals issued.

(g) Surfaces

Members highlighted that there were a number of category 7 works in the Bury town centre, as well as a variety of different surfaces and suggested that the Town/Borough Councils could source paving slabs so that the surfaces were more uniformed across the town.

(h) Invited observers

Invited observers from Forest Heath's Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Chairman of Suffolk County Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee also had an opportunity to ask questions and comment on what they had heard.

Councillor Simon Cole, Chairman of Forest Heath's Overview and Scrutiny Committee advised from what he had heard that he felt that Highways was trying to make the best out of a bad relationship with Kier and that embedding a private company into a government organisation was not necessarily the best way moving forward.

Councillor Storey informed the Committee that the contract with Kier had been in existence since 2013. The relationship with Kier in the past had at times been challenging, and the new working arrangements were intended to rectify past organisational problems, which had built up over a number of years. It was also acknowledged that there was a need to work together to achieve better results, rather than against each other.

Due to the strength of some of the comments made by Cllr Cole, the Chairman requested that he apologise so that the dignity of the meeting was maintained and that he retract his comments, which he duly did.

Councillor Mary Evans, Chairman of Suffolk County Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee was pleased to hear the positives around the element of quality assurance, which had been lacking in the past. However, she was concerned that some road signs would not have trees/branches cut back and urged that if highways was not going to carry out these activities then they needed to be honest and inform the community that it would no longer be carried out unless it was a safety issue. Finally, she suggested that she would like to see included in the highways forward work plan when faded lines would be programmed.

Councillor Storey summed up by acknowledging that communication was key. Moving forward SCC would be more honest, and recognised that complaints might also rise. Communication between SCC, borough, district and parishes was essential and moving forward it recognised that it needed to be honest with all tiers of local government.

The Chairman on behalf of the Committee thanked Councillor Jane Storey, Councillor Louis Busuttil and Jenny Wilson for attending the meeting and noted the aspirations of highways moving forward.

The Chairman summed up the meeting by stating that whilst the new arrangements were clearly more cost effective and had removed some duplication of work, they might still not be utilising the expertise and good will of all tiers of local government. She then wished to propose a strategy and timetable to:

- 1) Pursue a service level agreement with buy-in for parish and town councils
- 2) Make the Bury Town Centre Master Plan an aspiration for highways decisions.
- 3) Ensure that back office staff are clear on individual roles
- 4) Civil Parking Enforcement – ensure that all road markings are in place prior to transfer.
- 5) To value Parish/Town/Borough councillors more and provide opportunities to build relationships with designated Community Engineers.
- 6) Paving surfaces: to collectively look at uniformed surfaces
- 7) Make consultations more meaningful and worthwhile.
- 8) A further meeting be held with Suffolk County Council Highways and Transport in 6 months.

Councillor John Burns moved the recommendations, this was duly seconded by Councillor Margaret Marks and with the vote being unanimous, it was

RECOMMENDED:

That the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee formally writes to the Suffolk County Council Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport recommending that consideration be given to the following:

- 1) Several members raised concern regarding the disconnect between the current planning for the Tayfen Road Roundabout junction, proposed by Suffolk County Council, and the Bury Town Centre Masterplan, being led by St Edmundsbury Borough Council. The Committee recognised it is important that any highways modifications take into account the emerging masterplan aspirations to ensure there is a connected approach, and as such recommended:
 - i) To make Town Centre Master Plan aspirations the basis for Suffolk County Council Highways and Transport decisions with respect to the areas covered by such masterplans.

- 2) To make Parish/Town/Borough councillors feel more valued and provides access/opportunities to build a relationship with a designated Community Engineer.
- 3) Pursue Service Level Agreements with Town and Parish Councils for a buy-in to labour for small jobs or enable the Town and Parish Councils to take over certain activities.
- 4) The back office needs to be as efficient as possible with everyone being clear on individual roles.
- 5) Ensure road markings are replaced/redone in time prior for transfer of Civil Parking Enforcement.
- 6) To add value to consultations with the public (including other tiers of government) by demonstrating that full consideration has been given to the views expressed, and using those views in determining any decision.
- 7) There are many different types of materials used in paving surfaces and suggest going forward making surfaces more uniform across the Borough to ensure materials are readily available when surfaces need to be repaired.
- 8) That Suffolk County Council Highways be invited back in 6 months to provide an update on progress being made.
- 9) The Suffolk County Council Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport provides a written response to the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee with regards to recommendation (1 to 8) above".

The Meeting concluded at 6.05 pm

Signed by:

Chairman
