

Communities, Highways and Environment Scrutiny Committee

23 January 2023 – At a meeting of the Communities, Highways and Environment Scrutiny Committee held at 10.30 am at County Hall, Chichester, PO19 1RQ.

Present: Cllr Britton (Chairman)

Cllr Oakley, arrived 10.47am	Cllr Greenway Cllr Kenyon	Cllr Quinn Cllr Sharp
Cllr Albury Cllr Ali Cllr Baldwin	Cllr Oppler, Arrived 10.36am Cllr Patel	

Apologies were received from Cllr Milne

Also in attendance: Cllr J Dennis, Cllr Urquhart

39. Declarations of Interest

39.1 In accordance with the County Council's code of conduct the following declarations were made:

39.2 Cllr Oakley declared a personal interest as a member of Chichester District Council, the responsible authority for litter clearance, under agenda item no 6, and also under agenda item no 7.

39.3 Cllr Sharp declared an interest as a member of Chichester District Council, under agenda item no 7.

40. Committee and Business Planning Group Membership

40.1 The Chairman reported that following the review of proportionality approved at County Council on 16 December, Cllr Oxlade had stood down and Cllr Sharp was welcomed to the Scrutiny Committee. The Committee agreed that Cllr Sharp should now join the Business Planning Group.

41. Urgent Matters

41.1 No urgent matters were raised but the Chairman did ask that the recent severe weather and road conditions be addressed under agenda item number 6 on the Highways Maintenance Contract Performance report. The Chairman also sought a report to the Committee in the fullness of time on lessons learnt, planning ahead and what could be done to mitigate against unusual weather events going forward.

42. Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee

42.1 The Committee were asked to agree the revised minutes of the meeting held on 21 September 2022.

42.2 Resolved – that the minutes of the Committee meeting held on 21 September 2022 be approved as correct record and that they be signed by the Chairman.

42.3 The Committee were asked to agree the minutes of the meeting held on 18 November 2022.

42.4 Resolved – that the minutes of the Committee meeting held on 18 November 2022 be approved as a correct record and that they be signed by the Chairman.

43. Responses to Recommendations

43.1 The Committee noted the response to recommendations made at previous meetings.

44. Highways Maintenance Contract Performance Report

44.1 The Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport, Cllr Dennis, introduced the report and informed the Committee that she was pleased to see a significant improvement in performance over the last year thanks to new ways of working, improving processes, etc.

44.2 The Assistant Director Highways Transport and Planning gave an updated presentation to the one given to the Committee in September 2021, giving an overview of the delivery model. The Committee were also joined by Mr Walsh, Area Director for Balfour Beatty.

44.3 Members of the Committee asked questions and a summary of those questions and answers follows.

44.4 The pothole jet packer machinery was only useable in weather conditions which suited the infill material used. Work was being done on a new approach with a smaller pothole pro machine for use in smaller locations. Emergency defects would receive a 2-hour response time for teams to decide whether a short-term fix was suitable or whether the defect needed to go onto the list for a larger or permanent repair. This would be decided on based on the safety of highway network users. The trials had helped the service understand how best to utilise the machinery which it was expected would be back in use from April 2023.

44.5 Roadside grass verges were usually cut three times a year in rural areas and five times a year in urban areas. Some communities ask that verges were not fully cut to support flora and fauna. Within the South Downs National Park area there was only one cut a year. Unusually dry conditions in July 2022 had meant that one routine cut had been dropped from the schedule and contractors were redeployed to other work. The service shared the grass cutting schedule with district and borough colleagues so that they had the opportunity to undertake litter picks before verges were cut.

44.6 **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)** – The KPIs in the report were primarily used for operational purposes to monitor the performance of the contracts and had evolved over several years. They had been

agreed between the County Council and contractors as useful and effective measures.

44.7 **KPI 6.1** Amount of construction and demolition waste reused and recycled – The Assistant Director agreed to provide some figures to the Committee on this KPI.

44.8 **KPI 5.2 and 5.3** Make Safe and Repair – Whilst the performance to March 2022 showed to be below target, officers were pleased to report that since May 2022 all targets had been met or exceeded. Targets were still expected to be met despite the recent adverse weather conditions as close observation was being kept on volumes and resources adjusted accordingly.

44.9 It was acknowledged that some areas of the highways network presented challenges for those with disabilities or particular needs, e.g. pushchairs, mobility vehicles. Designs were looked at within disability guidelines and safety criteria, but more work could be done with the disabled community to make areas more accessible.

44.10 The service did envisage extra investment would be needed to keep the highway network resilient and sustainable in light of the damage caused by climate change and recent extreme weather events. More planning would have to go into medium and long-term plans in relation to climate change.

44.11 The County Council was responsible for **hedge cutting** on highways land which was done on a two-year cycle to maintain safety and functionality. There was no responsibility for privately owned hedges or hedge maintenance.

44.12 **Weed control** was maintained twice a year using a glyphosate product, which is not harmful to animals, as this was the most cost-effective product at the moment. A trial of a foam-based product had not been effective and was significantly more expensive.

44.13 There are 12-15 **underpasses** in West Sussex and they have experienced flooding in the recent extreme rainfall events when pumping could not keep up with rising water levels. The Service is looking to commission work to understand where there could be better alternatives to an underpass, how it could be made clearer to the public when an underpass is not accessible, and potential improving road crossing facilities where we have them.

44.14 **Road Space** – paragraph 2.17 – It was difficult to pinpoint any one activity that reduced road space. The County Council was investing more in the highways network with more than 200 active schemes. Utility companies were investing in their networks across the county which would improve longer term resilience. The **Lane Rental Scheme** had encouraged utility companies to work together and undertake works more quickly to reduce costs. Initial feedback on the Scheme was positive and the Committee would be updated on progress at a later meeting.

44.15 The **upskilling of staff** where the County Council had established a model of different contract lots, had meant that staff were much more involved in the day-to-day management of activities and an updating of skills was needed, e.g. on the annual mini procurement exercises. This had resulted in staff having greater ownership and understanding of processes and it also highlighted areas of weakness. Support from the Cabinet Member had ensured there were the correct number of posts to deliver the service under the new model but there were pockets within the service where it had been a struggle to recruit to the level necessary. Work was ongoing to resolve this.

44.16 The **reporting of defects** on highways or footways had moved to an in-house online reporting tool. The original app had inherent drawbacks, and it was felt this was a more flexible option going forward with more reports being made than had been received through the app. Members were asked to pass on any feedback on the new system so that improvements could be made where possible.

44.17 The Committee were reassured by Mr Walsh that, although resourcing personnel was a challenge across most industries, Balfour Beatty had engaged heavily with their supply chain, encouraging contractors to employ locally. They also invested in early careers and apprenticeships to get ahead of the game. They anticipated they would be able to keep pace with the skills shortage and aimed to have 5% of their workforce on each contract on an earn-and-learn experience.

44.18 Contractors had reacted well to several exceptional incidents over the year, e.g. Duncton, Pulborough and Pagham, in order to keep the travelling public safe. An exercise would be undertaken to investigate what had happened, why it had happened, and the lessons learnt.

44.19 Contractors fed back valuable information on problem areas, e.g. regular flooding spots, particularly those they could not resolve, and works could be undertaken to remediate them.

44.20 The Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport, Cllr J Dennis, thanked the Committee for their comments and hoped members could see the commitment of officers and contractors to consistently improve and obtain best value for money.

44.21 Resolved – That the Committee:

1. Thanks the officers and guests for the excellent report which was warmly welcomed by the Committee.
2. Notes the concerns of members on disabled access within town and city centres and asked that the criteria be reviewed to be improved.
3. Welcomes the work in hand on the ecology of wildlife on roadside verges.

4. Is pleased to hear about the review of underpasses within the county which are susceptible to flooding when there is severe rainfall.
5. Was surprised but pleased to learn that KPIs were not expected to suffer in the light of recent weather events. The Committee also noted that the continued improvements that the service were striving to achieve were being borne out in the KPIs.
6. Notes there would be greater investment in the highways network in the next financial year's budget.
7. Are pleased to hear about the positive impact of the lane rental scheme and looked forward to learning more in the future.
8. Notes that the priority was to keep members of the public travelling on the road network as safe as possible. This was reinforced by responses to incidents at Duncton, Pulborough and Pagham, and the Committee appreciated all the work that had been done by officers and contractors.
9. Asks that the Business Planning Group be updated on work looking at how to improve the resilience of the highway network with the challenges of climate change and major rainfall events.

45. Electric Vehicle Strategy Delivery Update

45.1 The Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change, Cllr Urquhart, introduced the report saying that whilst the initial strategy had been put in place by her team, they were now working closely with the Highways Service who are leading on the roll out phase.

45.2 The Committee received a presentation from the Assistant Director (Environment and Public Protection) on progress so far and the Committee asked questions and a summary of those questions and answers follows.

45.3 Committee members asked if the 25% **discount for low emission vehicles on residential permits** across West Sussex could be increased to provide a greater incentive. It was reported that the discount was part of the fees and charges which were regularly reviewed, and it could be looked at with a view to increasing or decreasing in line with market values.

45.4 The focus for residential areas was to use slower chargepoints, which were cheaper to use, with rapid chargepoints in public areas e.g car parks. An initial investigation had been undertaken by the contractor into rolling out rapid chargepoints.

45.5 The first batch of consultations for the on-street placement for chargepoints had raised some objections. Officers were reviewing objections to pick out common threads and apply this learning to future placement proposals. The biggest objection currently was the loss of parking space. Members were keen that officers kept communities onside

for these proposals and visited sites at various times of the day to assess them.

45.6 The plan for placement of **on-street chargepoints** would be on pavements or verges and the guidance on the minimum pavement width was that there should be 1.8m of useable space behind a chargepoint to allow mobility scooters and prams room to pass. These chargepoints would have dedicated spaces covered by a TRO for electric vehicle charging only and could be enforced by civil enforcement officers.

45.7 Members were keen that users had options to use **contactless direct payment** as well as apps and pre-registered RIFD cards. Officers reported that operators were looking at how they could offer a range of easy payment options.

45.8 Concern was raised at the number of **broken charging points** generally within the national network and officers confirmed that maintenance was included in the contract and when chargepoints were broken they show up on an app and this could be highlighted to the maintenance operators. Currently reliability is very high for Connected Kerb chargepoints.

45.9 Members were advised that the **transition to an electric vehicle fleet** for the County Council would be a longer-term plan as there were currently 9–12-month lead times for the purchase of electric vehicles. Calculations had shown, when looking at upfront capital leasing costs, fuel, and maintenance costs, that there was little difference between electric vehicles and internal combustion vehicles. Calculations re-run recently showed figures still looked comparable despite the current high cost of electricity. Consideration also had to be given to where staff would be able to charge the vehicles. Some staff who needed to get straight to work, for example highways inspectors, might ideally have home charging options, rather than travelling to a hub to charge a vehicle or using the public network. Consideration also needed to be given to how payment of the charging cost could be directed to the County Council and not the staff member, but suitable software solutions existed.

45.10 Members asked if there was any concern about the **electrical network capacity** to charge electric vehicles as take-up increased. Officers reported this was a well understood problem and there was a degree of confidence that capacity would keep track with the use of some interesting potential solutions to it. It was hoped in the future that there could be some solar panel connections to suitably located chargepoints

45.11 The Government had not indicated what funding would be available to support take up from April 2023, but it was expected that it funding would become more targeted.

45.12 Work was being undertaken with a number of collaborating organisations, e.g. parish councils, community halls, and Committee members welcomed this initiative.

45.13 The Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change, Cllr Urquhart, thanked the Committee for their comments and questions

and said they would be happy to return on an annual basis to update the Committee.

45.14 Resolved – That the Committee:

1. Welcomes the progress report.
2. Advocates regular reviews of the 25% discount offered within the fees and charges review.
3. Welcomes the reassurances that pavement widths would be maintained for all users.
4. Thanks officers for giving them a better understanding of the procurement and cost criteria in transitioning the County Council fleet to electric vehicles.
5. Welcomes the involvement of community halls and non-profit organisations in the roll out of chargepoints.
6. Reinforces the need for residents adjacent to proposed chargepoint sites to be engaged before the Traffic Regulation Order consultation process starts.

46. Energy Strategy Progress Report

46.1 The Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change, Cllr Urquhart, introduced the report which updated on activities over the past year and ambitions going forward. The biggest constraint for the County Council, and others nationally, was capacity on the electricity grid. The long time-span and the cost to get connections was making projects unviable. The County Council, along with the Local Government Association, County Councils Network and other organisations, had been lobbying Government for at least a year and the Skidmore Net Zero independent review had highlighted this as a key issue for the country as it tries to move towards net zero. It was hoped that the Government would respond soon.

46.2 Members of the Committee asked questions and a summary of those questions and answers follows.

46.3 The use of large-scale onshore wind and tidal energy was not a suitable option for the County Council. To work best on land, wind turbines would have to be located on high ground, much of which falls in the South Downs National Park and that would most likely be difficult to achieve. The current Government moratorium on onshore windfarms was limiting options although the Rampion offshore wind farm was looking to expand.

46.4 Income generated from the Solar Together project was put into a fund for emergency fuel vouchers which were distributed by Citizen's Advice to residents facing a financial crisis. District and borough councils were involved in retrofitting some of their social housing to help households and under the [Warmer Homes Scheme](#) households could apply for funded energy efficiency improvements.

46.5 Carbon offsetting would be a last resort for the County Council. The County Council wanted to make a genuine difference by focussing on reducing its emissions rather than simply offsetting its carbon footprint. Primarily work planned is to offset the authority's own emissions.

46.6 Good practice was being shared from the Local Energy Community scheme at Manor Royal BID with other areas and the County Council had been approached by a business association in Burgess Hill.

46.7 As mentioned by the Cabinet Member, the availability of National Grid capacity to enable future connections was the biggest challenge ahead and could hinder the development of future plans. The Government was looking to local authorities to produce evidence which could be presented to OFGEM to inform the network operators business cases for improvements to the grid.

46.8 The County Council was grappling with a growing list of options for the use of land, whether it be for sale, development, energy production, nature recovery or other opportunities. A clear strategy would assist with decision making. A member questioned whether the County Council should be looking at any significant land disposals given the lack of clarity over where priorities laid. The Cabinet Member said she would welcome a recommendation from the Committee around developing a strategic approach for this.

46.9 Officers reported that the supply chain for Lithium batteries had been affected by price increases and long lead in times (all batteries were imported) with up front deposits to secure manufacturing slots. This could affect planned works.

46.10 Resolved – That the Committee:

1. Thanks officers for the informative and interesting report.
2. Acknowledges officer remarks about the complexity of energy resourcing, prices, etc, going forward.
3. Congratulates officers securing Government funding towards projects.
4. Welcomes the help being given to residents who face difficulties with energy bills at this time.
5. Acknowledges that it is for the County Council to decide what will be the best use for its land whether it be for energy, development or nature and wildlife and noted that a strategic approach to this would be helpful.
6. Notes the comments about difficulties with capacity of the National Grid and gaining access.
7. Acknowledges that increasing costs and supply chain issues in the provision of batteries from overseas were impacting projects.

47. Work Programme Planning and Possible Items for Future Scrutiny

47.1 The Committee reviewed the most recent Forward Plan of key decisions and work programme. The Committee were updated that since the agenda papers had been despatched National Highways had announced a consultation on small scale options on the A27 at Worthing and at Lancing and the Committee agreed to add the County Council's draft consultation response to the agenda of the meeting on 6 March 2023.

47.2 A member questioned why the fragmentation of Public Rights of Way combined with the Active Travel item had moved to June 2023 when Planning and Rights of Way key decisions were coming up in March/April. The Committee were informed that the June timing was in line with the progress of the Active Travel work.

47.3 Members asked what they could scrutinise in relation to flooding and it was agreed that the County Council's riparian duties enforcement policies could be focussed on as part of the Local Flood Risk Management Strategy.

48. Requests for Call-in

48.1 There had been no request for call-in to the Scrutiny Committee within its constitutional remit since the date of the last meeting.

49. Date of Next Meeting

49.1 The next meeting would be held on 6 March 2023 at 10.30am.

The meeting ended at 2.48 pm

Chairman