

Communities, Highways and Environment Scrutiny Committee

17 November 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, Left meeting 10.45-11.30am	Cllr Greenway, left 12.45pm	Cllr Quinn Cllr Gibson
Cllr Ali, Left 2.05pm	Cllr Kenyon	
Cllr Baldwin	Cllr Kerry-Bedell	
Cllr N Dennis	Cllr Payne, left 2.40pm	

Apologies were received from Cllr Albury and Cllr Sharp

Also in attendance: Cllr Crow, Cllr J Dennis, Cllr Urquhart

28. Declarations of Interest

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

28.2 Cllr Gibson declared a personal interest as the owner of a strip of woodland alongside a right of way under agenda item no 5.

28.3 Cllr Ali declared a personal interest as a member of Crawley Borough Council under agenda item no 6.

28.4 Cllr Gibson declared a personal interest as a member of Mid Sussex District Council under agenda item no 8.

29. Urgent Matters

29.1 No urgent matters were raised but a member asked whether the closure of the Durban House offices due to flooding were having any effect on the operational activities of the County Council pertinent to this Committee. The Chairman agreed to seek an update to circulate to the Committee.

30. Minutes of the last meeting of the Committee

30.1 Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 20 September 2023 be approved as a correct record and be signed by the Chairman.

31. Responses to Recommendations

31.1 The Committee noted the responses to recommendations made at the previous meetings.

32. Ash Dieback Action Plan

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

32.2 The Action Plan involved the review of trees on highway land, within the corporate estate, with parish councils and private landowners. Comprehensive surveys had taken place on A, B and C roads but unclassified roads would be picked up during routine maintenance inspections. Priority had been given to the high-volume traffic sites to reduce the risk to road-users. Trees close to busy routes, e.g. bus routes, which could cause shedding of branches were likely to be identified routinely and removed on an individual basis.

32.3 It was possible that Ash Dieback disease could be spread by a wind tunnel effect alongside the highways, similar to the way moss can spread.

32.4 The contract for removal of diseased trees stated that once cut the felled wood belonged to the contractor and that the contractor would remove all felled wood and dispose of it in an appropriate way, with most of it going to biomass sites. The contractor pays the County Council £30 per tonne. So far approximately 2,600 tonnes had generated £65,000, which had been fed back into the project. Officers would discuss with the contractor whether felled trees that were not in an advanced stage of disease could be used for other projects. The contractors were following advice from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) on disposal of diseased trees.

32.5 Most landowners with ash trees on their properties were co-operative and legal remedies had only been sought twice. Sometimes there could be difficulty in identifying the landowner through Land Registry. Landowners and parish and district councils were able to take advantage of the County Council's contract.

32.6 A member of the Committee highlighted that the site on Beeching Way, East Grinstead, where felling had taken place, was still of concern to local residents who were worried about land slippage on to the highway. Officers reported that a geotechnical survey had been undertaken and that, with leaving the tree stumps and root systems, along with the natural regeneration on site, it seemed that the bank had been holding well during recent rainfall events.

32.7 Other diseases such as phytophthora, which affected a wider range of tree species, was of concern and a review was underway of other pests and diseases on trees on the network to identify risks, budget and resource implications, etc.

32.8 Officers were monitoring some trees annually for resistance to ash dieback disease, which could be used to restock other areas, the amount of regeneration from felled tree stumps and natural regeneration by other species.

32.9 Resolved – that the Committee:

1. Felt that the Action Plan had the right approach and was well-focussed.
2. Were keen that the tree felling contractors offer the opportunity for less diseased wood to be made available for projects rather than being used for producing energy.
3. Were reassured to hear that some trees were showing resistance to ash dieback and would like to learn more about that in the future.
4. Welcomes the closer collaboration with landowners and the opportunity for them to use the County Council's contractors for felling trees on their land.

33. Strategic Intelligence Assessment Process

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

33.2 The Strategic Intelligence Assessment (SIA) identifies high level cross-cutting themes that cannot be delivered through normal business. The local Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs) then prioritise the key areas in their locality that need particular focus and agree allocation of resources through multi-agency discussions. The SIA can help to highlight blockages in the system, e.g. if some social care relationships are not progressing to reduce crime and disorder, then focus can be given to those areas.

33.3 Child exploitation remains a high priority and, following discussions with partners, a significant system change has occurred this year resulting in a new structure and framework. The new process is a big improvement and links closely to district and borough council knowledge and resources. Information is now flowing both up and down the system.

33.4 The percentage of hate crime in the county was reported to be around 3%, but it was acknowledged that it was probably an under-reported crime. Connections could be seen between social and world events, and increases in hate crime. Work would be undertaken with local groups to encourage reporting and explain options to report confidentially.

33.5 Members were told that advice on how to deal with nuisance and scam phone calls had been included in the Community Safety Partnership e-newsletters, and that call blocking devices were available from Trading Standards for vulnerable targeted individuals.

33.6 The public consultation had taken place, but analysis had not yet been done. It was expected that the responses would match a predicted demographic. A survey would take place in 2024 county-wide in schools focussed on issues for young people. Targeted engagement would also take place with hard-to-reach groups, clubs and community groups, etc., to pick up more detailed information.

33.7 Following recent Government legislation to make Nitrous Oxide a Class C drug, work would be done to see what the impact of that change would be through the Combatting Drugs Partnership, drug litter work and work with Public Health.

33.8 The partnership can react quickly to public perception and confidence. When an issue arises, the partnership seeks to understand the issue, offer reassurance, work with targeted groups to improve behaviours and relationships, and promote engagement in the community to provide reassurance to local residents. It was suggested by Members that there could be an increase in publicity with local media to increase public confidence.

33.9 The Safer West Sussex Partnership understands the picture of organised crime in West Sussex and undertakes a lot of preventative work along with other partners. Much work is done to prevent victimisation and to make the public alert to the signs and how to report it. Most crime is driven by social inequality and organised crime can only flourish where communities are not supported.

33.10 Resolved – that the Committee:

1. Welcomes the opportunity to understand how the Strategic Intelligence Assessment helps partnerships to identify strategic priorities.
2. Appreciates the complexity of the multi-agency approach but welcomed what could be achieved by working together. Acknowledged that Government perceptions, and public priorities, confidence and perceptions can be different in response to local events.
3. Were concerned that it had been highlighted that children were more likely to be victims of crime but were pleased to hear about the proposed survey of school children to be undertaken and targeted work on issues in some secondary schools.
4. Acknowledges that social inequality can contribute to crime, or lead to people being drawn into organised crime, and encourages all local authorities to seek to address it.
5. Highlights the role of district and borough councils as housing authorities in relation to vulnerable properties, HMOs, caravan sites, etc, to identify individuals or areas with sources of activities of interest to community safety partnerships.

34. Council Plan, Medium-Term Financial Strategy and Preparations for 2024/25 Draft Budget

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

Communities

34.2 The proposal to reduce the **Record Office opening times** would enable more work to be done on-line for all residents to access. A consultation would start soon on the proposal to not open the Record Office on a Saturday due to very low levels of visitors. There would still be occasional open days on Saturdays. There could be some reduction in staff hours but no redundancies. Staff time freed up would be used to work on online projects.

34.3 Resolved – that the Committee is reassured the proposal to reduce the opening hours of the Records Office to better reflect the use of in-person services provided meant staff could be used to create more on-line content.

Highways and Transport

34.4 Whilst **concessionary bus travel** levels had not returned to pre-covid levels, the levels of other bus users were way above pre-covid levels therefore this budget could be reduced with no impact on those using buses across the county.

34.5 The Government's subsidised bus fare scheme would be watched carefully, with bus companies, but the County Council had also increased the discounted child fare offer up to 21-years-of-age to encourage bus travel.

34.6 The Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport, Cll J Dennis, and officers would be looking at the Government announcement earlier in the day of **additional funding to repair roads** in the county, and hoped it might come to fruition soon enough to impact on the 2024/25 budget. A member asked if the service had sufficient staffing resource to deliver the additional £5m maintenance spending in future years and was reassured there were no concerns about using the allocated monies.

34.7 The proposal to **Increase Parking Fees and Charges** had been extensively modelled as it had found in the past district and borough rates had been higher, so this proposal had tried to apply more consistency. Currently there was more parking demand than supply. A member asked whether consideration had been given to the impact the increase in fees and charges would have on small builders undertaking refurbishments of properties in urban areas where the road space might be used for skips, workers parking etc, which could add a significant cost to project budgets? Officers reported that this had not been considered but that the increases were in line with inflation. **Action:** The Cabinet Member agreed to discuss with the Parking Team to see what comments they had.

34.8 **Reduction in the budget for the removal of ash trees** – The reserve fund had initially been set aside, but now that a stable programme was in place the budget could be realigned to the actual project costs. The Committee was reassured that if the reserve was needed in future that it would be provided but there was confidence in reducing the budget for 2024-25. **Action:** The Interim Deputy Director of Finance agreed to provide a note to the Committee to show how the spending plan was in line with the funding plan.

34.9 Resolved – that the Committee:

1. Was reassured that bus operators had not expressed concerns about the proposed reduction in the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme budget.
2. Welcomes the recent Government announcement of additional funding to repair roads in the county and hoped that it would be available for the 2024/25 budget.
3. Welcomes that extensive modelling had taken place on the proposal to increase parking fees and charges, and that the percentage increase would depend on the area.
4. Recommended that the Service engaged with building contractors to better understand the impact of increased fees and charges on tradespeople.

Environment and Climate Change

34.10 The Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change, Cllr Urquhart, informed the committee that the County Council, along with partners UKHarvest and Biffa, had won the Food Waste Initiative category award for the Community Food Hub pilot project at the National Recycling Awards ceremony.

Booking System extension to all waste and recycling sites

34.11 The Cabinet Member advised that the introduction of the booking system at all sites would mean commercial vehicles would not be able to dispose of rubbish at taxpayer sites and would have to use the commercial sites they were supposed to use. Sites with the booking system reported far fewer commercial vehicles attending the sites.

34.12 Members were concerned that the survey data used for the previous decision to introduce the booking system at six selected sites was inappropriate and outdated for this proposal. The Cabinet Member reported there would be a customer service survey at sites in November 2023. Members sought reassurance that there would be publicity in the community for the changes.

34.13 The Cabinet Member reported that the drop-in waste tonnage rates at recycling sites could be due to many reasons e.g. the impact of weather affecting the amount of garden waste, greater door-step collection rates, residents coming less often but bringing more, etc, but that there was no evidence that residents were deterred by the booking system and were retaining material at home.

34.14 Members were also concerned that the restricted use of the household waste recycling sites for commercial vehicles would lead to fly-tipping. The Cabinet Member advised the Committee that a survey by the Government had produced no evidence to say whether booking systems increased or decreased fly tipping. The Scrap It project would be tackling any fly-tipping increases.

34.15 The Cabinet Member confirmed that cross-county border agreements would continue for residents who lived closer to another authority's recycling site. **Action:** The Assistant Director (Environment and Public Protection) agreed to contact neighbouring authorities to make them aware of any decisions, so they were informed.

34.16 Resolved – that the Committee:

1. Congratulated the service on the achievement of winning an award for the Food Hub Project at the National Recycling Awards.
2. Was concerned that the introduction of a booking system to all sites could lead to an increase in fly-tipping in the county.
3. Accepted that whilst most members supported the extension of the booking system to all household waste recycling centres, some did not.

35. Performance and Resources Report 2023-24 - Quarter 2 - July - September 2023

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

Communities

35.2 Incidents of **anti-social or disruptive behaviour** in libraries were on the increase and the welfare of customers and staff was paramount. Incidents could be in the libraries, which are public buildings, or in the environs e.g. car parking areas. The number of visits to libraries had increased to 2 million a year. Training is taking place to give staff techniques to de-escalate situations and the police had recommended increasing CCTV in the library estate. The incidents experienced had all been different, so it was difficult to determine any reasoning.

35.3 Financial pressure on the **Coroner's Service** continued due to the sustained level of excess deaths. There was currently no sign of a reduction in the levels, and this had been a national trend for the last few years. Members were reminded there would be a Member Development session on the Coroner's Service in early 2024.

Environment and Climate Change

35.4 The project to provide a **Solar and Battery Storage** site at Halewick Lane was still progressing with the re-procurement of the tender for the contract to build the site, including the supply of batteries. Until the site was built and operating the saving could not be achieved. The operation of such storage sites would help balance the National Grid levels to assist with the fluctuations in power production of renewable electricity systems.

35.5 The technical feasibility study of a site of council-owned land at Baystone Farm near Horsham for a new solar farm would determine if there would be sufficient financial gain from the project.

35.6 A member asked if the output of the first **Climate Change and Commuter Survey** would be shared with the Committee? **Action:** The Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change agreed to look into providing this.

35.7 A member asked if there was a comparison on **income raised by the solar farms** to budgeted income and the Cabinet Member reported that the annual report on solar production would be published soon and would contain that information.

Capital Programme:

35.8 **8 School Solar PV Programme** – Approx 6 schools had been impacted by quality issues and negotiations for rectification were close to resolution, at no cost to the County Council.

Risk Register:

35.9 **CR73a** – The Cabinet Member reported that the County Council had submitted a bid into the latest round of funding released by the Government to help with decarbonising the estate. Changes in the Government targets would not stop the County Council from continuing to do what was considered right for the tax-payers of West Sussex at this point in time.

Highways and Transport

35.10 **KPI19 – Highway defects repaired within required time scale** – A member raised an issue on the rural road network where the lack of a kerb line led to road surfaces fracturing away and needing multiple repairs. It was hoped that areas like this would be looked at under the Asset Management strategy, a solution planned, and work picked up under ongoing maintenance. The Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport reported that the change to a focus on repair quality to ensure longevity would mean it would take time for the measure to reach its target. However, the new Winter Maintenance Programme would have more resources to support this work. It was acknowledged that exceptional weather over the winter might make it harder to reach the target, but the service and contractor would endeavour to do the best they could.

35.11 **KPI41 - Killed and seriously injured casualties** – The Service was looking at road safety policies, but there were several factors impacting the numbers, including driving behaviour, speeding, not driving appropriately for the conditions. Incident locations were reviewed but it was rare for the highway infrastructure to be a cause. Work was underway with the Police and Fire Service to provide more bike safety awareness courses, visits to motorcyclist congregation sites, etc. Work was also underway with the Safer Sussex Partnership to review their programme and look across the south-east for any new or innovative ideas.

35.12 **Street Works Enforcement** – The Cabinet Member reassured the Committee that the Service was actively recruiting staff and that once those resources were in place the situation would resolve itself.

Capital Programme:

35.13 **11 LED Streetlight conversion** – The scheme is ready to go and awaiting final sign off from the Private Finance Initiative (PFI).

36. Work Programme Planning and Possible Items for Future Scrutiny

36.1 Members agreed the work programme with the following changes:

Issues yet to be timetabled

36.2 **Post budget lessons learned** from the additional £4.5m funding given to highways, and the proposed £5m for 2024-25. Suggested March 2024 to cover how spending has gone and how future spending will go.

36.3 Remove **Household Support Fund** as has been scheduled for meeting on 4 March 2024.

36.4 **Vehicle Removals** – Members questioned whether this was a function of local district and borough councils. **Action:** Democratic Services officer to investigate.

36.5 **Major Events and Lessons Learned** – report to the Business Planning Group (BPG) is requested to include impact of flood events leading to significant road closures, member engagement and communications. BPG to establish scrutiny approach and key lines of enquiry.

Forward Plan

36.6 A member asked how the Committee could be involved in the scrutiny of the introduction of a booking system to the existing household waste recycling centres.

37. Requests for Call-in

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

37.2 A member raised that they would be putting in a call-in request for a decision to declare surplus land at the old Tangmere airfield as it had implications for future active travel and sustainable travel routes, as well as access to the major green waste recycling site.

38. Date of Next Meeting

38.1 The date of the next meeting would be held on 22 January 2024 at 10.30am.

The meeting ended at 3.55 pm

Chairman