

Highways and Transport Committee: Minutes

Date: 23 January 2024

Time: 10:00am to 1.10pm

Present: Councillors Alex Beckett (Chair), Neil Shailer (Vice-Chair), Piers Coutts, Claire Daunton, Doug Dew, Lorna Dupré, Jan French, Ian Gardener, Anne Hay, Bill Hunt, Simon King, Peter McDonald, Elisa Meschini, Lucy Nethsingha and Alan Sharp

Venue: New Shire Hall, Alconbury Weald, Huntingdon, PE28 4YE

185. Apologies for Absence and Declarations of Interest

Apologies were received from Councillors Brian Milnes (Councillor Lucy Nethsingha substituting) and Councillor Gerri Bird (Councillor Elisa Meschini substituting).

Councillor Simon King declared a personal interest as member of Cambridgeshire Local Access Forum.

186. Minutes – 5 December 2023 and Action Log

The minutes of the meeting held on 5 December 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

The updated action log was noted. In relation to the Wisbech Access Strategy, members noted that the technical work had been completed, and securing funding was the next stage of the process. Dialogue would continue with the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA), and it was noted that each funding strand would have requirements that would need to be met before it was released. An update to the Committee on the Strategy would be considered at a future meeting.

187. Petitions and Public Questions

There were two public questions and no petitions. The public questions were heard under the relevant agenda items and attached, together with the responses, are available on the County Council's website.

188. Business and Financial Plan 2024-2029

The Committee received a report that set out the Business and Financial Planning proposals for 2024-29. The purpose of the report was to scrutinise the proposals and ask officers of questions and put forward considerations to the Strategy, Performance and Resources Committee.

Section 3 outlined the proposed contribution of the Committee to the strategic framework of the Council, in meeting the ambitions of the Council, and successes to date. Attention was drawn to feedback received from the residents who participated in the quality of life survey. 76% of those who had responded indicated that they were dissatisfied with the condition of highways, and as a result £9M of revenue funding would be invested in Highways from 2024-26.

Section 4 summarised proposed changes to the revenue budget inflationary pressures, and further information on the Highways £9M revenue programme, and savings proposed including the continuation of the street lighting project, replacing existing lanterns with more energy efficient LED lanterns, which would deliver £1M of savings in 24/25. In addition, £150K savings had been identified resulting from investment in recycling facilities. The report also highlighted increases in income, including a review of car parking tariffs and street works charges. Appendix 2 to the report provided a full schedule of fees and charges, and Appendix 1 listed key components of the £74M capital programme.

The Committee received a public question on this item, which was published on the Council's website, together with the response.

During discussion of the report, members raised the following points:

- clarity was sought regarding the difference between the delivery of the drainage schemes in 2023/24, and the specific proposed additional allocation for 2024/25 for drainage cleansing and management. Responding, officers advised that the former referred to specific schemes where there were structural interventions on pipes, replacing and replenishing assets as appropriate. The cleansing and management referred to the day to day gully clearing and emptying out of soakaways. The member sought reassurance that the two elements of maintenance were running effectively, and in parallel. Officers confirmed that this was the case, and that the cleansing often indicated where major work was required, driving the major interventions;
- welcomed the focus on gully clearing, and the comprehensive approach being taken. However, the member commented that none of the parishes in his division had been included to date, and he asked about the plan going forward. Officers confirmed that they were working round the network on a cyclical basis and all parishes would be included in the two year programme. The full programme would be published at the start of the financial year so members and residents could see where they were on that programme;
- a member was delighted to see the improvements to the A10 between Ely and the A14 were being highlighted in the report, and pleased to note the spotlight going on the crossing of the A10, the "BP roundabout" which has been an issue of concern for residents;
- noting the response to the public question, a member suggested that there should be a specific acknowledgement to the value of equestrians in the context of road maintenance hierarchy work, and officers agreed to do this;

- queried the savings to be made by replacing street lights with LED lanterns. Officers confirmed that £1M savings had been identified in 2024/25, but further savings were profiled for subsequent years. It was also noted the energy prices fluctuated, this impacted on the current forecasts;
- commented that the latest copy of cyclic gully cleaning programme focused on the south and west of the county, and asked what the rationale behind this focus, i.e. who made that decision given the desperate need for cyclical cleaning in other areas of the county which experienced significant flooding problems. Officers confirmed that the cycle ran over two years, so each area would be visited regularly. When there were reports of blocked systems that were causing highway issues, a targeted approach was taken on top of the cyclical maintenance programme. There had been considerable mapping of gulleys and technology over the last two years, and officers confirmed that prioritisation was based on need;
- regarding priority led investment, a member was pleased to note the report addressed many actions that needed to be undertaken, albeit with limited resources. At the Environment and Green Investment Committee (E&GI) members had requested additional funding for emergency planning, which had been universally supported. Increasingly frequent and severe storms and extreme weather events were impacting on communities across the county, and greater resilience needed to be developed. Communications between agencies and partners and with the public were key. Increasingly planning was required around civil contingencies given the increasing frequency of these weather events;
- noted that £400K had been identified for enhancing Public Rights of Way (PRoW), but that the sum of £1M was also cited. Officers explained the revenue funding of £400K was for regular and cyclic maintenance, e.g. repairs to stiles and fences. The capital proposal of £1M involved larger scale improvements to routes and larger repairs required such as bridges and providing new access points along routes. A member commented that day to day maintenance was really important, as it helped secure improvements to active travel. It was confirmed that the level of investment was significant but needed to be spread across the whole network;
- asked officers if they were confident that this significant investment in highways would make a difference, given that there had been major concerns about the state of the county's roads for some years, and the issues with the Milestone contract specifically. Officers outlined how more resources and a more stable structure, especially in project delivery, would make a difference to the county's roads. Together with holding Milestone to account, using the best procurement route depending on the programme, and investment in the Highways teams would ensure improvements in responsiveness and timeliness of highway interventions.

Whilst supporting investment into highways, Councillor Sharp commented that the Conservative Group would not be supporting the budget.

The Executive Director of Place and Sustainability summarised the debate as follows:

The Highways and Transport Committee welcomed the investment in highways, including schemes such as the A10 and work on gullies, and in footways, streetlighting, signage, cycleways and weeding. The H&T Committee sought clarification on:

- *The payback period for streetlighting.*
- *The allocation of gullies funding based on assessment of need.*
- *How funding on public rights of way differs revenue and capital, and that there is more investment in the general maintenance from £0.4 million more revenue.*
- *The £20 million investment and how this would be spent. It was confirmed that this will come back to Committee.*

Following discussion surrounding recent events and a call for more on prevention, preparation and response, the H&T Committee asked that Strategy, Resources and Performance Committee consider further investment into Emergency Planning.

It was resolved by a majority to:

- a) consider and scrutinise the proposals relevant to this Committee within the Business and Financial plan put forward by the Strategy, Resources and Performance Committee, 19 December 2023;
- b) recommend changes and /or actions for consideration by the Strategy, Resources and Performance Committee at its meeting on 30 January 2024 to enable a budget to be proposed to Full Council on 13 February 2024;
- c) receive the fees and charges schedule for this Committee included at appendix 2.

189. Review of the Highways Operational Standards in Relation to Weed Management

The Committee considered a review of Highways Operational Standards in Relation to Weed Management.

As part of financial year 2023/24 business planning process, the Council had agreed a policy change to a largely non-chemical, reactive approach to weed management. In the Autumn of 2023, a review of the policy change was undertaken, to gauge the impact on communities. It was recognised that there were lessons to be learned, and the report set out the proposed approach, including the reintroduction cyclical weed treatment in urban areas.

During discussion of the report, members raised the following points:

- how this experience emphasised the importance of effective communication with partners, and that it was helpful for members to know in advance the detail of those communications;
- previously it had been reported that the policy change would result in a saving of £120K. This report then stated that the cost for weed removal in 2024/25 would be £180K, and presumably this increase was due to weeds not being treated properly

during the previous year. The member commented that those communities that opted out of chemical weed removal needed to provide an evidence base to prove that their residents were supportive of that approach. Given the damage to the highway caused by not undertaking chemical weed control for one year, it was questioned what would be the likely costs going forward for areas opting out. It was confirmed that those communities that were opting out, were undertaking weed control using non chemical means, and officers would ensure that those communities were supportive of that approach. The additional costs factored in the physical removal;

- asked if there were any Health & Safety implications for those communities undertaking their own weed control, and how that process was managed, particularly near busy roads. Officers confirmed that those communities choosing to physically remove would be in accordance with the Council's policies and relevant Health & Safety legislation;
- queried the approach with regard to ragwort, Japanese knotweed and hemlock, the suggestion being that the latter could be dangerous to cyclists. It was confirmed that ragwort and Japanese Knotweed had continued to be treated with chemical weedkiller during the change of policy. Officers agreed to check the situation with regard to hemlock. A Member advised that there was a lot of hemlock in East Cambridgeshire last year so there was experience in managing this weed; Action
- a member commented that the change had been introduced in a rushed manner and there had been insufficient communications;
- advised that concerns had been raised in Cambridge City about biodiversity and the spraying of chemicals, and noted the alternative options that could be used, set out in Appendix 3 of the report. There were issues about how verges and public spaces were managed to support biodiversity and a balance need to be struck;
- welcome the ability for communities to decide for themselves and determine their own approach to weed management. An outcome focussed approach needed to be taken, as ultimately weeds should not be causing a problem in roads and drains. It was suggested that a more joined up approach need to be taken with partners, e.g. road sweeping;
- commented that road use was very different across the county, and this underlined the importance of consultation, and the importance of learning from experiences.

It was resolved to:

- a) note the outcomes of the review that has been undertaken regarding the implementation of the current weeds management policy that was introduced in April 2023 as outlined at Appendix 1;

- b) approve the draft revised Highways Operational Standards as outlined at Appendix 2 in relation to the management of weeds for consultation with local stakeholders;
- c) delegate authority to the Executive Director of Place and Sustainability in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair of the Committee to approve the final draft of the Highways Operational Standards following consultation with stakeholders.

190. Peat Soil Affected Roads - Safety and Management Plans

Members considered a report regarding the safety and management plans for peat soil affected roads. The particular issues relating to these type of roads, including their susceptibility to extreme weather events, were detailed in the report. Over 150 such routes had been identified across the county that have heavy usage. The report set out the proposed approach over both the short and long term to these roads, with a special focus on safety and risk.

A member stressed the importance of this issue for residents across the county. Many of the county's roads that were not designed for the current usage, and these roads had had insufficient investment for decades, and these problems were exacerbated by the impact of Climate Change and extreme weather. This major project required practical intervention, lobbying, engagement and communication. A strong lobby to government would be vital to identify and release the required funding. The member sought assurance that there would be strong member oversight of this issue, and noted that a number of these peat affected road were strategic A-roads, carrying huge volumes of traffic. Additionally there were roads with much lighter usage, where maintenance was vital for the communities served: interventions needed to be targeted to the individual community. The member also referenced winter maintenance, and commented that some of these roads may be more dangerous in winter weather, and they may be needed to be gritted. The Chair agreed that central funding was key, and whilst national funding was often focussed on new roads, there was little focus centrally on investing in existing roads. It was noted that the Lobbying plan set out timescales and this would be developed further. A model had been developed for the assessment of routes, and that model would be used to prioritise routes, especially where safety was an issue e.g. high banks.

During discussion of the report individual members:

- queried Twenty Pence Road in Wilburton, and whether it would include that part of the road in Cottenham, as it covered two divisions. The member also asked for good communications with Local Members. Officers agreed to respond separately on the local issues raised. Another member stressed the need for more member engagement;
- observed diversions often send inappropriate vehicles down unsuitable roads;
- observed that the significant number of large agricultural vehicles in the county caused weight issues and hastened degradation of these roads. Another member

agreed, observing that the size and weight of the largest agricultural vehicles had increased substantially in recent years;

- stressed the importance of consultations with towns and parish councils, including adjacent parishes, where appropriate;
- welcomed that signs would be visible and inspected, and asked how often both Milestone and Local Highways Officers would be inspecting these roads. It was noted that Appendix 2 to the report set out guidance for Local Highways Officers. With regard to the more technical assessments by Milestone, officers agreed to confirm this information. **Action;**
- suggested that Highways England was included in the list of partners in Appendix 4. The member also suggested using social media to raise awareness with central government, especially petitions. He also suggested forming alliances with neighbouring upper tier authorities. He felt it was very important to keep the momentum going on this issue;
- observed that the review undertaken was very comprehensive and was a huge step forward;
- highlighted the importance of the peat soil affected routes to communities and the county's economy.

It was resolved to:

- a) agree the actions set out in this report to manage the peat soil affected roads following the motion of 17 October 2023.
- b) note the work undertaken to identify and prioritise peat soil affected roads.
- c) note that the actions outlined in this report can be delivered within the proposed budget for 24/25 onwards and through existing compliant procurement routes.

(Councillor Gardener left the meeting)

191. Active Travel Network Maintenance Hierarchy

Members received a report on changes to the Highways Operational Standards, which set out approaches to support active travel through highway maintenance, by establishing an Active Travel Network Hierarchy.

The Committee received a public question on this item which is published on the Council's website, together with the response.

The Chair observed that the Budget proposals put forward by the Joint Administration earlier in the meeting included a significant increase in the maintenance budget for Public Rights of Way, which would benefit all road users.

While discussing the report, Members:

- asked if reassurance could be given that there would be an inspection scheme in place to ensure that the hierarchy was implemented fully? Officers advised that if the hierarchy was adopted and implemented it would act as a platform to undertake regular inspections to identify and repair road safety defects. It was confirmed that Local Highways Officers were focussed on highways, and that there were a number of Public Right of Way officers who carried out a similar role on PRowS, bridleways, etc. It was confirmed that the implementation of the hierarchy would result in a more managed network approach to maintenance rather than the current reactive approach;
- thanked officers for their engagement with the Cambridgeshire Local Access Forum;
- asked how this would increase the protection of grass roots. Officers explained that the hierarchy would enable officers to identify where there was likely to be pressure on roots through new developments, and provide the evidence base for discussions around routes that have historic or environmental value, whilst still facilitating improvements for wider active travel. The member welcomed this approach and asked how officers would factor in protecting the interests of existing users and how consultation would be carried out to ensure all views were accounted for. Officers confirmed that consultation was included in the development of the hierarchy work. Existing users' interests would be protected, and there was a process to ensure consultation and engagement, including involvement of the Local Access Forum. It was confirmed that changes to the network was a separate matter with separate processes. The Member commented that it would be helpful to include a reference to the difference in policies;
- requested that the Farms Working Group was involved in the discussions on PRowS;
- observed that in many areas there were no cycleways, and cyclists used highways which had potholes. It was important that those potholes, especially on the margins of the road, were dealt with. It was noted that section 3.4b addressed those issues;
- noted that the results of the consultation would be considered by the Committee at its September meeting;
- in response to a member question, noted that the hierarchy would assist with prioritisation for different users. The changes to Highways Operational Standards would ensure that when officers carry out dynamic risk assessment on a defect, the changes would make the prioritisation explicit;
- with regard to signs and lines, a member commented that it would be helpful if the maintenance of signage was included, so that there were checks on signage as part of the scheme. It was confirmed that some funding had been identified for improved signage and "way finding".

It was resolved to:

approve the changes to the Highways Operational Standards that support maintenance for active travel, as set out in Paragraphs 3.4 and 3.5 of this report.

(Cllr S King left the meeting)

192. Performance Management Update

The Committee received a report that presented an update on Performance Management across the Place and Sustainability directorate.

During discussion, Members:

- asked for clarity on the vacancy rate column. Action;
- welcomed the good news on highways maintenance roles being filled, and hoped this would be reflected in improvements to communication with members. It was confirmed that there would be greater capacity to communicate with Members, and communication also formed part of the broader Highways communications programme there was a focus on improving communications with Councillors;
- queried the lack of data for growth in active travel in 2022 and also requested a deeper dive into the detail behind Indicator 39 (percentage of road network in Green/Amber/Red condition);
- strongly welcomed the Vision Zero ambition to reduce road traffic accidents;
- requested more information on the underlying indicators which fed into the higher level indicators. It was confirmed that this would be reported in reports from April onwards.

It was resolved to:

- a) note the progress that is being made in developing a performance framework for the Highways and Transport Committee
- b) approve the recommendations set out in 2.5 of this paper.

193. Place and Sustainability Risk Register

Members received a report that gave an update to the approach to risk management across the organisation, and the risk register, including risks specific relevant to the Highways and Transport Committee.

It was confirmed that a full version of the report and supporting papers was available on the website.

A Member asked about adverse weather risk, noting that whilst contingency plans were in place, were unforeseen/worsening weather patterns were being planned for? It was

confirmed that the regular review process should pick up those challenges and how to better manage those risks. On Highways specifically, part of the review of the Winter Maintenance service was to bring the Council in line with DfT's approach to creating a resilient network, which was partly achieved by relevant officers working closely with specialist weather service providers. The budget proposals included increased investment in dealing with future climate risk. It was agreed that a Member briefing on this area would be helpful. Action.

It was resolved to:

note the update from the Place and Sustainability Directorate.

194. Highways and Transport Committee Agenda Plan and Appointments to Outside Bodies

The Committee noted its Agenda Plan.

195. Exclusion of Press and Public

It was resolved that the press and public be excluded from the meeting on the grounds that the following item contained exempt information under Paragraphs 1 & 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and that it would not be in the public interest for this information to be disclosed information relating to any individual, and information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information)

196. King's Dyke Update

The Committee received an update on King's Dyke.

It was resolved to approve the recommendations, as set out in the report.

Chair