

Minutes of a meeting of the Scrutiny Commission held at County Hall, Glenfield on Monday, 10 December 2012.

PRESENT

Mr. S. J. Galton CC (in the Chair)

Mr. G. A. Boulter CC
Mrs. R. Camamile CC
Dr. R. K. A. Feltham CC
Mr. G. A. Hart CC
Dr. S. Hill CC

Mr. Max Hunt CC
Mr. A. M. Kershaw CC
Mrs. R. Page CC
Mr. R. J. Shepherd CC

In Attendance:

Mr. A. D. Bailey CC, County Councillor for Blaby and Glen Parva (for Minute 317)

Mr. N. J. Rushton CC, Leader of the County Council (for Minute 318)

Mr. J. B. Rhodes CC, Deputy Leader of the County Council (for Minute 318)

Mr. B. L. Pain CC, Cabinet Lead Member for Economic Development (for Minute 319)

Mr. Andrew Bacon, Chairman of the Leicester and Leicestershire Enterprise Partnership (for Minute 319)

310. Minutes.

The minutes of the meeting held on 7 November 2012 were taken as read, confirmed and signed.

311. Question Time.

Mr. Andre Wheeler, a resident in Barwell, asked the following questions under Standing Order 35:-

- “1. In respect of highways works, on what basis are priorities identified and funding allocated?”
2. What is the average length of time it takes the County Council’s Highways Department to act on a work order placed and agreed by the Area Highways Supervisor in relation to cleaning out drains and culverts and jet washing? Could you make specific reference to the clean-up of Hinckley Road, Barwell on 3 September 2012 in your answer?”

The Chairman replied as follows:-

- “1. Any highway defects reported to the County Council through its Customer Services Centre are assessed by a local Highway Inspector within 14 calendar days unless it is patently obvious there is a need for an emergency response within 2 hours – this may take the form of a

fallen tree across a road or a road traffic collision at which assistance is required. The local Highway Inspector will assess the degree of urgency associated with the defect and assess whether it is Category 1 (with rectification expected within a further 3 calendar days) or Category 2 (with rectification expected within 90 calendar days of the original defect being identified).

The cost of the rectification works will be assigned to the relevant budget. The amount of budget available for any particular type of work in any particular year will not influence the categorization process. In other words, the speed of rectification of Category 1 and Category 2 defects is determined by need, not budget remaining.

2. The rectification of a reported 'blocked gully' would fall under a Category 2 defect. This is to ensure that the County Council's gully emptiers are not just driving from one reported blocked gully to another (a cost ineffective and time-consuming approach) but are optimising output by clearing road gullies in a sequential manner. So, whilst each individual gully is expected to be cleared within 90 days, the actual time to clear will vary from location to location. The latest evaluation of average time to clear reported blocked road gullies is actually around 60 days.

Records indicate that a road gully clearance took place between the old dairy and St Mary's Avenue along Hinckley Road, Barwell on 11 September 2012 and was reported to the Customer Service Centre on 11 July 2012, hence this particular clearance took 62 days. It should be noted that, due to the nature of Hinckley Road, some form of traffic management is required to undertake the work safely so timing will always be dependent on the availability of Leicestershire Highways Operations' Traffic Management Unit.

The Scrutiny Commission received an update report from the Director of Environment and Transport at its meeting on 7 November 2012. We are therefore fully aware of the challenges posed this year by the extreme weather conditions to delivering the gully maintenance service. As Barwell was one of many locations subjected to drainage or flooding issues arising from the heavy rain between Wednesday 21 and Sunday 25 November 2012, a further check on the gullies along Hinckley Road in Barwell is scheduled for the week commencing 10 December 2012."

312. Questions asked by members.

The Chief Executive reported that no questions had been received under Standing Order 7(3) and 7(5).

313. Urgent Items.

There were no urgent items for consideration.

314. Declarations of interest.

The Chairman invited members who wished to do so to declare any interest in respect of items on the agenda for the meeting.

No declarations were made.

315. Declarations of the Party Whip.

There were no declarations of the party whip.

316. Presentation of Petitions.

The Chief Executive reported that no petitions had been received under Standing Order 36.

317. Item Placed on the agenda at the request of Mr. A. D. Bailey CC: A426 Bus Corridor Scheme.

The Commission considered an item placed on the agenda at the request of Mr. A. D. Bailey CC, local member for Blaby and Glen Parva concerning a proposal for a bus corridor scheme in conjunction with the City Council on the A426. A copy of the report, marked 'B', is filed with these minutes.

The proposed scheme had received a significant level of public and press attention, with Glen Parva Parish Council having submitted a lengthy consultation response and a petition with approximately 4,400 signatures.

The Director of Environment and Transport delivered a presentation outlining the background to the scheme. A copy of the slides forming the presentation is filed with these minutes. Arising from the presentation, the following key points were noted:

- The decision to implement the scheme was based around the need for a quicker, more reliable and punctual bus service. The two existing traffic lanes would be retained as part of the scheme, which meant there would be no reduction in general traffic capacity;
- The scheme was part of an initiative to increase the number of people travelling on buses. Increasing the reliability and journey time of the bus network was recognised as being essential to increasing their use;
- Some footpath widths would be reduced along the route as part of the proposals, though footpaths of 1.5 metres or less would be increased. All footpaths along the route would meet the national guideline minimum width of 1.8 metres;
- The A426 was a key access route to the City. By improving bus access there would be knock-on economic benefits to the County.

The Chairman welcomed to the meeting the local member, Mr. A. D. Bailey CC who thanked the Commission for the opportunity to present his argument. Mr. Bailey tabled a letter he had received in 2005 from the then Assistant Director of Environment and Transport giving an assurance that bus lanes would not be pursued along the A426 at the expense of footpath width. A copy of this letter, together with some supporting information also provided is filed with these minutes.

Mr. Bailey outlined his argument against the scheme under the following headings:

Health and Safety

- Sections of the A426 were not wide enough to accommodate bus lanes. Though it was acknowledged that the scheme would meet the national guidelines for minimum footpath width requirements, the impact of reducing the width of the footpath at certain points would have knock-on effects to the health and safety of cyclists and pedestrians;

Bus Service Reliability

- The scheme was expected to reduce the bus journey times on key routes along the A426 by around five minutes. It was felt that this did not represent a significant benefit and that most people made decisions about whether to travel on buses based on cost and convenience. It was acknowledged that the Council had little influence over the cost of fares and that this issue lay with the bus companies;

Value for Money

- Though the scheme was grant funded to a large extent, it would still require some £600,000 of capital funding from the County Council. It was felt that the majority of benefits of the scheme would be felt in the City rather than the County and that the benefits put forward did not represent good value for money for County Council taxpayers;

Public Opinion

- Only 30% of over 1,000 respondents to the consultation had given their support to the scheme. Around 4,400 residents had signed a petition opposing the scheme and local councillors at district and parish level and Mr. Andrew Robathan MP were known to be against the scheme.

The Chairman welcomed to the meeting Mr. Richard Johnson, Glen Parva Parish Councillor and Lead Petitioner, who thanked the Commission for the opportunity to represent local people's views on the issue. Mr. Johnson circulated a hard copy presentation to members (a copy is filed with these minutes) and outlined the Parish Council's concerns against the proposals under the following headings:

Value for Money

- A reduction in journey times of five minutes was not felt to represent good value for money for a scheme costing in excess of £4 million;
- A number of other councils were pursuing “soft technology” in favour of more invasive options. These included satellite location information and smart phone apps, giving accurate bus timetabling data. It was questioned why the County and City Councils had not pursued these alternative options as a first port of call as they could have proved to be more cost effective;

Safety and the Environment

- Reduction of footpath widths would negatively impact upon pedestrians and homeowners who required access to driveways. It was felt that, though 1.8 metres met the national guidelines for minimum footpath width, this should not be viewed as a positive effect of the scheme;
- The fact that the bus lanes would not be implemented consistently along the complete route would add to the “stop, start” nature of the traffic congestion issue along the A426;
- The proposal was for 24 hour bus lanes, despite buses only using the lanes infrequently throughout the daytime. It was felt that this would put unnecessary pressure on traffic flow.

Modal Shift

- The addition of a bus lane would not achieve the modal shift necessary to get more people using buses. Buses were too expensive and infrequent and did not go to the desired locations.

In response to the points raised by Mr. Bailey and Mr. Johnson and following debate by the Commission, the Director of Environment and Transport clarified the following issues:

- Since 2005, the Authority’s position in regard to footpath width and bus lanes had changed. The scheme had been fully safety audited and footpaths meeting the advised minimum width were deemed to be safe for use;
- The reason for operating the bus lanes on a 24 hour basis was to avoid adding to the traffic capacity along the route. Cyclists would use the bus lane as a cycle lane at all times;
- A consultant had investigated previous experiences where bus lanes had been installed and this had proved that modal shift would be achieved with a 10-14% increase in passenger numbers up to March 2015 and a 20-40% increase by 2026. The reason to install a bus lane along this route was in the most part due to it being one of the most congested routes without bus priority;

- There was no reference in the proposals to air quality as the area was not an air quality management area;
- “Soft technology” would be part of the new scheme – with measures such as “Smart Ticketing”, personalised travel plans and real-time bus usage information;
- It was pointed out that many other councils were referred to as no longer installing bus lanes as they had already installed them on their key strategic routes.

In summing up the debate, the Commission expressed a wish to particularly highlight the following key points:

- There was presently insufficient evidence to support the theory that modal shift would be achieved by implementing a bus corridor scheme along the A426. “Soft technology” solutions should also be explored to such a modal shift;
- The scheme did not appear to offer good value for money to County residents and appeared to offer only marginal benefits to bus users;
- Junction improvements, particularly in respect of the inbound approach to Soar Valley Way, should be considered a higher priority issue to ensure better traffic flow along the route;
- It would be necessary to gain further clarity of exactly where along the route footpath widths would be reduced and exactly how this would impact pedestrians and cyclists.

RESOLVED:

That the views of the Commission as set above be circulated to the Cabinet for consideration at its meeting on 18 December 2012.

(The meeting adjourned at 12 noon and re-convened at 2.00pm.)

318. Discussion with the Leader of the County Council.

The Commission welcomed the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council to discuss the Leader’s first months in office and the Council’s financial position.

The Leader delivered a brief statement at the start of the session which included the following key points:

- The opening months of his term had been challenging with some Group disciplinary issues. The Conservative Group was now committed to a new Disciplinary Strategy which it was hoped all political groups would commit to. He felt that restoring the reputation of the County Council was of paramount importance;

- He had re-introduced Group Leaders' meetings in an effort to increase collaboration and the sharing of cross-party ideas;
- The biggest challenge going forward would be the requirement to identify efficiency savings, balanced against the need to maintain frontline services;
- He had met or was scheduled to meet all leaders of neighbouring local authorities and district councils and local MPs;
- He wished to focus his energies solely on Leicestershire and would only engage in meetings in Whitehall when there was a tangible benefit to the residents of Leicestershire;
- He was fully committed to the "6Cs" (three cities (Leicester, Nottingham and Derby) and three counties (Leicestershire, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire)) approach and working with neighbouring LEPs, which he felt would be the most effective route through which the County's economy would be enabled to grow.

Arising from the ensuing debate, the following key points were noted:

Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS)

- There was a commitment to freeze council tax for the life of the Council. The MTFS would be re-opened following the Local Government Finance Settlement, (which was expected on 19 December) and the changes that had been made nationally in respect of council tax benefits and business rates;
- The four year programme to identify efficiency savings of £74 million was on track. There would be ongoing pressures on the budget, such as the increased demand for Adult Social Care services arising from a growing elderly population and the loss of funding as a result of the academies programme;
- The Council's move to being a "commissioner" of services would become an increasingly important way of identifying efficiency savings, though service standards would need to be closely monitored to ensure that they continued to be of a high quality;
- The ongoing transfer of the Public Health function from the Primary Care Trust to the County Council had been a success and one that the Council was viewed as leading on nationally. Resources had been allocated in the budget to deal with any shortfall when the transfer was concluded in April 2013.

Key Policy Challenges

- The Council's "Supporting Leicestershire Families" programme was viewed as a key policy challenge. The success of the Programme relied heavily on the support of other authorities and agencies and therefore the cultivation of robust relationships would be key to the successful delivery of the Programme;
- It would be an ongoing challenge to deliver the required savings in respect of concessionary and home to school transport, the matter having been deferred by the Cabinet in May 2012. The Cabinet would be taking a fresh look at the proposals within the context of the MTFS in light of the Local Government Finance Settlement;

Overview and Scrutiny

- The Leader was willing to negotiate a revised approach. He was particularly keen to place greater emphasis on the scrutiny of the Health Service functions, which it was felt had placed some pressure on the workload of the Adults and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Much of this extra workload was felt to be as a result of the Joint Health Scrutiny Committee not having met for a long period of time whilst under the management of the City Council. The Leader intended to raise this issue with the City Mayor;
- Arising from the late announcement of the Local Government Finance Settlement, there would be a tight timescale for consideration of the MTFS by Overview and Scrutiny, though every effort would be made to ensure that enough time was given to scrutiny of the proposals.

RESOLVED:

That the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council be thanked for their attendance.

319. Discussion with Andrew Bacon, Chairman of the Leicester, Leicestershire Enterprise Partnership (LLEP).

The Chairman welcomed to the meeting Andrew Bacon, Chairman of the Leicester and Leicestershire Economic Partnership, to discuss the progress of the LLEP during its first 18 months in operation. A copy of the LLEP's Economic Growth Plan, a newsletter outlining its first year achievements and a copy of a draft Expression of Interest bid for the Government's "City Deals" Programme is filed with these minutes, marked 'C'.

Mr. Bacon thanked the Commission for the opportunity to brief members on the achievements of the LLEP. The Chairman commented that this was the first time the LLEP had been scrutinised by either the City or County Councils and he hoped that they would be able to build an effective relationship with one another.

Arising from the ensuing discussion, the following points were noted:

Securing Investment

- Under the LLEP, roughly five times the amount of private investment had been secured for the City and County than under the previous arrangements which included the East Midlands Development Agency and the LeicesterShire Economic Partnership;
- The creation of around 25,000 jobs was being supported under the LLEP, some of which would be part of the MIRA Technology Zone in Hinckley. £8 million of Growth Point funding had been secured for 2013, which would create in the region of a further 1,250 jobs;
- Though little of the funding gained thus far had reached frontline services, a number of projects were being progressed for 2013 which would provide a blend of short and long-term employment opportunities, particularly in the skills-based sector;

Focus

- Though the Economic Growth Plan included some 70 priority areas, not all were to be delivered by the LLEP itself, as it only employed eight full-time members of staff. Many priorities relied on business and other partners taking the lead, with a good number of the priorities set out over a long timescale;
- The proactive involvement of business had been one of the key successes of the LEP programme, which had enabled a more inclusive approach and had increased business confidence;
- The creation of long-term and sustainable employment would be achieved through ongoing road and rail improvements in North West Leicestershire and through the MIRA Technology Zone and Loughborough Science Park. The target to achieve 25,000 jobs was a conservative figure based on schemes that had already been agreed. The responsibility of the success of sustainable employment in the long-term would to some extent lie with educators to ensure that school-aged children were given a greater insight into and provided with the necessary skills for “the world of work”;
- Securing investment was currently the key barrier to ensuring long-term growth. The LLEP would have a presence at the MIPIM Conference in March 2013 in order to try and attract international investment. It was acknowledged that more could be done to promote the area beyond the Enterprise Zone offering. The County Council also had a major role to enable development, which was viewed as a contributory factor to achieving growth.

Sub-Regional Ambition

- It was acknowledged that the “East Midlands” had to some extent lost its voice. A greater level of collaboration with business had led to a firmer commitment to “sub-regional” activity. The Government’s “City Deals” programme presented a timely opportunity to bring to the fore innovative solutions to enable effective cross-border joint-working;
- Through the City Deal document, the LLEP and its partners was taking up the opportunity to combine funding to stimulate growth in the sub-region. It was also noted that there would be clear benefits to the Government’s proposed “Local Transport Body” approach, which would be based around LEP areas and support the prioritisation and development of major transport schemes in support of economic priorities.

It was reported that the draft Expression of Interest (Eoi) for the bid for the second wave of City Deals had been submitted to the Government at the end of November for initial feedback. The final version of the Eoi was to be submitted by 15 January 2013. There would be further opportunities for scrutiny of the City Deal, even after the Eoi had been through the approval process. The Commission felt that reference in the draft City Deal Expression of Interest to the GL Hearne Housing Study was erroneous; officers stated that the Study should not have been referenced in the document and that the Government was aware of this.

RESOLVED:

That Mr. Bacon be thanked for his attendance.

320. Date of next meeting.

It was NOTED that the next meeting of the Commission would be held on Thursday 31 January 2013 at 10.00am.

11.00 am - 4.30 pm
10 December 2012

CHAIRMAN