

**CABINET – 23 JUNE 2017****FUTURE OF HIGHWAY FORUMS****REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT****PART A****Purpose of the Report**

1. The purpose of this report is to seek the Cabinet's approval to disband Highway Forums and to the introduction of a new approach for managing petitions.

Recommendations

2. It is recommended that:
 - a) Highway Forums be disbanded;
 - b) The proposed approach for managing petitions be approved for further consideration by the Constitution Committee.

Reasons for Recommendations

3. The role of Highway Forums has changed since their inception. In the context of continued budget reductions and opportunities arising from digital technologies, Highway Forums are no longer sustainable. It is also intended to give greater recognition to the role of the local division member in dealing with highway concerns and complaints. For example, by setting up a dedicated email contact for members directly to the Customer Service Centre and for those contacts to be prioritised.
4. Highway Forums are currently the mechanism for considering petitions submitted to the Environment and Transport Department. If Highway Forums are disbanded, an alternative route for their consideration will need to be found. This report outlines a revised proposal on how petitions are managed which, if approved, will involve changes to the Constitution.

Timetable for Decisions (including Scrutiny)

5. The matter will be considered by the Constitution Committee and the County Council in September 2017.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

6. There is no statutory requirement to hold Highway Forums.

7. The unprecedented levels of savings identified in the Medium Term Financial Strategy 2017/18 – 2020/21 (MTFS) for Highways and Transportation, and the requirement to save £2m as part of the Council's digital agenda (Digital Leicestershire), are driving the need to challenge why and how services are managed and delivered and the identification of new opportunities for making efficiencies.
8. Digital Leicestershire 2016 sets out the County Council's ambition to enable residents and communities to benefit from online services and digital infrastructure. The plan encourages service providers to rethink whether digital technology can be used to change the way we work and how services are delivered.

Resource Implications

9. Highway Forums cost approximately £110,000 per annum in staff time.
10. A level of staff resource will continue to be needed to implement alternative solutions for information provision. However, it is anticipated that this will align with the Department's wider digital and information provision agenda.
11. Resources will also continue to be required to manage petitions. It is proposed that petitions would be considered by either the Director of Environment and Transport or the Environment and Transport Overview and Scrutiny Committee, depending on the number of signatures a petition has received.
12. Disbanding the Forums would make savings estimated at £100,000.
13. The Head of Communications and Digital and the Head of Democratic Services have been consulted on this report.

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

14. This report has been circulated to all members of the Council via the Members' News in Brief (MNIB) service.

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PART B

Background

15. Highway Forums were originally established to enable discussion between County and District Councillors on strategic issues such as the Local Transport Plan, proposed work programmes and traffic management proposals, as well as amendments or improvements to highways policies. Over the years the focus for the Forums has changed and in some areas their value is questionable as they focus on local highway requests, business which is and should normally be dealt with by the Department, and some, at times do not meet due to lack of business.
16. In summary, the function of the Highway Forums has been to:
 - a) provide information;
 - b) sign-post to and raise awareness of consultations;
 - c) consider petitions.
17. It is estimated that each Forum (3 per district area per year) costs approximately £5,300 to run, resulting in a cost to the County Council of approximately £110,000 per year.
18. In the context of significant Highways and Transportation budget reductions and to support the £2m savings target associated with Digital Leicestershire and the Council's move towards a more digital customer focussed approach, it is recommended that Highway Forums should be disbanded.

Proposal

19. The reports, work programmes and details of consultations currently presented to Highway Forums will be rationalised and provided through more timely, cost-effective solutions aligned to the Department's emerging digital programme. There will be a particular focus on timely interactive information to elected members to assist them in raising and dealing with local concerns. It will also be possible to make increased use of the weekly Members News in Brief and Parish Newsletters. The Customer Service Centre will remain the first point of contact for all enquiries and requests.
20. Highway Forums received 20 petitions in 2016, slightly higher than the 5 year average of 15 per year. The number of signatures varies and a breakdown for those received in 2016 is shown in Table 1 below:

No. of signatures	Less than 50	50 – 500	500+
No. of petitions 2016	6	13	1

Table 1

21. Disbanding Highway Forums would mean that alternative arrangements will need to be found for considering petitions. The proposals below would make the approach adopted in Leicestershire more consistent with neighbouring authorities in regard to consideration of petitions by scrutiny whilst not significantly increasing the burden on the Environment and Transport Overview and Scrutiny Committee or the Democratic Services section.

22. It is proposed that the County Council's Petition Scheme is reviewed and amended as follows:
- a) The minimum number of signatories required on a petition should be 100;
 - b) Any representations received which have less than 100 signatures will not be dealt with as a formal petition. The Council will, however, ensure that the relevant Service Director responds to the concerns raised;
 - c) Petitions with over 100 signatures, but less than 500, will be responded to by the relevant Service Director;
 - d) Petitions with more than 500 signatures will be considered by the Environment and Transport Overview and Scrutiny Committee. However, if the Service Department can do what the petitioner asks for, the acknowledgement sent to the petitioner may confirm that the action requested has been taken and the petition will be closed.

Cost Breakdown

23. Highway Forums have cost on average £110,000 per year to run. A summary of the cost is shown in Table 2 below:

<u>Meeting Preparation</u> Meeting organisation, report writing, petition investigation and report production, sign-off	£95,000
<u>Meeting Attendance</u> Agenda meeting, Chair update and forum. Travel time	£15,000
<u>Total</u>	£109,500

Table 2

24. There will continue to be a resource requirement associated with the provision of information and the management of petitions. This will be assessed as the new arrangements, if approved, bed in.
25. Disbanding Highway Forums would therefore make savings estimated at £100,000.

Dependencies

26. The proposal would require:
- a) A decision on the size of petition the Council views as appropriate to be considered at different levels;
 - b) A change to the Constitution to reflect the proposed changes to the way petitions are dealt with;
 - c) Alignment to the corporate digital technology developments to enable publication of information.

Background Papers

None.

Relevant Impact Assessments**Equality and Human Rights Implications**

27. An Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessment (screening) has been undertaken.
28. Due to alternative mechanisms being introduced or already easily available, as detailed within this report, the impact has been assessed as 'neutral'.

Environmental Impact

29. The significant reduction in meetings and travelling time will reduce business miles and have a positive environmental impact.

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