



**Rochford District  
Council**

<b>REPORT TITLE:</b>	<b>Highway Rangers</b>
<b>REPORT OF:</b>	<b>Marcus Hotten, Director of Environment</b>

### **REPORT SUMMARY**

The Council has, for the past 7 years, on behalf of Essex Highways provided the Highway Ranger service. Essex has, until recently, funded the majority of the cost to operate the service. This funding has now been removed, and although an alternative source of funding was secured for the 2023/24 financial year, at present no further funding for future years has been identified, leaving the future of the Highway Ranger service in question.

This report explores the possibility of further sources of funding, either through savings within the Open Spaces budget, or through drawing down upon the South Essex Parking Partnership surplus funding.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- R1 –** For Members to note the report.
- R2 –** That a further report is presented to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee reviewing the current allocation of SEPP surplus funding, and exploring potential savings within the open spaces budget, with a view to identifying a possible budget for the continuation of the Highway Ranger service in 2024/25.
- R3-** To draft a proposal that can be circulated to Parish and Town councils seeking Expressions of Interest as set out in paragraph 1.19
- R4 –** That the Leader of the Council writes to the Cabinet Member for Highways, Essex County Council, seeking clarification regarding the provision of a service with withdrawal of funding for the Highway Rangers.

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**SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

**1.0 INTRODUCTION**

1.1 Essex County Council offered Rochford District Council the opportunity to enter into a partnership in respect of a range of highway related initiatives and to provide access to additional funding. It was felt that a localised arrangement would provide better value for money. It would assist Essex in discharging a Statutory function in relation to Highways.

1.2 The Public Realm agreement was agreed by the Portfolio Holder for Environment on 4 October 2016. As part of the agreement a payment of approximately £75,000 per annum was provided by Essex County Council to support the Highway Ranger function. In return, there was an expectation that Rochford would employ two staff, supply hand tools and a suitable vehicle to undertake the function.

1.3 The Highway Rangers scheme set out to deliver immediate improvement to the road and path network. The scope of the works included:

- Trimming of vegetation and removal of cuttings
- Ad-hoc grass cutting and strimming
- Minor block flag paving repairs.

Further activities listed, but not undertaken by Rochford's Highway Rangers included:

- Cleaning, repairing, replacing road signs
- Roadside gutter and drain clearance (including minor repairs)
- Roadside litter picks

1.4 A list of suitable works were provided by Essex County Council each month to Rochford for the Highway Rangers to undertake, a subsequent progress report was returned to Essex to provide feedback of what works had been completed.

**Withdrawal of Funding**

1.5 In November 2022, Essex County Council announced that it would be withdrawing the funding, from the 1st April 2023, for the Highway Rangers service across all 11 District and Boroughs that had entered into local agreements. Essex advised that going forward, any matters would be reported via Essex Highways Report It tool, online, and then dealt with in accordance with their priorities.

1.6 In communication with Essex Highways it remains unclear, what, if any resource has been specifically allocated by Essex County Council to undertake these works in the absence of the Highway Ranger service.

It should be noted that the Cabinet Member for Highways at Essex County Council has stated that he is supportive of District Borough Councils continuing to undertake the service, but could not offer any financial support for doing so.

- 1.6 Of the 11 District Councils in Essex that entered a local agreement to manage the Highway Ranger service, all 11 local services are still being undertaken, albeit without the funding from Essex County Council.
- 1.7 For the 2023/24 financial year a one-off surplus (A payment of £186,000 was made to each Council) generated by the South Essex Parking Partnership (SEPP), was earmarked for return to Rochford. It was agreed by the partnership that a proportion of the surplus would be allocated for the Highway Rangers, addressing the £75,000 deficit. However, it is unlikely that the funding will be available in future financial years with the surplus representing 11 years-worth of SEPP accruals.
- 1.8 Of the £186,000 SEPP surplus, there is £26,000 that remains unallocated. Appended to this report (Appendix 1) is a list setting how the remaining £160,000 has been allocated. At the time of writing the report, although the funding has been allocated, it has not necessarily been committed. Therefore it may be possible to review the original allocation, with a view to the prioritising of the funding for the Highway Rangers for a further year.

#### **Work of the Highway Rangers**

- 1.9 Summary of work Undertaken by Highway Rangers:

<b>Year</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>
Logged Tasks Completed	159	54	103	46	81	177

- 1.10 The number of completed tasks in a given year have fluctuated and is not necessarily indicative of a fluctuating workload, rather changing preferences for how Highway Ranger tasks would be managed by differing Essex Highway Officers to whom Rochford District Council had to report back to. The years with lower numbers represent periods where the Highway Rangers were encouraged to take a pro-active approach, undertaking works known to be required, seeking to reduce the number of work requests logged by Councillors and residents. This ultimately reduced Highway Officer time taken to inspect complaints from the public.
- 1.11 In the last full year - 2022, a concerted effort has been made to log all works undertaken by Highway Rangers. Approximately 170 tasks completed in a year is probably a fair reflection, acknowledging that some tasks can be completed quickly, others can take several days.

**Capacity**

- 1.12 The team consists of two full-time manual staff, both of whom are required to demonstrate a range of practical experience and hold appropriate training certification for powered machinery. This allows the team to provide cover for other grounds maintenance functions, such as verge-cutting using ride-on mowers, grave-digging in the cemeteries or as an additional staff member for larger tree surgery works.
- 1.13 In return, staff from the grounds maintenance team will be drawn upon to assist in larger Highway Ranger works. This is particularly useful in situations requiring road or lane closures. Rather than a team of two being used to undertake the cutting back and clearance of vegetation, a larger team of approximately 6 staff can be used to speed up the works. Reducing the window of time taken to complete the task and consequently the time needed to close the road to traffic.

**Current Cost of Service**

- 1.14 The total annual cost of the service is approximately £80,200. A breakdown of the costs is set out below.

	<b>Cost (£)</b>
Salary (2 FTEs + On Costs)	70,300
Fuel (Van & Plant)	5,400
Vehicle Maintenance (Plant & Van)	2,800
PPE	500
Training	1,200
<b>Total</b>	<b>80,200</b>

**Current Grounds Maintenance Service**

- 1.15 The team consist of 15.5 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) – the staff structure is appended to this report (Appendix 2). This teams covers all aspect of ground maintenance, including, arboriculture works, cemetery services, play area inspections and maintenance across all Council open spaces and country parks.
- 1.16 The ability for the remaining open spaces team to absorb the Highway Ranger duties could only be undertaken if other key aspects of the open spaces service were not delivered. For context, the net budget allocated to the service in 2011/12 was £1,353,700 (Using the Bank of England inflation

calculator – that is the equivalent of £1,902,209 in June 2023). The present net budget allocated to the service in 2023/23 is £726,090.

- 1.17 It is the current view of Officers that the service is unable absorb the Highway Ranger function or identify aspects of the current service that could be stopped to accommodate the ranger function. However, further work could be undertaken on this aspect, setting out options for Members to consider, that identify possible reductions or savings in the open spaces service.

### **Cessation of Highway Rangers**

- 1.18 Currently, there isn't any budget allocated for the delivery of the service from April 2024 onwards. The cessation of the service will impact upon the Council in a number of ways:

- There is reputational risk due to withdrawal of undertaking of the works, such as vegetation clearance. These works have become more closely associated with Rochford District Council rather than Essex.
- There will be a lack of capacity and increased to risk to business continuity of the grounds maintenance service due to overall reduction in staffing levels. This will particularly impact the service at the peak of the grass-growing season in the Spring.
- There is likely to be an anticipated increase in complaints, certainly in the short-term, due to a perceived lack of service. This will impact upon Officer time, with a need to address the increase in complaints resulting in other works not being progressed.

### **Partnership with Town and Parish Councils**

- 1.19 A further consideration is the possibility of Parish and Town Councils contributing financially towards the running of the Highway Rangers service. The detail of such a scheme, and how it could demonstrate accountability to each Parish/Town council, and whether there are any Parish Councils that are interested, will need further exploration.
- 1.20 A key challenge will be ensuring that works are delivered in a timely manner for each contributor, given that demands will be high across all Parishes at the peak of the growing season.

### **Responsibility of Landowners Adjacent to the Highway**

- 1.21 Under the Highways Act 1980, Essex County Council as the Highways Authority have a duty to maintain highways listed as maintainable highways. The stated view of Essex Highways is that the cutting back of vegetation, that overhangs the highway from the adjacent property, should not be addressed by the Highway Rangers service. In this situation, it is the responsibility of the landowner to cut back the overhanging vegetation. Essex Highways have stated that they will address landowners and enforce the cutting back, rather than use Highway Rangers.
- 1.22 This statement is contrary to the experience of the Highway Rangers, where a significant proportion of the works undertaken have been to address overhanging vegetation as described above. The ability to enforce adjacent landowners to cutting back such vegetation is a Power available to Essex Highways, but not other tiers of local authority. It is viewed as not practicable to enforce in many situations, being time-consuming and drawn out to resolve.

## **2.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 2.1 Any consideration to continue the Highway Ranger service in future financial years would represent an additional £80,000 pressure on future financial budgets.

## **3.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 3.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report, the Council is not obligated or have a duty to undertake a Highway Ranger service.

## **4.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS**

- 4.1 There are no additional resourcing implications, but progressing the commitment will require the Council to identify resources to achieve the aims set out.

## **5.0 RELEVANT RISKS**

- 5.1 This has been discussed in the body of the report

## **6.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1 There are no direct equality and diversity implications arising from this report.

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**APPENDIX 1**

Approved SEPP funding allocation (£186,000):

• Financial Support for Highway Rangers	£70,000
• Local Cycling & Walking Highway Improvement Plan	£20,000
• Elizabeth Gardens/Iron Well Lane improvements	£20,000
• 'No Through Route' sign – Thorpe Road	£10,000
• Mobile Traffic Lights for Highway Rangers	£10,000
• Bollards in Rectory Road, Hawkwell	£10,000
<b>Total Allocated</b>	<b>140,000</b>
<b>Remaining Funds</b>	<b>26,000</b>



**APPENDIX 2**

Staff Structure – Open Spaces Service -2023

