



**Rochford District
Council**

REPORT TITLE:	Highway Rangers
REPORT OF:	Marcus Hotten, Director of Environment

REPORT SUMMARY

The report identifies and sets out three potential options that could be used to achieve the necessary saving (£70,000) required to fund the Highway Service. These options are: 1) Repurposing of the SEPP funding allocation; 2) Reduction in the Pavilion budget; 3) Transfer of the grounds maintenance allocation from the Car Parks budget.

The options above are not mutually exclusive, and indeed any combination of the above could be used to achieve the necessary financial savings to achieve the required funding of the Highway Ranger service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1 – To continue the Highway Ranger service, for the foreseeable future, by funding via the financial savings as outlined in paragraph 2.3 of the report.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The previous report presented to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, September 23 outlined how 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.

1.2 The report set out 4 recommendations set out below:

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 Essex Highways seeking clarification regarding the provision of service with the withdrawal of funding for the Highway Rangers.

1.3 The following report seeks to address R2, the use of SEPP surplus funding, and the use of potential savings within the Open Space budget. Both opportunities are discussed in turn.

SEPP Funding Surplus

1.4 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 returned to Rochford. A proportion of the surplus has been earmarked for supporting the £70,000 cost for the Highway Ranger service. 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, that is yet to be claimed by the Council from SEPP. The existing allocation of the £160,000 and the current status of the funding allocation is set out below.

1.9 Table 1 - Approved SEPP funding allocation (£186,000):

Submitted Project	Allocation	Committed
Financial Support for Highway Rangers	£70,000	Funding has been drawn down
Contribution to Active Travel England	£20,000	Not required- already funded
Elizabeth Gardens/Iron Well Lane improvements	£20,000	Awaiting confirmation from Highway Panel
'No Through Route' sign – Thorpe Road	£10,000	Not Committed

Mobile Traffic Lights for Highway Rangers	£10,000	Not Committed
Bollards in Rectory Road, Hawkwell	£20,000	Not Committed
Air Quality Monitoring	£10,000	Committed
Total Allocated	160,000	
Remaining Funds	26,000	

- 1.10 Although funding has been allocated, the £20,00-Contribution to Active Travel, is now not required due to the project having secured funding from an alternative source. A further £40,000 has yet to be committed, and when these amounts are combined with the remaining unallocated funds (£26,000) there is a potential total of £86,000. This is sufficient to fund the Highway Rangers for another financial year.
- 1.11 A further update report is required to be submitted to the SEPP Joint Committee for consideration reporting on any underspend or changes to the proposed projects, and seeking approval for any variations. Therefore, a mechanism exists, that would allow for seeking approval from SEPP to fund a further year of the Highway Rangers service, should that be deemed appropriate.

Current Grounds Maintenance Service

- 1.16 The ability for the 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 An analysis of Open Spaces team current spend has been broken down into smaller service units and set out in Appendix 1. The table considers the cost of each aspect of the Open Space service, identifying possible reductions in service, and the likely impact to service that these cuts would have.
- 1.18 The analysis reveals that any saving made will have an impact on service delivery, and in most cases the saving to be made would result in the complete cessation of a given service. An exception is the cutting of grass verges, the number of cuts undertaken in a year could be reduced to provide a saving. However, this may result in severe criticism of the Council by residents, as such a reduction in grass cutting would be visibly noticeable across the urban verges and open spaces in the District.

- 1.19 Looking beyond the spend set out in Appendix 1 for the Open Space Team, but still within the budgetary allocation for Open Spaces management, is the annual routine & maintenance allocation for the various football pavilions provided across the district. It is identified that this budget requires updating and revising to reflect that some pavilions are no longer operational and beyond repair (Grove Playing Field), and other pavilions are upon a full repairing lease arrangement (St John Fisher, and Great Wakering).
- 1.20 An initial review with Asset Management has identified approximately £40,000 savings can be achieved by finalising arrangements on existing leases, so as to ensure financial liabilities are transferred to tenants.

Further Opportunities

- 1.21 At present the maintenance of shrub beds and greenery in the Council car parks across the district is overseen by the Asset Team, and is undertaken using external contractors. An annual £30,000 budget is allocated for this purpose. This is not part of the Open Spaces budget allocation.
- 1.22 These works could be absorbed into the Highway Rangers remit, acknowledging that the focus of the ranger's work would be widened by providing this service, and the car parks would have a priority. Nevertheless, Officers are confident that value for money could be achieved, and still allow considerable capacity to address Highway Ranger works.

2.0 Summary of Savings

- 2.1 The report above sets out three options that are predicted to make savings that could contribute towards the continuation of the Highway Ranger Service. These are:
- 1) Repurposing of the SEPP funding allocation – This could be up to £86,000, but is a one-off funding allocation. Should this be the preferred option, then a further budget review would be required within a year to address future shortfalls in funding.
 - 2) Reduction in the Pavilion Budget allocation – This could provide up to £40,000 saving, and would have minimal impact on service delivery

- 3) Transfer of the grounds maintenance allocation from Car Parks budget – This could provide up to £30,000 saving, but would require a priority to be given to the maintenance of the carpark greenery as part of the Highway Rangers work.

2.2 The options above are not mutually exclusive, and indeed any combination of the above could be used to achieve the necessary financial savings to achieve the required funding of the Highway Ranger service.

2.3 However, recognising that the SEPP funding is essentially a one-off payment it is recommended that option 2) and 3) are taken up to provide the £70,000 saving required.

3.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

3.1 There are not any direct financial implications, however, the savings identified once committed to funding the Highway Ranger service are then unable to address any other financial pressures that the Council will have to consider as part of the annual budget setting exercise.

4.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 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.

5.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

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

6.0 RELEVANT RISKS

6.1 This has been discussed in the body of the report

7.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

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

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APPENDIX 1 - Open Spaces Service Cost Breakdown by Activity

Service	Overview of Service Area	Net Cost	Potential Savings	Impact on Service
Cemeteries	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Grave digging Funeral Service Cemetery Maintenance 	-£42,000	<p>Cemetery team consists of 2x FTE and a shared supervisor.</p> <p>Option 1 - Reduce size of team - The team would be unable to operate with reduced capacity.</p> <p>Option 2 - Remove service.</p>	<p>Total loss of service.</p> <p>Loss of income</p>
Arboricultural Operations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Providing arboricultural works to RDC owned Tree Stock. Open Spaces and Verges Grass Cutting Undertake Sanctuary Housing SLA 	£107,000	<p>Arb team consists of Team leader, Lead Climber and Apprentice.</p> <p>Option 1 - Reduce the size of the team. The team would not be able to operate under Health and Safety requirement with reduced members.</p> <p>Option 2 – Remove service</p>	<p>Total loss of service</p> <p>Risk to Council under Occupiers Liability Act for not managing owned tree assets.</p> <p>Insurance claims would no longer be defensible.</p> <p>Lose £36, 000 income from external SLA.</p> <p>Loss of resilience to cover Open Spaces and Cemetery service through sickness and Holiday.</p>
Arboricultural TPO and Planning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Provide expert arboricultural advice to Planning department relating to development. Manage TPO service. Undertake cyclical tree survey on RDC owned tree stock. Undertake Sanctuary housing SLA cyclical tree survey. 	£40,000	<p>The team consists of 1x part time employee.</p> <p>Option 1 – Remove service.</p>	<p>Total loss of service.</p> <p>Loss of Statutory Service (TPO Management/Planning)</p> <p>Risk to Council under Occupiers Liability Act for not managing owned tree assets.</p> <p>Insurance claims would no longer be defensible.</p> <p>Risk to Council through not providing Arboricultural and Ecology advice to planning department on new development.</p> <p>Loss of income from external SLA’s.</p>

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY

02 November 2023

Item 6

<p>Grounds Maintenance District Verge Cutting and Open Spaces Grass Cutting (40 weeks per year)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. District verge cutting 2. Open Spaces Grass Cutting 	<p>£247,000</p>	<p>The team consists of 4x FTE and 2x Seasonal Cover. This is shared with Parks and Open Spaces maintenance.</p> <p>Option 1 – Reduce teams by 2x FTE’s. This option would reduce the number of district grass cuts from c.16 per annum including Parks and Verges to 8 cuts per year. £63,000 pa saving.</p> <p>Option 2 – Remove service.</p>	<p>The resilience of the team would likely mean that they could achieve less than 8 cuts per year as there would be no additional cover for sickness and holiday entitlement.</p> <p>This would indicate a loss of serviceable machinery, meaning that breakdowns could no longer be covered.</p> <p>Winter sports pitches would have a perceivable loss of maintenance, further reducing income.</p> <p>The public would receive a heavily reduced service.</p> <p>Open Spaces, Parks and Play areas would have to adopt a long grass policy.</p>
<p>Grounds Maintenance (Parks and Open Spaces) 12 weeks</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Hedge Cutting 2. Ditch Clearance 3. Leaf Clearance 4. Bank Work 5. Planting 6. Weeding 7. Hard Surface Clearance 8. Sports Pitch Maintenance 	<p>£78,000</p>	<p>Team is the same team as above, both services are seasonal.</p> <p>There is no scope to reduce the FTE’s as this would reduce grass cutting service.</p> <p>Option 1 – To not provide winter sports facilities district wide.</p> <p>Option 2 – Remove Service</p>	<p>Option 1 would provide a saving of £11, 500 pa, however, would result in the loss of income of £17,000.</p> <p>Sport England, Essex FA and Football Foundation would raise objections.</p> <p>Council Health and Wellbeing Policy not supported.</p> <p>Open Spaces would have no shrub, hedge or bed maintenance.</p> <p>Car Parks and hard surfaces would become overrun with detritus, increasing the risk of claim.</p> <p>Increased risk of flooding from not providing ditch maintenance under Occupiers Liability Act.</p> <p>Insurance Claims undefendable.</p> <p>Total loss of service</p>

<p>Country Park/Hockley Woods Management</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Management of Country Park and Woods. 2. Relationship management with Friends Groups. 3. Parks for Nature Initiative. 4. Tree planting initiatives. 5. General Site Maintenance 6. Volunteers 	<p>£48,640</p>	<p>Team consists of 1x FTE.</p> <p>Option 1 – Remove service</p>	<p>Cherry Orchard Country Park and Hockley Woods would no longer be managed;</p> <p>Stakeholder relationships would no longer be managed.</p> <p>Rural Grant payments would no longer be managed.</p> <p>Parks for nature Project would no longer be managed, leading to additional maintenance on converted sites and loss of biodiversity.</p> <p>Total loss of service.</p>
<p>Play Space and Open Spaces Technical Works</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Routine and Operational play inspections. 2. Play Space repairs 3. Site condition monitoring 4. Park repairs (furniture) 	<p>£58,000</p>	<p>Team consists of 0.5 FTE.</p> <p>Option 1 – Remove Service</p>	<p>Loss of statutory service under Occupiers' Liability Act.</p> <p>Insurance claims would not be defensible.</p> <p>Loss of play provision district wide.</p> <p>The duty of care monitoring and safety inspections and reports would cease.</p> <p>Loss of income from providing Play Inspection Service to Parishes and Sanctuary Housing</p> <p>Total loss of service</p>
<p>Highways Rangers</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Highways vegetation and alleyway clearance. 2. Grass Verge Cutting. 3. Open Spaces Maintenance 4. Cemetery Cover 5. Arboricultural Cover 	<p>£80,000</p>	<p>Team consists of 2x FTE's.</p> <p>Option 1 – Remove service. The team could not safely operate under the Health and Safety at Work Act with reduced service.</p>	<p>Resilience to provide cover for Sickness and Holiday in the cemeteries is greatly reduced.</p> <p>Reputational Risk of cancelling funerals.</p> <p>Resilience to provide grass cutting cover is greatly reduced.</p>