

Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee – 21 October 2003

Minutes of the meeting of the **Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee** held on **21 October 2003** when there were present:-

Cllr P K Savill (Chairman)
Cllr C A Hungate (Vice-Chairman)

Cllr C I Black
Cllr Mrs R Brown
Cllr T E Goodwin

Cllr K H Hudson
Cllr P F A Webster
Cllr D A Weir

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr T Livings.

VISITING

Councillors Mrs L Hungate, A J Humphries, M G B Starke, Mrs M A Starke, Mrs M S Vince and Mrs M J Webster.

OFFICERS PRESENT

R Crofts	-	Corporate Director (Finance & External Services)
S Scrutton	-	Head of Planning Services
G Woolhouse	-	Head of Housing, Health & Community Care
C Nicholson	-	Solicitor
J Bostock	-	Principal Committee Administrator

REPRESENTING ESSEX COUNTY COUNCIL

Councillor R Bass	-	Cabinet Member for Highways and Transportation
K Bristow	-	District Manager, Transportation & Operational Services

472 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 7 October 2003 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

473 QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION WITH THE COUNTY CABINET MEMBER FOR HIGHWAYS & TRANSPORTATION

The Committee was pleased to welcome County Councillor R Bass who was in attendance to provide an update on highways and transportation issues that affect the District and to answer Members' questions.

Councillor Bass expressed thanks for the invitation to attend the meeting. The County Council was embarking upon a full and fundamental review of the

Highways and Maintenance Service, which would include appropriate consultation with the District via the Leader and Chief Executive. Councillor Bass had been engaged in service review activity since being appointed Portfolio Holder for Highways and Transportation in February. There were four key planks to the review:-

(1) Departmental structures

A review of departmental structures had been undertaken. It had been concluded that Area Offices should be geographically linked with the new forum areas for Essex, with Rayleigh continuing to provide the offices for the south-east area. Re-alignment of the officer structure was being progressed.

(2) Relationship with Districts

A number of Districts, including Rochford, had no direct highways agency arrangements. The County Council had concluded that agency arrangements were not working well and that, instead, there should be new Local Service Agreements (LSA) between the County Council and each of the twelve Districts. This would introduce a more equitable/even-handed arrangement across Essex. The County Council was in the process of identifying a hierarchy of County routes and local roads. The LSA would give Districts a greater say on local road networks with appropriate support from area highway officers. The County Council hoped to deliver an initial LSA discussion document to Rochford in early November.

Part of the County Council's plans involved proposals for co-locating County Council staff with those employed by the District and contractors to facilitate a 'one-stop shop' capable of dealing with all enquiries.

(3) Contract 2000

Contract 2000 involved maintenance and programmed works valued up to £500,000. The contractor for the south of Essex was Alfred McAlpine (May Gurney in the north) and the consulting engineers were Mouchel. It had been recognised that Contract 2000 arrangements were not working satisfactorily. The County Council and its partners had effectively surrendered certain important controls. Whilst this may seem to be an over-simplification, it was the case that the longer a contractor took to complete a job the more money they were able to receive.

The County Council had now developed a number of key performance indicators around Contract 2000 (a five year contract with provisions for rollover). There had been detailed discussions with McAlpine and May Gurney to achieve voluntary changes aimed at improving client side supervision and value-for-money aspects. The contractors had recognised that Contract 2000 was too open-ended and were responding well.

(4) Partnerships

The County Council wished to improve its effectiveness in working with partners outside Essex, such as Government Departments, since this had been identified as a previous weakness.

Responding to general questions on aspects of the highways and maintenance service, Councillor Bass advised that:-

- The budget associated with winter salting was, effectively, managed centrally. Notwithstanding that the local budget may appear low, the County Council was ready to provide resources as necessary. It would be impracticable and too costly for the County Council to gear up on the basis of the most severe winter scenarios, which typically occurred every five to seven years. It also needed to be recognised that authorities that prepared for consistently poor winter weather conditions often encountered difficulties. Over time, the County Council would be fully centralising the salting budget. A review of salting/methods was underway. It was intended that there would be precautionary salting on all main routes. The cabinet would respond to additional monetary requirements as appropriate.
- The administrative arrangements associated with responding to planning applications had not been a key aspect of re-organisation considerations. In Councillor Bass's view there was, perhaps, an opportunity for a more selective approach. For example, it may be that the Planning Authority is itself able to apply the County Council's general standards for certain de minimus applications so that the County Council can deal with significant applications on a case by case basis. It could be accepted that further thought would need to be given to these aspects.
- The County Council had concluded that historical road classifications were inappropriate and needed review. The new classification would include County roads (those of more than local significance), which should be salted. This would help address previous problems such as elements of key bus routes not being fully salted.
- New road classifications would be fully mapped and published. It was proposed that, eventually, road markings would be introduced on County routes to enable their identification on the ground. The new approach to budgeting included a likely usage formula. The County Council was keen for equitable budgets across all the Districts. The ideal situation would involve block sums being allocated to each District representing expenditure on County and local routes. It was felt that Districts were likely to be better at prioritising how local route monies should be spent. There should also be an opportunity for Districts to be able to augment a budget. In terms of the near future, Districts would need to use the County appointed works contractor. Some aspects, such as verge cutting, could

be devolved. The County Council was currently piloting search and repair arrangements and it may be that these will come out of the main contract.

- It may be that, in time, Districts will be able to appoint their own contractors. The contract 2000 arrangements involving the use of Alfred McAlpine are likely to be in place to at least 2006. If Rochford District was active in involvement with a Local Service Agreement and demonstrated a desire to run a bespoke contract, then it may be that arrangements could be reviewed.
- Residents who experience problems with local government services were not usually concerned which tier of local government provided the service. They were looking for solutions. Highway budgets, whether at County or local level, were never going to be sufficient to meet all demands. If the County Council could engender the full support of Districts in local service agreement arrangements this would strengthen the ability of the Cabinet Member to argue for a higher proportion of funds for highway and infrastructure works.
- The County Council would acknowledge that a number of lessons had been learnt about salting over the last winter. One objective was to have a centrally controlled facility for serious issues.
- Some surface dressing schemes have had to be abandoned due to budgetary constraints. Dressing matters had worsened due to the recent extraordinary spell of dry weather which had led to cracking and subsidence issues. The County Council had agreed that emergency measures needed to be put in place.

Responding to questions relating to Contract 2000, Councillor Bass advised that:-

- If supplied with details he would be able to provide specific responses to concerns associated with Town Centre Schemes, such as Hullbridge.
- Alfred McAlpine and May Gurney were very reputable and should not be blamed for issues associated with weaknesses in a local authority's arrangements.
- Whilst it could be recognised that Contract 2000 was basically flawed, a key aspect of effective partnership working was retention of an element of continuity. Both McAlpine and May Gurney were working positively with the County Council to resolve issues wherever possible.

Responding to questions in relation to the possibility of a Southend-on-Sea outer ring road, Councillor Bass advised that:-

- The County Council was in receipt of funding in the sum of £2.2 billion for specific application to the A12, the M25 and all the A120. The County

Council had further schemes, totalling £1.1 billion, relating to multi-modal studies. One further study had yet to be finalised. Within part of the latter monies there was earmarking for a road which putatively provided some relief around Southend. Councillor Bass, however, was on record as saying that the principal corridors to be evaluated in relation to South East Essex were the A13 to the west of Sadlers Farm and the A127 to the east and west of the A130. These provide the strategic transportation core for South East Essex. Whilst, link roads to the A127 corridor are important, the emphasis needs to be improvements to the A127 and A13 corridors.

- Whilst Southend-on-Sea may believe that they will need relief by way of a ring road, this is not of strategic significance to Essex County Council: any relief road would only be of local importance. The case for regeneration cannot be argued by aggravating problems further along an existing corridor. It may be that a local solution is needed for Southend-on-Sea issues, but that Authority would have to convince Rochford District Council that any proposals they have are viable. The County Council is aware of Southend's aspirations for a relief road, but has not been presented with any information about routes or road types.
- Any proposals that involved a main dual 2/3 lane highway commencing to the east of Southend-on-Sea (Thorpe Bay/Shoeburyness) going through the Green Belt in Rochford and joining the A130 at Rettendon, for example, would not be sustainable. The Department of Transport also took this view. Whilst discussion on relief roads cannot be ruled out, this did not mean that the County Council would be in favour. It may even be that Southend Borough Council and Rochford District Council would at some point wish to support each other with a proposal.

The Committee thanked Councillor Bass and the District Manager for attending the meeting and being so informative.

474 PROPOSED CHANGE TO PPG3 HOUSING – INFLUENCING THE SIZE, TYPE AND AFFORDABILITY OF HOUSING

The Committee considered the report of the Head of Planning Services which sought views on Government proposals to amend the guidance in PPG3 on the size, type and affordability of housing.

During debate it was observed that failure by applicants to comply with policies on affordable housing could justify refusal of planning consent. The Head of Planning Services confirmed that proposals reflected areas that the Council would need to consider in the near future in relation to the local development framework (which would replace the local plan).

The Committee endorsed the view of a Member that it was fundamental for the Council to define what is meant by key workers. There was no national definition, it being left to each Council. There was also a need to give detailed consideration to eligibility criteria for affordable housing, the definition of

affordable housing and associated financial thresholds. These were matters that are due to be considered in detail by the Council's Housing Best Value Sub-Committee. The Council was in the process of negotiating the future housing needs study, which would be key to future housing strategy. This was another matter to be considered in detail by the Housing Best Value Sub-Committee.

Resolved

- (1) That it be noted that the Council's definitions of affordable housing and key workers would be determined following the report of the Housing Best Value Sub-Committee in December. Likewise, the specification for the next Housing Needs Study would follow the Sub-Committee's report in January 2004.
- (2) That, subject to (1) above, the comments in the report of the Head of Planning Services form the basis of a response to the consultation from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister on influencing the size, type and affordability of housing. (HPS)

The meeting closed at 9.33pm.

Chairman

Date