

INFRASTRUCTURE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY PANEL

WEDNESDAY, 11 NOVEMBER 2020

PRESENT: Councillors John Baldwin, Christine Bateson, Jon Davey (Vice-Chairman), Phil Haseler and Julian Sharpe (Chairman)

Also in attendance: Councillor Gurpreet Bhangra, Councillor John Bowden, Councillor Mandy Brar, Councillor David Cannon, Councillor Gerry Clark, Councillor David Hilton, Councillor Andrew Johnson, Councillor Ewan Larcombe, Councillor Samantha Rayner, Councillor Shamsul Shelim, Councillor Gurch Singh and Councillor Simon Werner, Bob Pizzey and Duncan Mizen

Officers: Chris Joyce, Fatima Rehman, David Scott and Ben Smith

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

None.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

MINUTES

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the minutes of the meeting held on 17 September 2020 be approved as a true and correct record, subject to the following change:

- Councillor Singh's attendance to be amended for 17 September 2020.

ORDER OF BUSINESS

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the order of business as detailed in the agenda be varied.

SAFETY OF HIGHWAY TREES

David Scott, Head of Communities, said the Borough had a statutory duty to survey its trees every five years, which was contracted to VolkerHighways, in conjunction with the internal tree team. It could be argued to have three-yearly inspections due to climate change, more severe storms and higher rainfall instead, however this would require greater resource. The ten-year tree and woodland strategy were coming to an end and would be refreshed in late 2020.

The external arboriculturalists surveyed all trees over 75 mm diameter when measured at 1.5m above ground level and were prioritised based on whether they were on A, B or C roads and were targeted in the higher risk urban areas. Trees that were potentially at risk, unsafe or needed restoration were identified and had an earlier re-inspection if required. Approximately 31,000 trees over 1,7500 roads had been inspected, 500 trees of which needed re-inspection in a shorter cycle. Tree stock was replenished with local and diverse species to deter from spreading diseases by imported stock.

The Chairman indicated that for this item he was only taking comments from Panel Members. He asked more about the visual inspection and the Panel was informed that qualified arboriculturalists used a standard inspection framework to consider the health and condition of the trees. A standard assessment was followed, all data captured is stored in a database and this methodology was used for all roads. This included looking at high-risk species that dropped branches at particular times of the year, as well as the proximity to other trees, root plates, crown structure and the condition of the leaves and tree as a whole. A reliable judgement was then formed, identifying defects such as the removal of deadwood or weak branches near the highway was completed. Trees were cleared by 5.3m over the highway and 2.5m over the footway.

Councillors Baldwin and Haseler complimented the inspections undertaken. Councillor Baldwin said there was a need of flexibility to re-inspect trees that were of concern more than once in the 5-year cycle for the safety of residents.

Councillor Bateson asked if tree owners near the highway should cyclically inspect their trees by a commercial arboriculturalist, as more private trees fell than RBWM-owned trees. The Panel was informed that private residents had similar responsibilities as RBWM as tree owners, to ensure their trees were in safe condition, and where defects were spotted on private trees, the household was given a 'calling card' with guidance to encourage tree inspections.

The Panel noted the item.

ORDER OF BUSINESS

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the order of business as detailed in the agenda be varied.

CAPITAL PROGRAMME UPDATE

Chris Joyce, Head of Infrastructure, Sustainability and Economic Growth said due to other urgent matters, it was not possible to bring this report forward. It was proposed to move this item to the next meeting, which would inform the Panel on the capital planning processes for projects coming forward and how this could be improved.

RESOLVED UNANIMOUSLY: That the Capital Programme Update item be itemised for January 2021.

VOLKERHIGHWAYS LTD. ANNUAL REVIEW

Ben Smith introduced the item and said the five-year contract was awarded to VolkerHighways in April 2017, with an option to extend for up to another 2 years, subject to satisfactory performance. The contract covered highway services and the core contract value was £3.9 million per annum, as well as off-contract work that was done to deliver elements of the Capital Programme. This included delivering the annual Road Resurfacing Programme, in the order of £1.5 - £1.9 million.

A formal governance structure was in place where the Contract Lead met weekly, monthly, quarterly, six-monthly and annually to review the contract operation. Annually, the borough participated in the National Highways and Transport

Benchmarking Survey, where a sample of residents of 750 residents were asked questions about the service provided. RBWM was the sixth highest nationally in street cleanliness, and above the national average for the conditions of the highway network. Outside of the VolkerHighways contract, the borough performed poorly on local bus services and public transport.

A report was to be presented in April 2021 to Cabinet, to consider the extension of the contract. The Commissioning team was undertaking diagnostics to review the performance of the contract and provide data to review various options for the service. This included re-procuring the contract, having different contracts for some or all of the services, or bringing the services in-house.

Darren Myser, Project Manager at VolkerHighways, said there were a suite of 30 measures for performance, such as customer care, added value and quality management. VolkerHighways performed well in most areas and concerns in other areas due to the harsh winter periods over the last few years. Breakdown of vehicles led to a delay in the service in 2018-19. In 2019-20, two old gully emptiers were being used, which were now replaced due to breakdowns. All the gully waste was recycled, which introduced a saving on the service. In this time period, there was a dip in the 28-day completion of works, with resources now spent to ensure work was done in time. Overall, despite the challenges of COVID-19, the performance criteria were still met.

The Chairman asked how the service could be approved, and the Panel was informed that there were internal and external audits to identify areas of improvements. Mew electric powered equipment and handheld tools were purchased. To increase sustainability, three electric vehicles were used for highway inspections, with a lack of capacity for more due to the limited power for chargers in the depot. A review of using sustainable and cost-effective materials was underway. VolkerHighways were looking to use a more cohesive asset management system that managed assets with a work ordering system and a customer care module. This would allow VolkerHighways to respond directly to enquiries for a better flow from start to finish.

The Chairman asked if using plastic chips in the roads was an option in the borough. The Panel was informed that recycled products were sought when using and laying asphalt, such as rubber grit and wrap protocols, recycled glass and low asphalt temperatures-

The Vice Chairman asked where the funding came from to deliver 130% of the capital programme schemes. The Panel was informed that additional funding was made available from the Department for Transport that the Commissioning team made a successful bid for, which allowed an increase in works. Central government investment had increased in the last few years for pothole repairs, resurfacing and local transport schemes, therefore external funding was received.

The Vice Chairman asked about the use of waste from infrastructure schemes and the Panel was informed that material waste was arranged into skips according to the material type. The material was recycled or reused by different companies. Segregate was separated from ground excavation and recycled into other products and used in other works. Disposal of materials was a last resort.

The Vice Chairman asked what the ideal budget required for roadworks to be successfully completed was and the Panel was informed that road conditions were unlikely to be perfect as they deteriorated and therefore an exact figure could not be

given. A Highway Asset Management Strategy was in place that prioritised the primary road network in accordance to government guidance. Less investment was allotted to B, C and rural roads due to low priority, as they are not busy.

Bob Pizzey, Business Development Director, said investment was made in a Pavement Management System that took data from the performance of the carriageway to generate programmes of work for road improvements on a needs basis. This supported officers in decision-making for budget priority. There was a trial for plastic kerbs in another authority, with a view to review results and propose to clients. A plastic roads company from the Netherlands were due to demonstrate a pre-moulded plastic road that had the tensile strength as asphalt and easier storage and access for repair for cables and pipes.

Councillor Bateson asked if the weather conditions in the Netherlands was like the UK and the Panel was informed that parts of the Netherlands were similar. Councillor Baldwin asked what was limiting an effective in-house bid for some or all the services that were provided by the VolkerHighways contract. The Panel was informed that a diagnostic tool was used to apply different options in order to provide Cabinet with an objective recommendation for service delivery in future. If the services were to be brought in-house, a short-term bid team would need to be created and funded, as the commissioning strategy was based primarily on outsourced and commissioned services.

The Chairman asked how much a private sector organisation would incur in putting a bid together and the Panel was informed this would be approximately £100,000. Councillor Baldwin asked if unanimity was required, should Cabinet decide to extend the contract for a further two years. The Panel was informed that it was Cabinet's decision to extend the contract, however VolkerHighways could reject the offer. Darren Myser affirmed that VolkerHighways was interested in securing an extended contract.

Councillor Bateson asked if the target for all routes to be completed within 3 hours of commencing was in reference to snow ploughs as part of the winter maintenance plan, how this was achieved and what roads were included. The Panel was informed that the routes were predetermined and included A roads and access to priority places such as schools and hospitals. Snow ploughs and grit were put down at the same time if the conditions dictated and would continue to salt and grit the roads if needed, including secondary routes. The routes were a certain length, with the correct number of vehicles do complete the task in three hours. The weather forecast and sensors on the road network allowed the team to plan the task prior to the snow freezing.

Councillor Haseler asked if overgrown vegetation was managed by VolkerHighways or Tivoli. The Panel was informed that VolkerHighways managed hedgerows on a reactive basis, and Tivoli cleared overgrown hedgerows from private properties as part of the ground's maintenance contract. VolkerHighways issued calling cards to the landowner to manage the overgrown vegetation for a set period, followed by a second notice after 10 days, if required. If there was no action, officers were informed to take enforcement action, whereby the vegetation was managed, and the cost recharged to the landowner.

Councillor Haseler said there were regular overgrown vegetation in the same areas that should be managed in a regular program rather than on a reactive basis. Ben Smith said he agreed that improvement was needed in this area and would be

reviewed in the new contract. Councillor Haseler asked if there was a schedule to sweep roads and footpath from fallen leaves, which were hazardous and slippery for vulnerable residents on the footpath and blocked drains. The Panel was informed that there was an annual gully cleansing programme and cleansing schedules dependent on the classification of the roads and tree density. Roads and gullies were also cleansed as required and additional cleansing took place in areas that were predicted to need more cleansing.

Councillor Haseler said most of the gullies were soakaways rather than leading into a main drainage, therefore they filled quickly, and asked if the cost was high to remake the gullies. The Panel was informed that an extensive cleanse of the soakaways was to be put forward as part of the Capital Programme for 2021. The soakaways capacity had been increased by putting a borehole at the bottom of the soakaway. The proactive and longer lasting schemes, such as connecting to a positive drainage network rather than a soakaway, were limited due to a restricted budget.

Councillor Hilton said he could not locate where gully problems could be reported on the RBWM website, how the issue was processed and if a schedule could be published on the RBWM website. Ben Smith said he would check offline the for how to report gully issues, which could also be reported by emailing Highways@RBWM.gov.uk. The issue would be sent to VolkerHighways, which would be assigned a priority and then be resolved. It was feasible to have the gully cleansing schedule published on the RBWM website in future.

Councillor Brar raised concern that Councillor Hilton, a non-Panel Member, had been allowed to speak, but she had been denied that opportunity on an earlier agenda item. The Chairman said that he was using his discretion on when to allow non-Panel members to speak. Councillor Baldwin reiterated the concerns raised, especially as it looked as if opposition members were being denied a chance to speak. The Chairman said all non-Panel Members would not be allowed to speak on agenda items going forward. Councillor Baldwin said he would be raising this with the Monitoring Officer.

(Councillor Baldwin left the meeting.)

The Panel noted the item.

HIGHWAYS INVESTMENT REPORT

Ben Smith introduced the item and said the report showed the scale of the issue, how to assets were managed and how individual schemes were prioritised under the Capital Programme. As a highway authority, the borough was responsible for all the highway assets, which was managed in accordance to the Highway Asset Management Strategy and the Highway Maintenance Management Plan. Through local transport plan grants, money could be leveraged by central government, which graded authorities based on their asset management. The borough was in the highest banding, which allowed maximum funding and has been implemented to develop the Capital Programme.

Bids were assessed against strategic priorities, and the overall Capital Investment Programme would be agreed by Cabinet and then Council as part of the Budget every February. The Capital Programme would include highway related activity and the Commissioning team would return to Cabinet with a list of detailed schemes to spend funding on by using technical data, programming tools and surveys.

The Vice Chairman asked if the highway had land value or was based on the usage of the highway. The Panel was informed that the highway was valued based on the accounting guidelines by Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy. The Vice Chairman asked if the 17,000 streetlights in RBWM were owned by the authority, which was confirmed.

Councillor Bateson asked why there were no air quality monitors on the A30 and A4 and the Panel was informed there was not a vast network of air quality monitoring across the borough due to cost. There were fixed traffic counters across the highway network that collected annual data for plans such as the Local Transport Plan and traffic volume levels. Air quality monitors were placed where there was poor air quality, high levels of residential population and sensitive locations such as schools and hospitals. Councillor Bateson suggested traffic and air quality monitoring as an item on the agenda.

ACTION: Ben Smith to inform about air quality and traffic monitoring locations offline.

The Chairman asked how traffic flow was predicted and managed when new developments were in progress. The Panel was informed that highway assessments were undertaken using the highway model to assess the potential impacts of development set out in the Borough Local Plan. Data was collected and applied using methodologies set out by the government on predicting the estimated traffic. The model was applied to the road network to assess projected capacity issues and requirement for network improvements, which would then be added to the Infrastructure Delivery Plan. The funding of the scheme would be identified through Community Infrastructure Levy, Section 106 (S106) and external funding. New developments submitted through the Planning were accompanied with a Transport Assessment that identified the impacts of the development to the road networks and improvements required.

The Vice Chairman said the S106 was a small sum for highway improvement and asked how this amount would improve road structures and the Panel was informed that some of S106 was secured for specific improvements. Whilst multiple developments did not require upgrades to the road network, money was secured from them, which would be enough to contribute to road network improvements. The Infrastructure Team was working closely with the Planning team to seek appropriate contributions from developers to maximise funding.

The Vice Chairman asked the amount ALDI UK contributed to the highway improvement to improve the infrastructure for HGV use and Chris Joyce said for the application reference to be shared offline.

The Panel noted the item.

RIVER THAMES SCHEME PARTNERSHIP FUNDING

Ben Smith introduced the item and gave an overview over of the River Thames Scheme (RTS), which was an Environment Agency (EA) led project to reduce flood risk, by building a new flood channel alongside the River Thames in three sections. There were several partners, local authorities and organisations like Thames Water on the RTS. Channel 1 was within the borough, which contributed £52.7 million of the

overall £635 million project to deliver Channel 1. In 2017, the Council approved £10 million funding, with some sums paid pre-2017. There was a funding gap of £40 million and the financial strategy was to apply for a flood levy that was awaiting approval by central government, which was approved by Council. The legislative change did not happen and therefore the levy option for funding was unavailable.

At the time of the meeting, the RTS was at the point of submission of the consent order, which was the planning, design and procurement stage of the scheme. The project required a commitment from the Section 151 (S151) officer that the borough would be able to meet its full commitment; however, the S151 was not in the position to commit as the flood levy was not secured. The sponsoring board for the RTS decided to proceed with Channels 2 and 3 downstream without Channel 1. The EA committed to work with borough to explore other local flood measures that could provide flood protection. The solutions and costs were yet to be deciphered, but the funding was available to deliver local measures.

The Chairman asked what progress was made in finding local solutions and the Panel was informed that a meeting with the EA was diarised. The EA would present the options available and the impact they would have on flood mitigation. The options would be relatively low cost and have a short timescale for delivery.

The Vice Chairman asked why there was reliance on the flood levy as a means of financing Channel 1 when this was not approved by the government. The Panel was informed that the paper submitted to the Council in 2017 stated the financing was subject to the new legislation being enacted, with positive commitments from the government. Since then, the cost of the scheme was altered as more work needed to be done. The Vice Chairman said that over the five years, the borough invested £1.5 million of the total £50 million, therefore alternative sources other than the flood levy was not sought. He felt backup plans should have been put in place.

The Chairman asked if other local authorities in the RTS were impacted by the lack of flood levy. The Panel was informed that Surrey County Council supported the borough in lobbying the government to allow a flood levy so that the RTS could be funded. Surrey County Council made the decision to proceed with the scheme through other sources within their council and pay their commitment in full.

Councillor Larcombe said the EA website illustrated that the RTS was still fully funded and cost £640 million, with the Surrey County Council partnerships contribution of £237 million. He said the borough's press release on its participation in the RTS on 30th March 2020 said the scheme was currently estimated to cost £475 million and had committed to £10 million and an additional £43 million for the Berkshire section. He said the press release was can longer available on the website.

In March 2020, Councillor Larcombe was made aware for the first time of the £43 million shortfall. In August 2020, Councillor Cannon, Lead Member Public Protection and Parking, announced that Channel 1 would not be progressed due to the lack of partnership funding, after a meeting with EA in July 2020. Councillor Larcombe was awaiting copies of the agenda and minutes of the meeting with the EA and sponsor groups since September 2020.

Councillor Larcombe referred to the report that mentioned the borrowing costs were considered unacceptable and said this had not been discussed before and felt this was another failure of the financial governance. He felt residents downstream were

denied the opportunity for effective flood defences. He referred to the report where alternative local flood defences to protect Datchet, Wraysbury and Old Windsor were being considered with the EA and said this included re-profiling the Thames to increase the cross-sectional areas and reduce the rugosity. He said Plan Thames dredging for conveyance purposes was abandoned by the EA in the mid-1990s and all equipment was sold or scrapped. Councillor Larcombe asked:

- Who were the individuals involved in the discussions with the EA and why Councillor Larcombe was not involved or informed of the meetings?
- What the RBWM forecast borrowings of April 2021 and a detailed explanation as to why borrowing £41.275 million was unaffordable and unacceptable.
- To confirm that £10 million approved was readily available to spend on Datchet, Horton, Wraysbury and Old Windsor's flood defences.
- Who was involved in the consideration of the alternative local flood defences for Datchet, Horton, Wraysbury and Old Windsor, as he was not invited?
- When the downstream villages would benefit from the investment?

The Chairman said the requisite answers were not available in the meeting and therefore a response would be given offline.

ACTION: Ben Smith to respond to Councillor Larcombe's questions offline.

The Panel noted the item.

WORK PROGRAMME

The Chairman and Vice Chairman would review the Work Programme offline, along with officers. Scoping was required of the suggested items.

The meeting, which began at 6.15 pm, finished at 8.36 pm

CHAIRMAN.....

DATE.....