

Extract from the draft minutes of the Scrutiny Panel meeting of 12 March 2024

459. Local Highways Panel

Apologies had been received from Councillor Sue Lissimore, Chair of the Local Highways Panel, and Jane Thompson, Transport and Sustainability Joint Lead. Both had intended to be present but were unable to attend due to illness.

Councillor David King, Leader of the Council, explained that the report looked at the Council's relationship with Essex Highways. Responsibility for highways matters lay with Essex County Council, so questions could be framed as to how the City Council approached the Local Highways Panel, with changes underway regarding how highways work is carried out. It was expected that the ramifications for the Local Highways Panel [LHP] would be seen later in March 2024. The Council had limited influence, but the report presented that it was doing what it could do.

Matthew Brown, Economic Regeneration Manager, explained that the LHP looked at small-scale capital infrastructure projects, such as bus stops, cycle paths, and tackling local hotspots. The Council did not contribute funding since 2018-19, but did influence works via the LHP.

A Panel member noted the share of Council tax which went to Essex County Council [ECC], and asked whether devolution of highways maintenance to the City Council be workable. The Leader stated that ECC accepted the arguments in favour of devolution, but the question was how to carry out devolution in a practical way. The redevelopment of St. Nicholas Square was a good example of collaborative work with ECC. The Leader asked the Panel to consider what competencies the Council could add to the relevant team to help the Council achieve works in a simpler way, with a possible way forward for the Council to have an arrangement to do some highways work within Colchester. Lindsay Barker, Deputy Chief Executive, noted that Essex devolution was currently on hold, but it was hoped that it would be returned unto. Conversations continued across North Essex councils, seeking greater decision making in the area. Councils were making the most of current arrangements to influence and have an effect on decision making, seeing successes.

A Panel member asked why the budget for LHPs had been cut from £4m to £2m, with the Colchester LHP budget dropping from £0.5m to £0.25m. The Deputy Chief Executive explained that ECC had the same budget pressures as the Council, but with around 80% of their budget going into adult social care or into caring for SEND [Special educational needs and disabilities] children. ECC were seeking all possible ways to save money. The Council had a good record of gaining highways funding, but needed to be clear in its prioritisations. The Leader explained that there was an agreement in principle, between the Council and ECC, on a capital programme for Colchester centre in the Summer.

A Panel member raised concern that there might be a disconnect between the Council's Planning Team, and ECC Highways, where new housing developments were not matched by transport infrastructure improvements.

The Economic Regeneration Manager clarified that Colchester, Chelmsford and Basildon together received 12.5% of the overall Essex budget for LHPs. A Panel member asked if the Council could contribute funding to the LHP. The Deputy Chief Executive cautioned that this would generate difficult questions as to why the Council would be funding a function of the County Council. Another Panel member suggested that the Panel should recommend that Cabinet reinstates its £100k per year funding of the LHP, and that resource should be found for this. This was compared to the £7.7m agreed in the 2024-25 Budget for highways spending by the Council, on a specific local project. The Panel member suggested that this work be cancelled and the money used elsewhere.

The Deputy Chief Executive highlighted that the Council had just passed a Budget which would require a restructure, under very challenging circumstances. The £7.7m spending allocated to highways work around the Northern Gateway site was to be an investment in access to the biggest of the Council's assets. A Panel member countered with a request for priority to instead be given to matters of concern to residents, such as to minimise damage to vehicles from poorly maintained roads.

Other Panel members pointed out that ECC received a far greater share of Council Tax than the City Council received, for providing different services, which gave rise to caution as to whether the Council should provide funding for an ECC function. An alternative suggestion was made, that it would be preferable for ECC to restore its funding of LHPs to the previous level, of £0.5m

The Panel considered possible issues regarding how the LHP explained its work, to show the public what it was doing. A Panel member argued that the LHP's reputation did not engender confidence in it and whether it performed effectively. The Deputy Chief Executive noted that the request for better communication of the LHP's work could be passed on to the Chair of the LHP. The Chairman suggested that the Chair of the LHP could be asked to provide more information on its working, and on how this could be advertised. Owen Howell, Democratic Services Officer, noted that the Panel had no mechanism to make formal recommendations directly to the Local Highways Panel. The Chairman therefore pledged to write to Councillor Lissimore to make an informal request for more information on the LHP's work to be communicated, both to the Panel and to the public.

RECOMMENDED that CABINET consider authorising Council funding to be provided to the Local Highways Panel, as had previously been done up to 2018-19.