

To: All Members of the Cabinet Scrutiny Committee

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Date: 8 December 2008

Dear Member

CABINET SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - WEDNESDAY, 10 DECEMBER 2008

I am now able to enclose Item A8 – Notes of the Informal Member Group on Highway Services Business Plan – 2 December 2008, for consideration at the Cabinet Scrutiny Committee meeting taking place this Wednesday.

Yours sincerely



Peter Sass
Head of Democratic Services & Local Leadership

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NOTES of a Meeting of the Cabinet Scrutiny Committee's Informal Member Group on the Kent Highways Services Annual Business Plan held on Tuesday, 2 December 2008 at 9am.

PRESENT: Mr I S Chittenden, Dr M R Eddy, Mr R F Manning

APOLOGIES: Mr K A Ferrin

ALSO PRESENT: Mr Mike Austerberry, Executive Director of Environment, Highways and Waste; Mrs Caroline Bruce, Interim Director of Highway Services.

OFFICER: Mrs A Taylor, Research Officer to the Cabinet Scrutiny Committee.

1. Kent Highways Services Annual Business Unit Operational Plan 2008/09

Terms of Reference

- (1) The Informal Member Group had been established by the Cabinet Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 23 April 2008 to examine the Kent Highways Services Annual Business Unit Operational Plan for 2008/09.

Introduction

- (2) Dr Eddy explained that the purpose of the IMG was to look at the Business Plan for Kent Highways Service and the areas of risk or concern within the Business Plan. There had been difficulties in the past with Key Decisions being taken by Directorates without any reference being contained within the forward plan but being present in the business plan. However, the business plans did not always clearly specify what decisions needed to be taken and when, and it was hoped that this could be tightened up in future business plans.

Members questions

- (3) Dr Eddy referred to the Wrotham depot site and asked for clarification on how the other sites were progressing. Mrs Bruce explained that the Ashford depot was a successful site, it was a nice building and staff morale had increased since staff starting working there. Three other potential sites were being pursued and Officers were confident of achieving one of the sites which had a good location and good road network links. Mr Austerberry stated that finding a suitable site for a large highways depot which was acceptable both operationally and in planning terms was a difficult requirement to fulfil, with size, a good location near to the M20 and good road networks all crucial.
- (4) Mr Manning stated that the principle of the reorganisation was to have two or three centres of operation in the county, which was subsequently reduced to two. These enable to partnership team of contractor and consultant to work closely together.

- (5) Dr Eddy asked whether the Ashford Depot was making savings and whether it was delivering services more effectively. Mrs Bruce explained that the service had not focussed on obtaining that information so far, but it was an analysis that would be carried out to determine what level of savings the co-location and investment in technology had saved. Mr Austerberry stated that the early signs were promising but there was still a long way to go.
- (6) Mr Manning expressed his concerns over a previous lack of leadership and direction within KHS and asked Mr Austerberry for his assurance that this would not continue. Members of the IMG agreed that at this time the Highways Service needed stability to enable the major structural changes and investment in new systems to bed down and the staff fully deliver with them. While Mr Austerberry saw no need for further major reorganisation or transformation of the Service, he would make changes as needed to ensure continued improvement. Members expressed confidence in the senior staff but would urge the Chief Executive to put a plan in place for a permanent staffing solution as soon as possible.

KHS Half Year Monitoring 2008/09 table

Members of the IMG concentrated on those projects, developments or key actions within the monitoring table that were not fully delivered, and therefore had a red progress status.

- (7) *Community liaison: ‘demonstrate learning from customer feedback, measuring success against impact on the community’*

Mr Chittenden stated that he had had excellent feedback about the Community Liaison Officers and that they were working well as a link between the Council, Members and the Community. Mr Manning stated that Community Liaison Officers were fundamental to good working practices, they were key to preventing the public being left in limbo. Members asked how KHS received their feedback from the public? Mrs Bruce explained that the service was focussing on getting the basics right and had a particular focus on customer satisfaction and customer enquiries. Feedback was received through the contact centre survey and the tracker survey and these were showing positive news. Mr Austerberry confirmed that he was taking a personal interest in dealing with and monitoring customer enquiries and complaints, particularly those received from Members.

- (8) *Flooding: ‘refocus from reactive to proactive’*

Dr Eddy asked how the Service was going to achieve a proactive focus? Mrs Bruce explained that gully work was mainly reactive at the moment, as a lack of investment in the past has led to more work now when there were problems. The service had kept on top of the work but it incurred more costs than if the work was carried out in a proactive way. Mr Chittenden asked if money was available in the 2009/10 budget to make the service more proactive. Mrs Bruce stated that money was available but the budget was still to be approved. Mr Manning and Dr Eddy stated that it was important to remember that gully flooding was also affected by other activities, for example farming of land in the rural areas and builders in the urban areas, and it was important to tackle these problems as well to become more proactive. Members of the IMG felt that it might be useful to supply new Members

with a list of the gully schedules once the information was available electronically (it was understood that Dover schedules were not available yet). Mr Austerberry confirmed that officers had to ensure that the service was quick and efficient with whatever funding was available to them.

- (9) *Commercial Influences: ‘Develop commercial opportunities within Technical Services for expansion into the whole of KHS’*

Members of the IMG supported Officers in getting the basics of KHS right first before focusing strongly on this area.

- (10) *Journey time reliability and reduction in congestion: ‘Investigate new technologies and transport and traffic modelling tools to fully exploit the opportunities from innovation and partner contribution’*

Mrs Bruce explained that new technology was being used in the future of transport planning and network management. The County had aspirations of working more effectively with the districts and to have a county view on modelling. This has not had investment from KCC yet, as Officers had explained previously, the current focus was on getting the basics right.

- (11) *‘Occupational road risk consultancy and training’*

Dr Eddy asked if the areas which had been postponed until 2009/10 were postponed to allow officers to improve the basic level of service provided by KHS? Mrs Bruce explained that the strategy direction needed to be set before these objectives could be met. Road Safety were involved in a number of partnerships with the Police and other agencies and these objectives needed to be viewed in the wider context of the strategy. Mrs Bruce made it clear that the service was working with the community but the aim was to work with wider, harder to reach, groups and this had not progressed as far as officers might have liked it to. Mrs Bruce confirmed that funding was available for road safety projects and she also highlighted a production she had been to recently – ‘licence to kill’ which had been organised by KHS Officers, the Road Safety Team the Fire and Police Services and had been aimed at young people in Kent. It was a hard hitting production aimed at educating young people on the dangers of the roads.

- (12) Dr Eddy enquired about EDF and how we were progressing with the energy supplier? Mrs Bruce confirmed that we were progressing well and the problems we had experienced were common across local authorities. In November 2008 EDF launched an online reporting system which allowed the tracking and monitoring of complaints and delays. Mr Chittenden mentioned an informal briefing that Members had received from KHS Technical Services and suggested that this be repeated in the spring as it was a useful exercise.

- (13) Mr Chittenden raised the issue of Highways Trees – many were cut down and too few were replaced. Members of the IMG had concerns about balancing the removals and replacements of street trees. Mrs Bruce confirmed that this had been flagged up in the budget for next year, but was still to be approved. Mrs Bruce reported that KHS was working with Social Services to provide a nursery for growing trees from whips – this would save money on purchasing the trees and

they could be cared for through the supported employment process. Mr Austerberry confirmed that the service was committed to supporting this initiative.

- (14) Mr Manning asked whether the Officers were content that the objectives and priorities shown in the business plan were right. Mr Austerberry stated that he considered the business plan unbalanced in this area, with the challenges it set out not sufficiently reflecting the overriding importance of maintaining the state of all the highways assets KHS was responsible for, and the effort and significant budget that went into maintaining and renewing the asset. He intended that these priorities in next year's business plan would be more strongly reflected and give greater clarity on alignment with financial allocations. Responsibility for the business plans was now under Financial Services and it was hoped that this would provide for a clearer alignment between the budget and the objectives of the service. Mr Austerberry confirmed that the KHS business plan would be sharpened up next year and that there would be more reference to the core business of KHS.

- (15) Towards 2010 Targets (page 25 of KHS business plan):

Target 32: 'Provide more car parking places in Kent and remove unnecessary yellow lines and bus lanes'. Members asked for further clarification on how target 32 would be achieved. Mrs Bruce explained that additional car parking had been achieved through the Fremlin Walk development and the service would attempt to remove any unnecessary lines.

Target 33 'Penalise contractors for unnecessary delays caused by road works and synchronise works to minimise disruption'. Mrs Bruce explained that KCC had applied for a permit, under the new permit scheme and that target 33 couldn't be achieved until the permit scheme was in place.

Target 34: 'Tackle urban congestion and reduce peak journey times between and within towns by 10% using methods such as intelligent traffic light management systems and congestion-busting teams'. Dr Eddy asked how this would be tackled. Mrs Bruce stated that there had been an investment in intelligent traffic light management. KCC had achieved some good results but had been poor at reporting tangible benefits from the investment. Mr Chittenden confirmed that he had experienced a visible improvement in Maidstone through intelligent traffic light management.

Target 37: 'Improve the way we repair roads and pavements'. Mrs Bruce explained that this would be achieved through timeliness, the use of good quality materials, allocations of funding, new innovations, and environmental consideration. Dr Eddy asked how this would be measured and Mrs Bruce confirmed that she would circulate further information to the IMG Members on this issue.

Target 59: 'Work with our partners to reduce the number of deaths and serious casualties from road accidents'. Mrs Bruce confirmed that this was hoped to be achieved through the Public Service Agreement.

Target 31 & 35: KCC were not the lead authority on these targets, however, although they are not wholly owned and managed by KHS, they are influenced by

the work of KHS. Mrs Bruce would circulate further information to Members of the IMG on these targets.

Conclusions

(16) Members of the IMG:-

- a. thanked Mr Austerberry and Mrs Bruce for the clear and honest information they had provided and felt confident that officers would focus on getting the core business of KHS right at this stage;
- b. expressed concern about how long the current interim arrangements at Senior level in Kent Highways Service were intended to last. There was confidence in the senior staff but Members would urge the Chief Executive to put in place a permanent solution as soon as possible to ensure that Members are made aware at the earliest opportunity;
- c. noted the assurance of the Executive Director of Environment, Highways and Waste that KHS business plan would be tightened up, would reflect the core business of the services and would identify the key objectives of the service;
- d. requested that a list of gully schedules be supplied to all Members after the elections;
- e. requested that the informal briefing on EDF given to Members by KHS Technical Services be repeated in the spring;
- f. had concerns about balancing the removals and replacements of street trees;
- g. requested further information on targets 31, 35 and 37 of the Towards 2010 targets.

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