

MEETING:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Sustainable Barnsley Workstream
DATE:	Tuesday 7 February 2023
TIME:	2.00 pm
VENUE:	Council Chamber, Barnsley Town Hall

MINUTES

Present

Councillors Ennis OBE (Chair), Bellamy, Bowser, Cain, Clarke, Denton, Eastwood, P. Fielding, W. Fielding, Green, Hayward, Lodge, McCarthy, Mitchell, Moyes, Osborne, Richardson and Webster together with co-opted member and

42 Apologies for Absence - Parent Governor Representatives

No apologies for absence were received in accordance with Regulation 7(6) of the Parent Governor Representatives (England) Regulations 2001.

43 Declarations of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interest

Councillor Osborne declared a non pecuniary interest as he is a member of the Berneslai Homes Board.

Councillor Moyes declared a non pecuniary interest as she is a member of the Police and Schools Panel and works for the GMB Trade Union.

44 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 10th January 2023 were received.

45 Highways Peer Challenge - Outcomes & Actions Report

The following witnesses were welcomed to the meeting:

Paul Castle – Service Director, Environment & Transport, Growth & Sustainability Directorate, BMBC

Matthew Bell – Head of Highways & Engineering, Growth & Sustainability Directorate, BMBC

Ian Wilson – Service Manager Highway Delivery, Growth & Sustainability Directorate, BMBC

Cllr James Higginbottom, Cabinet Spokesperson for Environment & Highways

Councillor Higginbottom informed members of the committee that the Highways Peer Review Challenge had been an effective and well regarded process. In September 2022 Highways and Engineering had invited the Peers to conduct a 3 day review of

the Service and through open and honest conversations, they had accumulated 50 hours of discussions of areas of strength and consideration.

Councillor Higginbottom passed on his own personal thanks to the team that work within the service, who always strived for continuous development and improvement. The Review had demonstrated that the highways service does a good job with the budget and its reduced resources, due to budget cuts over the years, in its service to the residents of the Borough.

Matthew Bell provided members with an overview of the LGA Peer Review. In doing so members heard how the Peer Review was not an inspection but that the Peer team had been invited to look into specific elements of the Highway Service and act as a critical friend. Information collected for the feedback had been gathered from various individuals which gained credibility that it was honest and fair and gathered from a variety of sources to give a well-rounded review.

The Peer Challenge Team consisted of 5 members from a variety of backgrounds and with a great depth of experience and knowledge. The feedback is set out in a standard format across all peer reviews to contrast with other similar local authorities in order to pool the learning. The 4 core components of feedback were:

- Context and priority setting
- Planning and performance
- Enablers
- Delivery

Members were informed that due to the Highways department being too broad to be considered in its entirety over three days, four areas of focus had been chosen and members were provided with an overview of each Area which included:

- Financial Aspects
- Customer Aspects
- Process Aspects
- People Aspects

Following the feedback session, five key areas had been highlighted for improvement:

- Review of the Structural alignment of highway related services specifically related to a number of historical pressures which resulted in services being moved to different parts of the organisation. Members were informed this is already underway with the re-location of the Strategic Transport function from Regeneration & Culture (BU4) to Environment & Transport (BU6).
- Better utilisation of external benchmarking datasets. Although internal performance monitoring and measurement was considered a strength by the Peer Review team, the use of external benchmarking metrics is not well developed. The service was judged to be light in what it did with information comparing to other Local Authorities and national indicator sets and benchmarking routes. The submitted return for this year placed Barnsley's

Highways Service into a group with local authorities of a similar size and demographic for a round and fair assessment.

- Long term programming of capital investment – members heard how the Council had not been given long term annual funding assurances from central government for the past 7 years so was unable to plan past a 12 month programme. However, a 5 year settlement had been agreed through the Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA) ensuring a degree of certainty as to what the funding horizon now looked like. It had enabled a more transparent view as opportunities present themselves for one off projects over the next 5 years enabling a realistic and true look at capital investments.
- Communication with the frontline remained a shortcoming as the frontline staff do not have regular access to the Council's network in order to check on corporate updates in the usual manner. Improvements had been made by installing big screens at Smithies Depot, notice boards and takeaway materials in order to pass on key messages.
- Strengthening the relationship between the service and elected members – this had highlighted how communications flow between the service and elected members and elected members understanding of where the services responsibilities sit. Specific feedback indicated that there was a difference when officers defined highways compared to the elected members definition. A lot of work was undertaken to post queries into the right department. In order to tackle these issue highways had commenced sending out weekly emails containing the highways programme of works and roadworks in the Borough. The emails also contained contact details of a 'one stop shop' to help the service in replying to members as quickly as possible.

Members heard how the key was not to focus solely on what needed to be changed, but to also recognise and preserve what the service already does well. It was acknowledged that Barnsley had a lot of experienced and competent middle managers that made important decisions which is not always the case when compared to other Local Authorities. In terms of Barnsley's identity there was a distinct pride of working for the Borough as most staff members also lived in the Town. There was a strong relationship with the MCA and the service had complete backing from SMT to deliver its strategy and vision for Barnsley. Recognition schemes for staff were in place such as Thank you letters and Shout Outs. There was an initiative to invest in apprenticeships with a view to once qualified, they would be moved around the service to gain further experience.

All feedback, actions and areas for consideration and strengths are being developed into a detailed action plan which was reviewed on 14th December 2023. Following this the service had started to deliver some changes and address some gaps detailed within the plan.

In the ensuing discussion and in response to detailed questioning and challenge the following matters were highlighted:

Following the peer review, it was highlighted that Highways had an extensive set of performance indicators to highlight progress made and that feedback from the public

and elected members was also taken on board. Attention going forward would be focused on gaps that they were already aware of and to give credibility and space to think how to tackle the next problems.

When asked what service leaders considered the greatest positives from the peer review, their response included recognition of the experience, professionalism, loyalty and pro-active culture of the Highway's staff, the return on investment of the apprenticeship programme, the leadership qualities of service managers and the high workmanship standards of front line teams.

In terms of funding, the Mayoral Combined Authority had been successful in securing a City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement of around £400M. Of which £5M would be allocated to Barnsley for Highway improvement activities per year for 5 years. This would be broken down to £4M for maintenance and £1M for highway improvements. The total budget would be around £15M which also incorporated capital revenue of £3.3M, any finances brought forward from the previous financial years and a further £2M, subject to agreement at full council, from the Council's budget for highways improvements and road safety improvements.

A key priority was that improvements needed to be made in terms of communications with elected members and members of the public. In order to address these issues, there was ongoing work to update and improve content on the highways website to make it easier to navigate and contain more useful information which would enable members of the public to self-serve and elected members would be able to better and direct answers to questions.

A cross party working group would be established to look into the members enquiry process and a large piece of work was being undertaken in collaboration with IT ensure that the enquiry system will be as efficient and effective as it could be. This would ensure members were better informed and able to communicate between services in the authority and members of the public.

Members were informed that positive transformation work was being undertaken centred around geographic processes such as reporting potholes. Whilst this was not expected to be a quick fix with a timescale of around 12 to 18 months, new technology would be utilised to update customers experience in reporting and being kept informed.

In terms of comparison of services with neighbouring authorities, it was identified that some were further forward in their IT development but that on a whole, Barnsley was in a strong position in the upper percentile of the quality of service it delivers for the lower quartile of what funding is available and ensuring good value for money for the residents of the Borough.

It was acknowledged that more than ever was being done in terms of support for the physical and mental wellbeing of employees with a variety of services on offer including a health and wellbeing pop up event that was held at Smithies Depot which was well received by all and welcomed as an annual event. Notice boards and takeaway leaflets were available for frontline staff unable to access the network to signpost them to various avenues of support alongside the GMB Union who could also refer people to the relevant help required.

In terms of the action plan targets timescales and measuring success, a full action plan had been established identifying what needs doing and the resources required to complete it. A full project plan will be created to sit behind each action and once completed this would be circulated to all members.

Members asked what the critical success factors were to delivering the action plan. In response, Areas of the emerging Action Plan which are critical to it's success included;

- Continued support from senior leaders and elected members
- Project resourcing
- Retention of key members of the Highway's team
- Clear and timely communication of progress, successes and challenges

Members enquired as to what information could be taken back to residents in what they could expect from the service in the next 3 months. In response they were informed that work would commence on the proposed website changes and that the system around pothole reporting would not change significantly but the way in which it is communicated to residents would be. The 12 month programme maintenance and schedule of work report, which included planned works on the roads, footways and drainage system around the Borough was already being made available to Members on a weekly basis and can be shared with residents.

In terms of service standards in responding to enquiries, it was recognised that the members enquiries inbox was not achieving the standard members required. Improvements identified were around communication and feedback to members in what and when something has been done in order for members to feed back to residents. Work was being undertaken in collaboration with the Digital Team and colleagues in the Digital Transformation Team look into what could be done. Members were informed that phone lines were still in use for those who did not want to or were unable to go online. The corporate service standards timeframe are set at 5 days for a response, whilst this could be achieved for a bin enquiry, the more complex issues received such as investigations into speed restrictions or requests for double yellow lines take more time to look into resulting in timescales being missed.

Members enquired as to whether the Peer Review Team had been to look around the Borough to look at the infrastructure and whether they had any comments. In response it was noted that on this occasion this was not a key focus of the review and that this visit was more for a review of the internal setting of the Service.

A possible solution to recruitment issues was raised around the recruitment of ex service personnel and whether this avenue had been explored. In response members were informed that the Local Authority had a good relationship with the forces recruitment service and there were a number of ex forces personnel working for the Service already. However, it was recognised that the problems surrounding the recruitment of bridge, traffic and civil engineers is in part due to the competitiveness of the Council's pay and reward package, Market supplements and other incentives, have and are being explored for future, it was not on a par with national salaries being offered.

Members requested that member visits be reinstated as before the pandemic so they could visit Smithies Depot and speak with members of staff. It was agreed that this would be arranged.

In summary it was acknowledged that the service was only as good as the recognition it received from the public and that one of the main priorities going forward would be the improvement of communications which would then enable the continued service improvement. Thanks were given from members of the committee and the Senior Management to all employees within the Highways department for their continued hard work and dedication.

RESOLVED:-

- (i) that witnesses be thanked for their attendance and contribution;
- (ii) that the report presented be noted.

Chair