

HERTFORDSHIRE HIGHWAYS WATFORD JOINT MEMBER PANEL

27 October 2011

Appendix A

25. HIGHWAYS LOCALITY BUDGET

The Area Service Manager for the South West Herts Area office of Hertfordshire Highways gave a presentation to the Panel about the new Highways Locality Budgets and the future of the Joint Member Panels (JMPs). He asked for Members' questions and comments.

County Councillor Giles-Medhurst (LD, HCC and TRDC) noted that County Councillors had met with the Head of Highway Management and raised questions but had not yet received any responses.

County Councillor Lloyd (Con, HCC), Deputy Leader of Herts County Council, explained that the County's vision of localism was well-developed. Together with their locality budget, County Councillors would have £100,000 to spend and Councillors could contribute to their Highways Locality Budget from their Locality Budget. The system was designed to empower Members, allowing County Councillors to make decisions about their division. They were the "Cabinet member for their division".

Borough Councillor Sharpe (LD, WBC) said that he welcomed much of what was being proposed and endorsed the empowerment of County Councillors. He did not want to imply that JMPs were perfect but felt that it was a valuable model in the Watford context. Districts with villages and parishes might see more benefits from disbanding the JMPs as the needs of the area were more diverse. He referred to the Panel's discussion of two items – namely Watford Junction Station improvements which affected more than just the Central Oxhey division, and the Panel's concern regarding Section 106 contributions which led to £250,000 being ringfenced for projects other than the Croxley Rail Link - as examples where consensus was reached on what was needed for the benefit of the whole town. Devolving all this power to individual Members could have the effect of divide and rule. He noted that the Panel was representative of the County and Borough Councillors in Watford and when a view was taken it was representative and meaningful. This would not be achieved at the proposed Liaison Briefings.

Borough Councillor Rackett (Gn, WBC) concurred; it was useful for County and Borough Members to decide on strategic issues. He reiterated that the small nature of the Borough meant that the schemes discussed often had an impact across different divisions and wards. However, in principle he felt that it was good to have a Member-led scheme such as HLB.

Borough Councillor Khan (Lab, WBC) noted that all the County Councillors received the same sum of money regardless of the roads in their divisions. He

asked whether it was possible to calculate how much was generally needed in each division and allocate funds accordingly. He questioned how accountability would be ensured when one person could make the decision on how to spend £100,000. He also questioned how the categories would work; if trees needed cutting back. He asked whether this would be Category 3 (Member directed works) or Category 5 (cyclical/routine works).

County Councillor Lloyd (Con, HCC) responded that for an audit trail the spending would be on the website and all spending had to be approved by legal officers. Ultimately, the County Councillors were responsible to the electorate every four years. There was a need to keep the process simple and easy to understand, so there would not be any differentiation between divisions.

County Councillor Bell (Lab, HCC and WBC) endorsed the comments made by other Members, saying the JMP was popular and worked well for Watford. He said that it was important for all Members to see Section 106 spend.

County Councillor Watkin (LD, HCC and WBC) noted the potential for the scheme to be divisive. One half of his division could accuse him of concentrating his funds in the other area where he was also a Borough Councillor. He noted the need to manage expectations; he had recently enquired about the cost of replacing a section of footway and was surprised that it was £84,000. He also was not in favour of a twice-yearly presentation at the Liaison Briefings; Members would not attend and there would be little opportunity for scrutiny.

Borough Councillor Wylie (LD, WBC) noted the problem that in the public's eyes there was a blurring of responsibilities between the County and Borough Councils. Residents were surprised that highways were not a Borough Council responsibility. He noted that the County and Borough Councillors did have common interests and cited the example of special meetings that had been held to consider the impact of the New Station Improvement Project on Station Road. He felt that specific subject-related meetings for Watford-wide issues would be more effective than presentations. There was a cultural difference with the Borough Council where consultations were undertaken prior to decision-making rather than as an information exercise. There were tensions in the Panel when items were only for information and when Members and Officers felt their opinions were being ignored. He said that there was a need for meetings to discuss issues with real local input. He did not want a structure imposed that was not suitable for Watford.

County Councillor Brandon (Gn, HCC) agreed with the comments and felt that HLB was a good scheme in principle but considered that Watford would need something that suited the Borough. Watford Borough would need to decide how to replace the JMP, if it were disbanded. A centralised mechanism would not fulfil the idea of localism.

County Councillor Scudder (LD, HCC and WBC) agreed that the concept of the HLB scheme was good, and whilst the JMP was not always perfect it was

an opportunity for real discussion of Borough-wide issues. He felt that twice a year was not enough for a Liaison Briefing and suggested that quarterly would be more appropriate.

County Councillor Giles-Medhurst (LD, HCC and TRDC) said that he felt the JMP worked well and that he particularly appreciated the full report that was received from Watford Borough Council which was not provided to other JMPs. He said that twice a year was not often enough and a presentation would not be appropriate. He cited the Panel's recent success with S106 monies as evidence of its effectiveness. He also valued the Panel's collective decision-making; when he had objections to a change he was proposing in his ward he was able to have the Panel's support rather than personally overruling the objections to his proposal. He asked who would minute the County Councillor's decision-making process on petitions and asked whether it would be open to the press and public like the JMP. He also asked how the Highways Locality Budget would operate with forward budgeting when the elections were at the start of the following financial year.

County Councillor Lloyd (Con, HCC) thanked the Panel for the helpful comments and said he would want to make sure that cross-Borough issues were discussed widely. It would be up to Members to decide how they wanted to organise this under the new system. He reminded Members that it was acceptable to pool together their £90k HLB for the benefit of others in the town.

The Area Service Manager thanked all Members for their comments and said that they would be given to those conducting the review.