

PLACE SELECT COMMITTEE

SCRUTINY REVIEW OF AREA TRANSPORT STRATEGY

1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report outlines the findings and recommendations following the Place Select Committee's scrutiny review of Area Transport Strategy.
- 1.2 The Area Transport Strategy (ATS) scheme allows the community an opportunity to influence where a proportion of Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council's limited funding for improvements to the highway is targeted.
- 1.3 Four Borough-wide ATS groups were established to introduce public involvement in the selection of highway and transport schemes, and a budget was identified from the Council's Local Transport Plan (LTP) allocation to fund projects on an annual basis.
- 1.4 Over time, the process has been developed by Officers, in liaison with Members, to try and ensure the most appropriate schemes are selected and funded from a single budget rather than split between areas. However, concerns still exist as to whether the scheme provides value-for-money for all (especially at a time when there are growing pressures on funding allocations and resources have to be carefully prioritised), and if the process effectively engages with the community.
- 1.5 In addition, the ATS scheme can create a demand for services and projects that cannot always be satisfied, and can be a more staff-intensive process for the delivery of projects than other expenditure methodologies.
- 1.6 The aim of this review was to examine the current ATS scheme and, through an assessment of this and previous year's ATS rounds, establish if it was fit for purpose, inclusive, and allowed the public to have the appropriate level of influence, while being an efficient and effective process.
- 1.7 The Committee found that, in recent years, a significant driver behind a further review of the ATS scheme was around the amount of time Local Authority Officers had to spend developing proposals to a particular stage, regardless of whether they were selected for delivery or not – a factor which was of particular concern to the Committee. This resulted in much wasted work on unfunded projects, and therefore led to Areas being asked to submit a maximum of six top 'issues' to be investigated by Officers which then lead to schemes being developed depending on need.
- 1.8 The current annual ATS cycle was outlined which involves pro formas being sent out early in the calendar year, an ATS meeting each spring to receive and prioritise an Area's proposals, and an update on which projects are going forward around three / four months later following collection of survey information. However, the Committee and ATS stakeholders expressed frustration around the administration of ATS meetings (communication, amount of notice given), the amount of time it can take to progress proposals, and the lack of feedback given after the core spring meeting.
- 1.9 ATS stakeholders include a range of individuals and organisations such as Locality Forum members, Ward Councillors, Parish / Town Councils, Emergency Services, and former Road Safety Forum members. Whilst there

is extensive representation on each of the four Area Partnerships, the Committee was disappointed to receive only eight responses to its ATS survey, and considered whether this was an indication of either general satisfaction or perhaps apathy / lack of enthusiasm. Members were also informed that generally older people seem to attend ATS meetings in one particular Area, suggesting that the current scheme may not offer the most appropriate medium for engaging the younger generation in local transport issues.

- 1.10 The types of issues proposed across the four Areas cover three main categories – speeding, sustainable travel and parking. Strikingly, it was estimated that the ATS administration fee (Officer time, including community engagement, feasibility, consultations, Traffic Regulation Orders) could equate to £168,000 annually based on all 24 priority issues leading to schemes (approximately £7,000 costs per scheme) compared to around £54,000 if the same value of Strategic Maintenance schemes were delivered via LTP.
- 1.11 During deliberations on the future of the ATS, Members also noted that only Middlesbrough Council operate a vaguely similar scheme, and that all other Tees Valley authorities rely on Officer-developed schemes. In addition, whilst the original ATS process provided a platform for different Areas to prioritise their own needs depending on their geographical / demographic make-up, the four Area Partnerships had demonstrated that their priorities followed broadly similar themes – this called into question the need to have four separate ATS groups. A counterbalance to any potential changes to the current ATS scheme was the concern expressed by the Committee that there becomes a move to delivering only larger-scale accident-driven proposals, and that more ‘environmental’ projects (currently directed via the ATS) would never be progressed.
- 1.12 After careful consideration of the evidence gathered as part of this review, the Committee felt that the current ATS scheme was no longer the most effective or efficient process in fostering community engagement in transport-related proposals, principally due to the amount of time it takes to progress through the existing ATS annual cycle, and concerns around the communication of any developments relating to suggested projects. Members also recognised that a similar process enabling the community to identify potential solutions to issues across the Borough already exists in the form of the Community Participation Budget (CPB), which provides a quicker response to community-originated suggestions than the ATS presently allows.
- 1.13 The Committee therefore agreed that future annual ATS funding allocations should instead be transferred to the CPB as a ring-fenced amount for each Ward, who could facilitate continued community involvement in identifying transport-related issues and have oversight of any proposed schemes. This approach would lead to a timelier Local Authority response regarding suggested projects, a better flow of information between Officers, Elected Members and the community regarding the progression of potential schemes, and would retain the possibility that money can still be spent on community rather than purely technical priorities. To further strengthen this new approach, the Committee encouraged flexibility around how Elected Members could use, and even pool, their new ring-fenced transport-related CPB allocation to maximise the range of projects that could be proposed.

Recommendations

The Committee recommend that:

- 1) The existing ATS scheme ceases at the end of the current financial year (31st March 2020), with the yearly ATS funding allocation to be transferred to the Community Participation Budget (CPB) on a Ward-by-Ward basis determined by population per Ward. This addition to CPB funding should be ring-fenced for transport-related spend only.**
- 2) To allow for a greater range of potential schemes to be supported, as part of the new arrangements in recommendation 1 (from 1st April 2020):**
 - a) Council should enable, subject to overall budget control, Elected Members to have advanced access to some of their future CPB / ATS (ring-fenced) annual allocations should a larger-scale project be proposed and accepted – equally, Members should be able to roll over their allocations to enable the delivery of larger schemes.**
 - b) Council should enable Elected Members to pool / transfer their CPB / ATS (ring-fenced) allocation with / to neighbouring Wards should a larger transport-related scheme be identified that cuts across more than one Ward. Any disputes will be resolved as per the current CPB dispute resolution process.**
 - c) Council should produce a formal protocol outlining what transport-related schemes could qualify for core LTP funding, and what would be more suitable for the CPB / ATS (ring-fenced) route.**
- 3) An appropriate communication plan is put in place to inform all existing ATS stakeholders of the planned changes to the existing scheme, including the mechanisms in which to raise future transport-related issues / proposals directly with Elected Members.**
- 4) The new ring-fenced transport-related element of the CPB is not tied to the future of the overall CPB initiative (i.e. it is not dependent upon the existence of CPB).**