

HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**Report**

Committee:	Economy Transport & Environment Select Committee
Date:	30 October 2015
Title:	Parish Lengthsman Task & Finish Group: Outcomes
Reference:	6990
Report From:	Parish Lengthsman Task & Finish Group

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1. Purpose of Report

1.1. In April 2015 the Economy Transport & Environment Select Committee initiated a Task & Finish Group to consider the future of the Parish Lengthsman scheme, due to the pressure to make savings in 2017 from the Highways Revenue Budget from which this scheme is funded. This report feeds back to the Select Committee the work of this task & finish group, including their conclusions and recommendations.

2. Contextual Information

2.1. In January 2015 the Executive Member for Economy Transport & Environment took a decision to continue the Parish Lengthsman Scheme for the 2015-2016 financial year, but that 'an Options Appraisal is undertaken for the continuation of the scheme beyond the next financial year which will explore opportunities for outside funding'. At its January 2015 meeting, the Economy Transport & Environment Select Committee indicated their interest in forming a Task & Finish Group to feed in to this appraisal. In April 2015 the Select Committee considered a report outlining the background to the parish lengthsman scheme, and agreed the terms of reference for a task & finish group on the subject.

2.2. The task & finish group was cross party and comprised the following members:

- Cllr Brian Gurden
- Cllr Edward Heron
- Cllr Roger Huxstep
- Cllr Peter Latham
- Cllr David Simpson
- Cllr Mark Staplehurst
- Cllr Sharyn Wheale (Chair)

2.3. The Task & Finish Group held an initial meeting in June 2015, and a follow up meeting in September 2015, and arrived at recommendations regarding the scheme to propose to the Select Committee, for submission to the Executive Member for Economy Transport & Environment.

- 2.4. At the first meeting, Members requested further information, which was researched and presented to the second meeting. This included tasking officers to seek feedback from lead parishes taking part in the parish lengthsman scheme.

3. Background to the Parish Lengthsman Scheme

- 3.1. In April 2009, a decision was taken to introduce a pilot of a modern version of the historical parish lengthsman. Initially 19 parishes were involved and allocated a small amount of funding, to be used to undertake a number of duties around the highway (relating mainly to appearance issues) such as sign cleaning, litter picking and cutting back vegetation.
- 3.2. In 2011 the initial pilot was reviewed, and most parishes involved found it to be valuable and requested it be extended, which was agreed. Since then, the number of parishes involved has expanded. By 2014/15 91 of Hampshire's 262 parish councils were using lengthsman, with a further 24 expressing interest in joining the scheme.
- 3.3. By the time the work of the Task & Finish Group concluded (September 2015), 99 parishes were involved.

4. Finance

- 4.1. The parish lengthsman pilot is currently established on the basis of funding of £1,000 per parish¹, with a further 10% administration fee paid to the lead parish of a cluster (to contribute to their costs to administrate the scheme). This funding is in place for 2015/16, to cover the 91 parishes already in the scheme, and accommodate the 24 that have expressed interest in joining the scheme. (up to 115 parishes, therefore a budget of around £129,000). This funding comes from the revenue budget for highway maintenance. The revenue budget faces pressures and is required to make reductions by 2017.
- 4.2. If the funding for the scheme for 2016/17 was reduced by 14.5%, in keeping with reductions set across departmental budgets, this would equate to a reduction of £18,632. This would leave a budget of £109,868 (sufficient to support around 100 parishes at the current level).
- 4.3. If the funding for the scheme is retained at 2015/16 levels, capacity would exist to accommodate those remaining on the 'waiting list' to join the scheme (as planned for in setting the budget for this financial year). However, should further parishes wish to join, this would be difficult to accommodate without seeking funding from elsewhere, or reducing the amount allocated to each parish.
- 4.4. In addressing parish councils in November 2014, the Executive Member for Economy, Transport & Environment advised parish councils that, unless the parishes themselves are willing to contribute to funding the scheme from their precept, or the County Council is able to help parishes find alternative sources of funding, it may well be impossible to retain the scheme on the current basis beyond 2015/16.

¹ With the exception of Fleet Town Council which receives £3,000 due to the area of highway covered

5. Considerations of the Task & Finish Group

- 5.1. At their first meeting, the Task & Finish Group received an overview of the Parish Lengthsman Scheme from Highways Officers from Economy Transport & Environment Department, asked questions to clarify points, discussed their initial views of the scheme, and identified what further information they would wish to consider.

Functions undertaken by lengthsman

- 5.2. It was clarified that the highway tasks undertaken by lengthsman are not statutory functions. The County Council has established minimum service standards for highways maintenance, and funds work on the highways to meet that standard. If district councils or parish councils wish to do more than the minimum they can do. The lengthsman scheme enables parishes to take action regarding minor issues that would otherwise be low priority for the County Council (as they are not safety related). Appendix 1 outlines the duties parish lengthsman may undertake, and includes such tasks as cleaning signage, clearing drainage, cutting back vegetation, litter clearance and maintaining public open spaces.

Funding of the scheme

- 5.3. Members explored how the scheme is funded, recognising that areas of revenue spend were under pressure to make savings, particularly if the activity is not a statutory requirement. Members were supportive of exploring opportunities for sponsorship of the lengthsman scheme. It was noted that the scheme did not necessarily save the County Council money, as the type of tasks undertaken would be considered low priority by the County, and therefore without the lengthsman the County would not undertake those tasks in the same timescale. Members recognised that a benefit of the scheme lay in supporting Hampshire as a nice place to live and encouraging positive community feeling, as it helped areas feel well maintained.
- 5.4. Members noted that some of the tasks undertaken by lengthsman were district council functions, and that district councils do not currently contribute to the scheme. Members therefore discussed that it would be reasonable to approach districts to provide a small amount of match funding. It was also noted that some of the functions undertaken were parish council functions, and therefore that the parish councils themselves could also be invited to contribute. Members discussed that if parish council's value the scheme, and use it to focus on local priorities, it was reasonable to ask them to contribute a small amount towards it.
- 5.5. Officers reported that the current budget for the scheme of £129,000 is sufficient to support the current number of parishes involved. However, for the scheme to be sustainable in the longer term in a period of revenue budget reductions, the funding per parish would need to reduce in order for a larger number of parishes to be accommodated without increasing the budget.

Clustering

- 5.6. Members discussed the fact that under the scheme some parishes had formed clusters with lead parishes providing the link to the County Council, while others linked individually to the County Council. It was noted that it was preferable for the County Council to liaise with lead parishes, to reduce the number of invoices to process. Members discussed the option of requiring parishes to form

clusters. However, as entry into the scheme was voluntary, it was noted that being too strict in the requirements for entry may put off parishes that could otherwise benefit from the scheme. Members were supportive of encouraging parishes to form clusters as far as possible.

Further information requested

- 5.7. As a result of debate at the first meeting, members requested it be explored whether the County Council could assist parishes with the requirement to provide public liability insurance for lengthsman, as this could be prohibitive for some. It was also requested that feedback about the scheme be sought from the parishes currently involved.

Insurance

- 5.8. At their second meeting, it was reported to the Task & Finish Group that the insurance issue had been investigated, however the County Council self insures for public liability, and would be constrained from covering parish councils under this arrangement on the grounds that one authority cannot meet the liabilities of another. The alternative of a collective insurance policy that parishes could sign up to had also been considered previously, however there had been found to be little appetite in the market to provide such a policy.

Feedback from Parish Councils

- 5.9. Feedback was invited from the 19 lead parishes currently participating in the scheme and 15 responded. Members noted the largely positive response to the scheme from parishes, and recognised the value the scheme adds to enhancing the appearance of local areas. For example, the following reflect the comments received from the parishes who responded to the request for feedback; 'our parishes believe that there are significant non financial benefits to this scheme because it reduces the burden on the online reporting of problems because many jobs can be done locally. The local community can see that work which needs doing gets done without waiting for a response from Hampshire County Council through the online reporting system', 'it would be a great shame to lose a valuable, valued, effective scheme', 'the benefit in this parish has been clearly demonstrated, and the effects have been evident to and commented on by the community'.
- 5.10. Asked to rate their satisfaction with the scheme (on a scale of 1 poor to 10 good), of 15 lead parishes, 7 gave '10', a further 4 gave 8 or 9 and 3 responded 'good' or 'very good'. Only 1 (representing 1 parish) gave a score of 1, and it was reported that in this case there had been an issue with a delay in paying their invoice.

Maintenance of Rights of Way by lengthsman

- 5.11. Members noted that part of the role of parish lengthsman can include tasks to maintain footpaths and rights of way. Clarification on this point was sought from the Countryside Service, and it was reported that lengthsman do support maintenance of rights of way, which is a statutory function. While funding for this function is limited, the Countryside Access Team expressed interest in supporting parish councils who take a pro-active interest in management of rights of way.
- 5.12. The County Council's Countryside Access Plan has recently been updated and approved for 2015-2025, and includes an action 'B5: Explore the potential

for further Parish & Town Council involvement in network management and improvement, e.g. extending the Lengthsman scheme'. The Countryside Service have therefore offered to provide funding towards the lengthsman scheme, in order to support their objectives regarding maintenance of rights of way.

- 5.13. The Countryside Service has offered to contribute up to £30,000 to the scheme for the 2016/17 financial year. This would nominally represent a contribution to each parish of £200, and would equate to support for 27 parishes taking part in the scheme (at the current level of £1,000 per parish).
- 5.14. The Countryside Service would expect feedback from parishes regarding the tasks undertaken on rights of way by lengthsman, to provide assurance regarding the use of the funding they were providing. It was noted that the Countryside Service is introducing 'community engagement rangers', who would be well placed to liaise with parish councils regarding countryside tasks.

6. Conclusions

- 6.1. Following debate at the second meeting, Members took the view that given the feedback received from parishes, this was an important scheme to maintain despite the reductions to the Highways revenue budget. Members considered it was a small amount of funding, which supports communities to respond directly to local priorities. Members also noted that the type of tasks undertaken by lengthsman were issues often raised with County Councillors by residents. Therefore, it supported the reputation of the County Council for the county to be seen to be addressing these issues through the lengthsman scheme. Members recognised that without the parish lengthsman scheme, the County Council would receive a higher number of complaints regarding minor issues on the highway. Having considered the scheme, the Group therefore agreed the following recommendation:
 1. That the parish lengthsman scheme be retained.
- 6.2. The Group welcomed the offer of funding towards the scheme from the Countryside service, which recognised the role lengthsman play in maintaining rights of way. Therefore the Group recommend that:
 2. A contribution to the scheme from the Countryside Service be welcomed, and included within the budget for the scheme, to help maintain the scheme for the coming year.
- 6.3. Given that this funding would increase the overall budget for the scheme, and potentially outweigh any reductions to the highways revenue budget, the Task & Finish Group also recommend that:
 3. Funding be maintained at £1000 per parish for 2016/17
- 6.4. When debating the budget for the scheme, and the fact that demand from parishes to take part may exceed the current budget for the scheme, members discussed that the total funding available could be divided by the number of parishes wishing to take part, and the amount allocated to each parish reduced accordingly. Members of the Task & Finish Group agreed that existing and new entrants to the scheme should be treated equally, and therefore receive the same level of funding as each other in any year.

6.5. The Task & Finish Group also discussed that should the County Council need to reduce funding for the lengthsman scheme in future, it was reasonable to ask parishes to provide a proportion of match funding.

6.6. The Group therefore chose to recommend:

4. That funding levels per parish be reviewed if additional entrants to the scheme put pressure on the budget available.

6.7. As part of their discussions, members of the Task & Finish Group noted that discussions were ongoing with central government regarding a bid for devolved power to the Hampshire region. Members commented that when requesting devolution of powers, it was beneficial to be able to demonstrate that the County Council was committed to devolution in principle, and therefore was prepared to devolve powers further to district and parish councils where appropriate. The parish lengthsman scheme was an example of devolving small works to parish councils, which therefore fits with this approach. Members noted that a broader view may be taken in future regarding powers which are devolved to district and parish councils, and therefore the parish lengthsman scheme may need to be considered as part of that. Therefore, the Task & Finish Group agreed to make recommendations about the scheme for the coming year, along with a recommendation that:

5. Consideration be given to reviewing the scheme in future in the context of the devolution discussions and any broader review of functions delegated downwards.

7. Recommendations

7.1. As a result of their deliberations, the Task & Finish Group arrived at the following recommendations. The Economy Transport & Environment Select Committee is invited to endorse these recommendations, and to submit them to the Executive Member for Economy Transport & Environment for consideration:

1. That the parish lengthsman scheme be retained.
2. That a contribution to the scheme from the Countryside Service be welcomed, and included within the budget for the scheme, to help maintain the scheme for the coming year.
3. That funding be maintained at £1000 per parish for 2016/17
4. That funding levels per parish be reviewed if additional entrants to the scheme put pressure on the budget available.
5. That consideration be given to reviewing the scheme in future in the context of the devolution discussions and any broader review of functions delegated downwards.

CORPORATE OR LEGAL INFORMATION:**Links to the Corporate Strategy**

Hampshire safer and more secure for all:	no
Corporate Improvement plan link number (if appropriate):	
Maximising well-being:	no
Corporate Improvement plan link number (if appropriate):	
Enhancing our quality of place:	yes
Corporate Improvement plan link number (if appropriate):	

Other Significant Links

Links to previous Member decisions:		
<u>Title</u>	<u>Reference</u>	<u>Date</u>
Parish Lengthsman Scheme	6622	16 April 2015
Parish Lengthsman Scheme Update	6392	20 January 2015
Direct links to specific legislation or Government Directives		
<u>Title</u>	<u>Date</u>	
N/A		

Section 100 D - Local Government Act 1972 - background documents

The following documents discuss facts or matters on which this report, or an important part of it, is based and have been relied upon to a material extent in the preparation of this report. (NB: the list excludes published works and any documents which disclose exempt or confidential information as defined in the Act.)

<u>Document</u>	<u>Location</u>
Briefing papers provided to the working group	Held by Democratic & Member Services

IMPACT ASSESSMENTS:

1. Equality Duty

1.1. The County Council has a duty under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 ('the Act') to have due regard in the exercise of its functions to the need to:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct prohibited under the Act;
- Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic (age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, gender and sexual orientation) and those who do not share it;
- Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

Due regard in this context involves having due regard in particular to:

- a) The need to remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons sharing a relevant characteristic connected to that characteristic;
- b) Take steps to meet the needs of persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic different from the needs of persons who do not share it;
- c) Encourage persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.

1.2. Equalities Impact Assessment:

The recommendations in this report are that the parish lengthsman scheme be maintained at current levels, therefore there is not anticipated to be a change in impact as a result.

2. Impact on Crime and Disorder:

2.1. None anticipated

3. Climate Change:

- a) How does what is being proposed impact on our carbon footprint / energy consumption?
- b) How does what is being proposed consider the need to adapt to climate change, and be resilient to its longer term impacts?

The recommendations in this report are that the parish lengthsman scheme be maintained at current levels, therefore there is not anticipated to be a change in impact as a result.

Appendix 1

Duties Parish Lengthsmen may undertake.

Hampshire County Council	District Councils	Parish Councils
<p>Drainage:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Grips ▪ Localised ditching ▪ Cleaning channels ▪ Rodding of pipes (off highway) <p>Signs excluding street name plates (including reflector posts):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Cleaning ▪ Minor repairs ▪ Speed Limit Reduction sign relocation <p>Highway Minor Works:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Removal of soil/detritus ▪ Cutting back vegetation overhanging the road or footway ▪ Clearing footways of weeds/moss ▪ Removing vegetation from parapets or fences. ▪ Highway grass strimming around posts ▪ Reporting defects 	<p>Environmental:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sweeping ▪ Litter clearance ▪ Removal of fly-posting ▪ Land drainage (not highway) ▪ Graffiti/unauthorised sign removal ▪ Street name plates cleaning and repair ▪ Repair of street furniture including litter bins, benches, bus stops ▪ Reporting 	<p>Community:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Maintain public open spaces ▪ Maintain public rights of way ▪ Maintain play areas ▪ Maintain playing fields ▪ Maintain associated fences, styles etc. ▪ Acting as eyes and ears for the community having regard to vulnerable parishioners and anti social behaviour such as noise, car crime etc. ▪ Reporting

Due to the health and safety implications the Parish Lengthsman shall not undertake cleaning, repair or any work on:

- Street Lighting
- Illuminated signs and bollards (i.e. any street furniture with an electrical connection)
- The live road, and,
- Patching and structural repairs (no excavation due to possibility of underground apparatus)
- Emergency call-outs to highway incidents.