

ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

21 January 2021 at 6.00pm held virtually via Microsoft Teams

Held in accordance with the Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020; and conducted according to the Council's Standing Orders for Remote Meetings and those set out in the Council's Constitution.

Committee Members

Present:

Councillor A. Hicken (Vice-Chair in the Chair)
Councillor P. Bott
Councillor C. Creaney
Councillor M. Follows
Councillor S. Johal
Councillor P. Kaur
Councillor A. Nazir
Councillor M. Statham
Councillor S. Samra
Councillor I. Shires
Councillor M. Ward

Portfolio Holders

Present:

Councillor M. Bird	Leader of the Council
Councillor A. Andrew	Deputy Leader and Regeneration
Councillor O. Butler	Clean and Green
Councillor C. Towe	Education and Skills

Officers Present:

Simon Neilson	Executive Director of Economy and Environment
Dave Brown	Director Place and Environment
Neil Taylor	Interim Director of Regeneration and Economy
Fraz Hussain	Lead Accountant
Alan Bowley	Interim Head of Clean and Green
Matt Crowton	Transportation Major Projects & Strategy Manager
Mark Lavender	Head of Programme Management
Simon Tranter	Head of Regeneration Housing and Economy
Zoey West	External Programme Manager
Matt Powis	Democratic Services Officer

Invited Attendees

Present:

Sandeep Shingadia	Director of Development & Delivery at Transport for West Midlands
Thomas Skidmore	SPRINT Development Manager at Transport for West Midlands
Edmund Salt	Bus Development & Partnership Manager at Transport for West Midlands
Jon Hayes	Head of Bus at Transport for West Midlands
Stuart Everton	Black Country Director of Transport
Brett Chambers	Arcadis

22/20 Apologies

Councillor Harrison and Councillor Singh Sohal submitted apologies for absence.

23/20 Substitution

Councillor Samra substituted on behalf of Councillor Harrison and Councillor M Statham substituted on behalf of Councillor Singh Sohal.

24/20 Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

There were no declarations of interest or party whips.

25/20 Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)

Resolved

That the Committee considered that part of Agenda Item 8 be considered in private session due to exempt information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information) and Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1985 (as amended).

26/20 Minutes of the previous meeting

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 19 November 2020, as amended, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

27/20 Transportation in Walsall

The Committee considered an item on transportation in Walsall, which incorporated four key discussion points:

- A34 Walsall to Birmingham SPRINT (Bus Rapid Transit) Scheme
- West Midlands Enhanced Partnership Scheme
- Bus engine upgrades in the West Midlands
- Black Country Transportation overview

The Chair welcomed representatives from Transport for West Midlands (TfWM) and Black Country Transportation (BCT) and invited each representative in turn to address the Committee.

A34 Walsall to Birmingham SPRINT (Bus Rapid Transit) Scheme

The Transportation Major Projects and Strategy Manager and SPRINT Development Manager provided an overview of the A34 Walsall to Birmingham SPRINT project, which aimed to connect people to a range of opportunities in the West Midlands including events such as the Birmingham Commonwealth Games in 2022 and provide important regeneration to Walsall Town Centre.

West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) approved a revised phasing plan for the proposed SPRINT routes for the A34 and A45. Phase 1 works were scheduled to be completed by June 2022 in time for the Commonwealth Games and Phase 2 was intended to be complete by December 2024. However, it was noted that Phase 2 was unfunded and would be subject to future funding approval.

Members were informed that total estimated capital cost for Phase 1 works was £32.4m, which had been approved by WMCA. It was noted that the Council was not liable for any funding to implement the scheme as liability was held with WMCA and TfWM.

The Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration highlighted that he had requested pre-conditions for the initial approval of Phase 1 to include the publication of the commercial operator of the service in advance of the Cabinet decision. However, it was confirmed that details of the provider had yet to be realised at the time of the scrutiny meeting.

West Midlands Enhanced Partnership Plan and Scheme

The Bus Development & Partnership Manager at TfWM provided an overview of the West Midlands Enhanced Partnership plan and scheme. The scheme aimed to improve bus services across the West Midlands through a strategic improvement plan, which enables formal arrangements for partnership working between bus operators, WMCA and local authorities in the West Midlands.

TfWM undertook a review of available statutory powers and opportunities in accordance with the Transport Act 2000, which include options for Advanced Quality Partnership Schemes, Enhanced Partnerships and Franchising. Following a period of review, the WMCA agreed that Enhanced Partnerships was the most suitable option for delivering and managing the SPRINT system ahead of the Commonwealth Games in 2022. However, it was noted that the Enhanced Partnership scheme would require approval from all local authorities within the WMCA area.

It was noted that franchising was not a suitable consideration due to the inability to deliver franchising within the timescales for the Commonwealth Games in 2022.

Transport for West Midlands – Bus Presentation

The Bus Development and Partnership Manager and the Head of Bus at TfWM gave a presentation on the vision for bus in the West Midlands and proposed bus engine upgrades.

The Committee noted the Metropolitan Authorities Vision, which aimed to provide a world-class integrated, reliable, zero emission transport system providing inclusive travel for all across the West Midlands.

It was highlighted that £1.8m had been spent to reduce bus emissions through retrofitting existing buses. However, further action was still needed on the following:

- Finalisation of minimum emission standards for buses.
- Further subsidised bus services to Euro VI
- Greater engagement with new operators
- Development of electric vehicle (EV) charging infrastructure
- Implementation of A34 Walsall to Birmingham SPRINT
- Regional fleet cascade from Coventry Electric Bus City

Black Country Transportation Overview

The Black Country Director of Transport gave an overview presentation of the role of Black Country Transport (BCT) in the Black Country and wider West Midlands.

The Committee noted that £2.1bn worth of transport investment was scheduled for the Black Country and there were multiple opportunities to develop schemes in the area. However, there were concerns that greater influence was needed on a wider scale to attract investment into the Black Country.

The BCT had created a single Black Country Team across the four Black Country Authorities to streamline and prioritise transportation projects across the area. However, it was noted that the BCT was competing with major project organisations in the area such as TfWM, Highways England and Network Rail for resources when considering upcoming projects.

The Committee noted the current BCT Team Structure and the governance arrangements for the body.

A lengthy discussion commenced on all of the reports and presentations. A question and answer session took place and following on, the principal points from the ensuing discussion:-

- In relation to a development of a Park and Ride scheme mentioned within the SPRINT proposals. The Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration confirmed that the park and ride scheme and SPRINT were not combined proposals and that TfWM were exploring all options for park and ride in Walsall.
- A Member sought clarification on the SPRINT Phase 1 cost benefit to local residents and the wider community. In response, it was confirmed that chargeable fares on SPRINT would be comparable to existing bus services.
- SPRINT Phase 1 initial design work had been completed. However, Phase 2 park and ride scheme funding had yet to be confirmed.
- Existing bus services operating along the proposed SPRINT route (X51 and 51 services) would continue to operate alongside SPRINT and the number of bus services between Walsall and Birmingham were not expected to change.
- Existing bus services between Cannock and Birmingham via Walsall were expected to continue.
- A Member sought clarification regarding the lack of bus service routes through new build housing estates in Walsall. In response, it was confirmed that a response would be provided in writing.
- A Member sought clarification regarding Euro 6 upgrades. In response, it was highlighted that 190 Euro 6 buses were approved for use in the Black Country.

In addition, an accredited upgrade scheme was launched for older bus models to ensure compliance with existing fleets.

- There was a discussion on the transport franchising powers given to Mayoral Combined Authorities. It was confirmed that the WMCA had commenced a feasibility study on franchising to consider whether it was a viable offer for the West Midlands compared to other delivery models.
- A Member sought clarification from the Director of Transport at BCT regarding competition between BCT and other transport authorities. In response, it was confirmed that BCT had a strong focus on big transportation projects, which attracted young talent in the organisation. However, further work was required to attract and retain staff for the future as 50 percent of staff were leaving to other organisation due to higher salaries and secure project funding.
- The Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder of Regeneration highlighted that bus type and operator would need to be announced in public prior to approval at Cabinet.
- There was a proposal to invite bus operators to a future meeting of the Committee.

The Committee thanked representatives for their attendance.

Resolved:

- 1. That the reports and presentations be noted.**
- 2. That, local bus operators be invited to a future meeting of the Committee.**

28/20 Council Carbon Neutral

The Committee considered an update on the Council's carbon neutral policy and emergency action plan, which was agreed by Cabinet on 28 October 2020.

It was noted that the Council had declared a climate emergency, which sets forth a course of major changes to address climate change and decarbonise the Borough and the wider region. An internal working group was established to shape the action plans and engagement had taken place with a number of partners including the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA).

Six key themes emerged from internal discussions, which were outlined as follows:

1. Strategy (Taking the Lead)
2. Energy
3. Waste and Consumption
4. Transport
5. Nature
6. Resilience and Adaptation

In order to achieve carbon neutrality, the Council planned to create a fixed term Climate Change Programme Manager as part of the wider Proud Transformation Programme. It was highlighted that by 2050, the Council would have achieved £6m per annum from energy saving initiatives.

In the longer-term, the Council planned to engage with local residents, businesses, schools and the wider community as part of the decarbonisation strategy.

A question and answer session took place and following on, the principal points from the ensuing discussion:-

- There were concerns regarding electric battery quality for refuse collector trucks. The Council required refuse trucks to cover vast areas of the Borough in order to collect refuse promptly and efficiently. As a result, there were concerns on the effective battery range of refuse vehicles.
- The Leader of the Council highlighted the benefits of hydrogen fuel for use with personal and commercial vehicles compared to electric vehicles. In addition, there was concerns regarding issues with recycling electric vehicle batteries and the long term impact on the environment.
- A Member expressed concerns regarding the lack of electric vehicle charging points in the Borough.
- A Member sought clarification on Geo Parks and whether the Council had a tree planting strategy. In response, it was confirmed that an update would be provided in writing regarding Geo Parks. The Portfolio Holder for Clean and Green confirmed that the Council had a tree planting strategy and 2000 trees were scheduled to be planted at Aldridge Airport.
- A Member sought clarification on recycling rates in Walsall. In response, it was confirmed that a response would be provided in writing.

Following a brief discussion on the Environmental Bill 2020, the Chair requested a regular scheduled update on the Council's Carbon Neutral and Climate Change progress to be presented to the Committee.

Resolved:

1. That, the report be noted.
2. That, the Committee receive regular updates regarding the progress of the Carbon Neutral strategy.
3. That, a briefing note on recycling rates in Walsall be provided to Members in writing.
4. That, an update on Geo Parks be provided to Members of the Committee in writing.

29/20 Draft Revenue Budget Feedback and Draft Capital Programme 2021/22 to 2023/24

The Committee considered a feedback report on revenue and capital outturn for 2020/21 to 2023/24 for services within the remit of the Committee.

It was noted that the draft capital programme for 2021/22 totalled £65.99m, which included £28.17m capital investments funded from the Council's own resources and £37.82m externally funded capital grants. It was confirmed that the draft capital programme represented a balanced programme for 2021/22.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

30/20 **Areas of focus – 2020/21**

The Committee considered its areas of focus and the forward plans of Walsall Council, the Black Country Joint Executive Committee and West Midlands.

Resolved:

That, areas of focus 2020/21 and forward plans be noted.

31/20 **Date of next meeting**

It was noted that the next meeting would take place on 25 March 2021.

32/20 **Private Session – Town Deal Boards**

The Committee considered a private report on the Bloxwich and Walsall Towns Fund which aims at driving sustainable economic regeneration of Walsall to deliver long term economy and productivity growth.

Members were informed that the Government launched the Town Fund Programme in September 2019, which included both Bloxwich and Walsall towns for eligible funding as part of a £25m funding package. Following this publication, in June 2020 a further £5bn was announced as part of an Accelerated Towns Capital funding which supported and funded investments projects that supported jobs, stimulated economic recovery and complemented existing projects under development.

The Government requested that a Town Deal Board be established which placed requirements on the board in terms of responsibility, membership, accountability and scope.

The Town Fund intervention framework was outlined:

- Local Transport
- Digital Connectivity
- Urban Regeneration, Planning and Land Use
- Arts, Culture and Heritage
- Skills Infrastructure
- Enterprise Infrastructure

It was noted that £1.5m of investments had been secured through the accelerated funds submission, which included:

Bloxwich – Acceleration Fund Projects

Sustainable Transport Interventions

- The planning and design of transport interventions, linking local people with jobs and training opportunities

Bloxwich Town Area Environmental Improvements

- A kick start package of improvements to public realm and environments to encourage people into Bloxwich Town area

Improved Community Safety

- Upgraded/additional CCTV in Bloxwich Town Centre, identified local shopping areas and business parks

Park and Green Spaces Improvements

- Variety of rapid intervention in parks and greenspaces, enhancing the environment and outdoor sports facilities

Improving Transport access across Bloxwich

- Transport control improvement to Bloxwich High Street to improve traffic flow and safety

Walsall – Acceleration Fund Projects

Improving the Economy of Walsall Town area

- Identify areas for improvement to encourage use by the public and businesses to increase footfall, trade and investment

Walsall Town Area Environmental Improvement

- Improvements to public realm and environments to encourage people into the Town Centre

Park & Green Spaces Improvements

- Interventions in parks, greenspaces and enhancing environment and outdoor sports facilities

Improved Community Safety

- Upgraded/Additional CCTV in Walsall Town Centre, identified local shopping areas and business parks

The Committee considered an overview of the proposed projects across Bloxwich and Walsall, which would be submitted alongside a business case to the Government for consideration.

A question and answer session took place and following on, the principal points from the ensuing discussion:-

- A Member sought clarification regarding the timeframe for developing projects in the area. In response, the Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration confirmed that business case approval was required for each project before any publicised timescales. However, local Ward Members would be consulted and informed prior to any project announcement.
- The Chair sought clarification regarding funding for Willenhall and Darlaston Town Centres. In response, the Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration confirmed that the Council was developing a Willenhall Masterplan.
- A Member sought clarification regarding town centre funding for Aldridge. The Committee was informed that Cabinet would consider any regeneration suggestions from Members of the Committee. However, it was noted that the announcement of the development of Aldridge Railway Station was a positive development for the Borough.
- A discussion was held about the impact of Town Deals funding in a post-COVID future. In response, the Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder highlighted that funding would enable job creation and accelerate growth in the Borough.
- It was anticipated that office based private and public sector employees would return to office environments once the UK lockdown ceases.
- Members discussed the future footfall of Walsall Town Centre.
- The Chair requested that the private presentation regarding the Town Board projects be circulated to the Committee.

- The Deputy Leader of the Council confirmed that all Members would be engaged and consulted with Willenhall Town Centre Masterplan
- A discussion was held about the Town Deal Board membership. Particular concerns were raised about the lack of Ward Member representation on the Board.

Resolved:

- 1. That, the report be noted.**
- 2. That, the Committee receive annual updates on progress regarding Bloxwich and Walsall Town Deal Programmes.**
- 3. That, the private presentation regarding the Town Board projects be circulated to Members of the Committee.**

Termination of Meeting

There being no further business, the meeting terminated 8.37p.m.

Signed:

Date: