

Business, Employment & the Local Economy Scrutiny and Performance Panel

Thursday 22 January 2015 at 6.00 p.m. at the Council House

Panel Members Present:

Councillor D. Anson (Chair)
Councillor A. Andrew
Councillor I. Shires
Councillor M. Bird
Councillor S. Craddock
Councillor A. Ditta
Councillor J. Fitzpatrick
Councillor G. Illmann-Walker
Councillor D. James
Councillor R. Martin
Councillor G. Sohal
Councillor R. Worrall

Officers Present:

Simon Neilson – Executive Director – Regeneration (in attendance from 6:45pm)
Simon Tranter- Head of Regeneration Development & Delivery
Steve Pretty – Head of Service, Engineering and Transportation (Neighbourhoods)
Jo Nugent - Team Leader – Borough Wide Development
Helen Kindon – Team Leader – Walsall Town & District Centres Management
Kelly Valente – Lead Accountant, Regeneration
Matt Underhill - Committee Business and Governance Manager

Portfolio Holders

Present: Councillor M. Nazir – Regeneration

26/14 APOLOGIES

Apologies were received for the duration of the meeting from Councillor Barker. Apologies were also received from Simon Neilson who attended the meeting from 6:45pm.

27/14 SUBSTITUTIONS

Councillor I. Shires substituted for Councillor Barker for the duration of the meeting.

28/14 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND PARTY WHIP

There were no declarations of interest for the duration of the meeting.

29/14 MINUTES

[Exempt Information under paragraph 3 of Part I of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act, 1972 (as amended)]

The Panel considered the minutes of the previous meeting on 24 November 2014.

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting, held on 24 November, 2014 be approved as a true and accurate record.

The Chair announced the meeting's return to public session.

30/14 CHASE LINE ELECTRIFICATION AND BLOXWICH LEVEL CROSSING

The Head of Engineering and Transportation introduced the report. The following is a summary of the report and subsequent discussion:

It was explained that the tabled briefing had been provided by Network Rail who were unable to attend the meeting. It was also explained that it had proved necessary to put the current utility works on Park Street on hold until October 2015, after complications in the removal of the existing bridge structure were identified. This was as a result of the actual structure being different to the original plans, with the presence of reinforced slabs above the bridge beams meaning it would not be possible to cut and lift the beams out as intended. It was emphasised that while this would create a 9 to 12 month delay to the completion of works on Park Street, the overall electrification programme was still on schedule. In relation to other works, it was explained that work on the full reconstruction of the overbridge had now recommenced following further mining investigation works. It was also acknowledged that the works at Broad Lane had not been completed ahead of its re-opening in August 2014. However, these works to the carriageway would now be completed shortly.

A Panel Member expressed concern regarding the problems now being experienced in completing the works at Park Street. The Member noted that council officers will undertake significant research before committing to a project. In his view Network Rail had not undertaken a sufficiently thorough investigation prior to commencing work at Park Street into potential pitfalls and problems and the identification of appropriate solutions. He also expressed concern regarding the effect of the delay on the building of the new market. A number of Members expressed concerns regarding the impact of the delay in works at Park Street on Walsall's economy. A further Panel Member expressed concern regarding the potentially far reaching impact of the changes to the programme. He was concerned that the delays might result in greater costs being incurred. The Member suggested that, subject to planning approval, the council goes ahead with its plans for the market square to avoid losing the economic benefit of the increased footfall generated by the new Primark and Co-op developments. The Member also expressed the view that the cost of any disruption caused by this delay must be met by Network Rail. A number of Panel Members stated that the new timescale was unacceptable and it would be important for the Panel to meet with Network Rail on this matter. Officers explained that Network Rail were currently trying to resolve this issue and the Panel's concerns would be directly communicated to the company. A further Panel Member doubted that this would have been the first time that Network Rail would have experienced this kind of engineering problem, therefore it was not unreasonable to expect that a relatively speedy solution was identified. She emphasised that the resolution of this

problem should not be at the expense of Walsall's economic growth. All Panel Members supported a resolution requesting that Network Rail attend a special meeting to discuss the works at Park Street.

In response to a Panel query the Head of Engineering and Transportation advised that Network Rail had explained that works had been affected by utilities and there had been some delay over the Christmas period. However, the road has now been closed again and utility works are ongoing prior to bridgeworks.

A Panel Member advised the meeting that a petition was currently being organised by businesses and residents requesting that Bloxwich Level Crossing is kept open. She also highlighted concerns expressed by some local residents that the proposed new footbridge will overlook their homes. The Member also raised concerns regarding an apparent inconsistency in the possible options offered at two separate consultation events.

Resolved:

That Network Rail are invited to a special meeting of the Panel; &
the report be noted.

31/14 FINANCIAL PLAN 2015/16 TO 2018/19: UPDATE ON DRAFT REVENUE BUDGET & CAPITAL PROGRAMME, & OUTCOME OF BUDGET CONSULTATION TO DATE

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report. The following is a summary of the report and subsequent discussion:

It was explained that there had been no direct policy changes within the Regeneration portfolio and therefore no consequential impact on the budget. However, a Panel Member expressed the view that the entire budget had implications for Regeneration. He acknowledged that he had now adopted a different view on charging for town centre parking given the importance of supporting the businesses operating in the town centre. It was also noted that a previous intention to charge for parking in district centres had also been withdrawn by Cabinet for similar reasons.

A Panel Member highlighted page 5 of the report which referred to Capital 2014/15 – Transport projects. In particular, the section of the report requesting that the funding previously allocated for a new car park at Lucknow Road, Willenhall be reallocated to other highway schemes at Birmingham Road and Caldmore Road. The Member explained that the Neighbourhoods Panel had expressed serious concerns regarding the viability of the proposed one way scheme at Caldmore Road and its impact on local businesses and had recommended to Cabinet that it did not go ahead. The Portfolio Holder explained that the proposal for Caldmore Road had been prompted by a traffic flow study, while there were varying views amongst the Panel regarding the value of the potential scheme. In response to Panel queries it was explained that although transport projects sat within the Neighbourhoods Portfolio, the Panel was able to make a recommendation to Cabinet on these schemes. It would then be a matter for Cabinet to choose how to respond. Officers also explained that broadly speaking matters relating to operational highways issues sat within the Neighbourhood Services portfolio, while strategic transport matters were usually

the responsibility of the Regeneration portfolio. A Panel Member noted that it had previously been agreed by the Community Services Panel that a consultation with local residents be requested to be undertaken. The Member stressed the importance of the consultation being carried out.

Resolved:

1. That the Panel recommend that Cabinet be requested to allocate sufficient funding for both the provision of a new car park at Lucknow Road, Willenhall, together with the highway scheme on Caldmore Road;
2. the Panel also recommend that the consultation with local residents regarding the Lucknow Road scheme, originally recommended by the Community Services and Environment Panel on 10 October 2014, be undertaken; &
3. the report be noted.

32/14 DISTRICT CENTRE REGENERATION

The Head of Regeneration Development & Delivery introduced the presentation. It was explained that the purpose of the presentation was to provide guidance to the Panel regarding regeneration in the district centres, following the presentation given at the previous Panel meeting regarding work being undertaken in the town centre. The following is a summary of the report and subsequent discussion:

The Team Leader – Borough Wide Development set out the hierarchy of centres with town, district and local centres each providing different functions. It was explained that the success of district centres is influenced by a range of factors, including challenging business and market trends, land availability and the wider economy. It was further explained that support for district centres fell into three work streams: physical developments within the Primary Shopping Area and district centre boundary; physical development at the edge of centres to support population growth and footfall e.g. residential and employment land developments; as well as working in partnership with businesses providing business support and management to raise profile to help increase footfall and growth. In terms of district centre developments it was explained that there had been a significant amount of private sector investment. A number of key schemes were highlighted including Morrisons' Aldridge store extension, the office redevelopment on the former Aldridge Magistrate Court site, Wetherspoons' developments at Aldridge and Bloxwich, together with the £2.5m Asda, Bloxwich expansion.

In relation to future development opportunities it was explained that there continued to be demand from low cost and independent retailers. However, there was very little undeveloped land available. It was further explained that further development opportunity sites would be identified within Planning Policy and the Strategic Area Plan (SAP), working with land owners to bring forward sites, including supporting the redevelopment of redundant land. While there is also planned future reuse of surplus council assets e.g. Little London School. In relation to edge of centre developments it was explained that there were a number of residential developments delivered or underway across the district centres. These included Harrowby Road, Moxley – 231 units by whg, Wood

Street, Willenhall – 47 units by Accord Housing and Spring Lane, Willenhall – 112 units by Taylor Wimpey. The likely demand prompted by the Chase Line electrification increasing the frequency of services at Bloxwich was also noted. In relation to future development opportunities it was explained that a number of residential developments are being progressed or planned, including 300+ units by whg at the former Goscote Estate, Blakenall and 200+ units at the former Servis site, Darlaston. Other opportunities include the Black Country Enterprise Zone, Darlaston; Black Country priority sites in the SEP e.g. Bull Lane, Middlemore Lane; preparation and adoption of the Site Allocation Document to identify land use priorities; aspirations for re-opening a number of local rail lines.

The Team Leader – Walsall Town & District Centres Management explained that a range of support is provided to help sustain district centre businesses. This includes business support, reducing vacant unit numbers and duration, marketing towns and encouraging investment. Other activity includes delivering projects in conjunction with retailers aimed at boosting business growth and a range of partnership activity. It was also explained that while Business Rate Relief was available this was not actively promoted and had to be requested. It was noted that difficult economic times were being experienced and much of the funding that is secured is used to help businesses effectively market themselves. In response to a Panel query it was explained that in the 12 months up to January 2014 across district centres there were 500 new jobs created and 30 new businesses opened. During the same period 15 businesses closed. It was further explained that data for the 12 months up to January 2015 will be available soon.

A Panel Member explained that he had been impressed with the approach taken by officers in putting together parcels of land in the town to help make them more compelling for regeneration as part of an overall vision. However, he was keen to understand whether a similar vision existed for district centres. The Member noted successes in Willenhall, including Morrisons, although he also highlighted nearby land which was full of litter. A Panel Member also sought guidance regarding the level of support provided to those satellite areas beyond the district centres, such as a Rushall/ Shelfield. The former Portfolio Holder for Regeneration explained that, prior to the recession and subsequent cuts, the council's regeneration policy had included the investment of a considerable amount of money in both district centres, as well as satellite areas such as Pleck and Bentley. This work included establishing district centre managers which meant that council officers were in place to undertake day to day management. This was something not introduced by other councils. It was further explained that plans were also developed for each district centre in conjunction with whg. It was his hope that it would prove possible to strengthen district centre management. Officers also explained that the council owns fewer land assets in the district centres by comparison with the town centre which it could then bring to market. However, examples of recent success included work undertaken to put together parcels of land for Morrisons' £30m Willenhall development, as well as working with the owner of the Bull in Bloxwich. A Member highlighted that the district centres were losing an increasing number of traders. He emphasised that it would be important to return vacant units to a useable standard, as well as seek to bring any vacant buildings back into commercial or residential use. The Executive Director explained that officers continued to work in partnership with local businesses and stakeholders, although the key to success was the natural alliance formed by businesses in the district centres.

A Member applauded the work of officers in supporting district centres. However, it was his view that development opportunities had been missed as a consequence of what he considered an onerous planning application process. A further Panel Member explained that a more positive and cooperative approach had been adopted by planners. The Portfolio Holder thanked officers for their hard work in contributing to the economic growth in both the town and district centres, particularly the successful partnership working. The Executive Director explained that it would be important to build on the investment made in the district and town centres. He highlighted the importance of the council operating in a smart way regarding the future sale of land to protect regeneration and economic growth. For example, the council must seek to have the power to regain the ownership of land where developments are not completed.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

33/14 WALSALL TOWN CENTRE MARKET UPDATE

The Team Leader – Borough Wide Development explained that the planning application for the new market development was currently out to public consultation. The application is then scheduled to be considered by the Planning Committee in March. It was also explained that every effort would be made to ensure that any temporary move of the market would be carried out with the minimum of disruption. A Panel Member expressed concern regarding the potential impact of the possible delays in structural work to be carried out at Park Street by Network Rail. The Chair expressed a strong preference for the market to return to its original position where it had been previously based for 600 years and where significant EU funding had been spent on block paving. In response to a query from the Chair it was explained that market stalls of both 3.3 metres and 4.5 metres length will be used to enable flexibility in meeting traders requirements.

34/14 WORK PROGRAMME & FORWARD PLAN

The Panel considered the Work Programme and Forward Plan.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme and forward plan be noted.

35/14 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Chair noted that a special meeting of the Panel would be arranged, followed by its next scheduled meeting on 10 March at 6:00pm.

The meeting closed at 8:10 p.m.

Chair:

Date: