

# Minutes of the Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at Walsall Council House

Thursday, 23 November 2023 at 6.00p.m.

**Committee Members present:** Councillor M Follows (Chair)  
Councillor S Cheema  
Councillor P Gill  
Councillor A Hicken  
Councillor P Kaur  
Councillor R Larden  
Councillor M Ward

**Portfolio Holder:** Councillor K Murphy – Street Pride  
Councillor G Flint – Wellbeing, Leisure and Public Spaces  
Councillor Bird – Leader of the Council

**Officers Present:** Dave Brown – Executive of Director, Economy, Environment and Communities  
Kathryn Moreton – Director of Place and Environment  
Fraz Hussain – Finance Planning Manager  
Matt Crowton – Group Manager – Transportation and Strategy (Virtually)

**Other attendees present:** Ananth Murthy – Programme Sponsor– Package 1 and 2 – West Midlands Rail Executive (WMRE) (Virtually)  
Liz Baker – Programme Sponsor – West Midlands Rail Executive (WMRE) (Virtually)

## 28. **Apologies**

Apologies were received from Councillors Allen (Vice-Chair), Hassan and Whitehouse.

## 29. **Substitutions**

There were no substitutions.

30. **Declarations of Interest and Party Whip**

There were no declarations of interest or party whip.

31. **Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)**

There were no items to consider in private session.

32. **Minutes**

A copy of the Minutes of the meeting held on the 23 October 2023 was submitted. [annexed]

**Resolved**

**That, the minutes of the meeting held on 23 October 2023, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.**

33. **Willenhall, Darlaston and Aldridge Train Stations**

The Committee received a presentation on the rail programme works in respect of Willenhall, Darlaston and Aldridge Stations. The Chair welcomed project leads, Ananth Murthy and Liz Baker from the West Midlands Rail Executive. [annexed]

Rail Package 1 was anticipated to provide connectivity in the Walsall to Wolverhampton corridor and to/from Birmingham New Street Station. Following, the collapse of the principal contractor for the projects, Kier Group was appointed as the lead contractor and commenced works in October 2023. As a result of the impact of the former contractor going into administration, Willenhall and Darlaston Stations completion dates had been delayed to Quarter 1 in 2026.

The delivery strategy for Aldridge Station was in development and initial discussion were taking place with Network Rail on scheme design. Further work on parking feasibility and timetabling was underway in order to complete project proposals by Quarter 1 in 2027.

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

- There were cost pressures with Package 1; cost estimates were projected to range from £81.27m to £85.27m.

- Final timetable for Package 1 would be finalised prior to official unveiling of Willenhall and Darlaston Stations.
- It was envisioned that there would be two trains per hour (tph) in both directions (likely 1tph between Walsall and Wolverhampton and 1tph to/from Birmingham New Street Station).
- Investigations were taking place at site locations to understand the impact and financial implications of mine shaft remediation.
- Leader of the Council confirmed that both Darlaston and Willenhall Stations were due to open in 2023. However, due to the previous contractor going into administration and further investigative works, project completion had been delayed until 2026.
- It was identified that there was a circa £15m funding gap for Package 1 with further discussions taking place with Government on addressing the funding shortfall.
- There was a view that congestion and inconsiderate parking would be pushed to neighbouring areas should pay and display parking at the new stations be introduced.
- It was hoped that there would be a relocation of funding to local transportation projects within the West Midlands due to the scaling back of HS2.
- WMRE had learned lessons from previous rail projects including a greater understanding of ground risks and carrying out intentional intrusive surveys.
- Technical schematics and design in respect of Aldridge Train Station were due to be completed in Quarter 1 in 2024.
- The Leader of the Council confirmed that Aldridge Councillors would be kept informed of construction stages on a quarterly basis.
- Resident consultations for Aldridge Station would be carried out as part of the development.

Councillor Kaur joined the meeting at this point at 6:12p.m.

**Resolved:**

**That, the rail programme works update in respect of Willenhall, Darlaston and Aldridge Train Stations be noted.**

**34. Tree Planting Strategy**

The Portfolio Holders for Wellbeing, Leisure and Public Spaces and Street Pride presented an overview of the Council's Tree Planting Strategy.  
[annexed]

It was noted that the Borough was geologically and topographically diverse, thus comprising of leafier suburbs and patchwork of green spaces incorporated into the industrial landscape. The Urban Forestry Strategy for 2016 – 2026 was approved by Cabinet in 2017 and set out a strategic framework for tree management across the borough working in tandem with national policy.

It was noted the Council's intended to plant 19,754 trees working with a number of external funding agencies and local businesses.

- It was dictated in the Council's Planning Policy that removal of one tree would result in the site owner being obligated to plant three replacement trees. There was a desire to maintain and keep mature trees rather than plant younger trees.
- The Council considered an item at its meeting on 6 November 2023 on biodiversity net gain, which outlined the Council's commitment and policy on tree planting.
- Portfolio Holder (Wellbeing, Leisure and Public Spaces) highlighted that tree officers had regular maintenance schedules across the Borough. It was stressed that any tree conservation or maintenance issues should be reported through the Member portal.
- There was a commitment to address historical highway trees and the issues occurred by matured trees on public highways.
- Tree mapping had occurred across the Borough to address suitable tree planting sites. Portfolio Holder (Wellbeing, Leisure and Public Spaces) welcomed comments by Members and residents on suitability of tree planting in their localities.
- The Council welcomed engagement from local businesses to encourage further conservation work.
- Tree nuisance issues were not routinely dealt with by the Council.

**Resolved:**

**That, the Council's Tree Planting Strategy be noted.**

**35. Draft Revenue Budget and Draft Capital Programme 2024/25-2027/28**

The Leader of the Council introduced the report and underlined that it was still a time of budgetary pressures. He highlighted that many Councils across the country were facing financial pressures and Walsall was not unique in this respect. The Council was committed to balance the budget for 2024/25 and the Cabinet were due to consider revised proposals and provisional statement on 13 December 2023. [annexed]

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

A lengthy discussion occurred in relation to the breakdown of statutory and non-statutory services in respect of the budget. A Member sought clarification on whether the Council would have to cut back on free garden waste collection like many Councils across the country. The Leader of the Council responded that the Council was committed to free garden waste collections and was investigating proposals to turn garden waste into energy.

*Ref:93 – Removal of 2023/24 saving – increase recycling rates and reduce contamination*

A Member sought clarification on recycling rates and how to improve rates in the Borough. In response, the Portfolio Holder for Street Pride confirmed that the Council was committed to educating residents and businesses about the placement of refuse to avoid cross contamination of recycling objects. It was noted that only 7% of rubbish in Walsall proceeds to landfill sites with the remainder being recycled (including energy from waste).

*Ref: P4 – Street lighting dimming and trimming during the evening*

A Member sought clarification on whether street light dimming would make Walsall safer. In response, the Portfolio Holder for Street Pride confirmed that the Council was working with the contractor Amey on a pilot scheme. It was suggested that dimming street lighting by 50% would save the Council £160k during 2024/25 and would not result in a direct noticeable impact by the public. The Director of Place and Environment highlighted the Council was investigating the use of phased dimming which involved a gradual reduction of lighting as peak traffic reduces. She concluded that further investigation was required prior to finalisation of the scheme, and the saving proposed was based on a specific proportion of street lighting and not the entire Borough.

*Ref: P5 – Crease provision of Christmas lights*

There were concerns about proposed cessation of Christmas lights in the Borough. The Portfolio Holder for Street Pride confirmed the Council's contractor Amey had agreed to provide a social value contribution to the Borough's Christmas lights. Therefore, the Committee was assured that Christmas lighting would still go ahead as planned.

*Ref: OP69 – Other waste disposal – (e.g., grey bin, plasterboard, textiles)*

A Member queried whether the Council collected medical waste as the NHS provided a similar medical waste collection service. In response, the Portfolio for Street Pride confirmed the Council collected medical waste, which was paramount for individuals requiring long term medical intervention and treatment. In this respect, it was confirmed that Council's medical collections were a non-chargeable service.

*Ref: 89 – Enforcement of fly tipping, litter dropping, cigarette dropping etc*

There was a discussion about preventative measures and enforcement of fly tipping and littering. The Portfolio for Street Pride confirmed that penalties associated with fly tipping and littering were fixed and could only be adjusted by a Magistrates' Court.

In respect of CCTV enforcement, the Council utilised covert cameras and were consistently rotated around the Borough on a regular basis. In addition, there were several preventative signage to deter criminality. A Member

commented on whether there had been a cost benefit to the Council due to the implementation of preventative measure compared to 2022. It was confirmed that this information would be made available to the Committee at a future meeting.

A Member sought clarification on whether the Council could recover costs associated with fly tipping from a Magistrates' or Small Claims Court. In response, the Leader of the Council confirmed that this would be a responsibility for the Magistrates' Court. However, in respect of recovery from Small Claims' Court, he confirmed that officers would investigate, and a response would be provided.

*Ref: OP10 – Libraries partnership with voluntary sector*

A Member queried whether the Council was looking to make redundancies in library services or increase number of volunteers in the service. The Leader of the Council confirmed that whilst the Council could not guarantee there would not be any compulsory redundancies, there would be a commitment to ensure redeployment or early retirement opportunities were considered before any redundancy decisions.

*Ref: Capital Scheme – Other schemes carried forward from previous years – car park resurfacing works*

A Member requested that the Council examine the option for parent and child bays for Council owned car parks. In response, the Director for Place and Environment confirmed that parent and child spaces had an adverse impact on car parking capacity and were possibly unenforceable. There was a discussion about abuses of car parking spaces in particular, disabled bays. In this respect, it was confirmed that the Council enforces disabled bays and was looking to increase awareness of these types of spaces in communities.

**Resolved:**

- 1. That the draft revenue budget and capital programme for 2024/25 – 2027/28 and subsequent discussion actions be noted.**
- 2. The Committee noted that the revenue budget for 2024/25 was not balanced, with a gap of c£18m, and therefore a further report may be required to this committee if any changes to draft proposals outlined relate to services within the committee's remit.**

36. **Corporate Financial Performance – Quarter 2 (Financial Monitoring Position for 2023/24)**

The Committee received a report which considered the forecast revenue and capital outturn for 2023/24 up to 30 September 2023. [annexed]

Members noted that in relation to forecast capital, it was proposed that £10.4m would be carried forward. In respect of forecast revenue, there was a predicted overspend of £0.263m with use of earmarked reserves.

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

- A Member sought clarification on how the Council was addressing reductions in bereavement services income. In response, the Portfolio Holder (Wellbeing, Leisure and Public Spaces) confirmed that a new Head of Bereavement Services had been appointed. The Council recognised that greater commercialisation was required in the service in order to compete with neighbouring crematorium services. Therefore, there were proposals to update Streetly Crematorium offer.
- The Council had increased booking capacity in Bereavement Services to offer smaller burial services at Streetly Crematorium.
- Bulky waste charges had achieved a shortfall due to issues in updating prices on the booking system.
- There were concerns in respect of rewilding areas and making areas look untidy, as well as issues regarding gnats. In response, the Portfolio Holder confirmed that rewilding process took many years to embed into areas and would improve visually in future years. The Council had made efforts to widen pathways in rewilding areas to alleviate gnats, ticks, and insect bites.
- There was a request for information on the Council's proposed and upcoming rewilding projects.
- It was stressed that rewilding projects required specific management to be successful. The Council had received concerns from residents about rewilding and further investigative work would be carried out to alleviate resident concerns.

**Resolved:**

- 1. That the revenue and capital forecast for the financial year-end 2023/24 for the services that fall under the remit of the Committee.**
- 2. That, information on the Council's proposed and upcoming rewilding projects be circulated to Members in writing.**

**37. Areas of focus – 2023/24**

The Committee noted the proposed areas of focus for the remaining meetings of the municipal year. [annexed]

There was a discussion on proposed future item in respect of enforcement. It was requested that this item include information on the Council's efforts to reduce fly tipping, enforcement notice figures and CCTV distribution across the Borough.

**Resolved**

**That, forward plans be noted.**

**38. Recommendations Tracker**

The Senior Democratic Services Officer updated Members on the recommendations from previous meetings of the Committee. [annexed]

**Resolved:**

**That the progress on recommendations from the previous meeting be noted.**

**39. Date of next meeting**

The date of the next meeting is scheduled for 16 January 2024.

There being no further business, the meeting terminated at 7.29p.m

Signed:

Date: