

ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
23 October 2023 at 6.00pm held at Walsall Council House, Lichfield Street,
Walsall, WS1 1TW.

Committee Members

Councillor M. Follows (Chair)
Councillor P. Bott
Councillor S. Cheema
Councillor P. Gill
Councillor F. Hassan
Councillor A. Hicken
Councillor P. Kaur
Councillor R. Larden
Councillor K. Sears
Councillor M. Ward
Councillor J. Whitehouse

Portfolio Holders

Councillor M. Bird	Leader of the Council
Councillor A. Andrew Holder	Deputy Leader and Portfolio for Regeneration

Officers Present:

Dave Brown	Interim Executive Director, Economy Environment and Communities
David Moore	Interim Director of Regeneration and Economy
Sian Lloyd	Democratic Services Officer
Matt Powis	Senior Democratic Services Officer

19. Apologies

An apologies for absence was received from Councillor Allen.

20. Substitutions

Councillor Sears substituted for Councillor Allen.

21. Declarations of Interest and Party Whip

There were no declarations of interest or party whip.

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

There were no items to consider in private session.

23. **Minutes of the previous meeting**

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 12 September 2023, copies having previously been circulated, be approved as a true and accurate record.

24. **Regeneration Update**

The Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Regeneration presented an update in respect of regeneration activities taking place in the Borough in accordance with the Council's Plan 2022-2025 and the vision of the "We Are Walsall 2040" plan (see annexed).

He highlighted that £1.5 billion was being invested into transforming the Borough with a number of interventions to regenerate and support economic activity, increase housing choice and make Walsall a better-connected destination for businesses and residents.

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

Walsall Town Centre

- A Member of the Committee raised concerns about issues of drugs and criminal activity within the town centre. In response, the Deputy Leader (Regeneration) and Leader of the Council confirmed that the Council was working with West Midlands Police on both issues and CCTV had been introduced as a crime prevention deterrent. In addition, the Council had drone technology at its disposal which would complement the presence of rapid response Police cars to reduce criminal activity in the town centre. There were concerns about the number of homelessness and perceived intimidation especially with elderly or vulnerable shoppers.
- The Council wished to introduce compulsory knife arch for licensed night-time economy businesses to reduce the number of incidences involving knife crime in the town centre.
- There was a suggestion of a 2am curfew for licensed businesses within the town centre as recommended by West Midlands Police. However, this would be subject to debate by the Licensing and Safety Committee.
- The Master Plan would enhance Walsall Art Gallery and Walsall Leather Museum as cultural focal points in the area. However, there was opportunity to promote and encourage Walsall as a major cultural and sporting events due to its status as home to British Judo.

- There was a consensus that the UNESCO Geopark should be widely advertised and promoted to encourage tourism. A Member of the Committee requested an update in this respect and an update on Moorcroft Wood with the associated visitor centre at a future meeting of the Committee.
- Christmas and continental markets had been well received in previous years and encouraged footfall into the town centre.
- There were no new build targets for new residential projects in the town centre. However, there was a perception that the Council's existing parking policy of limiting residential car parking to one and half spaces was preventing new planning applications. Therefore, a review of the Council's parking policy was required.
- The Council was looking to review the types of residential living within the town centre and attracting different types of housing to the town centre such as retirement living.
- A Member sought clarification of the number of electric vehicles charging points in the town centre. In response, the Interim Executive Director of Economy Environment and Communities confirmed that a response would be provided in writing.
- The Council was reviewing the Future High Streets Programme which would improve the appearance of the town and improve rail and bus connectivity within the centre. In addition, with the addition of Adult Education, it was hoped that the town centre footfall would increase.
- A lengthy discussion ensued about the traffic flow within the town centre. It was suggested that reopening Park Street to vehicle traffic would improve connectivity with shops and businesses and ultimately improve footfall. The Leader of the Council highlighted that the town centre had the potential to be a retail destination if the town could attract companies like Apple Inc.
- Interim Executive Director of Economy, Environment and Communities confirmed that the Council was in the process of reviewing the Master Plan to incorporate new opportunities. There was a suggestion that the Council should be radical with regeneration plans to improve the town centre offer.

Bloxwich Town Deal

- Deputy Leader (Regeneration) confirmed that procurement had commenced on the Green Bloxwich programme which included regeneration of the Park Lodge and existing pavilion at King George V Playing Field.
- The Chair queried about whether there was any demand with the incubation space and digital access centre. In response, the Deputy

Leader (Regeneration) confirmed there were a high number of entrepreneurs in Bloxwich who could be assisted in setting their own businesses and would benefit from a digital access centre. A building had been identified which would be run by the Council initially with a future partner sought thereafter.

- The Council was committed to improving cycling improvements within Bloxwich. Measures had been taken to widen towpaths and implementing lighting on the canal network.
- Local Community Advisory Group would be the driving force for community projects within Bloxwich. There would be interconnectivity within projects including initiatives to activity remove barriers for people to uptake walking and cycling.
- There were no current plans to link regenerative work on the canal network between Bloxwich and Wednesfield. However, there was a proposal for the project to link with other parts of the Borough and connect to the network in Birmingham.

Willenhall

- The Council had agreed a new procurement developer partner for regeneration works in Willenhall which would be announced once the Executive Forward Plan 'call-in' window had ceased.
- A Member sought clarification on whether the Council would commit to a new Market Place for Willenhall following the decline of the local market. In response, the Deputy Leader (Regeneration) confirmed that Willenhall had already received over £2m in investment of the public realm and derelict shops in recent years. There was a view that historical conservation decisions taken in Willenhall had resulted in the area suffering from restrictive local planning policy which had damaged business confidence. It was the Council's view that regenerative projects in the area would renew outer areas of the town which would have a net positive effect on the town centre.
- There were a number of schemes in Phase 1 Moat Street and Villiers Street workstream with the Council successfully submitting a bid in August 2022 for £20m to support the delivery of the project. It was hoped that the scheme would allow many sites in the area to be regenerated.
- A Member sought clarification on the link between Willenhall Town Centre and the proposed Willenhall Train Station. In response, the Deputy Leader (Regeneration) confirmed that the Council was investigating how best to improve the junction near to the train station site to improve the link to the town centre to ensure best use of public transport. A copy of the Transport Scheme would be circulated to Willenhall Councillors.

- A Member sought clarification on proposals for Kendrick Road and Iron Park, Moxley Tip. In response, the Deputy Leader (Regeneration) confirmed that issues with Kendrick Road were commercially sensitive and was not currently subject to public debate.
- Housing building on brownfield sites in Willenhall required extensive negotiations with existing landowners. The Council was committed to target regeneration of brownfield sites in the area and had already seen the delivery of 800 units in Willenhall.

Strategic Employment Land

- There was a view that the skills agenda should be focused on delivering skills for the future such as developing skills for current and upcoming electric and hydrogen technology. The Council was actively engaged with the skills agenda to work with businesses to identify skill shortages and enable retraining for individuals that want to upskill or retrain in later life.
- Concerns were raised about the uptake of vehicle electric charging points and how they would integrate with terrace neighbourhoods within the Borough.

M6 Junction 10

- Members requested that Highways England and SISK be invited to attend the next available meeting of the Committee due to ongoing concerns of delays with the project. In addition, Members expressed their frustrations about the flow of traffic in the area and synchronisation of traffic lights.
- The Leader of the Council was sympathetic to the Committee's view in respect of the works at Junction 10. He highlighted that further work was needed with advance signage prior to Junction 10 and illuminated signage so drivers had advanced notice of lane changes.

The Chair thanked the Portfolio Holder for Regeneration for attending the Committee.

Resolved:

- 1. That, the Cabinet and Council Officers should be radical in changes to the Borough's Town Centre plans as our town centres have radically changed post-pandemic.**
- 2. In connection with (1) above, the Council look to increase transport links by moving bus services closer to Walsall Train Station and Park Street, Walsall.**
- 3. That, the Council explore a clearer vision of future housing potential in our town centres in future plans and reports.**
- 4. That, an update on the UNESCO Black Country Geopark be presented at a future meeting of the Committee.**
- 5. That, Highways England and SISK be invited to a special meeting of the Committee.**

25. **Areas of Focus – 2023/24**

The Committee noted the proposed areas of focus for the remaining meetings of the municipal year. (Annexed)

A Member requested that an item on cycling infrastructure plans be added to the Committee’s area of focus for 2023/24.

Resolved:

- 1. That, cycling infrastructure programme and the Government’s Recycling Strategy be included as part of the areas of focus for 2023/24**
- 2. That, forward plans be noted.**

26. **Recommendation Tracker**

The Democratic Services Officer updated the Committee on the recommendations from previous meetings of the Committee. She advised that one outstanding item remained in relation to the derelict properties’ taskforce. (Annexed)

Resolved:

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

27. **Date of next meeting**

It was noted that the date of the next meeting would be 23 November 2023.

There being no further business, the meeting terminated 7.43pm.

Signed:

Date: