

Council – 16 September 2019

Walsall MBC and the West Midlands Combined Authority

1. Summary

- 1.1 This report is to provide an update on the progress of the current West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) work and to review the achievements to date alongside future plans. This reflects a commitment made that Council will receive an update twice a year on WMCA matters.

The WMCA was formed in 2016, with all seven metropolitan West Midlands Councils as constituent members, together with 10 councils joining as non-constituent members alongside the three regions LEPs. We are now in the third year of delivery and this report is an update on Walsall's involvement to date, and to outline future activity and plans that could affect Walsall in the future.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 The Council note the report.

3. Report detail

3.1 Land and Housing Portfolio

Walsall continue to retain the lead for the Land and Housing Portfolio with the Leader chairing all WMCA Land and Housing Boards and having oversight and responsibility for the One Public Estate (OPE) programme.

3.2 Land Remediation Fund/Land and Property Investment Fund

The BC Land and Property Investment fund has now committed the initial £53m of the £150m programme to deliver 46 hectares of remediated land.. Walsall will benefit from this funding through the Goscote Lane Residential Development Scheme and Phoenix 10 schemes receiving a substantial grants to bring forward development.

The WMCA and the Black Country Consortium are currently commissioning a joint external review of the deliverability of the forecast outputs against the programme of projects allocated to the £53m initial tranche. It is anticipated that the conclusions of this review will help inform timing and values of further tranches of funding, subject to funding being available at the WMCA.

The BC Land & Property Investment Fund LPIF is available to support projects that will contribute towards the Black Country's Strategic Growth Objectives of:

- Site Remediation

- Commercial Floor Space
- New Jobs
- Private Sector Leverage
- New Homes

3.3 Appointment of the Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership's Single Accountable Body

On the 24th April, Cabinet approved a request from the BC LEP to formally appoint Walsall Council as their single Accountable Body for all LEP funding, which will include the funding received from the WMCA, together with other funding streams including:

- Local Growth Fund (existing)
- LEPs Core, Strategic and Growth Hub funding (existing)
- Enterprise Zones (to be migrated)
- Growing Places Fund (to be migrated)
- Land & Property Investment Fund (to be migrated)

Any future monies routed through the LEP will be managed by Walsall MBC to build upon the track record of delivery and good stewardship of public funding over recent years.

3.4 Investment Programme

Following an audit of the current WMCA Assurance Framework and processes, an enhanced Assurance Framework to support and ensure future delivery of the WMCA Investment programme is currently undergoing a development and review process, which is due for completion at the time of writing this report.

Of the £8bn Investment package, it was assumed that £2bn would require WMCA borrowing which would be repaid from the Devolution grant, business rate growth, supplementary business rates and a mayoral precept. Due to some of these funding assumptions not being secure, or not pursued, it has resulted in the WMCA being restricted to a capped funding level of £801m.

Commitments made against the Investment Programme total £722m at the end of July 2019, with WMCA expected to reach its borrowing limit based on the current forward plan in December 2019/January 2020.

The direction from West Midlands Leaders and the Mayor in relation to the funding challenge was that business cases for funding should continue through the Assurance Framework until September, when options to address the funding gap in the investment programme will be reviewed.

3.4 Housing and Land Town Centre Investment Package

The **Walsall to Wolverhampton Corridor** that will benefit from funding allocated by the Government's Land Fund remains a priority to aid the delivery of the Council's housing pipeline. The Corridor aims to deliver over 8,000 new homes by

2031 and the first allocation of funds totalling £41m has now been awarded to the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA)

In partnership with the WMCA, initial feasibility/ due diligence work and landowner engagement have been a key focus of activity to bring sites forward for development.

Walsall has also been chosen to be part of the **West Midlands Combined Authorities Town Centre Programme** that has selected the St Matthews Quarter of the town centre as one of the five pilot projects. The initial tranche of funding approved by WMCA Investment Board is £20million that is to be divided between the five pilot centres.

3.5 Skills

The Employment and Skills Team actively participate in regional working to ensure Walsall contributes and achieves against the objectives of the **West Midlands Combined Authority** and have inputted into and led on discussions in relation to the Productivity and Skills Commission, new Work and Health Programme, Employment Support pilot and on new propositions for Devolution Deals.

Rathbone Training were originally contracted to deliver the WMCA led Employment Support Programme for Walsall. The £463,215 project is focussed in the Birchills and Leamore area of Walsall and aims to deliver support to unemployed and low paid individuals.

The contract has since been transferred to Walsall College, following a restructure of the incumbent supplier. This has included the transfer of staff to the college to provide continuity of service until contract completion.

3.6 WM5G

Walsall Council is working in partnership with WMCA on the WM5G programme to support the efficient network rollout of 5G in the Borough. We have identified our Digital Coordinators who together will be working to support the development and implementation of the programme, alongside colleagues in planning, highways and legal.

The project is creating a common digital map of mobile and fibre coverage that will enable the authority to identify areas with poor mobile coverage and consider options to address these issues.

In August 2019, a 5G workshop brought together senior Council officers from across all directorates with key Combined Authority WM5G experts to identify some of the potential work streams that could be developed that look to maximise the benefits of 5G for the communities and employers of Walsall. This process is on-going, with some of the initial thoughts including:

- Creating a 5G ready Town Centre, to support the Walsall Town Centre Masterplan.

- Creating 5G ready communities to support improved co-ordination of the Social Care workforce across all participant employers.
- Helping to combat crime and anti-social behaviour through improved co-ordination of real time data linked to active information.
- Understanding the role 5G can take in supporting local employers through current 5G pilots, and applying this within Walsall.

3.7 Brexit

Following the release of the first tranche of Brexit Contingency resources, Walsall agreed to pool some resource to delivery a programme of Brexit preparedness activity across the region. Projects have included a region-wide Brexit Health Check for business and training schemes for public service officers to help signpost businesses to appropriate support. Further projects are in the pipeline and we will continue to work in partnership to support the Borough.

3.8 Transport

The A34 Walsall to Birmingham route has been identified as a key route to support the Sprint, Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project. The service delivers predictable journey times and high frequency dependable timetables. The route is approximately 14.5km in length running along the A34 from Birmingham to Walsall via Great Barr. The Scheme has Outline Business Case Approval, with WMCA Full Business Case approval scheduled for January 2020.

The two new proposed train stations for the Walsall area; Willenhall & Darlaston are included as part of the £18m High Speed 2 Connectivity Package & Transforming Cities Fund. Access to these funds will be through the development of their business case / bids, and their submission and appraisal at the WMCA. Both stations are now at planning application stage, following public consultation that ended May 2019.

Simon Neilson
Executive Director

Councillor Bird
Leader of the Council

9 September 2019