

Communities Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday, 18 September 2019

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Alan Cockburn (Chair)
Councillor Dave Shilton (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Jenny Fradgley
Councillor Seb Gran
Councillor Keith Kondakor
Councillor Bhagwant Singh Pandher
Councillor Caroline Phillips
Councillor Chris Williams
Councillor Andrew Wright

Portfolio Holders

Councillor Peter Butlin, Deputy Lead (Finance and Property)
Councillor Jeff Clarke, Transport & Planning
Councillor Kam Kaur, Customer & Transformation
Councillor Heather Timms, Environment and Heritage & Culture

Officers

David Ayton-Hill, Assistant Director for Communities
Shail Chohan, Service Manager (County Highways)
Mike Cunningham, Principal Street Lighting Engineer
Tom McColgan, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Christopher McNally, Performance and Improvement Service Lead
Mark Ryder, Strategic Director for Communities
Richard Sweeney, Service Manager (Transport Delivery)
Scott Tompkins, Assistant Director for Environment Services

1. General

(1) Apologies

Councillors Chattaway, Crump, Jenns and Seccombe had sent their apologies for the meeting. Councillor Williams was in attendance as a substitute for Councillor Jenns.

(2) Member's Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-pecuniary Interests

There were none.

(3) Chair's Announcements

The Chair informed the Committee that the first meeting of the Cross Party Climate Emergency Task and Finish group would be taking place after the meeting.

(4) Minutes of Previous Meeting - 19 June 2019

Councillor Kondakor stated that officers had sent him the information on employment rates by gender and age group and it showed that there had been a significant increase in employment among women who had been affected by the change in pensionable age.

The Chair noted that officers were due to hold a briefing for Councillors on the Major Road Network which was being arranged but for which a date had not yet been set.

2. Public Speaking

There was none.

3. Questions to Cabinet Portfolio Holders

Councillor Shilton stated that despite the Government's announced review of the HS2 project preparations in the County seemed to be carrying on as usual. He asked Councillor Clarke what he understood the situation to be.

Councillor Clarke responded that the Government's position was that it was business as usual as far as works on HS2 were concerned outside of portions of the track that had been planned to pass through ancient woodland.

Councillor Fradgley asked Councillor Clarke to provide an update on the works being undertaken by Network Rail to upgrade Stratford Station which had been subject to repeated delays.

Councillor Clarke responded that he appreciated the frustration felt by Councillor Fradgley and Stratford residents. Network Rail were aware of the slippages on the project and as soon as they provided a revised timetable to officers it would be circulated to the local Councillors.

Councillor Fradgley asked Councillor Clarke for an update on the works to the cycle tracks on Alcester Road and Evesham Road in Stratford.

Councillor Clarke responded that engineers had designed improved cycle way provision on Alcester Road that would provide a mile of off-road cycle way at a cost of an estimated £632,000. £150,000 had been allocated from the casualty reduction budget to the scheme which would enable some initial work to take place with the remaining components of the scheme to be brought forward when funding became available. He stated that there was also an opportunity for local Councillors to use part of their delegated budgets to contribute to the scheme. In relation to Evesham Road, Councillor Clark stated that the order for the works to replace the advisory markings on the road was with the maintenance team. The cycle lane would be expanded to increase the width to 1.5 metres which was now required.

Councillor Kondakor noted that the Council's consultation on its rail strategy mentioned the possibility of several additional parkway stations. He stated that he was concerned that increasing the provision of out of town stations would result in a reduction in the services to existing stations disadvantaging those without easy access to parkway stations. Councillor Kondakor asked for assurance that any increase in services to parkway stations would not be to the detriment of town centre stations.

Councillor Clarke responded that the Council was committed to providing flexibility in the local transport network and increasing the number of stations in the county was part of this. Councillor Clarke emphasised that the sites for any new stations were not yet known and if projects were brought forward, they would be subject to a detailed planning process with the associated consultations.

Councillor Kondakor asked for assurance that the mixed wood recycling contract that was due to go out for tender would be focused on reusing and recycling wood rather than burning it.

Councillor Timms responded that the Councillor Kondakor would be able to see the details of the tender when the report was published.

In response to Councillor Kondakor, Councillor Clarke stated that the removal of the bridge on the Hinkley Road was due to take place across two weekends hopefully during the school holidays in October.

(1) Economic Development Update

Councillor Butlin introduced the Economic Update on behalf of Councillor Seccombe.

The Chair welcomed the news of the new jobs being created across the county particularly the 400 jobs due to be created by the expansion Aldi's UK headquarters in Atherstone. The Chair noted the awards made by the Small Capital Grants Programme and asked who sat on the programme board.

David Ayton-Hill responded that awards from the Small Capital Grants Fund were made by a Board consisting of; officers from Warwickshire County Council, representatives from Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council, Warwick District Council, Coventry and Warwickshire Growth Hub and a member of the Local Enterprise Partnership Board.

Councillor Kondakor welcomed the jobs being created in Nuneaton but stated that there seemed to be an imbalance in county with higher paid jobs being concentrated in the south while the north seemed to be missing out on the growth in the technology sector that was happening around Leamington Spa in particular. Councillor Kondakor noted that the report mentioned £150,000 of funding and £100,000 of funding coming to Nuneaton and asked Councillor Butlin to confirm if these were two separate amounts totalling £250,000 or if the £100,000 sum quoted formed part of the £150,000.

Councillor Butlin confirmed that the £100,000 and £150,000 were two separate funds which could be worth up to £250,000. These fund were part of the larger Transforming Nuneaton programme through which Warwickshire County Council and its Partners were investing in the regeneration of Nuneaton town centre.

4. Highways Review Update

Scott Tompkins introduced the report which followed the update provided at the Committee meeting in July and the workshop officers had held with Councillors.

Councillor Kondakor welcomed the positive tone of the report and was pleased to see the improvements that were being suggested. He stated that he was keen to see an improvement in communication to Councillors about what residents were asking the County Council for directly so that delegated budgets were being spent on the right projects.

Councillor Shilton stated that there were persistent issues with utility companies shutting roads and blocking pavements for prolonged periods of time. He asked how officers monitor works being carried out on the highways by utility companies.

Scott Tompkins sought to assure Councillors that the Council had a strong Network Management Team who inspected 10% of all works in detail when they had been completed. All sites were under a two year warranty and additional inspections were also completed before the warranty expired. Scott Tompkins did state that no matter how well repaired the surface was any sort of work shortened the lifespan of a road.

Resolved:

That the Committee:

1. Requests Officers put in place better communication with members to improve the transparency of scheme delivery. This will be done over the next year with improvements to the Council website, member newsletters and access to programmes of work.
2. Requests Officers bring forward proposals to Corporate Board to improve the administration of the Delegated Budget scheme enabling a greater degree of transparency for members, faster delivery of works and a greater amount of in year delivery of works. These proposals should include ideas and solutions generated from the member workshop.

5. Public Transport in Warwickshire - Bus Services

Richard Sweeney introduced the report.

In response to the Chair, Richard Sweeney stated that the new powers given to local authorities under the Bus Services Act 2017 had allowed the County Council to strength its working relationships with bus operators. He also stated that bus services were being funded by about £1.6 million of s106 monies.

Councillor Williams stated that a parish council had reported to him that UBUS had requested a £3,000 donation in order to be able to keep operating in the Stratford on Avon area. Councillor Fradgley reported that Stratford-upon-Avon town council had also received a similar request for donations from UBUS.

Richard Sweeney stated that UBUS was primarily run by Stratford-on-Avon District Council (SDC) although the County did contribute funding and The UBUS service was funded until April 2020. Richard Sweeney stated that he would contact SDC about the messages UBUS had been sending out.

In response to Councillor Kondakor, Richard Sweeney apologised that there had not been any pre-warning of the reduction in the Hinkley service and stated that officers always tried to inform local Members of changes in their area.

Councillor Kondakor stated that bus services in Warwickshire were declining at a time when the County Council needed to grow them to enable modal shift and achieve its aim of a carbon neutral county as well as provide transport for an ageing population that would be less able to use a car. He stated that he felt s106 funding was not being used as effectively as it could be. Operators were running services to developments before they had been finished and there was a population to support them; by the time the passenger base was there the funding was gone and the service discontinued. Councillor Kondakor also stated that he felt the s106 arrangements did not provide the right incentives to grow passenger numbers; current arrangement provided the same level of funding whether anyone was on the bus or not.

Councillor Fradgley added that she also had concerns about how s106 money was being spent as a park and ride scheme in her area that had been established using s106 funds had stopped operating just as passengers were starting to use the service as the s106 funding ended.

Scott Tompkins responded that the Council was keen to ensure that any funding was spent effectively. He stated that issues highlighted by Members could be addressed through the s106 agreements which were signed when developers were granted planning permission. Councillor Clarke added that there were strong communication links between operators and the Council with regular meetings taking place.

Councillor Shilton stated that he had heard from residents that busses operating in Warwickshire were not being maintained to the same standard as buses that were operating in Coventry. He asked if there was anything the Council could do to improve the state of buses. Richard Sweeney responded that he would bring up cleaning and maintenance at the next meeting with operators.

Councillor Shilton also raised the issue of bus stops not being maintained and stop signs being hidden by overhanging trees. Richard Sweeney responded that town centre bus stops were mostly maintained by the County Council and asked Councillor Shilton to let him know about any that needed attention. Bus stops in rural areas were generally the responsibility of the operator and he would again pass on Councillor Shilton's concerns.

Councillor Kondakor asked if officers could provide a briefing note on the new powers offered by the Bus Service Act 2017 particularly in relation to forming a local transport authority.

Resolved

That the Committee requests officers produce a briefing note on the powers given to the Council by the Bus Services Act 2017.

6. Part Night Lighting

Scott Tompkins presented the report which followed a notice of motion that was referred to the committee by the Chair of the Council.

The Chair noted that the motion proposed to Full Council mentioned 'Conservative MPs' and clarified that the street light policy was set by the County Council with no involvement from MPs of any party.

Councillor Phillips stated that she felt assessments of part night lighting ignored the very real impact switching off street lights had on the wellbeing of shift workers, particularly female shift workers. She stated that she did not think a female point of view had been part of the formation of the policy and that the policy had a disproportionate impact on working class women. Councillor Phillips stated that she was not seeking a complete reversal in policy but rather targeted interventions in areas where shift workers were using public transport late at night and early in the morning. This would not only improve the lives of those already travelling to work by public transport but may also help to encourage modal shift away from cars. Councillor Phillips added that it may not be necessary to switch more lights on but timings could be changed to match shift patterns for example switching lights off from 10pm-3am rather than from midnight -5am.

Scott Tompkins responded that officers would be happy to look at specific areas where things could be improved. He stated that the Council wanted to make sure the right lights were on at the right time. Councillor Clarke added that he heard the concerns raised by Councillor Phillips and stated that the police could request lights to be kept on past midnight when there were concerns about safety in an area or to assist with an investigation.

Councillor Kondakor stated that he welcomed the roll out of LEDs and the improved lighting they provided. He stated that there were issues in isolated areas that required lights to be on all night and would like to see a budget line to provide for some small number of lights to revert to whole night lighting on request.

Councillor Butlin responded that officers had stated that they would be happy to look at individual issues and that the police were already regularly reviewing the policy with the Council. He felt that identifying a specific number of lights to be turned on risked starting a bidding process between Councillors. Councillor Butlin stressed that there was no evidence to show a link between an increase in recorded crime and part night lighting.

The Chair asked if Members wished to make any proposals to Council that the current street lighting policy be altered.

Councillor Kondakor proposed that the Committee recommends to Council that 500 lights across the county be switched to whole night lighting in areas where there would be a benefit to road users. Councillor Phillips seconded the motion.

The Chair called a vote and the motion proposed by Councillor Kondakor which was not approved.

Councillor Gran proposed that the Committee note the contents of the report. Councillor Shilton seconded the motion.

The Chair called a vote on the motion proposed by Councillor Gran which was passed.

Resolved:

That the Committee note the report.

7. One Organisational Plan Quarterly Progress Report: April 2019 to June 2019

Councillor Kondakor noted the £2.8 million slippage on the Bermuda Connectivity scheme reported in the papers and stated that he felt there came a point where large scale projects needed to be reviewed to see if it was still beneficial to proceed.

Scott Tompkins responded that the slippage had been due to a delay in delivery but that the scheme was now ready to break ground. He stated that he would be able to prepare a briefing note for Members.

8. Work Programme

Councillor Kondakor provided an update on the work of the of the cycling infrastructure task and finish group which had met to review progress against the action plan. He stated that he hoped to hold more meetings in the future and for a Councillor from the Rugby area to join the group.

Councillor Kondakor suggested that the Committee receive a report following the Government's review of HS2 which was due to be completed by the end of 2019. The Chair stated that he agreed as there was 30 mile of track due to run through Warwickshire and so any change would have a major impact on the County.

Councillor Shilton asked for a report or briefing note to be brought forward on Section 106 agreements as it had been a number of years since the Committee had looked at them in detail.

9. Urgent Items

There were none.