

Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 23 June 2021

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Jeff Clarke (Chair)
Councillor Jonathan Chilvers (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Richard Baxter-Payne
Councillor Jackie D'Arcy
Councillor Jenny Fradgley
Councillor Dave Humphreys
Councillor Bhagwant Singh Pandher
Councillor Tim Sinclair
Councillor Andrew Wright

Portfolio Holders

Councillor Andy Crump (Portfolio Holder for Fire & Community Safety)
Councillor Kam Kaur (Portfolio Holder for Economy & Place)
Councillor Wallace Redford (Portfolio Holder for Transport and Planning)
Councillor Heather Timms (Portfolio Holder for Environment, Climate & Culture)

Officers

David Ayton-Hill, Assistant Director - Communities
Daniel Cresswell, Team Leader, Project and Programme Management
Isabelle Moorhouse, Trainee Democratic Services Officer
Alison Robinson, Strategy and Commissioning Manager (Economy & Skills)
Chris Simpson, Section Manager (Delivery Lead) Business & Capital Programme
Colin Smith, (Project Manager (Contractor)
Scott Tompkins, Assistant Director for Environment Services

1. General

(1) Apologies

Councillor Daren Pemberton
Mark Ryder – Strategic Director - Communities

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

Councillor Richard Baxter-Payne declared that he had an interest in agenda item 7 as the topics covered fell within his remit of work.

(3) Chair's Announcements

The Chair welcomed all new members to the committee and highlighted the importance that scrutiny has on Council's decision making.

(4) Minutes of Previous Meeting

(i) 17th February 2021

The minutes were approved as a true and accurate record.

(ii) 25th May 2021

The minutes were approved as a true and accurate record.

2. Public Speaking

None

3. Questions to Portfolio Holder

In response to Councillor Jonathan Chilvers' concerns about the 'Nuckle' train line operating a reduced service due to a lack of train drivers and not getting the expected return investment, Councillor Wallace Redford (Portfolio Holder – Transport & Planning) agreed to obtain a member briefing note to address these issues.

Councillor Dave Humphreys queried the viability of an integrated transport ticket i.e. one ticket for buses and trains in Warwickshire, like the system available in combined authorities. Councillor Redford agreed to obtain a briefing note that would investigate this for members of the committee.

In response to Councillor Tim Sinclair, Councillor Heather Timms (Portfolio Holder – Environment, Climate & Culture) noted that there had been an increase of recycling picked up kerbside as there had been more home deliveries during the Covid-19 lockdowns. Trips to household recycling centres had been reduced to enforce social distancing and there will be a strategic review of these centres to ensure that they were being utilised appropriately. Councillor Timms concluded that as long as materials were being recycled or composted then it did not matter whether this was done kerbside or at household recycling centres.

Councillor Bhagwant Singh Pandher queried if the council checked prices during the procurement process to ensure that they were not being overcharged. Councillor Redford agreed to investigate this issue and provide a briefing note.

(1) Economic Development Update

David Ayton-Hill (Assistant Director – Communities) noted that there were a range of economic recovery and business support projects and programmes underway in Warwickshire. The 'Adapt and Diversify' scheme was set up with some government funding to support Covid-19 outbreak management. It was designed to sit alongside the funding Borough & District Councils received from Government to provide support to those businesses forced to close due to Covid-19; and instead focuses on the future activities of these businesses, helping them adapt and diversify their business models. £1.5 million has been issued over two rounds; the first round was only open for one day due to the amount of applications received. There were several ineligible applications as they did not provide enough detail on what they needed the funding for; these applicants were signposted to other

funding sources.

The 'Survive, Sustain & Grow' programme was set up to help businesses in the pandemic and provided them with bespoke support and consultants. These consultants worked with businesses so they knew what they needed to do to restart their businesses and helped with future grant applications. 600 businesses took part in the programme which had received positive feedback and case studies were available online.

The 'Tech Challenge' was started as part of Warwickshire's Economic Recovery programme to reach out to Warwickshire's strong creative digital sector, to develop innovative approaches to aid Warwickshire's town centres. Three projects were funded through this as of June 2021 with two still in progress and one going live in May 2021. The live project was the Leamington 'Local Young Talent' Festival (LYT) where creators put their wares in Leamington Spa shop windows, empty shop fronts were 'done-up' to create a marketplace for what the creators were doing. It was a popular project and increased footfall in Leamington and a full evaluation piece on the project was put online. Alison Robinson (Strategy and Commissioning Manager (Economy & Skills) clarified that these two other projects took place in other towns around the county. Things that worked well in the LYT project e.g. empty shop windows, were implemented cross-county. However, different needs of towns were considered, for example, if one town had more of a high street demand than another.

David Ayton-Hill continued that a redundancy support package was implemented and focused on re-skilling, but this was not as in demand as feared.

A digital service with Warwickshire's businesses sector was also set up to help school children that could not gain work experience and employability skills direct from businesses themselves. 30 videos were made with these businesses and provided to schools to increase student's career aspects and promote apprenticeships.

Councillor Kam Kaur (Portfolio Holder – Economy and Place) praised the work done by the economy team and noted how agile the team and businesses have had to be due to the pandemic lockdowns. She concluded that all business types were aided by Warwickshire County Council and not just one type of business.

In response to several questions from Councillor Sinclair, Alison Robinson stated that they were disappointed by the amount of applications they had to discard in round one of applications for Adapt & Diversify. To prevent this for round two they produced online webinars and offered advice to people who had questions on the application forms. Alison Robinson confirmed that the return and outputs were published online for the 'Survive, Sustain & Grow' programme but more worked needed to be done to promote it. The 'Tech Challenge' was being reviewed so it could be applied to other Warwickshire towns and the skill hub information would be advertised more.

In response to Councillor Jackie D'Arcy, Alison Robinson stated that the Education Transition Fund was open until the 28th June 2021 and there was a good take up.

Following a question from the Chair, Alison Robinson confirmed that the business videos for schools were on the school's website and their skills hub website.

4. Bermuda Project update (briefing note)

Scott Tompkins (Assistant Director – Environmental Services) informed the committee that CR Reynolds had been awarded the contract for the Bermuda Connectivity project in April 2021 who

had started work on St George's Way to remove kerbs. There had been some gas barrier monitoring as the barrier was caused by the landfill site that was there before. The monitoring work to protect the gas barrier and the cycle/walkway lanes will impact the final design of the project. These elements and the pedestrian crossing on Bermuda Road will be implemented within the existing budget. There were two phases to the scheme; phase one will be completed in late 2021-early 2022 and phase two will finish in late 2022.

In response to several queries from Councillor Chilvers, Scott Tompkins confirmed that the extension to the shared foot/cycleway was in phase two. It was noted that the £1.5 million in compensation for residents was a worst-case scenario; surveys were done before the scheme started and when it finished to judge these claims.

In response to Councillor Sinclair's questions on contingency, Scott Tompkins stated that for major schemes there were typically different levels of contingency at different levels of the scheme; as the beginning it tends to be 40% contingency but as the scheme develops and more things become known, this gets reduced to 10%.

Following a supplementary from Councillor Baxter-Payne, Scott Tompkins clarified that there was not a contingency in place for issues caused by HS2, but general contingencies were monitored for all the council's development works. They had received concerns from contractors regarding supplies and the costs of them, but this would be picked up through project management.

In response to the Chair, Scott Tompkins confirmed that the division member, Councillor Clare Golby, had been involved with the project and carried out a site visit. The project was on track to finish in late 2022.

5. Developer Design Guide

Scott Tompkins informed the committee that pre-election, all members were sent a draft design guide for them to consult on. The consultation was done with members, planning officers, borough/district councils and developers cross-county. The design guide was best practice in the industry and sets out the standards that the council has for developers when designing infrastructure, they want the Council to adopt. The guide was done to make Warwickshire's standards and expectations clearer for developers.

Chris Simpson (Section Manager (Delivery Lead) Business & Capital Programme) stated that the new design guide superseded the 2001 'Warwickshire Guide'. The new guide has been developed over the last two years and includes the latest standards and best practice for street design, traffic calming, highway green infrastructure and historic environment. The guide will help save time and money for developers giving them a better opportunity to submit design plans that meet the standards with less need for iterative changes and elongated technical approval processes. This will also improve the relationships between the council and developers to add future development and make ensure Warwickshire is seen as a good place to do development and the Council is a good development partner. The guide encouraged pre-application meetings and highlighted which standards to use depending on the development's location. Unlike some authorities, Warwickshire County Council maintained an active interest in managing development works and required that S278 works are full technically approved and supervised by the Council. All required financial funding from developers to the local authority was also included to ensure that the authority did not take any financial risks. Stakeholders that were involved in the consultation stage praised the guide. Once the current draft is finalised it will go through an approvals process with Cabinet.

Further work was done on commuted sums (cash payment to the council from developers) to maintain the assets of the development for 10 years after it is built.

In response to Councillor Jenny Fradgley, Chris Simpson confirmed that the design guide ensured that cycling provision was required for developments.

Councillor Chilvers expressed concerns that cycling provisions were not mentioned earlier in the design guide and suggested having evidence-based schemes to introduce a modal shift. Chris Simpson agreed to alter the wording so cycling provisions were mentioned earlier in the guide. Following a supplementary from Councillor Chilvers, Chris Simpson confirmed that the new guide contained LTN120 cycling infrastructure design.

Following a question from Councillor Sinclair, Chris Simpson stated that the new design guide policy included appendices for the flexibility of schemes. Chris Simpson agreed that the guide should be reviewed every few years as it could save money in long term. Scott Tompkins added that the Department for Transport (DfT) was going to review the guidelines for roads and bridges so national changes will update the council's guidance.

In response to Councillor Humphreys, Chris Simpson said that design standards must be met to keep things safe and the design guide being a policy gave it more weight.

Scott Tompkins added that the enhanced material policy ensured that the council had enough money to deal with development material issues and encouraged conversation between the authority and developers to ensure materials could be replaced.

In response to the Chair, Scott Tompkins confirmed that the planning authorities were involved in the consultation and development of the guide as well as frequent developers in the county.

The Chair praised the work done on the development guide.

6. Warwickshire Recovery Investment Fund (feasibility update)

David Ayton-Hill informed the committee that the Warwickshire Recovery Investment Fund (WRIF) had been reviewed by Fire & Resources OSC in May 2021 and the WRIF had a proposed £140 million investment into Warwickshire over five years. The WRIF originated from the Recovery Plan in September 2020, Cabinet approved the business plan in June 2021, and it was presented to Full Council in July 2021. The WRIF was developed to stimulate Warwickshire's economy during/after the pandemic. There was a gap in the market pre-pandemic with larger investment sources for debt funding/finance between £500,000 and £5 million. The aim was to stimulate economic growth/recovery, secure new private sector investments, create over 2000 more jobs and save 4000. Enquiries from investors were received before it was implemented, the council will receive a small net return and save business/council tax progressing forward.

The negative economic impact of Covid-19 was not as bad as previously projected, and recovery had started early partly due to central government investment. It was predicted that Warwickshire would be back to pre-pandemic economy levels by 2023 but employment levels would not recover until post-2025. Businesses were concerned with low cash flows/reserves and the government support schemes ending in 2021; banks were also concerned with investing in businesses. Historically, business start-ups increased post-recession so the WRIF supported this new growth. The £140 million from the WRIF was split into three sectors: £90 million for business growth (more secure investments), £10 million for local enterprises (riskier but smaller investments) and £40 million for property/infrastructure (for commercial business premises). Existing businesses that relocated to Warwickshire and employed over 50 people received loans between £500,000-£10

million to fund Warwickshire's economic growth. Businesses growth investments that were prioritised included the automotive technology, digital creative (inc. gaming), future of mobility (transport/logistics/electric vehicle deliveries) and low carbon technologies; followed by advanced manufacturing, tourism & hospitality, modern methods of construction, health & wellbeing, agri-tech and rural businesses. Prioritised local enterprises (businesses that already existed or new start-ups that employed between 2-50 people) were advanced manufacturing, digital creative and wider digital technologies, culture, tourism & hospitality, and low carbon technologies; followed by retail, community based businesses, creative industries, health & wellbeing, social care or other supply markets to Warwickshire County Council or the wider public sector. The Local Communities & Enterprise Fund would offer a higher volume of smaller loans (up to £100,000 generally). The WRIF Investment Strategy will be reviewed annually, based on monitoring and evaluation of impact and wider market conditions.

To gain business' interest, an advertisement/communication campaign will be launched as well as communication with business bodies. Applications for funding will be reviewed by the Economy and Skills team and, if applicable, the business was appointed a business advisor to meet with them to review their business plan/management structure/finances and approve them for a WRIF loan (if applicable). The advisors and businesses cooperate to see what works for the businesses even if this was not a WRIF loan.

The business growth investments will be monitored by the council itself and the finance team who sent WRIF applications to the investment panel; the investment panel will then send them to Cabinet for approval. Local enterprise investments will be outsourced to ensure all applications met FCA (financial conduct authority) rules. The indicative interest rate matrix will be based on the business' creditworthiness and security level for the provided loan. The higher their credit score and loan security, then the lower their interest rate was.

In response to Councillor Sinclair, David Ayton-Hill stated that the priority business sectors were pre-existing strong businesses in Warwickshire's economy and had strong economic growth potential. Electric vehicles were focused on as all automotive manufacturers were focusing on this and Warwickshire supplied components for electric vehicles already. Following a supplementary from Councillor Sinclair, David Ayton-Hill confirmed that they had consulted with businesses and funding providers for the WRIF, but they were not there to compete with providers. The WRIF's interest rates will be in line with the market, but they were able to take a bit more risks with investments than private sector investors.

In response to Councillor Chilvers, David Ayton-hill clarified that there was a lack of funding streams for new businesses who were working on their credit score outside of London and the South-East. Following the pandemic, private sector funding streams increased their interest rates for these types of businesses. Following a supplementary from Councillor Chilvers, David Ayton-Hill stated that the council's profile risk was lower and they did not need to make billion pound profits like the private sector; therefore they accepted a lower interest rate return to boost Warwickshire's economic growth.

Following a question from Councillor Baxter-Payne, David Ayton-Hill said that the WRIF's interest rates cannot undercut the private sectors with public money so businesses with higher risks had to be charged with higher interest rates. The WRIF invested into the Coventry and Warwickshire Reinvestment Trust who operated a 10-12% interest rate level with new businesses. This model worked well and was largely self-financing. The interest rate changed as the business grew to ensure the business had a system that worked for them.

Following a question from the Chair, David Ayton-Hill confirmed that all WRIF business applications must have their business premises in Warwickshire or employ Warwickshire residents primarily.

7. Year End Council Plan 2020-2025 Quarterly Progress Report (April 2020 to March 2021)

Scott Tompkins informed the committee that 55% of key business measures were on track, KSI (killed or seriously injured) numbers had reduced and recycling increased. The pandemic reduced the employment rates and increased transport needs for special education.

8. Communities OSC Work Programme

The work programme was approved as set out.

9. Urgent Items

None

The meeting rose at 15:31

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Chair