

Cabinet

Thursday 13 July 2023

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Isobel Seccombe OBE (Chair)
Councillor Margaret Bell
Councillor Peter Butlin
Councillor Andy Crump
Councillor Yousef Dahmash
Councillor Kam Kaur
Councillor Sue Markham
Councillor Jan Matecki
Councillor Heather Timms
Councillor Martin Watson

Others Present

Councillor Judy Falp
Councillor John Holland
Councillor Jerry Roodhouse
Councillor Tim Sinclair

1. General

(1) Apologies

None.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

Councillor Jan Matecki declared a non-pecuniary interest in item 10 on the agenda due to his grandchildren attending Long Lawford Primary School.

(3) Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting of Cabinet held on 15 June 2023 were agreed as an accurate record.

(4) Public Speaking

Councillor Isobel Seccombe (Leader of Council and Chair of Cabinet) welcomed Keith Kondakor to the meeting who spoke to item 6 on the agenda - West Midlands Combined

Authority & Devolution for Warwickshire.

Mr Kondakor stated his view that it was important for Warwickshire to join a transport authority. In his opinion, systems were collapsing, including stable climate, transport (particularly public transport), democracy and financial systems. He was of the view that there was an urgent need to improve public transport links and remove geographic barriers between Warwickshire, Coventry, and Birmingham and emphasised the important role of the Combined Authority to rapidly improve bus services, bus fares, bus routes, train services in a way that mirrored services in London which could be operated under a single ticket system.

Mr Kondakor also believed there was a democratic emergency, which meant that the right safeguards were needed to be in place in order to join the Combined Authority. He noted that in London, there was an Assembly with proportional representation so that every part of London and every political party had a check on the Mayor, and if Warwickshire did join the West Midlands Combined Authority, effectively creating a regional Mayor, he would welcome a similar structure. He felt this was important since one political party had a large majority, particularly among the leadership, and such a structure would make provision for other parties to ask the Mayor questions.

Mr Kondakor went on to claim that there was a financial crisis which would be mitigated by joining the Combined Authority and he stated it was important to work on one area rather than in silos.

He considered that it was important to act with pace and the opportunity to join a combined authority for transport, but not the minutia of day to day living, was important for strategy, fares and high level issues which needed to be addressed across the region.

He stated that it was important from a climate change point of view that action was taken with speed. Wholesale improvements to public transport and regional planning were needed to tackle climate change and cope with the resulting impacts. He considered that being part of a region would provide the resilience to support this aim and he hoped, therefore, that it would be possible to move forward with joining West Midlands Combined Authority in a democratic way rather than as a gain for a political party. He noted that four different parties were involved in the leadership of the district and borough councils in Warwickshire and he hoped that any regional structure would provide a voice for all and preserve democracy.

Councillor Izzi Seccombe also read a statement from Richard Waller relating to item 8 on the agenda – Concessionary Travel – Introduction of a Companion Pass. When concessionary travel was considered by the Cabinet in April, Mr Waller attended to speak on behalf of his son, Lewis, but it had been more challenging for him to attend on this occasion.

The statement read “as it looks like a year away in total every disabled person such as Lewis will need to go through FABA to have the cost of their carer travelling added as eligible expenses before the Council deducts care contributions. This will be completed now, again in October for the bus fare increase and again in January when the C+ scheme comes into effect. I believe it affects a couple of thousand disabled people so FABA will be dealing with an extra workload of 6000 assessment adjustments in the coming six months. Stagecoach currently takes two weeks to issue smartcards. This will increase to four weeks in August when the new intake of sixth-formers apply (from personal experience). Flashing software in

ticket machines is also a simple operation, as bus companies such as Stagecoach already have this system up and running in other counties. I do not see why the Council would want to wait until December to accept applications for the C+ and force its officers to complete the 6000 assessment adjustments in the meantime. The Council does not save any money by delaying the introductions, it only burdens the already overworked staff 6000 times.” Councillor Seccombe then passed the statement to the Portfolio Holder for Transport and Planning, Councillor Matecki, to consider.

2. A Financial Framework for the 2024/25 Medium Term Financial Strategy Refresh

Councillor Peter Butlin, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Finance and Property, introduced this report which set out a proposed strategy and framework to approach the 2024/25 MTFS refresh, rolling forward for an additional year. The refresh would start from a strong position based on the balanced and sustainable MTFS agreed at Full Council in February 2023 but there were a range of challenges that the Council was monitoring and managing which were detailed in the report. Councillor Butlin highlighted that the report set out six recommended key principles to underpin the MTFS refresh work, and particularly noted that inflation remained a key issue and focus, and that there were also increased demands in some key services which would increase budget pressures in the current financial year.

Councillor Margaret Bell recognised that there were challenges identified in the report but that this would also present opportunities and it would be helpful to have a list of possible projects that could be taken forward.

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse noted the challenges presented by unknown factors and the need to factor in the potential for higher pay increases following industrial action.

Councillor Andy Crump noted the Council’s achievement of 90% of its savings targets since 2014, with the Fire and Rescue Service meeting 98% of its saving target. He celebrated the financial resilience of the Council, how it had used its funding wisely and noted the welcome timing of the transformation programme. He considered that a five year MTFS enabled the Council to manage uncertainty and had confidence that the Finance Team would support the Council to respond to the challenges being faced.

In response, Councillor Butlin advised that a list of projects was being drawn up and that whilst negotiations were ongoing he was confident that the budget allowed for some resilience in terms of increasing salaries. In conclusion, he was confident that the Council could rise to meet the challenges being faced.

Resolved:

That Cabinet:

1. Notes the emerging financial position within which the 2024/25 budget and 2024-29 Medium Term Financial Strategy will be developed;
2. Agrees the strategic principles that will form the basis of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy, as set out in paragraph 2.4 of the report;

3. Subject to the agreement of the principles, approves the proposals for the refresh of the 2024/25 Medium-Term Financial Strategy and Capital Strategy, as set out in Sections 3 and 4 of the report;
4. Notes the requirement for the Authority to set a sustainable balanced budget which shows how income will equal spend over the short- and medium term; and
5. Approves the timetable for agreeing the 2024/25 budget and Medium-Term Financial Strategy Refresh.

3. Addition to the Education Capital Programme 2023-24

Councillor Kam Kaur, Portfolio Holder for Education, explained that this report detailed a project at Kingsway Community Primary School where costs had significantly increased due to the impact of inflation. She noted the background to the project, set out in the report, which was due to the forced academisation of the school.

Councillor Judy Falp supported the much needed works at the school.

Resolved:

That Cabinet

1. Recommends to Council that £2.633 million be added to the capital programme to deliver the scheme at Kingsway Community Primary School; and
2. Subject to Council's approval of the required addition to the Capital Programme, authorises the Executive Director for People, in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Property, to enter into the appropriate contractual arrangements for the delivery of the scheme; and to make the necessary funding arrangements, all on terms and conditions considered acceptable to the Executive Director for Resources.

4. Education Capital Development Fund

Councillor Peter Butlin, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Finance and Property, presented this report which sought to establish an early design fund to help develop greater cost certainty in Education capital projects at RIBA stage 3.

Councillors Jerry Roodhouse and Judy Falp welcomed the report which, in their view, was a sensible and timely approach.

Resolved:

That Cabinet approves the allocation of £1.4m from the Basic Need Grant to create and implement a fund (the Education Capital Development Fund) that will be used to develop education capital schemes to RIBA Stage 3 prior to requesting authority for procurement and implementation.

5. Addition of Lias Line Improvement Scheme to Capital Programme

Councillor Jan Matecki, Portfolio Holder for Transport and Planning, noted that the Lias Line was a disused railway line extending between Fosse Way and Rugby. It was a permissive route that was owned, managed and maintained by Sustrans. The paper recommended the release of capital funding, secured from the Active Travel Fund, to enable Sustrans to upgrade 3.5km of the Lias Line to multi-user greenway. Councillor Matecki further noted that there were some concerns regarding equestrian use of the Line and advised that Sustrans would be recommended to liaise with the British Horse Society on this point.

Councillor Isobel Seccombe welcomed the scheme but emphasised the importance of liaison with the British Horse Society following an increase in road accidents.

Councillor Heather Timms also welcomed the report, noting the success of the first stage of the project, and remained optimistic to bring forward further sections in future.

Councillor Tim Sinclair highlighted the need for ongoing maintenance and management which it was noted would be provided by Sustrans.

Councillor Jan Matecki concluded that this would be a welcome addition to the county's active travel offer.

Resolved:

That Cabinet:

1. Recommends to Council that £2,434,735 secured from the Government's Active Travel Fund be added to the Capital Programme for the purpose of improving the eastern section of the Lias Line traffic free greenway as part of the creation of a walking, cycling and wheeling route which connects Rugby, Long Itchington, Leamington Spa and other rural communities; and
2. Subject to Council approving the required addition to the Capital Programme, Cabinet authorises the Executive Director for Communities to enter into a sub-grant agreement with Sustrans, the owner of the Lias Line, to facilitate delivery of the project in line with the Active Travel Fund grant conditions and on terms and conditions acceptable to the Executive Director for Resources and on the basis of a full transfer of all the relevant obligations to Sustrans.

6. West Midlands Combined Authority & Devolution for Warwickshire

This item was considered before the other substantive agenda items so that it could be debated immediately after public speaking.

Councillor Isobel Seccombe introduced this report, drawing attention to the revised recommendation which had been tabled.

Councillor Seccombe explained that the paper authorised officers to look at the opportunities together with the risks and challenges involved in joining the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA). Greater understanding was also needed around the governance, costs and voting arrangements that would be involved. However, she also stressed that there may be options other than joining WMCA and the paper would allow an exploration of those also. Councillor Seccombe highlighted the challenging timeframe set by the government for this work to be completed, together with associated consultation, in time for Warwickshire residents to be involved in the 2024 Combined Authority Mayoral elections. She emphasised that she was not prepared to curtail preparations in order to meet the deadlines set as it was important that the decision to join was properly taken to ensure the best interests of everyone involved were met.

Councillor John Holland stated that a key test was whether or not Warwickshire residents would be better or worse off. He noted the challenges posed by the deadlines and whether it would be possible to complete a fair process in time. He noted that the decision had financial implications for the district and borough councils which would require their agreement.

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse also emphasised the need for appropriate consultation to take place. He considered that it was important to have a full understanding of what being a constituent member may involve and the disadvantages of having to compete for funding. He requested that the Head of Policy and Strategy attend group meetings to discuss the proposals.

Councillor Judy Falp echoed concerns around the timescale and ensuring there was sufficient clarity around the impact of joining the WMCA to enable a consultation with residents.

Councillor Peter Butlin noted that the Council was now operating in a changed funding landscape following the dissolution of the Local Enterprise Partnership and cessation of European Funding. The Council had received an invitation to join the WMCA but the timescale to do so was very tight and, as this was not a decision to be rushed and the decision should be the right one for Warwickshire residents, Councillor Butlin hoped that an extension of time could be granted.

Councillors Jan Matecki and Margaret Bell noted that the paper would investigate the facts and obtain answers to the questions that were being raised. Councillor Bell noted that there was a balance to be achieved between ensuring a robust process and taking any opportunities quickly but she hoped that if the timescale was considered too short, investigations into the options for joining WMCA could still be explored.

Councillor Tim Sinclair considered that the decision needed to be taken carefully and echoed comments about the possibility of extending the timeframe.

Councillor Seccombe stated that the timescale was a key issue driven by ensuring Warwickshire residents had a say in the upcoming Mayoral elections. She noted the paper would allow officers to explore if the timescale could be met and, if not, what options there were to join WMCA in the future. She assured the meeting that decisions would be made based on evidence and for the best interests of Warwickshire. However, she was aware that there were other areas involved and the decision should not be to their detriment either. It was important to look into the opportunity in light of changing funding streams but the risks also needed to be understood. Group Leaders would be kept abreast of progress and a further paper would be presented to Cabinet or Council.

Resolved:

That Cabinet authorises the Chief Executive to undertake such work as she considers necessary, in consultation with the Leader, including the completion of a governance review and consideration of a draft Scheme, to explore the opportunity for Warwickshire County Council as a two tier authority area to become a constituent member of the West Midlands Combined Authority and other options that may be available, and for a report to be brought back to Cabinet.

7. Better Care Fund (BCF) Plan 2023-25

Councillor Margaret Bell, Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care and Health, presented this report which set out the agreed funding and budget allocations to support the Better Care Fund plan from April 2023 to March 2025.

Resolved:

That Cabinet:

1. Approves the proposed pooled contribution of £17.254m by the Council to the Better Care Fund Plan (known as the Better Together programme plan) for 2023/24 and the provisional pooled contribution of £18.669m for 2024/25 and the plan for resources as set out in paragraph 2.2 of the report;
2. Authorises the Executive Director for People to enter into the proposed section 75 NHS Act 2006 agreement, with Coventry and Warwickshire Integrated Care Board (ICB) for delivery of the Better Care Fund Plan for 2023-25, on terms and conditions acceptable to him and the Executive Director for Resources; and
3. Approves the County Council continuing as the pooled budget holder for the fund.

8. Concessionary Travel - Introduction of a Companion Pass

This report, presented by Councillor Jan Matecki, followed a report to Cabinet in April 2023 when it was agreed to conduct a feasibility study into the introduction of a companion pass for concessionary travel users. Research had been undertaken and it was proposed to introduce a pass funded from the underspend on the concessionary travel grant due to still seeing reduced patronage on public transport since the Covid-19 Pandemic. Councillor Matecki noted the comments of Mr Waller which had been shared earlier in the meeting and explained that the process of introducing the passes would take time and, whilst he would have liked to see the passes introduced sooner, he also did not want to set an unachievable timeframe to conduct the background work required to introduce the pass.

Councillor Isobel Secombe noted that this was an important issue for the independence of disabled residents, but agreed that the passes should be introduced on an achievable timescale.

Councillor Andy Crump also recognised the importance of supporting independence for disabled residents and welcomed the introduction of the scheme.

Councillor Matecki noted that anyone with an age-related pass who also met the eligibility criteria would also qualify for a companion pass.

Resolved:

That Cabinet:

1. Approves the development of a companion enhancement to the existing concessionary travel pass for a fixed term, ending on 31 March 2025; and
2. Approves the eligibility criteria set out in Appendix 2 to the report.

9. Warwickshire County Council Energy Strategy and Delivery Plan

Councillor Heather Timms, Portfolio Holder for Environment, Climate and Culture, introduced this report which proposed a strategy to align the Council's previous Energy Plans and its longstanding work in measuring and monitoring emissions, with new targets, standards and legislation.

Councillor Jerry Roodhouse welcomed the strategy, particularly noting the user friendly design and readability.

Councillor Timms thanked the team for their work in preparing the strategy including the engagement that had taken place and the links drawn with other Council Plans and Strategies.

Resolved:

That Cabinet approves the Energy Strategy (Appendix 1 to the report) and the associated Delivery Plan (Appendix 2 to the report).

10. Change of Age Range at Brownsover Infant and Long Lawford & Nursery Hill Primary Schools

This report, introduced by Councillor Kam Kaur, Portfolio Holder for Education, sought approval for Brownsover Infant School to change its age range from 3-7 to 4-7 and Long Lawford & Nursery Hill Primary Schools to change their age ranges from 3-11 to 4-11 to allow early years provision to be delivered via governor-run pre-school rather than existing maintained nursery classes.

Resolved:

That Cabinet:

1. Approves the change of age range at Brownsover Infant School from 3-7 to 4-7 from September 2023;
2. Approves the change of age range at Long Lawford Primary School from 3-11 to 4-11 from September 2023; and

3. Approves the change of age range at Nursery Hill Primary School from 3-11 to 4-11 from September 2023.

11. Modern Slavery Statement

The Leader, Councillor Isobel Seccombe, introduced this report, noting that the statement provided affirmation of the Council's efforts and investment in preventing, tackling, or stopping modern slavery and human trafficking in 2022/23 across all council services. Councillor Seccombe drew attention to the changes outlined in paragraph 2.1 of the report.

Resolved:

That Cabinet:

1. Approves the Council's updated Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Statement for the financial year 2022/23; and
2. Authorises the Executive Director for Resources to publish the Council's Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Statement on the Central Government Registry alongside the estimated income for the Council in the year covered by the statement.

12. Reports Containing Exempt or Confidential Information

Resolved:

That members of the public be excluded from the meeting for the items mentioned below on the grounds that their presence would involve the disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A of Part 1 of the Local Government Act 1972.

13. Exempt Minutes of the 15 June 2023 Meeting of Cabinet

The exempt minutes of the Cabinet meeting held on 15 June 2023 were agreed as an accurate record.

14. Reorganisation of Coventry & Warwickshire Growth Hub

Councillor Martin Watson, Portfolio Holder for Economy, presented this exempt report.

Resolved:

That the recommendations as set out in the exempt report be approved.

The meeting rose at 3.30pm

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Chair