

Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 20 September 2023

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Jeff Clarke (Chair)
Councillor Jonathan Chilvers (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Sarah Feeney
Councillor Jenny Fradgley
Councillor Dave Humphreys
Councillor Bhagwant Singh Pandher
Councillor Mejar Singh
Councillor Andrew Wright

Other Members

Councillor Jan Matecki, Portfolio Holder for Transport & Planning
Councillor Martin Watson (Portfolio Holder for Economy)
Councillor Tim Sinclair

Officers

Amy Bridgewater-Carnall, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Mark Ryder, Executive Director for Communities
Steve Smith, Director of Commissioning Support Unit
Paul Spencer, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Scott Tompkins, Director of Environment, Planning & Transport

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies for absence had been received from Councillor Peter Gilbert and from the following portfolio holders: Councillor Andy Crump, Portfolio Holder for Fire & Rescue and Community Safety, Councillor Kam Kaur, Portfolio Holder for Education and Councillor Heather Timms, Portfolio Holder for Environment, Climate & Culture.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

None.

(3) Chair's Announcements

The Chair advised that the proposed item on Members' delegated budgets had been deferred to the November Committee meeting.

(4) Minutes of Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the meeting held on 21 June 2023 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

2. Public Speaking

None.

3. Questions to Portfolio Holders

Councillor Jenny Fradgley submitted two questions:

1. Reports in the Guardian suggest pothole repairs are at a 5 year low. Where is Warwickshire on its road maintenance programme? Does WCC have sufficient funds to properly maintain its rural and urban networks?
2. As the Bishopton 500 development progresses please can you update me, and residents, about the land here set aside for educational purposes?

On question 1, Scott Tompkins, Director of Environment, Planning & Transport would circulate a detailed written response from County Highways to the Committee. In summary there had been consistent revenue and capital investment by WCC in the road network. The news article reported data from an ALARM (Annual Local Authority Road Maintenance) survey which showed that several authorities had been struggling to finance repairs and by capitalising these costs it had reduced capacity for road resurfacing schemes. This in turn had reduced the number of pothole repairs, but was not the case in Warwickshire. Data was provided on the increasing number of pothole repairs to evidence this, together with the surveillance undertaken by safety inspectors. The public could report potholes through the Council's Website via an easy-to-use system.

On question 2, Councillor Martin Watson read from a reply prepared by Councillor Kam Kaur, Portfolio Holder for Education. The land which had been set aside would only be utilised where it was evidenced that the need for a new school came directly from this development. There was significant current and forecast spare capacity at the neighbouring Bishopton Primary School, which meant there was no requirement for a new school and the land could not be drawn down to the County Council. This position had been confirmed to the developers. Councillor Fradgley had a supplementary question, which she would submit directly to the Portfolio Holder, Councillor Kaur. This would be copied to the Chair.

(1) Economic Development Update

Mark Ryder presented the Economic Development Update, taking members through the following areas:

- Headlines/ Key Summary Points
- Economic Overview. The slight improvements in the overall economic outlook and a slowdown in the growth rate of inflation. It was anticipated that the Bank of England base rate may increase again to 5.5%. In terms of unemployment, the Coventry and Warwickshire (C&W) area was performing well with rates below the national average. Foreign direct investment was highlighted, with C&W seeing 56 new investment projects in 2023, a 24% increase.
- Business and Economy Support. Mark Ryder spoke of the small capital grant scheme, with Council investment securing private sector investment, the latest round totalling £80,000. Linked to this was the Warwickshire Recovery and Investment Fund (WRIF) with the report setting out the loans to business, and the Local Communities and Enterprise Fund had now reached £1.4m in investments.
- Business Support Programmes. A comparison was drawn between the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) which was smaller than the former European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). This had seen a reduction in the amount of support programmes which could be commissioned. There was close work with the district and borough councils which held the SPF to work collectively in commissioning four new programmes.
- Employability and Skills Support. Reference to the good progress with Fair Chance Jobs, where 50 businesses were working with WCC and the launch of a new jobs portal. The new Warwickshire Careers Hub was referenced.
- Development of the Business Centre Portfolio, with renovation works and rent reviews to secure market value rents.
- Sector Development and Inward Investment with a number of case studies being detailed.

Members discussed the following areas:

- On the UK SPF, it was noted that this was delivering some of the ERDF but was questioned if it was a lower percentage than the former scheme. In reply, the challenge was that the funding under the UK SPF which could be applied to business support programmes was at a lower level. The approach was to be innovative and to work with district and borough councils (DBC's) to encourage them to think about business support as an important pillar. The funding rested with the DBC's. A lot of work was taking place within Economy and Skills and to deliver value across the programmes.
- Reference to the Careers Hub. This was based in Nuneaton, and questions were submitted about expansion to other parts of Warwickshire and providing a digital offer. Councillor Watson had met with the team. He outlined the proactive service which was delivered county-wide, including through visits to schools. It was not just focussed on Nuneaton.
- Referring to the section on universities as drivers of trade and investment in the Midlands, the links to colleges was questioned. They were a key link and a needed to provide training which led to jobs. Mark Ryder confirmed that WCC was engaged with further education colleges, giving examples. Whilst the colleges set their own curriculum based on demand from businesses, the Council had an influencing role, providing information about developing sectors. Councillor Watson spoke about apprenticeships as the college and university route was not for everyone. The Council had made budgetary allocations to assist employers during the first three months of

apprenticeships. There was a mixed offer of support.

- The Chair referred to the section on commercial rent reviews. He was mindful that some properties were let to aid organisations and asked about the engagement with this group so that they were able to continue operating. He used an example in his locality to demonstrate this. Mark Ryder was aware that the Council had been helpful in assisting charities to establish in certain areas. Any members having such information were encouraged to speak with officers as the intention was not to drive out community benefit. There were good reasons to ensure rents were appropriate to enable maintenance, reinvestment and have a good base for business. He also touched on the business support available and wanting businesses to grow, and where appropriate, to move to larger premises.
- The Chair welcomed the update on provision of the new premises for the Royal Mail in Nuneaton. It was hoped this would address current residential postal delivery issues being experienced in Nuneaton. This was attributed in part to additional residential development in the area and a staffing shortage.

The Economic Development Update was noted.

4. Draft Final Sustainable Futures Strategy

This item was introduced by Steve Smith, currently Director of the Commissioning Support Unit. From October he would join the Communities Directorate and his role would include both Climate Change and Strategic Infrastructure. The draft Sustainable Futures Strategy was being submitted to all the Overview and Scrutiny Committees as part of a detailed engagement process, before its final consideration by Cabinet in November. Key information was provided in the covering report, which outlined the features of the strategy and the use of expert panels. A copy of the draft strategy, the action plan and an update on projects were provided as appendices.

Questions were submitted and discussion took place on the following areas:

- The opportunity for solar panel installation on large warehouse rooves. At planning authorities there were applications to site solar farms on agricultural land which caused tension. Steve Smith replied that this was led by planning authorities and the approach in each of the five areas varied. An example was the aim of Warwick District to formulate a net zero supplementary planning document. This would be planning and market led. There were significant capital costs, but lower running costs. For WCC this was an influencing role. The councillor reiterated the scale of warehouse development in Wellesbourne, the public feedback and it was questioned if stronger persuasion was possible. There was no easy answer as this concerned private investment decisions. Through planning and building regulation, authorities went as far as they could, but this really needed a push at the national level.
- Councillor Watson, the Portfolio Holder engaged with many businesses to raise this. There were a number of influencing factors for businesses. Installation of solar panels was more likely for new developments, but less so for retrospective fitting, with other measures being used instead to reduce energy consumption. A key aspect was the ability of the National Grid to receive the surplus energy generated.
- It was questioned if the Prime Minister's announcement on moving 'green' targets would impact negatively on the cultural shift required. Steve Smith said this had been raised at the Climate Change Group held earlier in the day. Transport emissions in Warwickshire were

significant and around half of these were journeys through the County. They could only be affected by people changing their vehicles over time.

- A discussion about water pipe failures causing wastage. There were endeavours to reduce water wastage and it was questioned whether the Council engaged with Severn Trent Water (STW) to encourage an update of their pipework to reduce such leaks. This was an area where there was more to do. STW had attended the committee providing a useful presentation and it was suggested that a further update would be worthwhile on progress in replacing its pipework. This would be picked up under the work programme item.
- A member spoke about the substantial warehouse developments in North Warwickshire and immediately adjacent to it. Further significant developments were planned in Tamworth. The member noted the point about substation capacity to accept excess power generated and only five of the thirteen substations in and around North Warwickshire could do this presently. He spoke further about the developments either built or planned at locations in the green belt and in neighbouring Tamworth. This was a planning issue and there was a need to lobby. Plans for on-shore wind farms should be resisted, instead there being a mandatory requirement to install solar panels on new buildings. Steve Smith agreed this needed to be a planning issue, where the design standards were set. Solar panels made good economic sense. There was a collective approach across the districts and boroughs to agree consistent policy. WCC would do what it could to influence in terms of strategic planning.
- A question on the gap between projected measures WCC could take to reduce emissions and the remainder that would need to be offset. Currently, about 50% would need to be offset. The question was how to reduce the gap, to as small a level as possible. Steve Smith confirmed this equated to 8-9 thousand tonnes. Not everything in the action plan was determined, with more to come and a reliance on funding availability. There were two areas where more could be done around transport and decarbonisation of WCC's estate. This accounted for 40% of emissions, due largely to reliance on the use of natural gas. Work was taking place across the Council, and periodic progress reports would be provided. The Councillor sought more of a commitment within the strategy to make progress and reduce the need to offset emissions, and not to accept the broadly 50-50 position. An assurance was provided that this was not a static position, that there was a commitment to reduce the amount needed and to inset the emissions within Warwickshire, not to offset them out of County, as much as possible. There was however a need to be realistic in terms of funding availability.
- It was important to ensure that the data was accurate (e.g. tree planting) and was not being used to offset multiple times. WCC had a dedicated officer who monitored all the mitigation work, working alongside colleagues in relevant areas to ensure the data was accurate.
- A question about the time lag between planting trees and the time they needed to grow before contributing substantially to emission offsetting. In reply, several points were made about the long-term nature of this project, the Council had its own tree nursery, and it was a blended approach. Land availability was raised, and the Council was using its estate as much as possible. This was a long-term journey, which the County was leading on. It would be a last resort to offset by tree planting outside the County.
- With regard to the action plan, a request to add an impact column to show the significance of each initiative. This was acknowledged as a fair observation. Steve Smith spoke about the dashboard which was being built to provide measurement, with carbon accounting to show the return for each investment.
- In North Warwickshire, to offset the Hams Hall development, there had been substantial tree planting 30 years ago. As part of the HS2 developments, some ten thousand of these

mature trees had been felled. There was a commitment to replace the trees, but it was questioned who would audit this. Reference to other significant tree felling due to HS2, and the time required for trees to mature before they provided substantial carbon offsetting. In reply, Steve Smith spoke of the need for enforcement, reminding of the planning obligations and ensuring these were met.

- Councillor Watson gave a local context on the impact HS2 developments in his division, part of which had been identified as a special management zone. The development was 'net offset', not a 'positive gain' in environmental terms which had been sought for many years. He agreed that the replacement trees would not be as productive in offsetting for decades, as those removed. He sat on a number of boards, and spoke of the difficulty in holding HS2 to account, not least because HS2 was the overarching organisation with a number of delivery contractors. There were two Council officers which did hold HS2 and its contractors to account. Several of the Council's leading members were involved in regular meetings about the HS2 developments. Councillor Watson added that the pause in development of HS2 north of Birmingham would not have any positive impact, as building of the railway lines and infrastructure would continue.
- Poor maintenance resulted in many of the planted trees and 'whips' dying. Councillor Watson responded that HS2 was challenged on many such issues, but policing it was less easy. Data reports were provided on tree planting, but this point had been raised previously.
- It was questioned if financial incentives or grants were provided to encourage recycling and reducing carbon emissions. There was support for small and medium-sized enterprises through the UK Prosperity Fund to encourage them to be more energy efficient and to reduce waste and water consumption. Mark Ryder added that further funding was available via the Combined Authority for business advice and information in this area. It included an allocation to administer the new scheme, so officers would do everything possible to ensure that Warwickshire businesses benefitted from the scheme.
- Clarification was provided on the 2030 and 2050 targets to achieve 'net zero' in carbon terms for the Council's operations and then for Warwickshire as a whole.
- Scott Tompkins advised that the rules on biodiversity net gain included a maintenance requirement for trees for 30 years. He added that trees needed to mature for five years before they really contributed to capturing carbon, and collected most carbon between years five and ten, before then storing it. Therefore, tree planting now was essential to hit the national targets set for 2040.

It was agreed that the comments set out above be submitted as part of the Cabinet's final consideration of the Sustainable Futures Strategy in November.

5. Council Plan 2022-2027 Integrated Performance Report Quarter 1 2023/24

Mark Ryder, Executive Director for Communities presented this item, which gave a retrospective summary of the Council's performance at the end of Quarter 1 (April - June 2023) against the strategic priorities and areas of focus set out in the Council Plan 2022-2027. Key sections of the report focussed on:

- Performance against the Performance Management Framework
- Progress on the Integrated Delivery Plan
- Management of Finance
- Management of Risk

In presenting the report, Mark Ryder referred members to the appendices which set out the 'RAG' rating of performance against target. He reminded that this was the first quarter report and highlighted the areas on track and those where performance was at risk or not predicted to achieve the target or measure. Additional information and narrative was provided on individual schemes.

Scott Tompkins referred to the finance aspects of the report and a £3.4million projected overspend. Most of this related to home to school transport and was due to additional service demand from students entitled to free school transport, an increase in services for SEND students and inflationary increases. There was a member working group and an improvement project looking at this area. Scott gave a performance summary focussing on those areas where performance was at risk or not predicted to achieve the target or measure. Additional information was provided for each area, specifically around home to school transport, flood risk mitigation and associated works. He highlighted the good performance on highway maintenance contracts with 100% of targets being achieved. He emphasised the supporting key performance indicators which were being achieved consistently by the contractor, Balfour Beatty, in a contract delivered across Warwickshire, Solihull and Coventry. It was subject to close scrutiny by a Highways Maintenance Board which included the portfolio holders of each authority. This service was in the top ten nationally in terms of performance. Tree planting was also highlighted, particularly the need to accelerate tree planting to hit the required target of planting one tree for every resident in Warwickshire.

Discussion took place and questions were submitted as follows:

- The delays in Section 278 developer funded schemes was discussed. Scott Tompkins explained that as soon as the agreement was concluded it was added to the capital programme, but the developer may not complete the scheme for some time, so it showed as a delay. Scott outlined some of the factors which could contribute. In essence this provided a forecast of monies being received that would be spent on schemes. He provided context of the excellent performance for the previous year on the capital programme expenditure and forecast to outturn.
- There were concerns about cuts to the Trading Standards budgets which a member linked to increases in complaints. Members became aware of illegal activity within their divisions, but the service had limited responsive capacity. Comment was sought on the increase in complaint levels, which Scott Tompkins offered to research and a written briefing would be circulated to members. He drew comparison to the significant budget cuts which some local authorities had needed to make to their trading standards services. Warwickshire had managed to maintain its services for a variety of reasons, including the calibration service for fuel pumps, used by many airports. Mark Ryder confirmed that it was an intelligence-led service which focussed on priority areas. He reminded of the historic service areas of Trading Standards and gave examples of the priorities which were now a focus. He had visited the calibration service earlier in the day and this brought in revenue from around the world.
- For the Adult Community Learning Service, there was a decline in income, and this had been the case for the last three quarters. Mark Ryder confirmed this was reported to the Committee but rested within the Education Service. An action was taken to investigate this and provide a report back to members.
- Further discussion about Section 278 (highway) agreements, and Section 106 (planning gain) agreements. It was noted that there could be a lengthy period between when

agreements were negotiated and the schemes provided, so was questioned if inflationary costs impacted on the authority or the developer. Scott Tompkins confirmed that there was no opportunity to revisit the sums negotiated through Section 106 agreements. However, for the Section 278 works, the developer paid some monies in advance and then paid a final bill based on the actual costs charged.

- The Chair raised the Transforming Nuneaton scheme and delays, referring to the Bermuda Bridge, its ongoing delivery problems and set out his concerns about delays to works that were scheduled or planned. The delays seemed to be impacting on other schemes which Nuneaton needed desperately. The plans to redevelop Vicarage Street had not been finalised and he quoted other examples about developing the library and business centre. There seemed to be a pattern that impacted on the delivery of many of the schemes.
- Mark Ryder responded, reminding members of the challenges to purchase commercial buildings and then clear the Vicarage Street site. This was progressing but was coupled with a period of massive inflation. This had an impact on delivery of the wellbeing business centre, which remained a commitment. There had been legitimate delays. On Bermuda Connectivity, the bridge scheme was coming to a conclusion, with weekly briefings being provided to members. Mark and Scott Tompkins touched on the significant challenges faced with this scheme, the delays experienced and impacts that it had caused for other projects.
- The Chair appreciated the update, also noting that other projects had been impacted, including the Hospital and College Street Island. There appeared a lack of movement to get these schemes back on track and he asked what options there were to align these schemes with the other delivery schedules. Mark Ryder responded that through the Transforming Nuneaton Programme Board members had the opportunity to see the updates and to provide a challenge.

The Committee noted the delays reported and was concerned to see those delays. The Chair was sure these concerns would be fed back to the Cabinet and Portfolio Holder, to ensure the Committee's comments were heard.

6. Communities OSC Work Programme

The Committee considered its work programme. It was agreed that Severn Trent Water be invited to a future committee meeting to provide an update.

Mark Ryder reminded members of the average speed camera pilot scheme. He suggested that the Chair and spokesperson meeting discuss the timing of this update to the Committee, to enable adequate data to be provided.

An update was sought about bus services and timetables. This could be discussed at the next Chair and spokesperson meeting. Mark Ryder referred to an allocation of funding which could be a part of such an update.

Linked to this, a member referred to computerised bus information at bus stops, asking if this was feasible for rural bus stops in Warwickshire. Councillor Sinclair was in attendance. He advised that the Bus Working Group had been looking at this issue, developing a bid from Community Infrastructure Levy funding. Officers had undertaken a County-wide audit of bus stops identifying priority bus stops on key routes. A bid was being finalised for such automated signage which was seen as a key priority. Whilst other digital means were available, having a physical sign at the bus stop was important for many commuters. The Chair agreed this would be discussed further at the

Chair and Spokesperson meeting. Councillor Feeney was also a member of this working group, which was undertaking good work, but was not known about by many members. A short update for the Committee may be useful. A further point was electric buses on the local bus routes and the need for charging points. The Chair suggested that a briefing note be provided in the first instance.

7. Urgent Items

None.

The meeting rose at 3.30pm

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Chair