

Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 22 June 2022

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 Mejar Singh
Councillor Andrew Wright

Portfolio Holders

Councillor Andy Crump, Portfolio Holder for Fire & Rescue and Community Safety
Councillor Heather Timms, Portfolio Holder for Environment, Climate and Culture
Councillor Martin Watson, Portfolio Holder for Economy

Officers

David Ayton-Hill, Assistant Director - Communities
Shail Chohan, Service Manager (County Highways)
Sarah Duxbury, Assistant Director – Governance & Policy
Judy Hallam, Delivery Lead ACL (Contractor)
Benjamin Hill, Contract & Policy Engineer
Isabelle Moorhouse, Democratic Service Officer
Alison Robinson, Strategy and Commissioning Manager (Economy & Skills)
Jon Rollinson, Principal Strategy & Policy Officer
Scott Tompkins, Assistant Director for Environment Services

1. General

(1) Apologies

Councillor Wallace Redford (Portfolio Holder – Transport & Planning)

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

None.

(3) Chair's Announcements

None.

(4) Minutes of Previous Meeting

1. Minutes of the 5th April 2022
The minutes were approved as a true and accurate record.
2. Minutes of the 13th April 2022
The minutes were approved as a true and accurate record.
3. Minutes of the 9th May 2022
The minutes were approved as a true and accurate record subject to the following changes:
Councillor Tim Sinclair noted that the new fund was called the Highway Community Action Fund not Highway Action Fund and the word 'Community' needed to be added in on page eight before the 'vote' section.
Councillor Richard Baxter-Payne noted that on page seven of the minutes in the last but one paragraph on the last line it should state 'if' or 'no' not 'in'.

In response to Councillor Sinclair, it was stated that the agreed member session on 20mph would take place in July not November.
4. Minutes of the 17th May 2022
The minutes were approved as a true and accurate record.

2. Public Speaking

None.

3. Questions to Portfolio Holder

In response to Councillor Sinclair, David Ayton-Hill (Assistant Director – Communities) concurred that the Council was notified by Diamond that the bus service between Stratford and Solihull was being curtailed from the 16th August 2022. To ensure this service is not stopped, the public transport team sent a contract out to tender for another bus service to take this route over on the 16th. Several services had already responded saying they were interested in running the route, but this may mean a different service.

(1) Economic Development Update

David Ayton-Hill highlighted that macroeconomic factors were challenging because of energy inflation costs affecting small businesses but business resilience was holding up in Coventry and Warwickshire. A demand for business support and employment skills programmes remained because companies want to recruit employees. There were workshops covering the Local Communities Enterprise Fund which provided small loans to small businesses. Central government brought in the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to replace the European Structural Funds but this will be delivered via the District and Borough Councils so they will be worked with to see how the fund will work and to offer experience/expertise and look at a strategic approach, especially to business support and employment/skills activity across Warwickshire.

In response to Councillor Sinclair, Alison Robinson (Strategy and Commissioning Manager (Economy & Skills)) concurred that the Borough & District Councils had a small window with this fund. Therefore, everyone was incentivised to collaborate, and it was recognised that some procurement and operational contracts would be delivered better countywide. Some things would be individualised to meet the needs of the different areas cross county. The Shared Prosperity Fund will be much smaller than the European Fund so things would need to be done differently. Some areas had more desire to do business support schemes and employability & skills schemes. All councils were meeting weekly to discuss this fund.

The Chair noted the different levels of disparity between North and South Warwickshire. In response to the Chair, Alison Robinson confirmed that they were supporting councils with more limited resources to apply for the fund.

4. Approach to Levelling Up

David Ayton-Hill presented the item and noted that this session was to get feedback on the Communities OSC specific areas:

- The White Paper (WP) was introduced in February 2022 as part of the Queen's speech and the first bill soon followed (Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill)
- The bill set out a programme of change set around 12 national missions to be achieved by 2030
- Devolution would likely be a part of the bill and this could be used to deliver the levelling up agenda
- The WP had four key objectives (Boost productivity, pay, jobs, and living standards by growing the private sector, especially in those places where they are lagging; Spread opportunities and improve public services, especially in those places where they are weakest; Restore a sense of community, local pride and belonging, especially in those places where they have been lost; and Empower local leaders and communities)
- Work was being done to apply this to Warwickshire and ensure that it complements WCC's work
- WCC plan to be cross organisational by working with partners/stakeholders, local communities, and residents to ensure a clear, focused and joined up approach cross county
- Communities needing most help should get it and Warwickshire's residents should receive all the benefits they can from WCC and central government
- Levelling up will take generations to have a long-term impact
- The relevant missions in the WP to the committee were: Local Leadership (England as a whole get the chance for a devolution deal with long-term funding and extra powers), Pride in Place (people satisfaction with Warwickshire's town centres and the engagement with their local areas has risen), Transport Infrastructure (everywhere has improved connectivity and is closer to the standards seen in urban areas), Skills (the number of people who had successfully completed high-quality skills training will increase cross-country), Digital Connectivity (ensuring that people are connected for gigabit capable broadband and more mobile phone coverage), Housing (ensuring more house ownership and the number of non-decent rented homes has fallen by 50%), Crime (ensuring that crime has decreased everywhere but especially in the worst affected neighbourhoods) and Living Standards (employment, pay, and economic productivity)
- These approaches need to be linked to existing and emerging strategies e.g. the Local Transport Plan will focus on levelling up around increased connectivity and improve all residents ability to travel actively or via public transport

- The updated Economic Growth Strategy and Digital Infrastructure Plan will include the levelling up agenda as well as the existing strategies/plans
- Employability and skills are critical to levelling up because household income is a determinant on these outcomes. Therefore, work needed to be done to improve this through levelling up
- Feedback received from residents highlighted the importance of town centres in terms of Pride of Place as prosperous town centres made happier residents
- Funding streams would be used to invest in town centre businesses when available
- All partners were being collaborated with to achieve the levelling up principles and progress was good so far
- WCC want to focus on strength-based approaches to improve the lives of Warwickshire's communities/residents/businesses and data driven approached could be accelerated
- The 12 missions will be applied to the Council Plan so increased opportunity and social mobility were important to enhance by reducing disparities across all sectors including education and health
- The Community Powered Warwickshire platform and Voice of Warwickshire panel will help engagement with communities on the missions as well as the climate change agenda and adaptation as this is a key part of levelling up
- In a survey, residents in Nuneaton and Bedworth had lower levels of pride compared to other areas in Warwickshire, rural residents identified as being from a village whereas urban residents identified being from their area of a town and residents said that parks/open spaces, town centres, local facilities, good schools, easy access to health provisions and safety levels were needed to make an area great to live
- Evidence based areas would be targeted first i.e. areas of multiple deprivation (the 10-20% most deprived wards where nearly all the key indicators for levelling up are facing the most challenges)
- Types of residents who need extra support with employment will be helped first too e.g. people leaving care, people with special educational needs or disabilities, ex-offenders and older workers

Sarah Duxbury (Assistant Director – Governance & Policy) added that a councillor in another OSC requested that active sustainable and healthy travel relating to health and wellbeing, also be linked to the levelling up agenda.

In response to Councillor Jenny Fradgley, David Ayton-Hill stated that the new Local Transport Plan will focus on active and public transport being prioritised over private and they needed to be smarter around things WCC already controlled, better utilise developer contributions and better influence the planning system to try and align it with the transport network. Part of the levelling up journey will link in with the devolution deal from central government. A strong case would focus on funding and powers that would help support the public transport network. The bus service improvement plan would be discussed with central government in devolution discussions so funding for it could be negotiated.

Councillor Jonathon Chilvers suggested a wording amendment as the report mentioned delivering road priority schemes but a recent meeting, he attended showed that WCC were prioritising non private vehicle schemes instead.

In response to the Chair, David Ayton-Hill stated that performance measures showing what improvements will be delivered would be developed. Sarah Duxbury also added that the Levelling

Up approach document going to July's Cabinet will contain reference to the development of impact measures for the Levelling Up priorities mentioned. Central government will also have their own performance framework for local authorities to measure successes against. The approach will include the outcome measures.

5. Draft Report for Highway Schemes

Shail Chohan (Service Manager (County Highways)) stated how his area worked with the member's delegated budgets:

- They were trying to resolve the issue that members had with the lack of visibility on the progress of their schemes
- Members struggled to get up-to-date information and there was a lack of accurate information around delivery timescales
- To resolve this, a SharePoint page was drafted and ready to go live in Summer 2022
- The page will contain information and background on what the delegated budget scheme is, this will link to the relevant Cabinet papers or member session
- The page would be updated monthly and will have lists and maps of the locality officers who will also have the latest information on delegated budget schemes
- A monthly pdf will be produced for each district and borough, the division, the scheme status, which delivery phase it is in, the key contact for the scheme within WCC
- To do this, a single resource within County Highways the responsibility to collate the information and update it
- Members will receive an e-mail when the page is live and feedback would be sought
- Work was being done with Balfour Beatty to get updated accurate completion dates on the web page as well as a list of estimated costs for various types of works that are done on the network
- Financial costs would need to be estimated because there could be extra traffic management required but every scheme was given a 'ballpark' indication. This will enable members the ability to plan ahead

In response to Councillor Dave Humphreys, Shail Chohan said that the webpage would include schemes from September 2020.

Councillor Baxter-Payne noted that it was important to know the costs so they would know what budget members have left as well as the start and end date for projects. Shail Chohan said the dates should be automatically done after the relevant work has been done with the contractor.

Councillor Fradgley noted the previous gaps with delegated budgets. Shail said that the whole process being electronic should resolve this as it would be the one source.

Councillor Sinclair requested that Shail Chohan come back to the committee in six and 12 months' time to provide the successes/failings on the page and any feedback received. Councillor Humphreys suggested this happen at the end of the fiscal year.

Scott Tompkins (Assistant Director – Environmental Services) added they agreed to run a second member development session on this new web page in the first session.

6. Vehicle Activated Signs Policy - Briefing Note

Jon Rollinson (Principal Strategy & Policy Officer) summarised that vehicle activated signs (VAS) policy will go to Cabinet in July 2022 and was designed to present a robust set of criteria which will allow WCC to control the installation of VAS in future. It would also help to identify and schedule the removal of those VAS which have had no road safety benefit and present a financial and maintenance burden. VAS are important for local communities so the new policy would provide a mechanism to allow these communities to fund the retention or replacement of existing VAS which would otherwise be removed.

In response to Councillor Fradgley, Jon Rollinson stated that communities could retain VAS through Parish/Town Councils, local community groups or delegated budgets.

Councillor Chilvers expressed concerns with the criteria to keep the VAS being restrictive, especially if trying to promote active travel. Jon Rollinson said that VAS would remain if there were five personal injury collisions over a three-year period. The injury collision criterion used a weighted scoring system rather than just individual collisions and would reflect the consideration of VAS for use at sites with a lower collision history than sites that could qualify for the casualty reduction scheme work. This criterion was there to address this middle ground in terms of road safety concerns.

Councillor Sinclair noted that the note stated that 40% of VAS in Warwickshire were non-operational and ones that did not meet the criteria would be removed too. In response to Councillor Sinclair, Jon Rollinson said the budget was £10,000 annually for 400 VAS cross-county but this had now increased to £80,000. The only signs that would be removed were ones that had not shown a road safety benefit in terms of reducing personal injury collisions but were a financial or maintenance burden on the Council. Signs that were beneficial but broken would be fixed and remain.

Scott Tompkins added that Warwickshire had a lot of signs for its area and the purpose of the maintenance fund is to deal with the maintenance of the ones that are coming at the end of their life and look at reducing the number of VAS not putting more out.

In response to Councillor Andy Crump (Portfolio Holder – Fire & Rescue and Community Safety), Jon Rollinson stated that the current policy as proposed did not allow for parish/town councils or community groups to choose to install a VAS in their area, the new policy would state that they could decide whether to retain a VAS in their area which was otherwise scheduled for removal. Entirely new VAS installations would be where there was a demonstrable road safety risk as defined in the new policy.

Councillor Humphreys said that at a recent road safety event he attended, WCC said they planned to reduce KSIs (killed or seriously injured) by 50% but removing VAS would make them worse. He said he could not support the proposals because Council tax had already been spent on the existing signs, they were maintainable, and his parish councils were requesting more VAS.

Councillor Baxter-Payne stated that keeping and maintaining the VAS would be better than a major engineering project in every area where a VAS has been removed.

Councillor Sinclair said that because the VAS were not going to meet the new threshold, this did not mean that they were not useful.

Councillor Fradgley noted that she had requested a VAS for a straight piece of road and queried whether the town/parish councils had been consulted with for this policy as they would need to financially support the sign if they bought it.

Jon Rollinson said that DfT research showed that VAS reduced traffic collisions between 25-35%, but under the proposed policy signs would only be removed if they have not reduced any collisions.

David Ayton-Hill added that when VAS were first introduced there was a loose policy around what constituted the requirements for VAS which is why there were so many implemented and may not have had a positive impact. The popularity of VAS led to these policies.

Scott Tompkins stated that the whole kit for the VAS would need replacing when it broke.

The Chair concurred with the concerns raised by the committee and added that only some areas would be able to buy their own VAS which could cause a disparity. He agreed that there should be a policy for these signs, but the VAS made residents feel safer.

Councillor Sinclair raised that the paper said that 40% of 400 signs (160 signs overall) which were operational at the time of the meeting would be decommissioned which was more than Gloucestershire had altogether. He said he found this unacceptable, and the signs benefits should also be measured by prevention and not just collisions.

David Ayton-Hill suggested that this wording needed to be amended as 40% of these signs were coming to the end of their life span and would not necessarily be removed.¹

Councillor Sinclair formally proposed that:

That Communities OSC ask Cabinet to amend the vehicle activated sign policy to apply for new signs going forward and not apply retrospectively to existing signs. The budget allocated by Council to the maintenance of signs is used appropriately.

This was seconded by Councillor Andy Wright.

The committee voted unanimously for this.

Resolved

That Communities OSC ask Cabinet to amend the vehicle activated sign policy to apply for new signs going forward and not apply retrospectively to existing signs.

AND

The budget allocated by Council to the maintenance of signs is used appropriately.

7. Warwickshire Adult and Community Learning Progress and Performance Report

Judy Hallam (Delivery Lead ACL (Contractor) presented the report and highlighted that:

- The Adult Community Learning Services provided a variety of high-quality learning opportunities to adults across Warwickshire

¹ Post meeting note – 40% of VAS are requiring maintenance or repair. The proposed policy states that, when a sign stops working, it is assessed to see if it has had a positive impact on reducing injury collisions. Those that have not had any benefit would be identified for removal, but only at sites where the collision record is low.

Under these proposals approximately one in 12 VAS would be identified for removal, (33-34 signs currently). These signs would be offered to local communities for retention if they wished by taking on the funding of maintenance and repair.

- It targeted those with the highest needs however there were challenges with funding as the grant funding from the SFA (Skills Funding Agency) was static for years so resources needed to be carefully utilised
- Another challenge was with delivering education post Covid-19 as people wanted to learn in different ways
- Classes were not done a mixture of in-person and online
- They wanted to attract new learners, particularly residents with high needs
- She was seeking feedback on the current performance and future plans statement of intent that was being drafted with future aspirations for the service

Councillor Jackie D'Arcy praised the report and the fact that the curriculum grades remained steady. In response to Councillor D'Arcy, Judy Hallam stated that they were trying to get more males into adult education as they were below the national average with males. They were also looking at how to target more unemployed residents because they were missing out. Work was being done with the Department for Work and Pensions on how to identify these people and meet their needs; historically the service had not done this. This should attract more males into adult education.

8. Verge Maintenance Policy

Benjamin Hill (Contract & Policy Engineer) presented the item and highlighted the following points:

- The note outlined the principal activities, procedures and benefits in the new policy in line with the best practice and guidance for plant life
- This started when 'Plantlife' conservation charities contacted local authorities to consider the wider issues around biodiversity and the environmental impact
- The new policy will raise awareness of the biodiversity value of roadside verges in Warwickshire in line with their road safety purpose
- The current policy separated mowing into two separate programmes (rural and non-rural) and the contractors engaged in this work cross county
- Rural mowing included verges outside towns and villages that typically have a speed limit more than 40mph. They were cut on a safety basis of 1 metre swathe plus additional areas at junction bends
- These were cut three times a year
- Non-rural verges were situated in towns and villages generally with a speed limit of 40mph or less. The District and Borough Councils managed these verges and mowed them 10-15 times annually
- The new policy will affect rural verge mowing as certain verges with good biodiversity value will only be cut once a year between August and September to allow for the growth/flowering of wildflowers while preventing verges from being dominated by a particular species
- Sites will be identified by the WCC ecology team
- Non-rural mowing will have a introduce a community engagement scheme which will give local interest groups, parish/town/district/borough councils the opportunity to explore the possibility of reducing the level of cuts for non-rural verges
- Local interest groups, parish/town/district/borough councils will in effect maintain a section of highway verge within these areas and an officer from county highways will assess the site to ensure it fits with the new policy
- County Highways will then request for its removal from the relevant District or Borough Councils normal mowing schedule

The committee praised the report.

In response to Councillor Chilvers, Benjamin Hill stated that WCC pay money to the Borough and District Councils to maintain the non-rural verges to effectively cover the safety element of mowing (mowing three times a year). The councils then decide how many more times they wish to mow the verges which they pay for themselves.

Following a supplementary from Councillor Chilvers, Benjamin Hill said that the applicants must agree not to use weedkiller on the verges as part of the community engagement scheme.

Councillor Sinclair suggested making the community engagement element on the policy clear for residents and a visual map for them to make it clear on the biodiversity importance with the new policy.

Benjamin Hill concurred with this and said a map was being produced and this new policy would not incur any additional costs on the Council.

Councillor D'Arcy noted that some residents were split on these wildlife areas, but they were needed to protect the bees.

Councillor Fradgley queried if WCC make biodiversity assessments on larger areas in towns as these spaces needed to be managed appropriately.

Councillor Humphreys noted that long grass or overgrown trees on some verges and raised roundabouts had caused accidents.

Councillor Baxter-Payne noted that these areas needed to look like wildflower meadows and not like someone could not be bothered to mow the grass. The Chair concurred with this and added that these areas need to be maintained as wildflower meadows.

Councillor Chilvers suggested signs up outside the meadow area. Councillor Sinclair concurred with this.

Benjamin Hill said that only public highway land would be directly included in the policy, but roundabouts were not specifically precluded from the policy however would need to be reviewed on a safety basis. For the community aspect, individuals would need to apply through their parish/town/district/borough council. They would then need to do a consultation process with the residents to ensure that there is 'buy-in' from the project because it would be divisive. Any seeds planted on the public highway would be looked at in two ways, an amenity perspective and aesthetic perspective. Ecology would be worked with to maintain this balance and they would only use native flower seeds for the sites and ensure they are suitable.

Shail Chohan added that they were following the best guidance with planting wildflower seeds and were using what was native and naturally grew in the areas of Warwickshire. Contractors looked at alternatives to weedkiller but these were unsuccessful, but alternatives were still being sought.

9. Year End Performance Progress Report

David Ayton-Hill presented the report and highlighted the following points:

- Of the 11 key business measures for the committee, nine were available now but two would be received later in the year
- Three were on track and six were not. Covid-19 affected some of these
- The ones highlighted were the ones that improved from the previous year e.g. the number of businesses supported and growing through WCC programmes

- Unemployment rate was falling but there were significant vacancy levels in Warwickshire and some businesses were struggling to recruit
- Household waste recycling and composting were below target but more waste was being collected. This was because of the amount of people working from home
- The recycling centre fire affected recycling numbers in the south of the county and every district/borough was now charging for green waste collection
- There were driver and labour shortages because of Covid-19 as well as some industrial action. These all caused the recycling rates to be lower
- Work was now being done to increase these rates back up

In response to Councillor Sinclair, David Ayton-Hill said that the Power BI system would say what was being done to improve the areas that were failing. Some areas could not be improved by WCC due to external factors e.g. unemployment.

Councillor Chilvers noted that the reason the biodiversity target was missed in this report was because there were three types of biodiversity habitats (low, moderate, and high) and some things were moved to high from moderate, but others went to low. The positive thing for the verges was that amenity grassland counts as 'low' biodiversity, but this would increase to moderate with wildflowers. Scott Tompkins concurred with this but noted that WCC does not own highway land they just took a bit of it to maintain the road network.

10. Communities OSC Work Programme

Two reports on the successes, failing and feedback received by members of the new delegated budget monitoring page. This will be received by the committee in six and 12 months' time.

The rest of the work programme was noted.

11. Urgent Items

None.

The meeting rose at 16:02


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Chair