

Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Wednesday 7 February 2024

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Jeff Clarke (Chair)
Councillor Jonathan Chilvers (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Jenny Fradgley
Councillor Peter Gilbert
Councillor Bhagwant Singh Pandher
Councillor Mejar Singh
Councillor Andrew Wright
Councillor Jackie D'Arcy

Councillor Martin Watson (Portfolio Holder for Economy)
Councillor Heather Timms (Portfolio Holder for Environment, Climate and Culture)
Councillor Andy Crump (Portfolio Holder for Fire & Rescue and Communities)
Councillor Tim Sinclair

Officers

Steve Smith, Director for Strategic Infrastructure and Climate Change
Scott Tompkins, Environment, Planning and Transport
Isobel Woods, Head of Economy and Skills
Sophie Kitching, Graduate Management Trainee
Lou Richardson, Lead Commissioner – Corporate Policy and Strategy
Nicole Conway, Democratic Services Officer

Others Present

Andy Mitchell - Press

1. General

(1) Apologies

Councillor Jackie D'Arcy substituted for Councillor Sarah Feeney

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

None disclosed.

(3) Chair's Announcements

The Chair welcomed Andy Mitchell from the press and notified all present that the meeting was being webcast.

(4) Minutes of Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 November 2023 were confirmed as an accurate record by the Committee.

2. Public Speaking

None.

3. Questions to Portfolio Holder

There were no questions put to the Portfolio Holders.

(1) Economic Development Update

Isobel Woods (Head of Economy and Skills) presented the Economic Development Update and summarised the following points.

- The economy remained flat, with some growth in the service sector. Lower inflation had boosted wages, while unemployment remained below regional and national averages.
- Warwickshire Gross Domestic Product (GDP) had experienced both incremental growth and decline. Despite these fluctuations, the overall economic situation in Warwickshire remained relatively stable compared to January 2023.
- The service sector, particularly Information and Communication, had been replaced by Education and Social Work as the primary driver of monthly growth.
- The unemployment rate in Warwickshire was 3.3% which was lower than the rates in the West Midlands (4.5%) and the entire UK (3.7%).

Business and Economy

- Access to Finance, this had been the most active quarter so far for loans and grants, facilitating £2.5 million. This amount had further leveraged £2.8 million from the private sector. In addition, 55 new jobs had been created, with 160 more expected and 106 jobs safeguarded. The Apprenticeship Levy supported 98 apprenticeship opportunities. Within that funding offer, included the Local Communities Enterprise, witnessed significant loan activity. In the third quarter, 12 loans were issued, totalling nearly £900,000. This brought the years total to 42 loans with an additional 21 expected. The Digital Creative sector contributed to job creation, new product development and

accelerated growth with 12 applications received, resulting in a total award of £310,000. Efforts were underway to draw down on this funding before the end of the financial year.

- In November, the Business Support team announced plans to launch the Business Growth programs in Warwickshire. These programs, which complemented the efforts of local Districts and Borough Councils, went live in December 2023, and had received over 300 engagements. In addition, 22 business assists had been provided, and the team were on track to achieve their annual target of 100 assists by the end of the financial year.

Employment and Skills

- The Fair Chance Jobs Portal had been operational for six months and served as a dedicated space for employers to recruit inclusively. During that time, 58 employers had signed up, and approximately 28 job vacancies were posted each week with 220 people actively using the portal.
- Supported Employment Service, worked with a range of employers, including Fair Chance to help those with learning difficulties and autism to secure paid employment. Over the last twelve months, the programme had successfully supported 44 customers in obtaining paid work, 16 of those working independently and four customers who had embarked on apprenticeships.
- The Future Skills Fund engaged with industry which included discussions of the employment of a future skills officer as well as holding roundtable discussions which focused on construction and digital sectors. There was also the offer of salary support for those in the workforce aged 50 and over, looking at apprenticeships, with 58 entering work. Apprenticeship Levy Support offered salary support for those who entered in apprenticeships and to assist with in-work training, with 15 apprentices progressing in their training.
- The Careers Hub had been in operation for six months, and officers highlighted the appendix showing the list of 52 schools in participation which was available for Members perusal. As part of the service, the Careers Hub assisted schools in self-assessment for the Gatsby Measure. Isobel Woods explained the benchmarks of the measure and discussed the average scores for Warwickshire schools, explaining that they had increased from 5.79 to 6.04, surpassing the national average of 5.50 since the Careers Hub began working with the schools.
- The national programme, Multiply Fund which promoted numeracy across the UK, had been active in Warwickshire since January 2023 and during the calendar year, 1719 people had been supported. Agencies and providers collaborated to enhance numeracy skills and align them with practical life skills.
- The Business Centre improvements had been completed, were well-received by tenants and attracted new tenants. Occupancy was at 78% and was expected to rise to 84%.

- The Financial Times had published their FDI rankings in February 2024 as Warwickshire has been recognised.
- The results of the hashtag campaign, #WarwickshireChristmas conducted during the festive season garnered nearly 25,000 likes or shares on social media which brought local businesses together in towns and villages.
- Local Visitor Economic Partnership (LVEP) was an emerging partnership working with Districts, Boroughs, and partners in Coventry and Warwickshire to gain an economic understanding of visitor economy aligned to the Visit Britain campaign.

Isobel Woods welcomed questions and Members discussed the following points.

Councillor Martin Watson (Portfolio Holder for Economy) thanked Isobel Woods and her team on a very good report and reiterated that the Council was very supportive of businesses in Warwickshire. He supported the comments about the FDI rankings due out imminently as well as some further news about highspeed broadband across the County. Councillor Watson highlighted the excellent work being done with the employment services.

In response to a comment from Councillor Jonathan Chilvers, Isobel Woods agreed that emphasising environmentally friendly changes in the construction industry was important and future skills would need to be focused on. Isobel Woods went on to explain that this had already been recognised in the construction sector and was called Green Skills. This would be noted and would ensure that it was a visible response reflected in the constructions sector. Councillor Chilvers commented that there was an opportunity to work with the Council's Property Development group around this.

In response to Councillor Chilvers secondary question about the Careers Hub and the student journey, Isobel Woods explained that the Council worked with school careers advisors and presented the school with a tailored package such as interviews, CV preparations and career days. Isobel Woods advised that a report could be prepared and presented at a future meeting documenting the students' journey.

Councillor Chilvers suggested that it would be interesting to invite schools or students to a meeting to hear their firsthand responses to the Careers Hub and what we were doing as a Council. Councillor Fradgley supported this proposal. Isobel Wood welcomed the idea stating that it would expose young people to local government and could be a positive learning opportunity for them.

The Chair noted the comments and advised this would need to be discussed at the next Chair and Spokes meeting to get the process moving forward.

Following a question from Councillor Bhagwant Pandher, Isobel Woods advised there was no age limit on the 50 plus apprenticeships.

The Chair commented on the Nuneaton industrial Campus after a recent visit and shared his positive experiences.

The Committee noted the Economic Development Update.

4. Futures and State of Warwickshire

Sophie Kitching (Graduate Management Trainee) presented a report outlining the Future and State of Warwickshire and summarised the following points:

- The aim of the report was to look ahead at future trends, challenges, and opportunities from 2030 to 2040.
- This brought together thinking, best practice and research from across the County and provided a snapshot of items which were continuously monitored and updated.
- The report's content was structured around five key themes which were outlined for Members.
- Within the five key themes, five Council-wide issues had been extracted with four specific considerations identified specifically for the Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- The overall priority issues were described as:
 - Demographic shifts, tailoring services to changing demands.
 - Global political economic and political uncertainty, whilst being adaptable, resilient, and planning for the future.
 - Climate Change, adaption, and mitigation across the workforce.
 - Artificial Intelligence (AI) – this had wide ranging impacts but was being embraced as a positive and complimented the face to face work being done.
 - Inequalities between groups and places, thinking about holistic communities and localised intervention, including the digital divide.
- Specific Impacts within Communities OSC.
 - Environmental/climate policy, public support evolving central government policy.
 - Future skills, skill gaps, reskilling and future skilling
 - Transport, demand, autonomy, infrastructure, connectivity, energy source
 - Urban regeneration, changing footfall in town centres, town centre regeneration, shift in urban/rural living patterns, future of workspaces.
- Going forward this would be available as a live resource for officers and members as an information tool for decision making now and in the future and ongoing feedback would be encouraged.

Members discussed the following points.

In response to a query from Councillor Jenny Fradley, Lou Richardson (Lead Commissioner – Corporate Policy and Strategy) stated that ensuring older generations were considered in decisions that would affect their ability to interact with systems or online now as well as in the future was important and this would be noted and considered when discussing with team and planning ideas. She continued by discussing electric vehicles stating that more information was becoming more widely available about alternative fuels, and this would be taken into account in the future as it became better understood. Lou Richardson made a final comment relating to Artificial Intelligence this was underexplored and would be something that to be noted and monitored as it became better understood.

The Chair stated this was a good report, noting that the world was fast changing and therefore felt there would be alternatives that the Council needed to be conscious and well informed of going forward. Councillor Fradgley added that some of these changes could happen quickly, even if they were expected and could potentially catch the Council unawares.

In response to a question from Councillor Chilvers, Lou Richardson advised that the Corporate Policy Team, as part of the Futures Work, ensured that information was filtered down by senior officers, identifying any items brought to their attention. There were quarterly meetings with each directorate to discuss and identify issues. Meetings and discussions were also held with the Strategy Network and heads of service to identify strategies and issues going forward. Additionally, a key part of the strategy development was to discuss with teams who had been looking at policy changes coming forwards and challenge them on what the services offered.

Having considered the report, the Committee

Resolved to

- a) Note the trends and themes highlighted in the 'Warwickshire Futures 2030/40' and 'Warwickshire in 2030 and beyond' reports and consider how they may relate to ongoing and future policy development; and
- b) Considers the Committee's current work programme in light of the Warwickshire Futures work.

5. Communities OSC Work Programme

As mentioned during the Economic Development Update, an item would be added to the next Chair and Spokes agenda to discuss a potential invitation to schools and students regarding the Careers Hub and the student journey.

The Committee noted its work programme, with the Chair requesting any additional items either at this meeting, or the subsequent Chair and Spokes meeting.

6. Urgent Items

None.

The meeting rose at 14:44

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Chair