

Economy and Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Friday, 12 March 2021, Online - 2.00 pm

Minutes

Present:

Mr A A J Adams (Chairman), Mr P Denham (Vice Chairman), Mr G R Brookes, Mr B Clayton, Mr M E Jenkins, Mr A D Kent, Mr R J Morris and Mr J A D O'Donnell

Also attended:

Dr K A Pollock, Cabinet Member with responsibility for Economy and Infrastructure

Paul Smith (Assistant Director for Highways & Transport Operations), Susan Crow (Economic Growth & Investment Manager), Elliot Pritchard (Highway Maintenance Operations Manager), Samantha Morris (Scrutiny Co-ordinator) and Emma James (Overview and Scrutiny Officer)

Available Papers

The members had before them:

- A. The Agenda papers (previously circulated);
- B. The Minutes of the Meeting held on 1 February 2021 (previously circulated).

(Copies of documents A and B will be attached to the signed Minutes).

407 Apologies and Welcome

Apologies had been received from Cllr Rebecca Vale.

408 Declarations of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

409 Public Participation

The Chairman reported that five members of the public had asked to speak. A summary of the key points from the participants was as follows:

Janice Bell

- The lack of reference to cycling in the agenda item 'Highways Operations Update' was striking given that the Council had secured funding for active travel, and Councillor Amos's statements in the Worcester News about Sabrina bridge being part of plans to enhance walking and cycling routes throughout the county.

- Cycling was a mode of transport and not just a leisure pursuit, therefore should be considered alongside the other areas set out in the report
- Good provision for cycling would relieve congestion, reduce pollution and improve the population's health

The Chairman referred to the Panel's regular consideration of cycling, including the meeting of November 2020, which included several pages about new schemes, which demonstrated the Council's commitment although he acknowledged the importance of taking a holistic view. A scheme in his own area had enabled children to cycle to school.

Dr Siani Morris

- The Agenda included information on how the Council supported businesses including the programme Clean Growth Worcestershire, however on the Council's website the projects listed received funding from a European Growth Programme which had finished – clarification was sought on current measures to support businesses in Worcestershire to reduce their carbon footprint and support the Government's target for reduction in carbon emissions this decade – the Chairman agreed this was a good question, which the Panel would ask during the meeting.

Isabelle Michel

- The Agenda included consideration of amendments to the work programme and the omission of climate change was astounding
- Considering the target for the UK to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050, the recent announcement by Boris Johnson of the Government's target to reduce UK carbon emissions by 68% by 2030, and the likelihood of further extreme weather events, why was climate change not a standing item and given the priority it deserved?

The Chairman advised that the Panel's Agenda in August 2020 had included the Council's work and role in tackling climate change, and explained that the future work programme would be at the discretion of the new Panel after the county council elections in May 2021.

Chris Cooke

- During a previous Panel update, Cllr Kent had

referred to a farmer being unable to install solar panels due to unsurmountable costs

- The Panel's attention was drawn to the Local Electricity Bill, currently supported by 254 MPs (cross-party) and 65 County Councils and Local Authorities, which was now making its way through Parliament. The Bill enabled the local supply of electricity by empowering communities to sell local renewable energy directly to local households and businesses - County councillors were urged to support the bill and to lobby local MPs

The Chairman spoke in support of the Bill and asked for the web-link to be circulated to the Panel.

Dr Johnny Birks

- The Agenda included consideration of amendments to the work programme, and it was queried why dates of further updates were not listed against 'The Council's Work and Role in Tackling Climate Change including monitoring progress against the new goal of being carbon neutral by 2050', as was the case for other topics.
- Given that the work programme agenda item stated the need to retain the flexibility to take into account any urgent issues, did the Panel not agree that climate change was an urgent issue, which merited frequent review, as highlighted by Sir David Attenborough at the recent UN Security Council?
- Would the Panel accept that progress on climate change targets in this county would be much more effective if the Council joined the majority of UK Local Authorities in declaring a climate emergency?

The Chairman advised that this topic was a standing item on the Panel's work programme, and that scheduling of future updates would be up to the new Panel after the county council elections in May 2021.

David Whiting

- At its meeting of 4 August 2020 this Panel stated that "Council reports are now required to include information on the environmental impact of all proposed projects. The completion of a JIA (Joint Impact Assessment), and any consequent full impact assessment for environmental sustainability, is required for all proposed projects. This includes assessment of carbon emissions".

- The Highways Operations Update agenda report regarding carriageways stated that “In order to get best value from structural maintenance funding, schemes are prioritised using a number of factors but including road condition data, defect data (number of pothole repairs), engineer site assessments as well as cost/benefit analysis” – the lack of reference to environmental sustainability in carriageways or of a Joint Impact Assessment was therefore queried;
- Was the Council taking a narrow view of what constituted a “proposed Project” so that it excluded new and ongoing maintenance work? If so, how did it believe it could help meet the Government’s commitment to achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050, which recognised that much of this reduction must happen before 2030, when, under current planning, significant falls in the Council's projected carbon emissions would not be seen until 2039/40?
- What was the Council's strategy for resolving the disparity between the major changes required before 2030 and projections that carbon emissions would not fall significantly before 2039/40?
- What criteria would be used to assess the environmental impact of new projects; how would competing environmental risks be dealt with, and what weight given to factors measured against social and economic factors to ensure that much of the carbon reduction occurred before 2030?

The Chairman referred to the Panel’s January 2020 discussion with the Council’s highway maintenance contractor (Ringway), which had included environmental initiatives, and the fact that Worcestershire was one of a few areas using warm (instead of hot) asphalt, which used less energy. The Directorate of Economy and Infrastructure would be asked to provide a response to the participant’s questions.

410 Confirmation of the Minutes of the previous meeting

The Minutes of the meeting on 1 February 2021 were agreed as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman.

411 Update on what the Council has done and is doing to Help Businesses in Worcestershire during COVID-19

Sue Crow, the Council's Economic Growth and Investment Manager provided an overview of the Council's support to Worcestershire businesses during Covid-19, referring to the presentation included in the Agenda.

Her team had had a very busy 12 months and from the outset of the pandemic, a partnership group had been formed to maximise support. The Worcestershire Covid-19 Economic Response Recovery and Resilience Group (WCERG) had developed an economic recovery framework to rapidly identify local interventions and the most effective ways to deploy resources, with five key areas of focus:

- delivering co-ordinated information about national programmes and guidance to the business community – to clarify confusion
- focusing and enhancing current support programmes available across the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) areas region to support recovery
- accelerating investment in major schemes, once this was possible
- using direct resources to support specific demands and opportunities
- ensuring the best information possible – national analysis and local data.

Regarding the impact on the local economy, overall the number of people claiming job seekers allowance plus universal credit (the claimant count) had more than doubled since the same time the previous year, rising by 9,885 and taking the number of claimants within Worcestershire to 17,855 (5.1% of the working population, compared to 6.3% nationally and 7.1% across the West Midlands). The claimant count for 18-24 year olds had risen to 8.3%, compared to the 8.8% national average, although both figures had declined slightly over recent months. There had been a greater increase in claimant count for men than for women.

39,700 employments had been furloughed as at 31 January 2021, a take-up rate of 14.7% which was similar to regional and national rates, with the highest proportion was in the Wyre Forest area. The WCERG continued to monitor figures and input from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) on the WCERG was very important as it gave first-hand information.

In terms of support for businesses, the Council, in

partnership with Herefordshire and Worcestershire Chamber of Commerce, Worcestershire Business Central and Worcestershire LEP, had undertaken two surveys in April and June to inform them and to understand the local impact. Key messages from respondents were:

- almost 50% were either in survival mode with the majority of staff furloughed or ticking over with staff furloughed but still operating. Weekly surveys by the Office for National Statistics revealed that in certain sectors, around 20% of businesses worried whether they would still be in business in the next few months.
- 76% expected a decrease in revenue; almost 30% of these expected this to decrease by 50% or above
- encouragingly, 70% had taken up Government support, with very high experience ratings
- there was an ongoing need for support, in particular information on compliance with Covid rules, support for diversification, business development and marketing.

In response, the Council repurposed business support projects. Much of the Council's support was euro funded, and so some changes had been needed in terms of delivery, for example online, but all schemes had still operated successfully during Covid, including Enterprising Worcestershire, Elevate (24 people recruited to a project with no drop-out), Worcestershire Innovation (63 business given grants), BetaDen at Malvern Hills Science Park and Clean Growth Programmes.

In terms of Clean Growth Programmes, both the Business Energy and Efficiency Programme and the Low Carbon Opportunities Project were still operational, with a number of ongoing projects which were currently projected to make 128 tonnes of CO2 savings, with businesses applying for grants for a range of work such as LED lighting or green waste. The Business Energy and Efficiency Programme continued to be successful, which offered businesses an audit of resources with recommendations and they could then apply for up to £22k to put measures into place.

Examples of work to repurpose existing support included a single point of contact to access support (Worcestershire Business Central), and supporting businesses to employ young people, for example working with the DWP on upskilling.

The Council's Here2Help Business Programme, launched in July 2020 and allocated £3.5m, had been very well received and had provided support to businesses as well as young people; over 500 enquiries had been responded to, over 60% of the funding allocated and 40 graduates placed as a result.

Local district councils had been administering government grant schemes and had issued over 17,000, totalling over £140m.

The Council had worked with others to promote the Government's Coronavirus Business Interruption Loans Scheme (CBILS) and the Bounce Back Loan Scheme, both of which had had a large take-up, with 753 CBILS loans offered and 12,228 Bounce Back loans.

Through the Getting Building Fund, working with the Worcestershire LEP, the county had been awarded £12m to accelerate delivery of infrastructure schemes including the Malvern Technology Park Vale Business Park expansion and Kepax walking and cycling bridges, schemes which also provided local employment and the area as a business location as well as for residents.

Regarding marketing and social media, there was a new Strategy to encourage visitors to Worcestershire when this was allowed and small grants had been given to tourism businesses to assist recovery. In response to feedback from businesses, the Council's social media presence had been rebranded, resulting in more followers.

The Chairman invited discussion and the following main points were made:

- The Panel was advised that around £2m of grants had been given to Worcestershire business, however the exact figure would be confirmed.
- When asked about continuation and adequacy of EU funded business support schemes, the Economic Growth and Investment Manager (the Officer) explained that EU funding would continue until around 2023, and was expected to be at a similar level, having been underwritten by the Government.
- Panel members commented that though feedback from businesses was somewhat depressing, the Government had continued to provide a huge amount of support and some sectors would hopefully benefit from pent up consumer demand.

Concern was expressed that some businesses may have come to rely on support and not plan ahead.

- Cllr Kent referred to a recent update on apprenticeships to the Council's Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel, which had revealed surprisingly low levels of interest in the scheme. As a small business owner himself, he suggested further promotion of the scheme to businesses and young people seeking opportunities, perhaps through the next survey of businesses, would be helpful, in view of the difficult times ahead – the Officer would look into this possibility.
- The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Economy and Infrastructure (CMR) also expressed disappointment with the very low take up of apprenticeships both at a local and national level.
- The CMR advised that a report was due to go to the Council's Cabinet about projects designed to facilitate cycling including the Kepax bridge and the Chairman agreed it was important to publicise such work.
- Legislation to allow businesses to make use of outside space on pavements during the pandemic had recently been extended and the Chairman highlighted the importance of businesses being able to use outdoor space.
- When asked whether a short document could be produced to help signpost businesses to the considerable range of support available, the Officer explained that information had been circulated in September although it was a complex area, however further consideration was being given to an online brochure.
- A Panel member who was also a business owner asked if the Council could assist with problems experienced by businesses trying to open business bank accounts due to increased security and fraud concerns, and the Officer undertook to look into this as her team had good relationships with banks locally.
- The Council's enhanced presence on social media was positive and helpful, for example posts on LinkedIn could be shared.
- Cllr Jenkins requested a breakdown of business support programmes aimed at green initiatives, which the Officer was happy to provide him with outside of the meeting.
- When asked about any barriers to businesses

applying for grants to assist green initiatives, and how these could be overcome, the Officer felt that awareness would help and she would circulate information to the Panel. She also explained that some may be deterred by the fact that grants covered 40% of the costs involved, and the financial returns may take 5-10 years to come through. Increasing the grant may help improve take-up, however the Council would need to identify the additional funds.

Summing up, the Chairman was pleased to see the level and range of support and grants available to businesses and highlighted the importance of communicating messages in a simple way to business owners, for whom time was precious.

The following action / information was requested:

- confirmation of the amount paid to Worcestershire businesses so far during Covid
- in the upcoming survey of businesses, the Panel encouraged promotion of the apprenticeship scheme
- consideration of a summary document of support available to businesses
- assistance to overcome the current difficulty for businesses in opening business bank accounts
- circulation to the Panel of information about sustainability business support programmes.

**412 Highways
Operations
Update**

In attendance for this item were:

Paul Smith, Assistant Director for Highways and Transport Operations

Elliot Pritchard, Highway Maintenance Operations Manager

The Assistant Director for Highways and Transport Operations introduced the presentation and clarified that highways operations included a vast number of functions and the report and slides addressed specific aspects (carriageways, footways and public rights of way, plus an update on drainage system cyclical technology to improve reporting) which had been requested by the Panel.

The Chairman referred to one of the public participant's questions about sustainability measures in highway maintenance and the Officers agreed that it would be important to include sustainability work in future updates to the Panel, which were numerous, for example the Council's contract with Ringway for highway maintenance

included a key performance indicator for recycling with very good performance attained.

The Panel was aware that as part of the Council's 2021/22 budget, agreed in February 2021, there was additional expenditure available for carriageways (£6m), footways (£4m) and public rights of way (£500,000), and an initial update on plans had there been requested.

Carriageways

The Highway Maintenance Operations Manager explained that the additional £12m funding had been split equally over two years (2020/21 and 2021/22), which with the addition of Department for Transport (DfT) funding for 2020/21 of £14.4m, meant the combined funds for improvements was £20.4m.

The Panel was shown how this funding compared with previous years, and the Directorate's current Strategy and Annual Programme. The Council strived for its road condition to be in the upper quartile of condition A, B, C and U roads measured with the national average of road condition. In order to get the best value from structural maintenance funding, schemes were prioritised using factors including road condition and defect data, engineer site assessments and cost/benefit analysis. It was clarified that the additional funding was for maintaining existing roads, not new schemes.

Discussion points

- The point was made that the additional funding was a fabulous investment which would further enhance the condition of the county's roads and footways and would encourage walking and cycling which had greatly increased during the past year.
- There were 4,112 km of roads in Worcestershire - the Officer agreed to provide the number of carriageways in each of the categories A, B, C and U roads and the spend required to keep them in the upper quartile.
- It was explained that the Directorate had carried out an approximation as to where the condition of the county's roads needed to be in order to reach a higher quartile, based on the previous year's results.

Footways

£8m additional funding had been made available to improve Worcestershire's footways asset, split equally over 2020/21 and 2021/22. DfT funding for 2020/21 was

£2.4m. £1.8m of this fund would be utilised for structural renewals, and the remainder utilised for other footway treatments. There had been no addition to the New Members Highways Fund, and to date around £1.5m of the £2.5m fund had been spent on renewal schemes.

The 3,400km total length of the footway network was categorised as either main shopping areas, busy urban, less used/quite urban or busy rural.

The Directorate obtained information about footways from a variety of sources. Recent asset trend analysis showed steady improvement for all footway categories, and funding was prioritised and allocated based on information and modelling scenarios provided by the asset Management Team, footway defects, third party claims information and onsite engineering assessments.

The funding allocated for 2021/22 was expected to be around £7.3m, however this may increase if additional footways were funded through the New Members Fund, and all members were encouraged to inform the Directorate as soon as possible. The core budget allocation had already been agreed and passed to Ringway to programme for next year.

Members had been sent a list of proposed schemes for their division and a good deal had already replied and agreed with the proposals, therefore sufficient schemes had been passed to Ringway to allow them to programme up to November. It was likely that the annual programme would require 10-12 gangs throughout the year to deliver the full budget allocation.

Discussion points

- Panel members highlighted the importance of footways (which were also cycleways) and also public rights of way to members of the public, therefore the additional funding was very much welcomed.
- A member pointed out that the increased activity would generate more requests to councillors for footpaths maintenance, and asked how requests would be assessed and managed, including use of the members Fund, and the Officers explained that the new councillor case management system should help, and that factors considered included scanner data, usage and vulnerable users.
- Regarding issues with hedges overhanging pavements, Officers were engaged in work to encourage householders to take responsibility for

these, however this was part of separate funding.

- In terms of determining ownership of assets, it was explained that to all intents and purposes, footways and pavements were the same thing, however a public right of way was very different and may not be the Council's responsibility to maintain and was therefore more complicated.
- When asked whether the Council could have the same targets for the condition of footways compared to other areas, as it did for carriageways, it was explained that footways were not scanned in the same way, although the Council was improving footways more than many neighbouring local authorities.
- Cllr Morris asked how he could increase the focus on maintenance of housing estate footways (Westlands and Chawson), since while the Highways Engineer had been very helpful and the members allowance was appreciated, it would not be at all sufficient – the Operations Manager would look into this.
- The Chairman referred to the Panel's emphasis on transparency and suggested a footway tracker would be helpful in keeping members better informed about how footways in their area were prioritised.

Public Rights of Way (PRoW)

The Assistant Director for Highways and Transport Operations explained that the additional funding allocation of £500k capital and £100k revenue would make a big difference to PRoW, of which there were 4,600km, therefore a significant asset. PRoW usage over the past 12 months had doubled, and there were synergies with health and wellbeing and active travel.

A project group had been established to ensure that additional works were carried out effectively within budget and member approval, ensuring that value was added. Funding would be deployed across a variety of schemes including traditional works (gates, styles, footpaths, signage), structures (bridges), enhancement of well used paths and a mix of urban and rural rights of way to ensure accessibility.

Discussion points:

- The practice of labelling repairs with signage to indicate work had been carried out by the Council and contact details was very effective way of enabling the public to inform, and should be widened – a further suggestion by the Chairman

to include QR codes and promote volunteering was also agreed to be a very good idea.

- Panel members were excited about by the enhancement plans since PRoW were so well used and contributed to the population's health. Officers agreed to follow up with Public Health Colleagues regarding any potential to leverage against any grants to build on the increased usage.
- The Chairman suggested it would be helpful to add a map of existing volunteer groups to the Council's webpage, and pointed out that volunteers were often key in resolving issues as they knew landowners.

The Assistant Director pointed out that PRoW were a mix of urban and rural, and also advised that the additional funds meant an enforcement officer would be added to the PRoW team.

Cyclical Drainage

The Panel was updated on gully cleaning, mapping systems, the GIS system and next steps. There were around 104,000 gullies on the Worcestershire highways network, as well as around 10,000 additional drainage assets.

During 2019/20 significant resources were deployed to cleanse drainage assets and improve asset data recording and reporting. During the past few months Ringway had utilised resources to analyse new data to produce a revamped cleansing schedule with all drainage assets prioritised, based on recent and historic data, which determined cleansing frequency.

Each gully had a unique ID reference and had been plotted on the Council's GIS mapping system. Through GIS each gully could be interrogated to determine its ID reference, cleaning frequency, date last attended and known issues.

The online mapping system was in the final stages of development, which was split into two parts (ensuring data was accurate and fit for purpose and ensuring the system was compatible with the existing County Council website 'report it' function). Work was progressing well and demonstration of the system would take place that month, after which a trial period would start, with a limited number of users before the platform was launched.

The Panel was shown a snapshot of the Council's GIS

platform, which the new online mapping system would resemble, in a more user-friendly form, and with functions to indicate where issues had already been reported.

Regarding next steps, additional funding would be used to resource repairs of many of the defects identified during recent gully emptying. The new asset data system provided sophisticated reporting functions that allowed Officers to identify and cluster similar defects into work streams. In preparation for the next financial year, works programmes were in development to ensure commencement in April. Whilst progress was still needed, it was envisaged that there would be three additional crews the following year as well as an additional jetting resource.

Discussion points:

- The system for determining cleaning frequency of a gully was not an exact science since it depended on a range of factors.
- It was confirmed that all gullies had a unique ID.
- The Council's Officers liaised regularly with district council colleagues to ensure work was joined up and any issues discussed.
- The Chairman was really excited by the progress made on the new system, which would be a real asset in reporting issues and members highlighted the impact that drainage problems had on people's lives.
- The Chairman cautioned against spending time developing a public facing system in addition to the one used by staff, since the existing one would be accessible to everyone and there was a great deal of local expertise.

The Chairman requested a demonstration of the new online system for the Panel, and Panel members thanked the Officers present for all their work and progress during this Council term.

The following action / information was requested:

Carriageways

- Information about the number of carriageways in each of the categories A, B, C and U roads and spend required to keep them in the upper quartile when this was set at the start of the year

PROW

- encourage use of signage on styles and gateways etc to promote the council's work, volunteer

413 Work Programme

- groups and also the QR code to enable reporting
- Investigate the possibility of use of public health grants to facilitate PROW work because of the health and exercise benefits to the public and recent increased use

Cyclical Drainage – Demonstration of GIS platform new system to the Panel.

No further items were added to the work programme.

The meeting ended at 4.15 pm

Chairman