

Minutes of the Economy Overview and Scrutiny Panel
Malvern Hills District Council, Council Chamber, Avenue
Road, Malvern, WR14 3AF

Wednesday, 30 November 2022, 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Matt Dormer (Chairman), Cllr Karen Hanks (Vice Chairman),
Cllr Mel Allcott, Cllr Martin Allen, Cllr Allah Ditta, Cllr Ian Hardiman and
Cllr Tony Muir

Also attended:

Cllr Marc Bayliss, Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Economy,
Infrastructure and Skills
Cllr Tom Wells, Malvern Hills District Council
Daniel Walton, Malvern Hills District Council
Connie Dixon, Openreach
Chris Priestly, Openreach

Gary Woodman, Interim Assistant Director of Economy
Susan Crow, Economic Growth and Investment Manager
Steve Ashton, Senior Project Manager
Robert Stepniewski, Project Manager
Rachel Hill, Assistant Director for Economy, Major Projects and Waste
(attended remotely via MS Teams)
Dave Corbett, Lead Analyst for Performance (attended remotely via MS
Teams)
Samantha Morris, Overview and Scrutiny Manager
Jo Weston, 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 6 October 2022 (previously
circulated).

(A copy of document A will be attached to the signed Minutes).

14 Apologies and Welcome

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the offices of Malvern Hills District Council.

Apologies had been received from Councillors Bob Brookes and Craig Warhurst.

15 Declarations of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

16 Public Participation

None.

17 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 6 October 2022 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

18 Malvern Hills District Council Economic Challenges and how the County Council Could Help

The Leader of Malvern Hills District Council (MHDC), Councillor Tom Wells, and the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development and Tourism, Councillor Daniel Walton, had been invited to the meeting to outline the District's economic challenges and how the County Council could help.

Malvern Hills District was diverse. It was well known for its tourism offer, had a number of public schools, the highest number of degrees per capita in the West Midlands, yet had some significant pockets of deprivation.

One challenge was the lack of connectivity. Public transport links were poor, the rail network was very limited and there had been a demise in bus routes and services. One example given was the lack of any bus service between Upton upon Severn and Malvern. Councillors appreciated the bus industry was in crisis, however argued that if the workforce was unable to commute, there was an impact on business survival.

A further challenge was how to encourage visitors to stay longer and increase the tourism and leisure offer. Accommodation providers had reported that guests stayed in Malvern Hills then visited other parts of the County and beyond.

The District Council had a small team of Economic Development Officers who were enthusiastic in promoting Malvern Hills, including recent 'High Street' promotional activity.

The Leader and Portfolio Holder agreed that the County Council could support the District in 4 areas of activity:

- Advocate for additional bus services for the District
- Support Active Travel to and within the District
- Continue to promote the expansion of the successful Malvern Hills Science Park (MHSP)
- Ensure the most rural parts of the District had access to Superfast Broadband in order that businesses could flourish.

The Panel was invited to ask questions and during the discussion, the following points were raised:

- As a result of a successful plan to increase mineral extraction near Upton upon Severn, a large rowing lake would be developed. It was hoped the facility would make a huge difference to the District and County
- A Member asked that consideration be given to expand the pedestrianisation of the riverside in Upton upon Severn and hoped the County Council would support such an initiative. Access to and from the Town was an issue, as was parking, however, District Councillors commented that more could be made of the waterways generally
- Upton upon Severn held a number of festivals throughout the year. It was reported that mobile phone signal was impaired at these times, however, it was clarified that any large event, such as a stadium sporting event, would have the same issue
- An Active Travel Corridor between Worcester and Kempsey was under consideration, with a decision hoped for by the end of the year. Original cost estimates had increased as in order to attract Government funding, schemes had to be developed to a prescribed specification. It was hoped the 6.5 mile Corridor would be approved as it would not only boost the tourism offer but benefit the health and wellbeing of residents. Ideas involving bicycle hire, opportunities for walking and using the river were in development
- The Panel agreed that reliable transport options were vital for economic growth. A Member referred to 2 community bus schemes in Upton upon Severn, one serving the surrounding villages and one serving the Gloucestershire town of Tewkesbury. Fares were £4 and £8 respectively (half price for concessions) and passenger numbers were around 14 each week, proving the local need. The Member wished for a community bus between Upton upon Severn and Malvern and saw community transport as a way forward, however, seeking volunteers and funding was always a concern, especially in light of increased running cost. It was suggested that the cost of a trip outlined was up to £90. The Member was able to contribute to the schemes discussed from Worcestershire Councillors Divisional Fund to the sum of £300 each quarter
- MHDC Leader reported that the County Council had a role, as allowing bus operators to determine which services to run could diminish even more routes. Bus subsidy was a possible solution, however, the Panel

agreed that the County Council should not ask bus operators to run at a loss. Fares had to be real and fair

- It was noted that bus timetables were reported to be outdated even in the main bus station in Worcester
- MHDC Leader and Panel Members believed that Active Travel was a positive way forward. It was suggested that Council Leaders from South Worcestershire needed to be working together to improve the situation.

The Panel Chairman thanked the Leader and Portfolio Holder for attending the meeting.

19 Tourism

The County Council's Economic Growth and Investment Manager introduced the Item and referred to the Agenda Report.

The County Council (the Council) had taken over the running of Visit Worcestershire (VW) in April 2020. A small team of Officers had worked through the COVID-19 pandemic and more recently had arranged events and increased interaction with providers.

The VW Strategy had changed to promote all of Worcestershire's assets and the existing VW membership fee had been withdrawn. This had resulted in an increased number of businesses accessing services. Tourism Officers from each of the 6 Districts met regularly to discuss strategy.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the sector was worth nearly £1 billion to the County. It was reported to be down by 25% in 2021 compared to 2019.

The VW website had been launched in summer 2022, with new branding and marketing. Working with Visit Britain, it was hoped that a wider audience would be reached.

In the ensuing discussion, the following main points were noted:

- A Member asked to what extent website visitor activity was tracked, to be advised that the 'what's on' page was the most visited page. Associated weblinks were also tracked, with searches for specific events, such as Christmas events or date ranges featuring highly
- Clarity was given over fees and charges. VW did not charge any fee for advertising a business or event on its website, all content was free of charge and businesses and event organisers were encouraged to provide VW with content, which could then be self administered. There was only a cost if a business wished to advertise in the printed guide book
- The Panel agreed that all Councillors could promote VW, and the services it offers, within their own networks.

20 Superfast Broadband Annual Update

Members had received a comprehensive Report as part of the Agenda and were therefore invited to ask questions of Openreach Representatives and County Council Officers. In the ensuing discussion, the following main points were raised:

- A Member commented that although they were impressed by the superfast broadband coverage within Worcestershire, it was disappointing that mobile phone call coverage was not as good. In response, it was reported that there was a national drive to improve 4G coverage and public bodies were working together to install additional masts. However, communities often objected to proposed mast sites and sites were sometimes rejected
- The Panel noted that 3G was being switched off from 2023, with 2G switch off expected by 2030
- Looking to the future, the Panel also learned that old copper / analogue networks would be switched off in time, resulting in fibre becoming necessary. Implications were far reaching and not yet fully understood
- WiFi calling was a solution, with mobile applications such as WhatsApp. It was generally agreed that WiFi calling could be promoted more widely as a solution
- Although the roll out of superfast broadband had been extremely successful, technology had developed throughout the Contract periods. Focus had shifted to deploying Fibre to the Premises (FTTP) and Gigabit capable infrastructure networks. FTTP in Worcestershire was around 31.5%, compared to around 43% of the UK. The County Council's Corporate Strategy had set a target of Gigabit capability of 95% by the end of 2027, however, it was noted that suppliers would need to work towards the targets also. The Government ambition was that 85% of the UK would be upgraded to full fibre by 2025
- Openreach outlined their work in Worcestershire and thanked the County Council and its Officers for their support since 2014, especially reaching the County's more remote properties and communities. 67,000 premises in the County, and 25m across the UK by December 2026, would be upgraded and 29 exchanges were also in the upgrade plan for Worcestershire. Openreach had invested their own Capital, reporting that 75% of exchanges were upgraded without public subsidy. They were building the largest full fibre network across the UK, spending £15 billion to reach 25 million homes and businesses by the end of 2026
- When asked whether there had been challenges in relation to planning or road closures, it was reported that the scale of activity was second, only to High Speed 2 rail, which was why relationships with Officers was vital in order that solutions could be sought in partnership. One example given was a possible road closure which would have resulted in a school bus diversion being longer than the permitted time for children travelling
- It was clarified that Openreach was a Wholesaler. It would build the network and providers, such as BT or Sky, would then engage with end user contracts

- Housing Developments over 20 houses would now have full fibre installed free of charge and individual district councils could impose conditions, such as installation of gigabit capable infrastructure
- A Member suggested that it would be helpful if one approach to installation on footways/highways could be adopted, in response the Senior Project Manager advised that there would be liability issues for companies, as each workforce would not be working to the same specifications
- In relation to workforce, Openreach employees were given all the tools and training to undertake the tasks required, therefore no prior knowledge was required. It had the highest number of apprentices in any private sector organisation and it had its own training and development centres. There had been a reduction in international labour, however, turnover was not high and around 40 applications would be received for every vacancy advertised. They also had a good track record of recruiting ex Forces personnel and participating in local skills shows/job fairs. Openreach was committed to using only highly skilled teams (civils gangs), they recognised that complaints would always occur, so quality was key
- For clarity, Openreach had provided 31% of premises with access to full fibre (FTTP). It was important to note that residents would then need to enter into a contract for it. Officers recognised that more could be done to promote the requirement
- There had been an 80% take up rate for superfast broadband, which was described as 24 to 300 megabits per second
- A Member highlighted that advertised speeds were confusing, to be informed that several factors could reduce speed, such as use of WiFi compared to a network lead, the number of devices accessing the network at a given time and the activity undertaken, such as internet browsing or streaming videos.

21 Performance Monitoring

Members had received Performance Information for Quarter 2, July to September 2022. Attention was drawn to business survival rates, which were broadly in line with West Midlands data. A Member questioned the data relating to business survival rates (which started in 2017 and were trading 3 years later) in particular Bromsgrove businesses, was much lower than the other 5 districts. This was explained as due mainly to a large number of short term leases.

Rail Station Use data for 2021/22 had been released after the Agenda had been published and would be shared with the Panel and included in future reports. It was noted that passenger numbers were recovering well since the Covid-19 pandemic. When asked whether Worcestershire Parkway station had diverted passengers from the 2 Worcester City stations, it was clarified that Parkway served a different market, including the rural edges of Worcester City.

A Member asked why Worcestershire Parkway, opened in February 2020, had no refreshment facilities, to be informed that there was space for a food and

beverage offer, however, it was the responsibility of the train operating company to secure such a service.

The Cabinet Member with Responsibility was very pleased with the progress that Worcestershire Parkway was making, noting that it had been in development for 40 years. The pandemic had hampered progress, however, it was already successful and expansion, including car parking was possible if required. It was clarified that the redevelopment of Redditch Station would also include a food and beverage offer.

22 Work Programme

The Panel agreed that the Item ‘Update on the local economy and what the Council is doing to help businesses recover and grow’ was a duplication of other Items and should be removed from the Work Programme. It was agreed that the January 2023 Agenda be formulated in consultation with the Chairman.

The meeting ended at 11.55 am

Chairman