

Minutes of the Economy Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Wyre Forest District Council Offices, Kidderminster

Monday, 27 March 2023, 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Matt Dormer (Chairman), Cllr Karen Hanks (Vice Chairman),
Cllr Bob Brookes, Cllr Ian Hardiman and Cllr Tony Muir

Also attended:

Cllr Helen Dyke, Leader of Wyre Forest District Council
Rachel Hill, Assistant Director for Economy, Major Projects and Waste
(attended remotely via MS Teams)
Gary Woodman, Assistant Director, Economy
Steph Simcox, Acting S151 Officer (attended remotely via MS Teams)
Susan Crow, Strategic Programme Manager Economy and Sustainability
Dave Corbett, Lead Analyst (Performance) (attended remotely via MS Teams)
Samantha Morris, Interim Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Manager
Alison Spall, 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 20 January 2023 (previously circulated).

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

29 Apologies and Welcome

Apologies were received from Councillors Mel Allcott, Martin Allen and Craig Warhurst.

30 Declarations of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

31 Public Participation

None.

32 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the meeting held on the 20 January 2023 were confirmed and signed as a correct record.

33 Wyre Forest District Council Economic Challenges and How the County Council Could Help

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Helen Dyke, Leader of Wyre Forest District Council (WFDC) and thanked her for joining the meeting to discuss the District's economic challenges and ways in which the County Council could help.

The Leader of WFDC set out details of the two major regeneration projects that the Council was currently involved with, the 'Future High Streets Fund' for which the Council had been awarded £20.4m and the 'Levelling Up Fund' for which £17m of funding had been secured. The details of the individual projects being developed with this funding were as follows:

Future High Streets Fund

- To improve the connectivity from one side of the town to the other, from Worcester Street to Oxford Street.
- To refurbish the old Magistrates Court in Worcester Street and improve the area where Crown House had previously been located.

Levelling Up Fund

- To enhance the canal towpath in partnership with the County Council.
- Improvements to Kidderminster Town Hall, a 2-year project led by Kidderminster Town Council.
- To regenerate a building in Weavers Wharf, now expected to be used for food/beverage outlets as well as office space.

The Leader highlighted these monies had been awarded pre-pandemic and since that time, costs had risen considerably, therefore the original business cases had been partially scaled back. The schemes had taken time to progress, but the detailed groundwork had been carried out effectively to ensure that the current position was able to be achieved. The Council was working hard to ensure that as much as possible of the original schemes could be delivered and in a way that residents could see what was being achieved and notice a real impact from the implementation of the schemes.

The Chairman asked what the County Council could do to help the Wyre Forest district. The Leader explained that the County Council's Highways team were on the Project Boards for the regeneration projects and they provided helpful input and advice. Since the Local Plan was implemented last April, and the volume of planning applications had risen considerably, the importance of

the continuing close working relationship between the District and the County Council had been even more crucial. The Leader asked that the County Council keep Wyre Forest in mind for any potential future funding that could enable the District to improve the subways in Kidderminster town centre which were a barrier to attracting visitors into the town, and whether a maintenance programme could be established. Members commented that the cost of footbridges was prohibitive but referred to subways in other towns which had benefitted considerably from new lighting and artwork.

A Member asked the Leader what work was taking place to attract high skilled jobs to the area. The Leader explained that work continued through the Rewire Board to try to improve the local skills base and attract industries. Colleges had an important role in ensuring that young people were equipped with the skills that local businesses needed to ensure their businesses could develop successfully. The Leader highlighted that the Council encouraged and supported apprentice schemes and had a number being operated within the Council itself, as well as providing funding to support NVQ's.

The Leader acknowledged that the road network was not ideal for attracting new businesses to the District, so Council focussed on businesses that were less reliant on the road system. The District was keen to create permanent long-term employment wherever possible. The Leader also reported the success of the local start up business programme and in start-ups progressing to the next stage, although extra capacity was required with units as some of the sites were fully occupied.

In terms of a wish list, the Leader summarised the key priorities for the District going forward as follows:

- Improvements to the town centre subways.
- Continued effective joint working with the County Council on regeneration schemes and planning issues.
- Identifying other areas for joined up working such as parking enforcement, residents' car parking schemes and maintenance of highway verges.
- The extension of local bus operating times by means of improved public transport subsidies.
- The railway station improvements had been greatly appreciated and any influence that could be used to increase the number of direct trains to London would be welcomed.
- Good communication to be maintained, with an open and productive mindset on all sides.

The Chairman concurred with the importance of effective partnership working and commented that the County Council should be able to assist with a subway maintenance programme. The issue raised on public transport regarding local buses would be forwarded to the relevant Cabinet Member.

34 Business Start-Up

The Panel received a report which set out details of the Council's Enterprising Worcestershire (EW) Start-Up programme and how the Council supported and promoted enterprise in the County.

The Strategic Programme Manager (SPM) explained that they had been working closely with the 3 North Worcestershire districts for the last 8 years on business start-up initiatives, ensuring that there was no duplication with other programmes that the Districts were part of.

Referring to the data on business births and deaths, the SPM reported that following the pandemic, business births were on the rise again and that Worcestershire's numbers exceeded those in the neighbouring authorities. Whilst there was also a rise in business deaths this was at a slower pace, but the overall position was one of net gain.

The Panel was informed that through the EW programme, a comprehensive range of services was able to be provided alongside District Councils and libraries. The current EW programme with a value of £4.2m, mainly funded through European funding, had been started in 2020 and would complete at the end of June 2023, when European funding was removed.

The SPM explained the variety of support offered by the EW programme which included a range of support services including Start-Up Club offering pre-start workshops and one to one advice for those considering setting up a business; Early-Stage Business Coaching providing occasional, flexible support often required in the first few months of a starting a business; Enrich delivered by the University of Worcester to support 16-24 year old to provide an introduction to the skills and knowledge required to set up a business and High Growth Support which offered specialist targeted support to highly experienced managers in the early stages of a potentially high growth business. There were also other initiatives to support business growth including grant funding for start-up businesses up to 3 years old and EW awards recognising success achieved by those receiving support through the EW programme.

The delivery of the EW programme was monitored through the Tractivity Customer Relationship Management system which was a shared system with District Councils and enabled all partners to review and report on activity in their own area and analyse the overall data. The importance of the partnership with the libraries was highlighted and that this provided a key access point for initial enquiries and referrals.

The SPM explained that there were other programmes which provided a range of support to start-up businesses. She highlighted the success of the Community Renewal Fund programme, funded by central government, which had seen one project 'Made in Worcester' designed to accelerate the local film industry, result in 16 new businesses being created. A partnership developed with Enterprise Nation would lead to online resources and support shortly being made available free of charge to start-up businesses.

The Panel was informed that the European funding which would end at the end of June 2023, would be replaced by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, for which the 6 District Councils would have responsibility for managing and allocating funds. The SPM advised that the Council would work closely with the Districts to determine how business support could continue to be provided in the county. The Council's Growth, Investment & Sustainability Team had submitted proposals to all of the District Councils for continued delivery of business support including business start-up and was awaiting final confirmation of funding from the District Councils. The County Council had also allocated funding through the Open For Business Board for a business support and grant programme. The SPM advised that the Council would shortly be going out to commission the next 2 years of activity for business start-ups.

Members asked questions to which the following responses were provided:

- It was clarified that the total programme funding for the EW programme included private sector funding as well as contributions from the District Councils which were matched by the County Council. The SPM agreed to confirm figures for these contributions.
- The remit of the Open for Business Board was explained and examples of capital projects that the Board had supported were given. The SPM agreed to circulate a previous Cabinet report which showed specific details of this.
- In response to a query, the SPM advised that there had been about 130 grants allocated to date to businesses up to 3 years old in the current EW programme, with a further 25 to be awarded. Details of the grants awarded, with the data split into District Council areas would be circulated.

35 Performance and 2022/23 In-Year Budget Monitoring

The Panel received performance data for Quarter 2. Referring to the data on Business Enterprises by Employment Size bands, the Lead Analyst apologised that the data for the Wyre Forest District was missing. However, it was a positive picture for Wyre Forest in that there had been an 11.2% increase in the number of businesses across all size bands in the past year. The full details for each category would be circulated to Members.

With respect to the Local Enterprise Partnership data, Members were informed of the significant improvement in recent years to the Gatsby Benchmark rating whereby educational establishments were rated against 8 benchmarks, with the latest performance figures for 2022 showing that Worcestershire was one of the top 3 nationally performing areas with an average compliance rating of 6.6%. It was highlighted that this benchmark was becoming increasingly important with regards to the impact on Ofsted assessments especially where technical and vocational educational choices were offered.

Members attention was drawn to the county's employment figures for working age adults which was 77% in December 2022 and above the level for England, but below the pre-Covid level. With regard to pay rolled employees, there had been a slight increase of 1.7% in the past year, and this was at a lower rate

than the national figure. The impact of the industrial action on train services and timeliness were also highlighted, with a marked reduction in the percentages for the October to December 2022 quarter.

Members were invited to ask questions and the following points were raised:

- With regard to Superfast Broadband (SFBB) data, a Member suggested it would be more meaningful if the figures for premises connected to broadband referred to SFBB speeds in excess of 75mb per second rather than 24mb. In addition, it was agreed that the Panel would be provided with the number of premises that have fibre to the premises (FTTP).
- A Member expressed concern at the falling number of working age adults in the county. The Assistant Director for Economy commented that this was a national trend that the Directorate had been observing and worthy of further investigation.
- With regard to the greenhouse gas emissions data, a query was raised about what the 0.1% staff air travel related to. A response would be provided following the meeting.

The Acting S151 Officer highlighted that the Budget information covered the whole of the Economy and Infrastructure Directorate, which it had been agreed to present to both this Panel and the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel. It was highlighted that it was an improving position for the Directorate with a £682k underspend forecasted for the end of the financial year. The variances were detailed in the report with some increased income relating to network management and passenger transport operations; whilst the main pressures creating the overspend related to the Transport Planning and Strategic Planning teams, including the ongoing impact of contractor staff costs to cover hard to recruit vacancies.

The Panel was informed that the extension to the Waste contract had been successfully completed with a very favourable settlement, with all savings targets predicated in the budget being achieved.

The Acting Section 151 Officer referred to the impact of the rising interest costs and cost of delivery of schemes particularly on the Capital programme. The Council had approved an increase in the Capital programme for the next financial year to help ensure that important schemes were able to be delivered.

A Member asked about the latest position on recruiting hard to fill posts. The Assistant Director advised that whilst there had been some interest, there were still difficulties with recruiting to certain key posts in the S278 team and within the development management team. There would be a campaign launched to try to bring some of the roles to life to attract more candidates. It was agreed that this would be shared with members so they could circulate the information widely.

36 Work Programme Refresh

The Panel considered the items in its current work programme for 2023/24 and the following suggestions were agreed:

- The 'Worcestershire Workforce skills, including the role of Colleges' to be added to the May 2023 meeting.
- The Council's position on encouraging the over-50's back into the workforce to be added to the work programme.

In response to a Member's query about Active Travel, it was confirmed that this was an item on the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel work programme later in the year.

The meeting ended at 11.24 am

Chairman