

Minutes of the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Panel

County Hall, Worcester

Monday, 25 September 2023, 2.00 pm

Present:

Cllr Alastair Adams (Chairman), Cllr Peter Griffiths, Cllr Paul Harrison,
Cllr Emma Marshall, Cllr Beverley Nielsen and Cllr Emma Stokes

Also attended:

David Muggeridge, Chair, Worcestershire Community Transport Consortium

Paul Smith, Assistant Director for Highways & Transport Operations

Steph Simcox, Deputy Chief Finance Officer

Matt Stone, Head of Transport Technology

Madeleine Sumner, Community Transport Officer

Dave Corbett, Lead Analyst (Performance)

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 17 July 2023 (previously circulated).

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

51 Apologies and Welcome

Apologies were received from Panel Members Dan Boatright-Greene and David Ross, from Cabinet Members Richard Morris and Mike Rouse and from Rachel Hill (Assistant Director, Major Projects and Waste).

52 Declarations of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

53 Public Participation

None.

54 Confirmation of the Minutes of the previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 July 2023 were agreed and signed as a correct record.

55 Demand Responsive Transport and Community Transport Update

The Panel received a report which provided an update on Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) and Community Transport (CT).

The Assistant Director for Highways & Transport Operations (Assistant Director) highlighted that with the challenging background of commercial bus operations in the county, going forward DRT and CT were seen as vital sustainable components towards trying to ensure that residents could have access to a transport option, especially in rural areas. Worcestershire on Demand (WOD) was the Council's DRT operation, with an initial trial having taken place in Bromsgrove and a further trial currently taking place in Malvern.

The following points were raised by Members as part of the discussions:

Demand Responsive Transport

- In response to a question about the use of the Bromsgrove on Demand (BOD) service, the Head of Transport Technology (HTT) advised that the usage of the service was fairly constant; whilst there had been a reduction in requests for transport, there had only been a very small decrease, less than 3%, in actual journeys taken. The HTT confirmed that it was a flat fare of £2.50 per journey.
- The Assistant Director explained that when DRT was in a robust position, it could then be reviewed as to how it could dovetail with existing bus services. This was currently a transitional piece of work and there was no intention to degrade current services at this stage, with the whole process needing careful thought. The Assistant Director added that DRT had filled a gap with commuters travelling to Bromsgrove station and that this would have had a positive impact on air quality in that area.
- A query was raised about the cost of DRT per passenger compared to commercial buses. The HTT advised that an overview of this was currently being carried out. Whilst it was difficult to do a precise like for like, it was felt sufficient data was now available so that a comparison could be made. Once the work was completed the outcome would be shared with the Panel.
- The flexible nature of the DRT system was highlighted compared to fixed bus services. Reference was made to the use of use of trip attractors in the Malvern scheme which could be used to boost user numbers.
- A Member raised the need for additional bus stops to be provided on main commercial bus routes, for instance in proximity to where new

housing estates had been built. The Assistant Director advised that the funding situation relating to the S106 planning agreement would be checked in this regard. The Panel was assured that the team were always keen to highlight any additional potential usage to bus operators and the Assistant Director agreed to follow this up.

- A related issue was raised about there being bus stops in some locations which were unused because no bus companies were currently operating those routes. The HTT advised that a review was to be carried out which would include this issue and details would be reported back.
- In response to a request, the HTT agreed to report back on the total number of new bus stops built in the County in the last 12 months.
- With respect to commuters' use of DRT during the trials, a Member asked if there was any data which could be made available on usage patterns, for instance average journey distance and times.
- The HTT explained that data obtained from the Malvern pilot, particularly the points of interest selected, would be used to enable decisions to be made about future provision. The Assistant Director added that with the second pilot they had wanted a contrasting area to Bromsgrove and one which focussed on more rural communities, which would be a valuable learning curve.
- In terms of the promotion of the Malvern scheme, the HTT advised that as the initial pilot was now coming towards the end, and greater understanding of the system had been gained, the Economy and Infrastructure Directorate would be launching a full publicity drive on 19 October. It was agreed that the Communications plan would be circulated to the Panel for information.
- With regards to the footprint of the Malvern DRT, the Panel was informed that nothing was set in stone and that it would be developed in areas where people wanted to use it. It was highlighted that the Council's Strategic Partner, a Transport Technology software provider was providing an excellent service. A rural area of operation was new to the software provider and the learning was being shared with all parties. The Panel was pleased to hear this and Members were encouraged by the effective and proactive approach of the software provider, which would be helpful moving forward.
- A Member asked what the timescale would be before another DRT pilot scheme could take place, and whether Evesham could be considered. The HTT advised that they would wish to allow the Malvern pilot to become established first and the data to be analysed. He highlighted that the designing of a service was straight forward, but the procurement process took a considerable time. The Assistant Director reported that they had to ensure that schemes could be sustainable and flexible. Malvern was expected to give a good indication of this for taking things forward. The Assistant Director confirmed he would report back with an estimate of a likely timescale for a further pilot. The Panel was informed that it had to be a carefully considered approach, taking into account that any potential area needed to be 'fit for purpose'.
- The Chairman reminded the Panel that at their meeting the previous year, the Cabinet Member for Transport and Highways had offered CT the use of the demand responsive app which had been developed as

part of the WOD pilot in Bromsgrove, in order to help them get involved more rapidly.

- The Panel's attention was directed to the key data which had been obtained on the operation of the WOD in the past two years. The HTT highlighted that they were pleased that the average customer satisfaction was 4.7 out of 5. It was also recognised that there was still some untapped demand.
- A Member asked what would represent a successful outcome for the Malvern pilot. Another member was concerned that it would be compared unfavourably to the Bromsgrove pilot. The Assistant Director assured Members that they were not looking to make a direct comparison as the locations of the pilots were very different. The HTT explained that the pilots were being seen as a learning curve to understand what type of services could be operated effectively.
- A Member asked what liaison had taken place with other local authorities operating trials with similar software. The HTT advised that they had been in contact with a few local authorities as well as the service which runs Flecsi across the whole of Wales. He agreed to provide a map showing the locations of current trials in England.
- In response to a query, the HTT confirmed that they were in regular contact with regional colleagues about DRT through Midlands Connect, where they benefitted from shared learning.

Community Transport

- The Chair of the Worcestershire Community Transport Consortium (Chair WCTC) explained some of the benefits of the CT schemes particularly with regards to personalised and flexible service. With the DRT schemes having fixed areas, the Chair WCTC felt that CT operators would work well with DRT as the CTs could dovetail around the DRT areas, provided there was a clear understanding of operational areas between the two. He highlighted that there would always be outlying areas where residents would still need CT services.
- With regards to using DRT, the Chair WCTC commented that he was pleased that the DRT pilots still allowed users to have access to a telephone helpline, as in his experience, many older people were not able or confident to use an app.
- The Panel discussed how with the development of the software, the DRT and CT schemes could in future work more closely together to meet demand. The Chair WCTC confirmed that the Cabinet Member's offer for CT schemes to be enabled to use the software was welcome and of interest, although he stressed that CT would not be able to offer an 'on demand' service.
- The Community Transport Officer (CTO) advised that the CT schemes were regularly reviewing their booking software, with a meeting taking place the following day to look at software options and to assess how CT could be added into the DRT app. The HTT added that software solutions were being looked at to fit with the wider network, based on 3 offers of Fixed, DRT and CT services with discussions taking place on the feasibility of an integrated service.

- A Member asked whether the technology would be able to be used in private cars. The Chair WCTC commented that the cost of the technology would be prohibitive for cars, but that it could be an option for minibuses. The HTT explained that where there was planned demand for service it would be easier to set up, but it would be more difficult for immediate demand. The CTO advised that information was being gathered from CT schemes to see how things could be moved forward.
- With praise for the work of the CT schemes, a Member queried how young people could also be made aware of the WOD/CT options. The CTO advised that the services were open to people of all ages who had a reason to use the services. She stressed that with a huge drop in volunteer numbers, they were reluctant to promote a service above what was currently offered, as they had to be able to match drivers to the demand for journeys. The CTO added that where a particular need was highlighted in an area, she would work with the CT operator in that area to try and support the need.
- The way in which the shortage of volunteers was curtailing the CT schemes was discussed. Members made a number of suggestions, including tapping into established social groups such as 'Men in Sheds'. The CTO highlighted the range of methods she already used to encourage potential volunteers. With regards to adverts placed in Parish magazines, the CTO was happy to take up a suggestion of forwarding a similar advert to Members, who could then seek to promote the cause in their area.
- In response to a question, the Chair WCTC explained that the legislation applicable to volunteers driving minibuses had not been altered as had been expected. Volunteer drivers could still drive vehicles up to a certain weight with their standard driving licences. He added that the Department for Transport were currently reviewing all licence classifications, so the outcome of this was awaited.
- It was highlighted that there had previously been some discussion as to whether the Council could provide support to CT by procuring minibuses on their behalf. The CTO advised that there had been some discussion, but unfortunately very few suitable minibuses became available to purchase, and with costs having also risen considerably, they hadn't been able to move forward on this. The Assistant Director advised that if CT wished to purchase new vehicles, the Council's commercial team could help with this, and he would liaise with the CTO on this. He highlighted there would, however, be a long lead in time for the procurement process.
- A Member queried whether there was a 'Motability' scheme for purchasing minibuses similar to that for private cars. The Chair WCTC commented that he was aware of an offer, but he understood there was specific requirements regarding the turnover of the organisation purchasing the vehicle. The CTO agreed to obtain further clarification on the eligibility criteria.
- In summarising, the Chairman commented that he felt WOD and CT were great initiatives, and the Panel was very supportive of both. The Panel hoped that the software and expertise that was available could also work for CT and ultimately that one platform could be available. In

addition, it was hoped that the procurement muscle of the Council could be used to assist the CT schemes going forward to enable them to develop their services.

- The Panel asked that an update be provided in 12 -18 months.

56 Performance and In-Year Budget Monitoring

Performance – Quarter 1 (April to June 2023)

The Chairman enquired about the progress being made towards this Panel having access to Power Bi. The Lead Analyst advised that he would liaise with the Chairman following the meeting, with a view to arranging an informal demonstration for the Panel.

The Panel raised a number of queries relating to the performance data as follows:

Condition of Street signage

A Member raised concern about the poor condition of some street signage in her area, in that they were dirty and falling over. Other Members agreed that they also were noticing similar issues. The Assistant Director advised that inspection of street signage was part of the Highway Contractor's core service and covered under one of their regular inspection schedules. He would contact the Highways Contractor to highlight the concerns that had been raised. In the meantime, Members were encouraged to continue reporting these matters to the Directorate in the usual way.

Waste Composting

In order to improve waste composting levels, a Member asked what the next steps would be to engage the public. The Member referred to a free magazine provided in her area offering advice to residents on these issues, which she felt was really helpful. The Assistant Director advised that there was a dedicated resource allocated for promotional activity to reach the wider public and it was confirmed that further avenues would be explored.

Countryside Access - Volunteer Groups

The Chairman highlighted the significant benefits to be gained by the Council from the effective use of volunteer groups and for the volunteers themselves from their involvement in the groups. He was keen to see their further development. The Assistant Director acknowledged the significant number of issues resolved by the volunteer groups and he would encourage their further expansion.

Pothole Defects report graph

The Chairman referred to the new pothole defects graph and the Lead Analyst advised that this enhanced graph had been introduced to provide more detailed information and some context around the clarifications.

Highways Development Control cases

A query was raised on the June figures as to why, despite less cases being received, there was a reduction in the number of cases completed that month. The Lead Analyst advised it was likely to relate to the complexity of the cases involved, or staffing issues, but he would check and report back to members.

Waste collected across Worcestershire

Members discussed the reasons why Worcestershire's figures for waste collected (kg per head of the County's population), were relatively high compared to other counties such as Oxfordshire. The Lead Analyst highlighted that a difference with some of the best performing authorities was that they carried out extensive collections including food waste. A Member explained that roadside collections represented only 38% of the kg per head figure, with the remainder coming from a variety of sources including bulky waste and commercial waste.

Greenhouse Gas emissions

A Member asked whether methane emissions were monitored separately, given its damaging impact. The Lead Analyst agreed to check the source data to identify whether methane was separated out, and if so, details would be reported back.

In response to a question about the scope of influence data, the Lead Analyst explained that the top table related to per capita emissions and was beyond the control of the Council. On the other hand, the lower table set out 3 scopes over which the Council did have some control. He highlighted that the latest figures for 2022/23 indicated that the figure for scope 2 should go down to zero.

Public Enquiries (PEMs)

Referring to the subject matter of PEMs enquiries, it was highlighted that a number of categories, including hedges and trees, were showing a zero number of cases in recent months. The Panel was informed that there had clearly been an issue with the categorisation process and that this would be rectified.

Developer Funded Highways Infrastructure - S278s and S38s

The Chairman commented that the average number of days for S278s and S38s to be approved was still too high. The Lead Analyst advised that, following a request at the last meeting, some supplementary information on outstanding schemes was being finalised to be incorporated into the data set. Members discussed the significant impact that delays in S38s had on residents seeking to sell their homes, with them having to take out extra insurance cover for this issue if their road had not yet been adopted.

Definitive Map Modification Orders (DMMOs)

It was requested that figures on numbers of Public Pathway Orders (PPOs) should be included in future reports. The Lead Analyst explained the difference between the Council's duty in respect of DMMO's, compared to the discretionary nature of the Expression of Interest list

In Year Budget Monitoring - 2023-24

The Panel received the budget monitoring information for Period 4. The Deputy Chief Financial Officer (DCFO) explained that the Corporate budget position had been provided to the Panel for information and would be considered by Cabinet on 28 September. The net forecast overspend for the Council and Worcestershire Children First was £18.2m, a position similar to that faced by other local authorities.

The DCFO provided details of the most significant variances in the Economy and Infrastructure budget, with a £0.5m overspend relating to hard to fill posts within Planning and Regulation, this being after the use of the earmarked reserve. There was also a £0.6m overspend within Waste Management due to higher levels of waste tonnage than having been predicted at budget setting, and the Retail Price Index (RPI) rates being higher than could have been anticipated due to inflationary pressures. It was highlighted that there had been a partial mitigation with this due to the favourable position of recycling within the contract. Finally, the Panel was informed that an underspend of £0.7m had been achieved in road lighting, as a result of the roll out of the LED replacement programme and the reduction in kWh usage being at a higher rate than expected.

Comparative details of the revenue spend on Highways Maintenance from Quarter 1 in 2022/3 year to Quarter 1 2023/24 was requested. The DCFO agreed to supply these figures following the meeting.

Referring to the £627k forecast variance for Waste Management, a Member was keen to learn more about what happened when there were operational problems within the plant, how quickly they were able to be rectified, and the resultant impact on this figure. The Member was informed that the Assistant Director (Major Projects and Waste) would be best placed to advise on this. The Chairman also recommended that the Member could benefit from a visit to the plant to broaden her understanding of operations.

57 Work Programme

The Panel considered its current work programme, and no changes were required.

It was agreed that the situation with regard to the approval of the S278 Scrutiny Task Group report would be checked to clarify when the Cabinet would be reconsidering the report.

The Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board (OSPB) had asked Panel Chairman to invite Panel members to make suggestions for topics for the next Scrutiny Task Group. All suggestions would be considered at the next OSPB meeting on 19 October. Members were asked to forward any ideas that they wished to be considered.

In response to a Member's question about a school street policy, the Assistant Director agreed to follow this up.

The meeting ended at 5.05 pm

Chairman