

Minutes of the Economy Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Wychavon District Council Offices

Friday, 17 November 2023, 10.00 am

Present:

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

Also attended:

Cllr Christopher Day, Wychavon District Council
Cllr Richard Morris, Wychavon District Council
Ian Edwards, Wychavon District Council
Cllr Matt Jenkins, Green and Independent Alliance Group Leader
Steve Ashton, Senior Project Manager
Emily Barker, Head of Planning and Transport Planning
Dave Corbett, Lead Analyst (Performance)
Rachel Hill, Assistant Director for Economy, Major Projects and Waste
Steph Simcox, Deputy Chief Finance Officer
Robert Stepniewski, Project Manager
Gary Woodman, Interim Assistant Director of Economy
Samantha Morris, Interim Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Manager
Deborah Dale, Community Engagement Officer

Available Papers

The members had before them:

- A. The Agenda papers (previously circulated);
- B. The Minutes of the Meeting held on 5 October 2023 (previously circulated).

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

58 Apologies and Welcome

Apologies were received from Councillors Matt Dormer and Mel Allcott.

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and advised the agenda order would be altered to discuss Performance and In-year Budget Monitoring at Item 7 (instead of Item 8) and Worcestershire Rail Investment Strategy at item 8 (instead of item 7).

59 Declarations of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

60 Public Participation

None.

61 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 5 October 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

62 Wychavon District Council Economic Challenges and How The County Council Can Help

The Chairman welcomed the Leader, the Executive Board Member for Economic Growth and Tourism and the Director of Economy and Environment of Wychavon District Council (WDC) to the meeting to discuss the District Council's economic challenges and ways in which the County Council could help.

The Panel received a presentation (slides attached) which covered the following main areas:

- Economic Conditions
- 2022/23 highlights
- Economic Development
- 2023/24 Priorities
- Economic Vision
- Asks of the County Council

The main areas that the District Council would like support from the County Council with were:

- Strategies to support WDC's ambitions ie Rail, Local Transport, Skills
- Delivery of UKSPF business support programmes
- Supportive engagement in planning applications/consents supporting job growth
- Specific asks:
 - Congestion in Evesham
 - A46 roundabout improvements
 - Hampton footbridge
 - Common Road to the Valley active travel route
 - Funding for footbridge at Pershore Station
 - Droitwich Spa station masterplan
 - Westlands Roundabout
 - Copcut/A38

During the opportunity for discussion, the following main points were made:

- In response to a question regarding the number of commuters using local stations within Wychavon, the Leader of WDC confirmed that although Droitwich Station was the busiest, commuters were opting to drive to Birmingham International Rail Station to commute to London as there were 3 trains per hour on that service. There had also been improvements on the Cotswold service to London which was popular.
- It was highlighted that the opening of the Worcestershire Parkway Railway Station which the Leader of Worcestershire County Council had driven forward was a good example of collaborative working between the County and District Council and more opportunities were welcomed.
- In response to a Member question about which Wychavon Industrial Estates were expanding, the Panel was advised that Hartlebury was a good example, as well as Stonebridge Cross and Vale Industrial Estate.
- In response to a Member question about whether there were any possible areas for business incubator sites (ie support for start-ups and early-stage businesses) in Wychavon, various initiatives and examples from other areas were discussed. The Interim Assistant Director for Economy, Worcestershire County Council also explained that the County Council was interested in opportunities which linked to universities and were within one hour travelling distance to Worcestershire such as Oxford, Bristol and Cardiff as data showed that university students were likely to consider options within this timeframe. The Leader of WDC felt that it would be useful to have further conversations.
- A Member who was not a Panel Member questioned what the congestion issues in Evesham were and was advised that the solution was to increase the capacity of the A46 and complete the Hampton footbridge.

63 Digital Infrastructure and Connectivity Annual Update

The Panel was updated on the progress of the deployment of broadband, mobile digital infrastructure and other initiatives to improve digital connectivity in Worcestershire.

During the discussion, the following main points were made:

- In response to a Member's question about the location of phone masts and telegraph poles and the concerns of residents, it was confirmed that commercial operators would need to install more phone masts in preparation for the 2G and 3G switch off as 4G and 5G did not reach as far at 2G and 3G.
- From November 2023, the Digital Infrastructure and Connectivity Team (DI&CT) would be reviewing applications for mobile masts and Councillors would be notified of those in their area. A briefing note and list of FAQs would be provided to help Councillors respond to questions, should they be contacted by residents.

- The Panel was informed that network providers were sharing infrastructure, such as masts but there could still be some gaps in coverage. Gaps could also occur when networks looked to reduce running costs by 'turning the network down'. As the Council could not influence networks to improve their coverage, there was a need for essential coverage on highways.
- The Council was looking to provide support for event coverage in Worcestershire by attending events in Worcestershire from March 2024 – March 2025 to provide small mobile networks for example to provide payment terminals. Three months' notice was required for mobile network licences. but with a shorter notice period for flooding incidents.
- It was confirmed that Worcester City had over 80% Gigabit capability.
- A Panel Member suggested that it would be helpful if further information and education on infrastructure could be provided, and it was confirmed that a web link to a guide would be provided to all councillors.
- The Interim Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Manager advised that the Corporate and Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel would be considering the Council's preparedness for preparedness for PSTN/ISDN Switch at its meeting on 18 January 2024.

64 Performance (Q4 January - March) and In-Year Budget Monitoring

The Panel received performance data for quarter 2 (July – September 2023) and in-year budget monitoring information for period 6.

During the discussion, the following main points were noted:

Performance

- Updated information regarding rail journeys: station usage for 2022/2023 was due to be published on 14 December 2023. It was noted that for 2021/2022 and visits to Pershore Railway Station had bounced back since the pandemic and Worcestershire Parkway was performing well.
- The numbers of working-age adults in employment had reduced but were not a cause for concern and were almost back to pre-Covid level.
- Trends of payrolled employees remained the same, at just under the national level.
- There was no available update on business survival rates for the meeting but data on the level of businesses still trading after one year would be available at the beginning of December.
- Worcestershire Business enterprises were down 5.5% on last year.
- The biggest change had been the drop in the survival of micro-businesses in Bromsgrove and Worcester (businesses with 5 - 9 employees)

In-year Budget Monitoring

During the discussion, the following main points were noted:

- The overall outturn forecast at Period 6 for the Council was a net overspend of £21.9m.

- There were significant budget pressures in Adults, Childrens and Home to School Transport – price and demand but this was a similar position for other Local Authorities.
- The Economy and Infrastructure Directorate had a forecast overspend of c£0.7m.
- As the Council’s demand was greater than the funding available, the Secretary of State was being lobbied.
- Interest rates on waste contracts were higher than forecast, but improvements should be seen in the next financial year.
- In response to the question on whether the overspend of £21.9 million would increase further, the Panel was informed that there were cost pressures relating to adult and children’s social care placements as well as Home to School Transport costs which had increased significantly.
- A Member questioned if £9m of reserves had been used, how much was left and it was confirmed that the general fund reserves balance was £14.217m at the end of 2022/23 which was an increase from £12.3m at the end of 2021/22. This was confirmed in Table 17 of the budget report to Cabinet on 2 February 2023 which can be found at [4. Cab 2-2-2023 Budget Report FINAL.pdf \(modern.gov.co.uk\)](#)
- The Council’s auditors were comfortable with the reserves going forward and at the end of the financial year, the auditors would look again at the figures to identify if the Council had sufficient reserves. Last year’s accounts would be reported to Cabinet and would be available at the end of November 2023.

65 Worcestershire Rail Investment Strategy

The Head of Planning and Transport Planning summarised the report and the meeting was then opened up for questions, during which the main points were noted:

- The aspiration for Rushwick Station was detailed in the South Worcestershire Development Plan (SWDP) review, which was being submitted to the Secretary of State, the timing of works was dependent on the upgrading of the semaphore technology to modern electronic technology. The cost of this resignalling was uncertain with Network Rail to produce designs for this technology.
- The demand for parking at Droitwich Railway Station was low as commuters used the vacant site at Union Lane and surrounding roads. Due to the location of the station being within a cutting, there had been a history of anti-social behaviour and county lines activity. It was confirmed that work was being undertaken in terms of safety and visibility and further improvements would be looked at.
- A Member suggested that in terms of active travel, links/timings for trains and buses could be improved.
- It was also highlighted that better active travel options for cyclists were needed at Worcestershire Parkway as there were numerous steps at the rear of Worcestershire Parkway station to reach the secure parking for cycles, the Head of Planning and Transport Planning advised that Active Travel Team would be looking at a solution for accessing the steps to aid cyclists. As part of the Parkway settlement there were new

cycle routes into Worcester and Pershore and First Bus and Great Western Railway were looking at routes to improve connectivity.

- The Panel noted that improvements to stations such as Kidderminster and Malvern were very welcome and every accessibility issue and concern regarding Worcestershire Parkway had been addressed.

66 Work Programme

The Panel considered its current work programme and required the following items to be added:

- How the County Council could support local business growth
- The support provided by County Council to encourage local university students to work and live in Worcestershire.

The meeting ended at 12.24 pm

Chairman

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Minute Item 62

Overview

- Economic Conditions
- 2022/23 Highlights
- 2023/24 Priorities
- Economic Vision
- Asks of the County Council



Explore Vale & Spa



Economic Conditions

- High wage economy with workplace earnings above County and Regional averages (£631.60 pw) *
- Growth in workplace earnings since 2010 outstripped County, Regional and National Figures (45%) *
- Low unemployment compared with County, Regional and National levels (3%) **
- Those economically active comparable with County and above Regional and National figures (80.5%) **
- Visitor economy worth £170 million employing over 3000 people

* ONS annual survey of hours and earning 2022

** ONS claimant count 2022



2022/23 Highlights

- Launched Investment Prospectuses for Droitwich Spa, Evesham and Pershore
- Secured £5m of UKSPF and REPF grants
- Secured inward investment including ZwickRoell, Alliance Carpets, IONOS and MP Filtri
- 35 Events supported, including Battle of Evesham, Pershore Plum Festival, Saltfest and Outdoor Cinemas
- Tourism offer promoted on national TV, Radio and in print including, The One Show, Countryfile and The Times newspaper.
- Supported major town centre investment projects including Riverside Shopping Centre, Droitwich Lido and Pershore Marina feasibility work
- Fully resourced Economic Development Team



Economic Development



Head of Economic Development
Shawn Riley



UK Shared Prosperity Fund Programme Manager
(Wychavon and Malvern)
Elspeth McQueen



Skills Officer
Sue Owens



Place Projects Manager
Steven Knight



UK Shared Prosperity Fund Support Officer
(Wychavon and Malvern)
Georgina Muckle



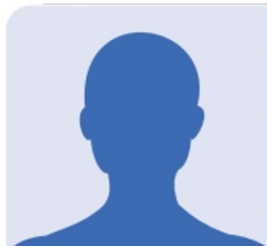
Pershore & Rural Tourism and Regeneration Officer
Angela Taylor



Place Projects Officer
Gemma Ranford
(Droitwich Spa)



Economic Development Officer
Emma Ridley



Tourism and Regeneration Assistant
Megan Salacinski



Place Projects Officer
Caroline Tredwell
(Evesham)



Economic Development Assistant
Megan Crane

2023/24 Priorities

- Progress the regeneration of the Riverside Shopping Centre.
- Deliver town centre initiatives that attract additional footfall
- Deliver a grant funding programme targeted at rural businesses and communities funded by REPF
- Provide grant funding programmes that support local businesses to grow and increase productivity
- Work with local schools to ensure young people are engaged with the economic opportunities available to them locally and provide further apprenticeship grants as an alternative to leaving the area by going to university
- Secure additional commercial space to enable local business to grow and new businesses to locate in Wychavon
- Promote Wychavon as an attractive tourism destination
- Support events throughout the year across the district
- Develop our working relationship with local businesses in all sectors and improve our means of communicating with them



Economic Vision

- Sustainable town centres with increasing footfall, reducing vacancies and increased spend and dwell time
- Significant growth in the provision of employment space supported by the South Worcestershire Development Plan Review including:
 - Worcestershire Parkway
 - Throckmorton
 - Expansion of existing commercial/industrial estates
- Increase in workplace income
- Key sectors
 - Tourism
 - Hospitality
 - Food Production
 - Logistics
 - Low carbon economy
 - Knowledge intensive, high value jobs



Explore Vale & Spa



Asks of the County Council

- Strategies to support our ambitions ie Rail, Local Transport, Skills
- Delivery of UKSPF business support programmes
- Supportive engagement in planning applications/consents supporting job growth
- Specific asks:
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 - A46 roundabout improvements
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