

Attendance

Members of the Scrutiny Board

Cllr Paul Sweet (Chair)
Cllr Philip Bateman MBE
Cllr Rita Potter
Cllr Wendy Thompson
Cllr Simon Bennett
Cllr Susan Roberts MBE
Cllr Zee Russell
Cllr Ellis Turrell (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Louise Miles
Cllr Udey Singh
Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman

Employees

Martin Stevens DL (Scrutiny Team Leader)
Tim Johnson (Chief Executive)
Richard Lawrence (Director of Regeneration)
Ian Fegan (Director of Communications and Visitor Experience)
Crissie Rushton (Visitor Economy Manager)
Alison Shannon (Chief Accountant)
Liam Davies (Head of City Development)
John Thompson (Head of Procurement)
Parvinder Uppal (Head of Commercial Services)
Stephen Alexander (Head of City Planning)
Michele Ross (Lead Planning Manager)
Ian Culley (Lead Planning Manager)
Earl Piggott-Smith (Scrutiny Officer)

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 **Apologies for absence**
An apology for absence was received from Cllr Val Evans.

The Cabinet Member for Inclusive Economy sent his apologies due to illness.
- 2 **Declarations of interest**
There were no declarations of interest.

3 **Wolverhampton Local Development Scheme**

The Chair explained that the decision on the Wolverhampton Local Development Scheme taken by Cabinet on Wednesday, 26 October 2022 had been called-in by the Vice-Chair of Scrutiny Board, Cllr Ellis Turrell. This meant the decision by Cabinet could not be implemented until Scrutiny had considered the matter and made any recommendations. The decision taken by Cabinet had been as follows: -

1. That the Wolverhampton Local Development Scheme (2022-2025) attached as Appendix 1 to the report, be approved upon formal confirmation that the Draft Black Country Plan is no longer proceeding.
2. That a further report to approve Issues and Preferred Options consultation on a Wolverhampton Local Plan covering the period to 2040, which would build on work already completed through the Draft Black Country Plan be submitted to a future meeting.
3. That it be noted that the Black Country Plan preparation process has now ceased following the announcement of the intended withdrawal of Dudley Council.

The Vice-Chair commented that the Scrutiny Board had the following options available on the item: -

- a) note the decision, which can then be implemented immediately;
- b) ask the Cabinet to reconsider the decision (a decision can only be reconsidered once)
- c) refer the decision to Full Council's next meeting to see if it wishes the decision to be reconsidered.

The Vice-Chair gave a statement as to why he had called-in the decision by Cabinet. He commented that it was a very important matter as it would be the Council's Housing Development plan up until 2040. He said that the Cabinet had wanted the decision to be taken under the special urgency powers in the Constitution, which would have meant no scrutiny could have taken place before or after the decision. This was why he had not consented to the decision being taken under the special urgency provisions. He was aware there was considerable opposition from residents for building on the green belt. It was important to consider all options now Wolverhampton were developing their own plan, including possibly reissuing a call for sites. There were issues about the plan to date in how it met the provisions of the requirements of the NPPF (National planning Policy Framework) particularly around the requirements of open space and the need to replace open space if it was taken away. He wanted the matter to be considered by Full Council.

The Chief Executive remarked that the Cabinet Decision was very much about the process of moving towards a Wolverhampton Local Development plan. There was a whole plan, consultation process and approval process to follow in the future, including taking it to Full Council.

A Member asked for reassurance that there were enough planning staff to undertake the required work on the Wolverhampton Local Development Plan within the appropriate timescales. The Chief Executive responded that they were looking to utilise on the work already completed on the Black Country Draft Local Plan so they did not lose any unnecessary time and incur additional expense. The Council would however need to spend whatever funds were required to ensure a quality plan within the timescales required.

A Panel Member asked for reassurance that the Council was liaising with the correct Government department on the process. The Chief Executive responded that the three leaders of Wolverhampton, Walsall and Sandwell had written to the Secretary of State to inform him of the intention of each of the authorities.

A Member of the Panel commented she understood why Dudley had pulled out because their consultation with the public showed that many were against the plans to build on green belt land within Dudley. She knew that residents in Wolverhampton would also be opposed to green belt land being built on. She had been concerned in the past with the communication between planning Officers at Wolverhampton Council and local Wolverhampton Councillors on developments in South Staffordshire which could impact on Wolverhampton residents. She stated that Wolverhampton had less than 11% green belt land. She wanted to protect this land. The obvious land to build on was industrial and Brownfield land. She felt that the standard of some of Wolverhampton's social housing needed to be raised. Wolverhampton had also helped the Home Office by housing a significant number of refugees and migrants in the past. The old Wolverhampton Environment centre she felt strongly should be removed from the strategic housing list. There was a lobby group of over 1000 people who were seeking the removal of the site. She asked for proper liaison with Councillors about the inquiry that would take place in Tong, Shropshire.

The Chief Executive commented there would be a time for Councillors and residents to make their views known on the plan. They were looking at the requirement of housing numbers in Wolverhampton. The original numbers had been presented by the Government. The numbers had been challenged in the past with Ministers, but it did not change any of the numbers significantly. The Wolverhampton plan had to be drawn up with the requirements of the existing legislation.

The Vice-Chair expressed concern about the timetable for the Wolverhampton plan. He felt it was being rushed. His view was that everything had changed with Dudley pulling out. He suggested that a reissue for a call of sites should take place. There was an opportunity to reassess whether the extent of green belt needed to be in the plan.

The Chief Executive responded that other sites could be considered as part of the process. It was the intention to progress as quickly as they could. There were significant risks to the City, if there wasn't a plan.

A Panel member commented that every effort should be made to protect the green belt land in Wolverhampton. He was particularly concerned about the green belt land in Bushbury North which was at high risk. The impact on local services and infrastructure in the area also had to be considered as part of the wider picture. He

felt a fresh look was required and the process should not be rushed. He asked who had given the external legal advice to the Council and on what basis.

The Chief Executive reiterated that the process would allow the ability to look at fresh sites and those that had already been consulted on. Legal advice was received by the Council and he was willing to share what he could.

A Panel Member supported the comments that the process should not be rushed and a fresh look should be taken.

The Chief Executive commented that it was important to get the plan right and the process would be robust. It would be resourced accordingly. If the timetable needed to be reviewed then they would take a considered position.

There was a discussion about the risks of government intervention and the risk of slowing down the process of publishing a final plan. The Chief Executive commented that developers wanted certainty. Areas that could provide planning certainty tended to see a resulting increase of investment. A lack of certainty could therefore make Wolverhampton less attractive for investment, which would be non-desirable. Government planners had the power to take over the local plan development process and would charge the Local Authority for the costs.

Several Panel Members stressed the importance of listening to residents and ensuring that the appropriate staff took into account their views.

The Vice-Chair remarked that the Mayor of the WMCA area was committed to trying to protect the green belt land in Wolverhampton. The Vice-Chair did not believe Government intervention was likely at the present time. He asked if the work that had taken place on the Regulation 19 consultation would be published, in terms of the sites that would be carried forward. Additionally, he asked in relation to the Local Development Scheme, why there was no reference to the Tettenhall Local Neighbourhood plan.

The Lead Planning Manager stated that the responses to the 2021 consultation would be taken into account in the new plan. The work for the regulation 19 plan, would be used to support the Wolverhampton plan and some of that work would be published for the new consultation. Neighbourhood planning was brought forward under different legislation, so the Council could not include neighbourhood plans as part of the Local Development Scheme. Although neighbourhood plans were a legal document which would hold weight in the determination of planning and appeal decisions. They were however out of scope of the Local Development Scheme.

Resolved: The decision of Cabinet be noted and implemented immediately.

4

City Centre Regeneration

A presentation was given on City Centre Regeneration by the Director of Regeneration, and The Head of City Development. A copy of the presentation is attached to the signed minutes. The Chair had invited all Members of the Economy and Growth Scrutiny Panel for the item.

There was a comprehensive discussion about hotels, where they should be located and how they should be funded. The Director of Regeneration commented that it

was hoped a report on hotel options would come before Cabinet in the next few months.

The Vice-Chair stated that he thought the City Centre was in a poor state. Businesses were still closing and moving out of the City Centre. There were also considerable empty units in the City Centre. He was concerned about smashed windows in buildings. He was particularly concerned about the St. George's site. He commented that the Government had strengthened compulsory order purchase powers, but he felt the Council had not used them enough. He believed that without the help of the Government and the WMCA the position would be even worse in the City.

The Director of Regeneration stated that the Council had looked to compulsory purchase Shakespeare House, 66- 70 Lichfield Site, but the owner's assessment of the value did not match the Council's. They had changed the usage which made a CPO very difficult.

The Vice-Chair commented that he was most concerned about derelict buildings in the City Centre, Shakespeare House was now being used as apartments and was not a derelict building. He asked why the Council were not looking to purchase derelict buildings. The Director of Regeneration responded that it came down to influence with third parties and trying to encourage them to develop. If it was part of a key strategic objective the Council would consider a CPO.

A Panel Member praised the work that was taking place near the Canals. He hoped the local nature reserve could be promoted as part of Wolverhampton's green space. He hoped a hotel could soon be developed, he had speeches going back to 2005 when he had raised the need.

Some Panel Members praised the money, over a billion pounds, which the City had received from Government to help with regeneration projects.

A Panel Member asked if a compensation package would be put in place for businesses on North Street, like was being considered for businesses on Victoria Street due to the Public Realm works. The Director of Regeneration responded that it was the Council's intention to provide business support. Ongoing conversations were taking place on the next steps.

A Panel Member raised a concern about the building site near the Molineux ground. The site was not secure and businesses were raising concerns with him due to their buildings being damaged. He had some photos which he could send to the Director. The Director responded that he would welcome the photos and could raise a concern with the contractors.

A Member of the Panel asked if the Council had received assurances from the WMCA area Mayor regarding the further delay of the metro extension. The Director of Regeneration responded that he had been seeking assurances at Board level that the trams would be running as soon as possible. There had been some assurances it would be in the coming weeks, but they were awaiting a definitive timeline.

The Vice-Chair commented that the presentation had detailed a strong demand and interest in new hotels in Wolverhampton. He questioned why public intervention

might be required because if there was strong demand and interest, it wouldn't be required. He asked if the evidence of the demand could be provided. He thought a new hotel should not be located in the west of the City Centre as it was too far from the train station and bus station. He asked if existing buildings on Lichfield Street could be converted into a Hotel. He asked for some examples where a Local Authority had built their own hotel.

The Head of City Development responded that they had done some soft market testing and had received responses from brands and franchises. A number of locations had been stress tested. There was a clear need for a hotel but a private hotel had not been brought forward in Wolverhampton in the last 14-15 years. It was clear a hotel was needed but the market was quite clear as to how it viewed the situation. The information would be provided in the forthcoming Cabinet report. The evidence on the sector showed a hotel would take a number of years to break even, this information would be in the Cabinet report.

A Panel responded that there needed to be more footfall in the City and regeneration was required. Bringing the private sector in to work with the public sector was an effective way of helping a City to regenerate. She felt proper recognition was needed of the support the Government had provided regeneration projects in the City. She referred to the lack of a professional quarter in the City. She had received some negative comments regarding the proposed Box Park. She had constant comments made to her about the lack of good car parking in Wolverhampton and taxi drivers were often complaining to her about the condition of the streets. People were choosing not to visit the City Centre and were instead going to Birmingham, Shrewsbury and Telford.

A Panel Member asked if there was any data on how many businesses had closed in Wolverhampton due to Covid. She was concerned about the lack of spending money some people would now have and the changing retail habits of people shopping online. The Director of Regeneration responded that it was clearly a difficult time. Business start up rates in Wolverhampton were some of the best in the Country. It was true that certain sectors were struggling and had been since the pandemic started. They had been supported through national and local business support activities and grants. The energy prices were also having an impact. Planning for a sustainable and strong economy was critical.

A Panel Member commended Sainsbury's for securing a number of brands in their store. He asked about the plans to find developers for the West part of the City Centre. The Director for Regeneration responded that they were working with the WMCA and Homes England to bring part of the site forward. They were also in negotiations with commercial developers and investors. There was no definitive timeline.

A Panel Member asked for a timeline for the development of the west part of the City to ensure that it was progressed in an appropriate timescale.

5 **Visitor Experience: Strategy, Plan and Budget**

A presentation on Visitor Experience, Strategy, Plan and budget was given by the Director of Communications and Visitor Experience, and the Visitor Economy Manager. A copy of the presentation slides are attached to the signed minutes.

A Member of the Panel asked how many people attended the Speedway and Greyhound Racing at the Racecourse. These people often went on to buy food and drink within the City at other venues. The Director of Communications and Visitor Experience commented that it was a point well made and more could be detailed on the benefits of the Racecourse in the future. The Council were keen to build on some of the sporting elements in the City.

A Panel Member asked if the Council wanted the City to have a unique signature event in 5-10 years' time. The Director of Communications and Visitor Experience responded that it was certainly an ambition but one that needed to be carefully considered. He couldn't put a timeframe on the ambition, but he certainly wanted to see some UK profile events in the City. Achieving a unique signature event was a challenge.

There was a discussion about what success would look like in the City. The Director of Communications and Visitor Experience stressed the importance of performance metrics and indicators to be able to judge success.

The Vice-Chair referred to the events budget in the previous year having been exceeded by £200,000. He expressed surprise that the Council had been putting on some events without a pre-established budget. The Relight Festival did not have a budget but had cost the Council nearly £160,000. He expressed concern about the budgets and profits for Council run events. He wasn't sure how indirect economic benefit was calculated. He asked about the costs of the external consultants IPW. He felt analysis of demand was important before events were hosted.

The Director of Communications and Visitor Experience responded that there did need to be better use of data when looking at demand. Economic modelling was based on the 2015 Great Britain Day survey. They would be going to a newer model in the future. The Relight Festival had been challenging because of the pandemic. It hadn't been intended to be a commercial event, it was more about indirect benefits. The sales window had been hampered by further restrictions. He reassured Members that the events programme in the future would be data driven.

A Panel Member stated that it was important not to be in conflict with AEG and the events they would host at the Civic Halls. They also needed to be mindful of events held at the Molineux and the Racecourse. He emphasised the importance of the darts tournament returning to the Civic Hall and the economic impact it would bring to the City Centre. He believed the Council should work with AEG to ensure it happened.

The Director of Communications and Visitor Experience agreed that AEG were critically important to the City. City governance was critical to ensure events were co-ordinated. PDC and AEG would have to have negotiations over whether the darts would return to the Civic Halls.

A Panel Member commented on the importance of the event programme in ensuring the Our Council priorities were met and enriching the culture of the City. Wednesfield in Bloom and the Canal Festival were good examples of how volunteers could enhance the local economy.

6 **Wolverhampton Pound Select Committee: Progress on Action Plan**

The Head of Procurement, and the Head of Commercial Services presented and summarised the report on the Wolverhampton Pound Select Committee: Progress on Action Plan.

The Vice-Chair commented that he was intrigued a post titled “Head of Wolverhampton Pound” was being recruited, under recommendation 7. He asked who had made the decision and whether it was necessary. He asked if the post would be funded by the Council or if there was an opportunity for it to be funded by some of the other partners in the anchor network.

The Head of Procurement responded that the decision regarding the actual post was taken as someone was needed to coordinate work across the anchor network. It hadn't been recruited to yet and needed to go to job evaluation. No final decisions had been made on funding the post and he would speak to the Director of Finance, to see if the post could be funded across the anchor network. The Head of Commercial added that they had reviewed structures and it was considered that an extra post was needed to resource and co-ordinate the work on the Wolverhampton Pound.

The Chair complimented Officers on the speed of work in implementing the recommendations from the Wolverhampton Pound Select Committee.

7 **Scrutiny Work programme**

The Vice-Chair asked if an item on graffiti and parking on grass verges could be added to the Scrutiny Board agenda for the meeting on 6 December 2022.

Resolved: That an item on graffiti and grass verges be added to the Scrutiny Board agenda for the meeting scheduled to take place on 6 December 2022.