

Economy and Growth Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 15 February 2023

Attendance

Members of the Economy and Growth Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Mary Bateman
Cllr Philip Bateman MBE
Cllr Dr Paul John Birch J.P.
Cllr Craig Collingswood
Cllr Wendy Dalton
Cllr Celia Hibbert
Cllr Sohail Khan (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Zee Russell
Cllr Mak Singh
Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman (Chair)

In Attendance

Cllr Stephen Simkins (Cabinet Member for City, Economy and Growth)

Employees

Martin Stevens DL (Scrutiny Team Leader)
Lee Booker (Scrutiny Officer)
Richard Lawrence (Director of Regeneration)
Liam Davis (Head of City Development)
Ian Fegan (Director of Communications and Visitor Experience)
Jon Roseblade (Director of Resident Services)
Oliver Thomas (Service Manager Green Cities)
Isobel Woods (Head of Enterprise Regeneration)

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 Apologies**
Apologies received from Cllr Darke
- 2 Declarations of interest**
Councillor Birch declared a pecuniary interest in Agenda item 6.

3 **Minutes of previous meeting**
Minutes 30 November 2022 resolved

4 **The Green Economy**

The Deputy Leader Inclusive City Economy expressed his view that the Green Economy was the future in industry. Statements were made surrounding the history of the Black Country and the Industrial Revolution.

The Director of Regeneration opened the presentation (a copy of the presentation is attached to the signed minutes). The Head of City Development informed the panel that the Green Economy was a growth economy and had huge opportunities for the City. He informed the Panel that partners would lead a Green Growth Strategy Plan. He discussed the National Centre for Sustainable Construction, explaining that The City of Wolverhampton was experiencing the alignment of unique local conditions and drivers for change. He told the Panel that the future success of Wolverhampton, if it was to be an innovator, would rely on leveraging physical, networking, and economic assets. He discussed the National Brownfield Institute (NBI), which was located in the City, specifically as part of the University of Wolverhampton's Springfield Campus. The NBI provided vital information through its research to enable a brownfield first approach to future construction methods and techniques within the City. This would contribute to and enable carbon neutral construction standards and help reduce building on Green sites, protecting British eco systems. The site provided great opportunities for students and jobs in the City. The Director of Regeneration was pleased the City had gained a National Asset, which was a real boost for the City. The Head of City Development then discussed the Green Innovation Corridor (GIC); a "Place-Based Approach" developed in partnership with the Council, the University and the private sector. The priority of the GIC was to contribute to the development of sustainable construction and a circular economy, to support inclusive growth, transform the local economy, create quality jobs and new skills for the emerging green sectors and help align the City's existing strengths to high value manufacturing, green technologies and digital innovation.

The Head of City Development raised the i9 building, which was the second headquarters for the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. The i9 was designed and built with locally sourced materials which reduced the carbon footprint during its construction period. It was designed for energy efficiency which included low to zero carbon emission technologies. The Head of City Development felt this was an example to highlight, displaying the Council's approach to development. He then informed the Panel that the City of Wolverhampton Council in partnership with the Canal and Riverside Trust had appointed Legal and General Modular Homes to build the regions first Net Zero carbon residential development. This was called the Canalside South zone development. It was to be built on former industrial land, in line with the Council's brownfield first approach and would incorporate eco-friendly green technologies in all its houses. He also discussed the i54 Business Park, one of the most successful enterprise schemes in the region. He informed the Panel that green technologies were actively promoted by all partners on the site, with further expansion of the site to include a sustainable energy business, who aimed to be a net-zero enterprise. In addition to this, a further 10,000 new trees had been planted at the site extension to contribute to offsetting emissions.

The Service Manager for Green Cities discussed the transitional plan and the stage the City was in. They highlighted the need to install roof top solar panels across all domestic and commercial buildings to contribute to the reduction of the City's carbon emissions. This would contribute to 350 local jobs a year, reduce energy prices, and reduce local energy bills from up to 50%. A former landfill site had been commissioned by the Council, in partnership with New Cross hospital, to be the site of a 6.9mw solar farm. This was designed to power

the hospital specifically. Domestic Energy remained a challenge for the City; to tackle this the Council needed to retrofit 6000 properties a year up until the year 2041. Investment of up to £0.5 billion would be required by the year 2030. The average energy efficiency rating of properties across the City was D/E and they would need to achieve a minimum C/B rating to be in line with the City's targets which was why the retrofitting scheme was required. The Council was working with the local College and University to offer the necessary skills for the green transition in the industry. Upskilling would also be required for those currently working in the industry. The response to this was being developed with the West Midlands Combined Authority to secure £15.2 million in funding to skill the future workforce for retrofit construction as well as electric vehicle technologies.

A Councillor raised concerns about the availability of charging points for cars as the market grew and more people relied on electric powered vehicles. The Head of City Development replied that the i54 site would be developing 30 charging points and that it must be understood this was an emerging sector. The Head of City Development believed those who lead in the industry private sector would develop more and faster charging sites in line with demand. The Service Manager for Green Cities discussed the 2030 ban on petrol and diesel vehicles and stated that the Council with regional partners was tracking the infrastructural development of charging points across the city over the course of the next decade. The Black Country Transport Team would be delivering 80 charge points across 40 different locations within Wolverhampton across the next year. These would be for residential areas, such as those who did not have their own driveways.

The Councillor requested a plan for the charging points, which the Service Manager for Green Cities agreed he could provide for the Panel. The Director of Resident Services explained that there was planning guidance to new housing which also included provision of charging points. The Deputy Leader Inclusive City Economy re-affirmed the points made by Officers about what the City needed and how it would benefit through partnership working; he also mentioned a Green Investment Bank as a proposed idea to allow the Council to have better control over industry finance in the future.

A Councillor asked if a communication plan would be available to help deliver these changes across the next 5 years so that residents understood what was occurring. He also asked how the work translated locally.

The Director of Communications and Visitor Experience said their team was supporting this and that further focus with more investment was required to meet the pace with which these changes needed to be done. The Service Manager for Green Cities understood the need for local level communications and investment to win local people to adopt the changing technology and economy. He explained that people would need to see local level short term benefits to their communities and that communicating this and engaging with the public was key.

The Vice Chair expressed his view that this was a major project with a relatively short window of time to achieve it in. He said it was funding dependent and therefore wanted to know if the Council had a funding strategy plan to ensure the money required would be available throughout the project so that the Council could achieve its goals. The Deputy Leader Inclusive City Economy replied that this would be a collaborative project, with government intervention and private sector funding, as well as Local Authority level, Combined Authority Level and National government level partnerships.

The Director of Resident Services cited some examples where money had been secured and was being invested into communities, such as the new developments in New Park Village and Heath Town.

The Chair enquired into the managerial structure of funding, noting that a Green Partner Board was being created. She asked where the Council was in the development of this. The

Service Manager for Green Cities replied that the Council was in the procurement stage on this and once done, would approach potential partners to convene with the aim of having the first Board meeting by the end of Summer 2023. The Chair confirmed a progress report on this would be available as an item in Autumn for the Economy and Growth Scrutiny Panel.

A Councillor raised concerns about the length of charging leads at charging points for electric vehicles, stating that European built cars had their chargers on the driver's side. Currently charging ports offered a 3-metre length lead to plug into the vehicle, when the actual length required for cars with ports on the driver's side was around 5 metres. He wanted to know if the Council was aware of this and would plan accordingly. The Councillor also discussed rates of charging costs and wanted to know if the Council would be negotiating to ensure the most cost-effective energy supply deal. He specifically suggested using the cheaper night-time rates to charge fully whilst utilising solar panel reserve energy sources to top up during the day.

The Director of Resident Services replied that his recently bought Electric Vehicle came with a 5-metre long charging cable, suggesting that manufacturers were perhaps beginning to adapt to this demand, specific to left hand side driving countries like the United Kingdom. He said the issue was being considered in location selections.

A Councillor wanted to know how the Council planned to tackle the climate change issue, specifically whether it was to be looked at on an individual basis or as part of a joined up approach. The Deputy Leader Inclusive City Economy believed the Council was in a good place on this matter, and said he was happy to take questions and feedback from Scrutiny seriously, he pointed to the combination of government, local government, the private sector as working within the limits set out to tackle the issue.

A Councillor stated that solar wasn't the best option for the country and asked how this would impact on the Council's plan. The Director of Resident Services replied that the relevant experts had done the surveys and research and confirmed solar power would be suitable to the plan.

A Panel member stated that their concern was small businesses, they felt too much responsibility was being put on businesses in the City to reduce their carbon emissions and instead wanted to know if the Council could do further retrofitting to older buildings across the City to reduce carbon emissions and offset some of the responsibilities currently aimed at businesses. The Director of Resident Services replied that the housing renewal plan was already focused on retrofitting buildings across the City. The Councillor disputed this, referring to a previous meeting she had attended that work was not being done in her ward. The Director of Resident Services stated he would take up the conversation with the Councillor outside the meeting to clarify the information.

A Councillor stated the City of Wolverhampton's college training for the necessary skills was 3 years behind other Local Authorities within the Combined Authority area. He asked how much power the solar farm would provide and how many houses would it cover. The Deputy Leader Inclusive City Economy replied that the City was the last to be granted the funds necessary to update the local college by the government and that this was why they were behind.

5 **Business Support Activities within the City Council Wards**

The Head of Enterprise began the presentation (a copy is attached to the signed minutes) and displayed a map of Wolverhampton's wards and businesses which received support, 499 had received funding, with 1066 interventions, subject to European Union funding criteria. She then displayed a map of Wolves at Work links to local businesses, with 206

businesses supported and 388 interventions. The Head of Enterprise summarised the “Let’s Talk Jobs” events that had occurred around the Local Authority, 283 jobs gained through this scheme went to Wolverhampton residents. The Head of Enterprise encouraged Councillors to share a business survey which had been launched to gather further information on the makeup of businesses across the City of Wolverhampton.

The Director of Regeneration added that these schemes were in line with and reliant upon European Union funding, which was coming to an end. He informed the Panel that regional support funding packages were currently being drawn up as a replacement scheme for the near future.

The Vice-Chair asked if a report of the breakdown of businesses helped at ward level could be provided to the Panel in the future. He commented that night-life economy applied to wards outside of the main city also. The Vice-Chair praised the Wolves at Work scheme, but cited the Office for National Statistics which showed that Wolverhampton had higher than average unemployment rates nationally. He wanted to know why people were not taking up the opportunities being provided.

The Head of Enterprise replied that they did have the information in reference to ward level businesses and would have a conversation about it with the Councillor at a later date. She then stated that Wolves at Work were hosting events and doing outreach in communities to attempt to communicate to local people about the services they provided and the jobs available. Businesses had also expressed openness to learn and make their job application processes easier for people. The Council was aware of the work needed to be done to try and get more people into employment.

A Councillor praised the Council’s work in this area and felt they were listening to Councillors and improving their communications.

A Panel member asked how the United Kingdom Shared Prosperity Fund would compare in funding levels to the European Union funding and where would these new funds be targeted.

The Head of Enterprise said the funding plan from the National Government would be significantly less than the funding from the European Union. She explained that because of this, ensuring well targeted funding was more crucial than ever and stated the new business survey was exactly the type of work the Council was doing to get more detailed information on businesses so they could make more informed choices on where funding is utilised.

6 **Public Realm - Support Package to Businesses**

The Deputy Leader Inclusive City Economy gave background information on the trader’s board, which had formed to give local businesses a direct voice to the Local Authority on business disruption caused by the City’s regeneration works. The Director of Regeneration began the presentation (a copy is attached to the signed minutes) and gave more detailed background information on the Public Realm Improvement Works. £15.5 million had been invested into the City as part of the Government’s Future Highstreet Programme.

The Director of Resident Services summarised the interactions the Local Authority had had with businesses disrupted by the works. The Council had been clear to state that it was not legally responsible to make disruption payments, but had given a commitment to support local businesses where clear and substantiated evidence had been provided. Transparency and Scrutiny on this matter was fundamental. The Head of Enterprise set out in chronological order the planning, interaction with partners and business representatives and construction periods from the end of 2018 until present. The main contractor for the development had a liaison officer for businesses on site every day, with multiple outlets utilised for communications with businesses. Businesses had engaged and inputted with the contractor and the Local Authority throughout. Further reviews had been taken since then

with another report planned in the near future. Business support was changing as European Union funding was coming to an end post-Brexit. The Council was now working with the West Midlands Combined Authority and other stakeholders to develop a new business support programme in place of the EU schemes.

The Vice-Chair asked how many advisors had been employed by the Council to deal with the issues facing businesses and the development. He also enquired about business support payments and wanted to know if the 6 businesses that had gone out of business could provide evidence that their loss of earnings was caused by the developments that they would be given money.

The Deputy Leader Inclusive City Economy explained that the Trader's Board agreed with the investment and works that were being done in the City and that the reduced footfall had occurred post-pandemic due to people increasingly moving to online shopping. This market fact, he argued, complicated matters and that a legal framework had to be followed when handling public money. He said that all works had been done in consultation with and in agreement with the local traders.

A Councillor gave examples of the entertainment industry and asked if the Council was reaching out to those within that industry to look to set up businesses within the City, as he felt the City and Council shouldn't just focus on retail trading. The Director of Communications and Visitor Experience agreed and said the Council was looking towards all investors to increase footfall in the City centre.

A Councillor cited newspaper articles which discussed issues with business viability in the City centre due to the roadworks and asked how the Council could change the perception of the City to attract new investors. The Director of Communications and Visitor Experience explained to the Panel that as new projects completed, this would help alter perceptions and increase footfall in the City, he cited the newly renovated Civic Halls as an example. He explained that events were planned in the future in the City which would attract people and business, which would help transform the perception of the City as it moved through and out of its transition period.

A Councillor asked if the RSN report would be made available for the Panel to view. The Head of Enterprise replied confirming it would be made available to the Panel. The Deputy Leader Inclusive City Economy added that some content would be redacted for data protection purposes.