

Minutes of Economy Skills Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board

3 October 2023 at 5.35pm
in the Council Chamber - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury

Present: Councillor Taylor (Chair);
Councillors Akpoteni, Dhatt, Owen and Rahman.

Officers: Rina Rahim (Town Fund Programme Manager), Suky Suthi-Nagra (Democratic Services Manager) and Anthony Lloyd (Democratic Services Officer).

28/23 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ashraf, Chapman, Hemingway and Hussain.

29/23 Declarations of Interest

Councillor Taylor declared a personal interest in the matter referred to at Minute No. 33/23; (Europa Avenue Cycle Path and Associated Consultation - Considerations and Conclusion - Report of the Working Group), in that she was the Cabinet Member for Sustainable Transport who oversaw the scheme in 2021.

30/23 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meetings held on 13 July 2023 be confirmed as a correct record.

31/23 **Additional Item of Business**

There were no urgent additional items of business to consider.

32/23 **Towns Fund Programme Update**

A Towns Fund Programme update was provided to the Board.

On 23 March 2023, Cabinet approved the Regeneration Pipeline that set out the regeneration priorities for the period 2022-2077. Within the pipeline was an investment plan which included £67.5m for the Towns Fund Programme with £25m allocated to West Bromwich, £23.5m allocated to Smethwick and £19m allocated to Rowley Regis.

West Bromwich Town Fund Update

The Towns Fund Programme for West Bromwich aimed to deliver a number of outcomes including the renovation of heritage buildings, provision of new green spaces, improved floor space and rehabilitated land, the introduction of new cycle ways, pedestrian paths, improved roads and multiple full-time and temporary jobs. The Sandwell Civil and Mechanical Engineering Centre had successfully completed on-time and budget and had opened to students in September 2023. Additionally, significant progress had been made on both the “Urban Greening” and “Digital Den” projects with the latter now being complete.

The Retail Diversification Programme, which aimed to deliver comprehensive regeneration and transformation of the West Bromwich retail submarket, had experienced slippages since the last update. Acquisition of sites had been more challenging than first assumed and the Council was pursuing the acquisition of the former Wilkos site instead of Kings Square Cinema. Internal cost reviews for the relocation of the indoor market was underway following the significant increase of the estimated costs of the project.

The Town Hall Quarter project aimed to restore and renovate the Grade II listed West Bromwich Town Hall and Central

Library buildings. Associated Bell Tower works had been completed and internal work had started to assist in the final cost plan.

Smethwick Town Fund Update

In total, there were five approved projects within Smethwick that aimed to deliver a number of objectives including employment opportunities and land development. The Midland Met Learning Campus project would deliver a major skills resource providing training from entry level up to level 7. Cost inflation pressures had impacted the project and, as a result, the Council had applied for additional match funding from West Midlands Combined Authority. The planning application for the site was expected to be determined in October 2023 and despite delays, the Council would ensure that correct processes were followed.

Significant delays had been encountered in relation to the delivery and spend of the Grove Lane regeneration project due to delays in acquiring the site that was required. A different route to acquire the site was now being sought via a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO); this would result in a slippage of over 12 months. Delays had been explained to the Department of Housing, Levelling up and Communities. Works on the Rolfe Street Canalside Regeneration Scheme were also taking longer than expected but the necessary steps were being taken to adequately prepare the site.

Subject to the installation of equipment, the Ron Davies Centre Expansion project had been completed.

Rowley Regis Towns Fund Programmes

The Britannia Park Greenspace and Community Hub project aimed to develop a new low carbon community building, create new allotment plots and to significantly improve the overall quality of Britannia Park, including the reconstruction of the skate park and replacement of all play and fitness equipment in the area.

Several improvements to the park had already been completed including works to the car park, main entrance, woodland trail and the perimeter pathway and the second phase was underway. A planning application had been

submitted for the changing rooms, however costs for remedial works to the allotments had drastically increased.

An update to progress on the Canal Network Connectivity project was also highlighted to members. Works on the Old Mainline had been completed and were open to the public and additional match funding had been secured which would allow further improvements. Additionally, Phase 1 works of the Rowley Regis Connected project would take place in February 2024.

The Blackheath Bus Interchange project had been categorised as high-risk due to a petition that was raised against the scheme. Other options were being considered and a further update would be provided in due course on how the project would proceed.

Delays to the Satellite Education Hub project had been encountered due to issues with obtaining planning permission, however the application had been approved and contractors would be due to start works in February/March 2024.

Following further discussion and questions from members, the following points were made:-

- the Department for Housing, Levelling up and Communities had not provided any further funding, however a 30% change to project scope allowed the Council to make changes;
- cost-saving measures to battle inflation were always considered and, as an example, the Midland Met Learning Campus had reduced the size of the building without impacting learning space;
- if it was difficult to deliver projects on-time and budget, the department for Housing, Levelling Up and Communities could be consulted and the funds could be used elsewhere;
- members would be continuously consulted and updated on the progress of towns fund projects;
- a consultation and engagement plan would be created and shared with the Board to ensure that residents were consulted efficiently;
- local businesses would be consulted to ensure that local trades benefitted from the projects.

Concerns were also raised by members in relation to the safety of Rolfe Street Train Station in Smethwick.

Officers were thanked for their attendance and work.

At this point in the meeting, Councillor Taylor left the Chamber and Councillor Owen chaired the meeting for the matter referred to at 33/23.

33/23

Europa Avenue Cycle Path and Associated Consultation - Considerations and Conclusion - Report of the Working Group

Further to Minute No 24/23 (13 July 2023) of the Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Committee, the Board noted the findings of the Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board Working Group in relation to the Europa Avenue Cycle Path Consultation.

Following a site visit by the working group on 4 August 2023 and an additional meeting to discuss the matter on 18 September 2023, and having considered the views of residents and the report on the consultation taken, the Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board agreed that consultation undertaken on the Europa Avenue Cycle Path was conducted in accordance with Council procedures.

Resolved:

- (1) that in connection with the Europa Avenue Cycle Path Consultation, the following findings of the Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board Working Group, in relation to whether sufficient and appropriate consultation had been carried out in line with existing council policies, practices and procedures, be approved by the Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board:-
 - (a) that having listened and considered the views of local residents, the Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Board:-

- (b) note that the Working Group are satisfied that consultation on the Europa Avenue cycle path, which was carried out both online and by letter drops to households, was conducted in accordance with Council processes, however, communication with residents could have been improved further;
- (c) note that in future, where simultaneous improvement works are being carried out within the vicinity by different departments, internal communication between departments should be undertaken to avoid confusion and disruption to residents;
- (d) suggest that the Council consider all platforms, including Citizenspace and neighbourhood forums, for communicating with residents, taking into consideration digital deprivation across the borough;
- (e) acknowledge that the Overview and Scrutiny function should be used to consider matters of strategic importance within the borough and not local ward issues in order to ensure value is added.

(Councillor Taylor returned to Council Chamber and resumed the Chair).

34/23

Cabinet Forward Plan and Board Work Programme

The Board received the Cabinet Forward Plan and Board Work Programme. Members requested that the following items from the Cabinet Forward Plan be added to the Board's work programme for the 2023-24 municipal year;

- Single Use Plastics Policy
- Endorsement of the Tackling Poverty Plan

Meeting ended at 6.22pm

Contact: democratic_services@sandwell.gov.uk