

Minutes of Economy Skills Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board

**9 October 2024 at 6.00pm
in the Council Chamber - Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

Present: Councillor Davies (Chair);
Councillors Rahman (Vice-Chair), Hackett, Hemingway,
Horton, Jeffcoat and Johnston.

Officers: Mervyn Bartlett (Interim Assistant Director – Highways),
Rina Rahim (Towns Fund Programme Manager) and
Anthony Lloyd (Democratic Services Officer).

In attendance: Councillor K Allcock (Cabinet Member for Environment
and Highways).

22/24 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Dhatt
and Kaur.

23/24 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest made.

24/24 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 11
July 2024 are confirmed as a correct record.

25/24 **Additional Item of Business**

There were no urgent additional items of business to
consider.

Grass Verge Parking Policy

Members received a report on the issue of grass verge parking in Sandwell and what options were available to the Council to address the problem.

National legislation to assist in enforcement had been anticipated for several years but had not yet been introduced. Instead, other local authorities had established their own policies. Therefore, members were minded that it would be prudent for Sandwell to review its position and consider the development of its own policy which would allow a more rigorous and consistent approach to be taken in tackling grass verge parking.

It was noted that grass verge parking, as well as footway parking, held no criminal offence unless it was dangerous or caused an obstruction. The only enforcement action available to the Council related to damage to the verge. In order to do this, the Council would need to prove beyond reasonable doubt the offence for each vehicle present. Contractors were in place to survey problem areas however, this resource was quite limited.

There were a number of engineering options available to prevent parking on grass verges. Physical bollards or similar had already been installed in some locations across the borough. However, this option was costly and had a significant impact on grass cutting costs. Other options, such as grasscrete that facilitated parking but preserved some of the grass, were available, but were not affordable within the revenue budget. A final option was to convert the grassed area to tarmac; this also had financial implications.

Members highlighted that although grass verge parking was an issue, consideration must still be made to those who relied on their cars for travel, especially those living in narrow streets with limited off-road parking or those that were disabled. Members were also keen on ensuring that the development of a grass verge parking policy included:- clear options and guidance on each scenario, re-wilding and tree planting alternatives to grass verges and that flooding mitigation was taken into account.

Officers were thanked for their attendance.

Resolved:-

- (1) That the Cabinet Member for Environment and Highways is recommended to consider the development of a Grass Verge Parking Policy to include:-
 - a. An equalities impact assessment in relation to the Grass Verge Parking Policy, with a particular focus on individuals with disabilities;
 - b. considerations of the impact of grass verge alterations on flooding prevention;
 - c. the utilisation of rewilding methods and tree planting to prevent grass verges being used for vehicle parking; and
 - d. clear guidance on what options should be used in each specific scenario to address grass verge parking issues.

- (2) That the Cabinet Member for Environment and Highways considers liaising with other local authorities who operate a grass verge parking policy to obtain impact assessments on whether or not the policy has been successful.

- (3) That the Cabinet Member for Environment and Highways considers an in-depth look across the borough to highlight areas with significant grass verge parking issues.

27/24

Tracking and Monitoring of Scrutiny Recommendations

The Board noted the status of actions and recommendations it had made. Further updates would be reported to future meetings of the Board.

28/24

Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board Work Programme 2024 – 2025.

The Board received the Cabinet Forward Plan and Board Work Programme.

A request to the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) to present an item in relation to bus franchising had not been viable due to limited resources. Despite this, members highlighted that consultation on bus franchising was due to begin in November 2024 and that, as such, the Council's representatives on the WMCA's Transport Delivery Overview and Scrutiny Committee should be encouraged to engage where possible.

Members noted an interest in the Sandwell Skills and Employment Strategy item and, as a result, requested that consideration of the item be added to the Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board Work Programme for the 2025/26 municipal year.

Resolved that the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Infrastructure, alongside the Council's representatives on the West Midlands Combined Authority's Transport Delivery Overview and Scrutiny Committee, be requested to engage with the bus franchising consultation process carried out by the West Midlands Combined Authority.

29/24 **Towns Fund Programme and Levelling Up Fund Update**

Further to its meeting on 8 February 2024 (minute no.7/24 refers), the Board received an update on the Towns Fund Programme and Levelling Up Fund.

In 2021, Government had identified several towns in Sandwell that would benefit from the Towns Fund. West Bromwich (£25m), Smethwick (£23.5m) and Rowley Regis (£19m) were offered funding which made Sandwell's total Towns Fund allocation £67.5m. This was confirmed in a Grant Offer, received on the 20 August 2021.

As a result, Business Cases for 16 projects were submitted and approved by Government resulting in Sandwell securing the full £67.5 million of funding. Each town was committed to deliver Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government defined outputs as well as local measures agreed with the Towns Fund Boards.

St Michael's Sandwell Engineering, Science and Manufacturing Centre

This project had been completed and was delivering outputs in learners supported. An additional application had been made by St Michael's for a further one-story modular build adjacent to the campus.

Urban Greening

Capital elements of the project had been completed and outputs were being delivered.

Digital Den

The "Digital Den" project had been completed and the training room at Greets Green Community Centre was delivering courses to residents. Over 215 enrolments had taken place.

West Bromwich Connected Scheme

Continuous improvement around pedestrianisation continued and works were on-going until March 2025.

Midland Met Learning Campus

Although initial delays had been experienced due to the project being subject to match funding, funding had been secured and approved in March 2024. The Delivery phase was underway and works had been scheduled for completion by November 2025.

Smethwick Connected Scheme

Phase 4 works had been completed in July 2024 and the project was approaching its final stage.

Ron Davis Centre

Capital works had been completed and the additional training rooms were fully operational and delivering outputs.

Britannia Park

Playground equipment, changing room, skate park and allotment works had been completed. The Sons of Rest Community Centre was also under consideration for potential works as part of the wider generation of Britannia Park.

Canal Connectivity Programme

The majority of works had been completed and additional works had been approved by the Towns Fund Board which included works to the bridge which was scheduled for completion by April 2025.

Rowley Regis Connected

Lane and pathway works had been completed in September 2024 and the remaining works were estimated for completion by September 2025.

29/24(a) **Exclusion of Public and Press**

Resolved that the public and press be excluded from the rest of the meeting. This is to avoid the possible disclosure of exempt information under Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act, 1972, as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006, relating to the financial or business affairs of any person, including the authority holding that information.

29/24(b) **Towns Fund Programme and Levelling Up Fund Update**

Further to minute no.29/24, the Board received further updates of some of the planned Town Fund and Levelling Up Fund projects.

Satellite Education Hub

Land transfer delays had impacted the project however, the issues had been resolved and the project would be able to start with construction spend. The project was indicating

overbudget by £112k and therefore, as a result, value engineering would take place to ensure that the project was deliverable within the Towns Fund allocation. Works were due to commence in October 2024 with a target opening date of January 2026.

Retail Diversification Programme

The funding profile for the project had been moved to the 2024/25 financial year due to delays on site acquisition. The Queen's square shopping centre was no longer being progressed through the Towns Fund following further review of the leasehold position. A request to remove the site had been submitted to Government with the aim of utilising the former Wilko site instead. Works on the indoor market were due for completion by June 2025.

Following questions from members, it was confirmed that if difficulties remained, the Council could divert the funds to other projects. The Council had previously sought advice from government on the possibility of introducing new projects; this option was not available. However, following the change of Government, the Town Fund Board would ask the question again. It was also confirmed that the funds must remain within their individual towns.

Grove Lane Regeneration

In November 2022, Cabinet approved the initiation of a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) of the site after the landowner declined to sell the property. Based on legal advice, a Statement of Reasons was being prepared, along with the submission of a planning application. Efforts were being made to reengage with the landowner. The project had been RAG rated as high risk, as its delivery was contingent upon the CPO decision being finalised by April 2025. As a contingency plan, an expression of interest to existing projects had been carried out so that funds could be re-diverted if the project did not come into fruition.

Rolfe Street Canalside Regeneration

The initial planning application for the Rolfe Street Canalside Regeneration had been withdrawn in December 2023, following objections received from Historic England and

Canal & River Trust in relation to conservation of historical buildings. Consequently, the Council had decided to undertake a Heritage Impact Assessment. Following a procurement process, a contractor had been appointed who aimed to complete the assessment by December 2024. Current programme outlines project could be delivered by February 2026 if no further delays were encountered.

Rowley Regis – Blackheath Bus Interchange & Public Realm

A revised proposal for this project was made following objections received during the public consultation in 2023. Final designs of the scheme were being completed prior to being presented to Cabinet with works due to start in January 2025.

Members noted the update and requested that a further update be provided to the Board, either via a working group or via email, before the end of the 2024.

Resolved that the Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Infrastructure is recommended to consider the production of a “lessons learned” report in relation to the Towns Fund and Levelling Up Fund Programmes.

Meeting ended at 7.48pm.

Contact: democratic_services@sandwell.gov.uk