

Minutes of the Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board

**7th February, 2019 at 5.30pm
at Sandwell Council House, Oldbury**

Present: Councillor Rollins (Chair);
Councillor Singh (Vice-Chair);
Councillors Ahmed, Allcock, Chidley, and E M
Giles.

Apologies: Councillors Ali, Ashman and Preece.

In attendance: Andrew Timmins, Group Head, Education, Skills
and Employment
Chris Ward, Director – Education Skills and
Employment.
Erroll Blackwood, Manager 16-19, Connexions &
Sandwell Adult Family Learning (SAFL)
Stuart Lackenby, Director – Prevention and
Protection.
Richard Norton, Environmental Health Manager.

1/19 Declaration of Interests

Councillor Allcock declared a non-pecuniary interest at the meeting in relation to item 5 - Air Quality Update as a Member of the Transport Delivery Committee on the West Midlands Combined Authority.
Councillor Elaine Giles declared a non-pecuniary interest at the meeting in relation to item 6 – Skills in Sandwell Update, her husband was an employee of Sandwell Adult Family Learning SAFL.

2/19 Minutes

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 8th November, 2018 be approved as a correct record.

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3/19 Waste and Recycling Centre Visit

The Chair thanked officers at Shidas Lane and the Eagle Transfer and Recycling Centre for providing an insight into issues of the waste contract on a daily basis, highlighting the role of the crews, the use of the in-cab technology the operational systems and the interaction with the control centre.

The Scrutiny Chair indicated that Members of the Scrutiny Board had found the presentation to be enlightening and raised several lines of enquiry. Officers responded to Members questions and gave examples of how technology had enabled amendments to be made during the course of a round. They advised that updates were live, they could film and record evidence on site and record changes to routes taking account of live incidents.

Members visited the Eagle Transfer Site where they had opportunity to see and hear about the operations and facilities on site, they met with the Litter Watch Team to hear about litter picking projects and groups supported in the Borough to keep areas clean.

The Scrutiny Board supported the recommendation made by Members attending the Site Visits.

Resolved:-

- (1) that a report be requested to a future meeting relating to the domestic food waste collection service.
- (2) that members noted the recent campaign to remind people about recycling, what plastic they should put in recycling bins to reduce the amount of contaminated waste and how we can better inform people how to separate waste and plastics.

4/19 Air Quality Update

The Director – Prevention and Protection and the Environmental Health Manager provided a presentation of background information about air quality nationally and locally. In 1975, levels of Nitrogen Dioxide were very high and the focus for the UK was to decrease emissions of the harmful nitrogen dioxide pollutants which were

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associated with combustion processes. UK emissions had fallen by 70% over the years and the reduction in emissions was associated with the introduction of cleaner engines. In Sandwell air pollution had improved significantly, in line with national figures, since 1975.

Sandwell had its own specific challenges:

- Transport infrastructure, motorways and A-roads across the Borough;
- Industry - logistics companies (e.g. DPD);
- Vehicle age – the age of vehicle in Sandwell was likely to be older and therefore the engine technology would be less efficient.

The Air Quality Action Plan was prepared and considered by members in January 2018. At that time there had been seven main hotspot zones identified based on local monitoring and exposure, and a number of interventions were suggested at that time based on national guidance. It was reported that only 67 consultation responses had been received to the first consultation process. It was thought that the recent media coverage of the death of a young person exposed to a high concentration of Nitrogen Dioxide poisoning would result in a bigger public response due to raised public awareness of pollution issues.

Since the Draft Action Plan was prepared in January 2018, Client Earth had challenged the Government in a court case, to require Councils with higher levels of Nitrogen Dioxide to do more to improve the quality of air in their area. Sandwell was one of 33 Councils to receive a Ministerial Direction in 2018 to undertake a Targeted Feasibility study on Nitrogen Dioxide reduction. Sandwell was identified as having four sites which were modelled to be compliant by 2020 without additional intervention (improvements in engine technology would improve the Nitrogen Dioxide pollution levels). Of the four sites, it was found that there were no practicable measures that could be implemented to bring forward the date of compliance. On two remaining sites identified, Sandwell would monitor and analyse the areas and, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Public Health and Protection, put forward any suggestions for interventions to make a difference to pollution levels and DEFRA would fund the improvements. The two areas suggested were:

- Signal optimisation to promote traffic smoothing to reduce the time vehicles spend idling at traffic lights on the A41 at west Bromwich between M5 Junction 1 and the Borough boundary.

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- Continue the retrofit programme of buses on A41 at West Bromwich and A457 at Oldbury. Transport for West Midlands (TfWM) has secured Clean Bus Technology Fund to retrofitting older buses with end of pipe technology to bring Euro 6 Standard.

Another change since the Draft plan in January 2018, also as a result of a Ministerial Direction, was the Birmingham Clean Air Zone (CAZ) which had a consequential impact for Sandwell:-

- People travelling in and out of Birmingham would be charged a daily rate for non-compliant (generally older vehicles) when travelling in the zone.
- People with older vehicles would be likely to travel around the CAZ and park outside the zone, the park and ride stations would be better used due to the additional cost of travelling into the centre of Birmingham.
- The consultation had raised concerns about the shift of traffic, the park and ride schemes, the allocation of older buses outside the zone and the impact on Sandwell's air quality.

The Scrutiny Board was advised that the next steps would be to revise the 2018 Air Quality Action Plan for Sandwell to reflect the Ministerial Direction for Sandwell and the Birmingham CAZ.

The proposed timescales for the Revised Air Quality Action Plan were:

- Outline Air Quality Action Plan – February 2019
- Consultation with Birmingham CAZ mitigation February 2019
- Presentation to Leaders meeting draft single Air Quality Action Plan and local consultation with Ward Members - March 2019
- Air Quality Action Plan being presented to Cabinet in April 2019 for approval.

The Director Prevention and Protection highlighted a specific workshop for Scrutiny Members before the consultation process to consider the detail in the Air Quality Action Plan.

From the comments and questions by members of the Scrutiny Board the following responses were made, and issues highlighted:

- In response to questions about the criteria used to identify the hotspots, the Board was advised that DEFRA used a computer-based model, the Council used an evidence-based model. Officers gathered tick box evidence of vehicle types, frequency, proportion of diesel etc.

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- Local diffusion tubes were dotted all over the Borough which provided the actual data around the Borough.
- There was a need to monitor over a period of time to be accurate, measured over a years' worth of data.
- In response to a question about access to mitigation funding the Board was advised that Sandwell MBC could not access funding directly but that proposals could be put forward for Birmingham to access funding on its behalf.
- Sandwell may want to put in a range of bids for buses on routes near the border to be retrofitted or for parking development costs to increase capacity parking for park and ride schemes, as options.
- The Cabinet Member for Public Health and Protection was having conversations with colleagues in Birmingham. Councillor Peter Hughes, as Chair for the WMCA Scrutiny Board, was invited to attend the Council's steering Group to maintain a link between the work of the WMCA, Scrutiny and Sandwell on Air Quality Strategy.
- Councillor Allcock referred to the hybrid version of Hackney carriage vehicles which were currently on the market at a cost of £59k compared to a cost of £47k for a standard vehicle. He asked if there were any thoughts about an electric vehicle policy in Sandwell. The Director – Prevention and Protection advised that there would need to be a consultation exercise with Hackney Carriage Drivers to raise the issue, but he suggested that the challenge in this area would be to find any new Hackney Carriage vehicles in the West Midlands as the taxi fleet tended to comprise older vehicles. It was suggested that even if there was a grant available, the issue would be whether it would be of significant enough benefit to the local area to grant or fund local drivers to purchase the new electric vehicle. The introduction of hybrid taxi vehicles would form part of the consultation process.
- The Board was advised that much of the Sandwell fleet was not currently fitted with the latest diesel engine emission control technology to reduce harmful components that were released in exhaust gas. The Director – Prevention and Protection had received enquiries and was considering a feasibility study to switch to hybrid vehicles. A request had been made for contract

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West Midlands to provide details for some of the smaller vehicles to consider the level and impact of the switch.

- Members welcomed that Junction 9 M6 had been considered as one of the hotspots for pollution and noted that the area would eventually be part of the area of smart motorway. The Director indicated that when the junction modification work first began on the motorway network there had been concerns that congestion would be so bad the junction would be like a ‘car park’ but this had not been the case.
- Members were concerned with the proposed new shopping centre at Junction 2, M5 would create more congestion. The proposed ‘hamburger’ junction was not yet passed for planning permission and funding was required however it was thought that this would relieve pressure on the section of the motorway; this would be monitored.

The Chair thanked officers for the update and presentation.

Resolved:

- (1) that the update and presentation be noted;
- (2) that a specific workshop for Scrutiny Members in March be arranged prior to the consultation process to consider the draft Air Quality Action Plan.

5/19 Skill in Sandwell Update

The Director – Education, Skills and Employment, Principal Advisor and Andrew Timmins introduced the report and presented the current position in relation to the current skills position in Sandwell including changes to the Adult Education budget.

The report highlighted the percentage of working age population by qualification in 2017. The Board was surprised by the 21% of adults with no qualification figure in Sandwell and welcomed that Sandwell Adult Family Learning (SAFL) received funding for and encouraged community learning to develop skills.

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The Board heard that Sandwell Adult Family Learning SAFL had received a good rating from Ofsted inspection in 2018 and had taken a decision to increase and broaden the learning base, to look at skills gaps and more qualifications for 30-39 year olds, and for the 50 plus group who were looking to change jobs or to return to the learning new skills market.

From the comments and questions by members of the Scrutiny Board the following responses were made, and issues highlighted:

- Learners were offered a number of training course options; the training courses were not mandatory.
- In terms of the low numbers of apprentices, the actual numbers could be circulated to the Board Members for information. The reason for low numbers was not known, numbers of 16-18 years old apprentices had declined and was of concern to the Board. In the Council the numbers of apprenticeships had tripled with many of the existing workforce taking advantage of the opportunity to train one day a week in an apprenticeship role to improve their skills.
- The Government no-longer asked for grades A-C GCSE in an apprenticeship role, but employers did ask potential apprentices to meet the grade criteria. Many were encouraged to work towards the grades but not all would meet the requirements. Some employers took a change and employed apprentices who were working towards the grades.
- The Director – Education, Skills and Employment advised that Sandwell MBC was looking to change the threshold for some apprentices, especially young people finding it difficult, particularly those with disability. Once the new threshold was tried and tested the model could be rolled out to other employers.
- The Board was advised that there was further data to indicate trends over a period of time and to indicate that this was not just a Sandwell problem; other Local Authorities in the West Midlands Combined Authority Area were finding similar trends; however there was an indication from the table provided that Sandwell had fallen behind neighbouring Authorities on trade apprenticeships and there were still a number of people with no qualifications.

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- In response to questions about flexible working and part-time apprenticeships for disabled people the Director advised that the Council was considering job carving to meet the needs of employees with specific needs. He advised that the Authority had to consider something that found the right balance to redesigning an existing job around the needs of an individual employee with a specific disability or two individuals apportioning respective job roles as part of a job-share arrangement.
- The Board was advised that the Sandwell Education Skills promise was for another year. Members were advised that the Connexions service was working with schools to look at the skills gaps with employers and that there was a need to have dialogue to say what young people need to make career choices, picking what they want for their future careers. They were advised that this was not a quick fix and that it would take a generation to start to build skills that had been lost over the years. The Board recognised the need to future proof local specialist skills.
- Members voiced concerns that young people had been training and learned skills in fields where there were no jobs.
- There was recognition of the need for older people to learn new skills, but Members voiced concerns that older people could not afford to take an apprenticeship wage. The Board was advised that there were some well-paid apprenticeships and that many apprenticeships were at a level where employees could work in their current role for four days a week and train for one day a week.
- The Board considered alternative sites for outreach training such as pop-up training in schools and community centres.
- It was confirmed to members that construction skills training was still available at Sandwell College and that training was signposted to interested parties at the most appropriate place for them.

Erroll Blackwood, Manager 16-19, Connexions & Sandwell Adult Family Learning (SAFL), advised that a Careers and Apprenticeship Event would take place at the Council House Oldbury on Thursday 7th March 2019 and invited Board members to attend.

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The Chair of the Board thanked officers for the update report and requested that an annual update of skills and employment performance be included in the Scrutiny Board Work Programme.

Resolved:

- (1) that the Skills Update be noted and that an Annual Update report be included in the Economy, Skills Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board Work Programme 2019-20;
- (2) that Scrutiny Members be invited to attend a Careers and Apprenticeship Event at the Council House Oldbury on Thursday 7th March 2019.

(Meeting ended at 6:45 pm)

Contact Officer: Deb Breedon Democratic Services Unit 0121 569 3896
