

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

24th September, 2020 at 5.30 pm
Virtual meeting

Present: Councillor Rollins (Chair);
Councillors Eaves, L Giles, Hackett, M Hussain
and Worsey.

Apologies: Councillor Sandars.

In attendance: Dr Alison Knight, Executive Director
Neighbourhoods;
Alan Caddick, Director of Housing and
Communities;
Andy Miller, Strategic Planning and Transport
Manager;
Samantha Holder, Senior Planning Policy
Officer.

8/20 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 25 June,
2020 be approved as a correct record.

9/20 **Reset and Recovery – Phase One Findings**

The Board received a report and presentation from the Executive Director Neighbourhoods to provide detail of the impact of Covid and Sandwell and greater detail on economic aspects of recovery to discuss.

Sandwell experiences of the pandemic mirrored that emerging nationally however the poverty in Sandwell had meant it had been vulnerable to the direct and indirect effects of the pandemic both in the Community and the economy. The Council had continued to deliver services and support the local economy despite the

Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board – 24 September, 2020

challenges during this period, but there was a need to think about how to respond and develop the recovery plans.

The road map highlighted that initially crisis reporting had taken place, which moved into a period of consolidation and now there was a move to review the impact assessment and look at what needed to happen to change services moving forward.

The main messages from the Community Impact Group relating to national picture were the direct impact of Covid, major and unequal impacts on society:

- mental health/ personal relationships had deteriorated
- unhealthy behaviours were increasing – alcohol misuse decreased physical activity
- exacerbating the impact poor quality housing
- food insecurity and hardship
- children and young people were hardest hit
- exposed and exacerbated longstanding inequalities such as digital exclusion

Sandwell evidence highlighted

- Mental Health issues
- Food insecurity
- Digital Exclusion
- Household debt
- Neighbourhood stress - anti-social behaviour (ASB), Domestic abuse
- Health of BAME groups and impact on communities.
- 632 children were shielding
- big increase in volunteering, voluntary sector was under pressure but was working with the Council through the crisis
- some areas were harder hit by Covid and cases were rising
- in addition to personal long-term health, the risks included gender, older age, deprivation, overcrowding and ethnicity.
- Sandwell was a densely populated area, deprivation was widespread but concentrated in the central part of the Borough. The spatial distribution of the risk factors was uneven, particularly parts of Tipton, Central Wednesbury,

Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board – 24 September, 2020

Central West Bromwich and Smethwick were emerging as vulnerable to Covid.

Key findings from phase 1 were that Covid had exacerbated existing weaknesses in Sandwell's community particularly poverty and deprivation and more needed to happen to engage with people in a culturally sensitive way, to do things differently and to address the underlying vulnerabilities.

In relation to the impact of Covid on the Sandwell local Economy, the Economic Impact Group focussed on Community Wealth and Economic resilience.

- The biggest impact was around social distancing and restrictions on opening.
- Sandwell was in recession; the epidemic had affected employment rates and business closures.
- The impact was higher in West Midlands, the level of furloughs was higher, the automotive industry has been affected (particularly the supply chain) and there was impact on the high street.
- There was particular impact on different type of skills.
- There was a 36% productivity drop due to closed premises.
- Places with entrepreneurial activities tended to recover quicker and there was a need to look at this in Sandwell.
- The Federation of small businesses in UK expected 25% of SMEs to close this year.
- 6.8% of people were self-employed and were particularly hard hit. Almost 14,000 self-employed people were vulnerable.
- 12.7% of jobs had been affected, with a large impact on young people and a drop in unique vacancies
- Concern around furlough ending in October and a further spike in redundancies.
- Digital exclusion for all age groups due to lockdown and deprivation factors.
- Not enough college or university places when young people return to education because there were no jobs or apprenticeships.

Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board – 24 September, 2020

- February to July 2020 had seen a significant increase in unemployment, in spite of furloughing unemployment had more than doubled and was higher than the regional average, also universal credit (UC) claims had doubled.

Financial support had been put in place for SMEs, £55 million in grants had been awarded through the revenue and benefits team, many businesses had been contacted directly to remind them to apply. European programmes had been adapted to help with skills etc and discretionary grants utilised to top up those that had been unsuccessful with grants.

Sandwell was working with West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) to try to move forward with schemes, develop further plans and to put support in place to help with jobs in the area.

The Board noted the challenges in Sandwell:

- the disproportionate impact on young people
- low skills base
- impact on over 50's
- skills and employment support demand would be different
- digital exclusion and poverty was still a major barrier
- mental health
- economic impact on BAME.

The key things themes emerging were

- digital exclusion
- wellbeing and mental health
- young people and their skills
- lifting community wealth
- communication with local people

The Board noted the next steps were to work on communicating the messages, to do more work on the thematic working groups and by mid- December consider the refreshed Corporate Plan.

The Board welcomed that the Community Wealth and Economic Resilience Board being set up and working alongside key partners and the business sector to make sure that wealth stayed

Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board – 24 September, 2020

in Sandwell and that money was used to encourage jobs and economic growth to get through the recession in Sandwell.

The Board noted the following comments and responses to questions:

- The impact from an economic perspective of the local lockdown. Local restrictions were quite limited, they had restricted people from going into other people's houses and to stay in their own home, the main impact had been on those that had been working who needed childcare.
- The wider new restrictions as of that week, meant that there would be earlier closures of hospitality and that businesses would have to ensure masks were worn and that they displayed posters showing QR codes to track and trace. There would be further economic impact, what this would be was not yet clear and there was a need to wait to see what happens.
- There was potential for a double impact on businesses if there was a no deal Brexit. People were worried and had started to buy in extra food. The Council was looking at what needed to be done to revisit food hubs to support and protect vulnerable citizens.
- The Board was advised that Sandwell Leisure Trust (SLT) had been supported throughout lockdown. The SLT position was a separate issue to the reset and recovery plan and was for SLT to consider, a meeting SLT Board would be taking place soon. A further report would be going to Safer Neighbourhoods and Active Communities Scrutiny Board.
- In relation to the future of the high street, on-line shopping had progressed and accelerated the need to look at high streets and Town Funds. The Board was assured that nothing had gone on hold, there had been some delays with Government guidance, however the three Town Funds bids for £25 million were progressing and a lot of work was going on in the three Town Boards and the Sandwell Town Superboard would meet soon. The Executive Director assured Members that an update would be brought to a future meeting.

**Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board –
24 September, 2020**

- Digital exclusion had been identified as an issue for some young people in the impact assessment, previously young people had accessed IT in libraries, at school or colleges. The issue had been highlighted because the spaces which they normally access were not available. In terms of social media, many young people were able to keep up on their phones, but in terms of work, lessons and job applications they did not have access. There were schemes to access equipment with education services and funding made available for that but there was more to think about making space in the future.
- Approximately 60% of SMEs businesses had adapted to on line services, but there was a need to influence through the business growth package to help businesses and our residents to access them.
- There was an increased need for mental health services, more work was happening to support and signpost people through public health, adult and health services. There was more work and activities through the voluntary sector to help people get back into work, and there was more to be done to build in confidence and working behaviours and integrate into customer support packages,
- The Chair informed members that there was a joint session on mental health planned in October and that the Board could look further down the line at economy and employment.

The Chair welcomed the comprehensive presentation and responses to questions and indicated that it would be beneficial to drill down into specific things arising from the information, such as lessons learnt and things that had to happen due to restrictions, to identify the better ways forward for services in Sandwell.

Resolved

- 1) That the Board receive an update report regarding the Towns Fund.

**Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board –
24 September, 2020**

10/20 **Community Wealth Building & Inclusive Economy Action Plan**

The Board received a report from the Service Manager Business Excellence and noted that Community Wealth building was an important pillar to ensuring an inclusive economy for our communities, and an essential driver for Sandwell's recovery from Covid19 and any impact on the economy particularly for Sandwell residents.

The Board noted that views had been sought from residents, voluntary services and businesses and that the team had worked with the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) which carried out a diagnostic of community wealth activity and developed recommendations to deliver improvement, as well as noting strengths around Sandwell's healthy voluntary and community sector for the Council and its strategic partners to build on.

In Sandwell it was found that only 15% of spend in communities was local spend, some areas such as Preston were achieving up to 50%, the Board noted that there was room for improvement.

Sandwell's Inclusive Economy Deal was agreed at full Council 10 March 2020. Sandwell was the first Council in the country to agree an Inclusive Economy Deal to create a better Sandwell and develop wealth for all. Three deals had been developed: A resident deal, a business deal and a voluntary sector deal. It was about creating and retaining community wealth and improving individual and community wellbeing across the six Towns.

The Council had developed the community wealth and inclusive economy action plan, the joint plan ensured there was clear synergy and a focus on the real priorities. The key elements of the plan were looking at some of the opportunities in greater detail and the community wealth building, the economic resilience delivery officer group were developing the programme using existing strengths, looking at gaps and at recovery after Covid to improve things for people of Sandwell.

A Strategic Community Wealth and Economic Resilience Board had been established, chaired by the Cabinet Member for Skills and Employment and involving voluntary sector and key anchor organisations in Sandwell to have oversight of the agenda and

Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board – 24 September, 2020

provide the forum for real and effective collaboration on the issues and actions that will support community wealth building in Sandwell and aid its economic recovery.

The Board noted the key themes and proposed activities of the action plan:

- Sandwell as a community wealth building council;
- Pillar 1 – progressive procurement of goods and services
- Pillar 2 – Fair employment and just labour markets;
- Pillar 3 – Socially productive use of land and assets;
- Pillar 4 – Making financial power work for local places;
- Plural ownership of the local economy.

The Board noted that Covid-19 had influenced the development of the plan. WMCA citizen's panel of 36 people had met virtually during the summer. The panel was made up of people from different backgrounds, age and ethnicity to discuss their experiences of Covid. Three had been selected from Sandwell to talk about a range of topics such as health or young people.

- Six priorities arising were:
 - Getting back to normal safely
 - Health care
 - Mental Health
 - Education- preparing for children to go back to school
 - Employment – creating new jobs and skill sets
 - Promoting and supporting business – buy local

Cllr Worsey and the Chair welcomed the presentation indicating that the much work had been done and that this was an excellent summary. Sandwell was in a really good place to progress this work.

The Executive Director Neighbourhoods advised the Board that Sandwell had been invited by the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) to present the work it was doing as best practice.

Resolved

- (1) That the Economy Skills Transport and Environment Board note the progress being made and invite a further report in Summer 2021.

**Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board –
24 September, 2020**

11/20 **Planning White Paper – Planning for the Future**

The Board received a report from the Strategic Planning and Transport Manager to outline the proposed plans to streamline and modernise the planning system, members were advised the consultation would finish at the end of October 2020.

The Board note the following main messages and comments from the report:

- The proposals were a major move away from the current planning process, the applications would not be considered on their merit, this was a move towards developments getting approval in principle with much less involvement from Local Authorities.
- There would be a zoning system for land, but it was unclear how applications would be judged.
- In renewal areas there would be a ‘presumption’ for development, effectively fast-tracking permission.
- There would be a heavily revised Local Plan process; the white paper would end the need for the 12 documents that made up the local plan; the new local plan process would need to be completed in 30 months before change would commence.
- Section 106 agreements would end, and more funding would be drawn from the Community Infrastructure Levy. Essentially this would be a tax on development for housing and retail above a certain size, currently set our own levy locally this would be set nationally.
- The planning system would no longer require a duty to co-operate between neighbouring authorities on development location, significant impacts and environmental protection.
- Design codes would be introduced, and a body set up to assist the Local Authority to design, this would have resource implications for Local Authorities.
- There were concerns that there would be an increase in developments permitted automatically and would reduce the ability of the authority to debate the principle, they would only be able to influence the detail of it.
- Open data would be required– digitising this would be resource heavy.
- A Chief Officer post would need to be established to deal with design and place making, an urban design professional to

Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board – 24 September, 2020

draw up bar codes.

- The implications:
 - Regulatory and enforcement, checking with the code after it was built.
 - By moving away from Section 106, to infrastructure levy would be payable once houses were occupied.
 - infrastructure development would have to be paid upfront by the Council and would be claimed back from development receipts.

The Board noted the following comments and responses to questions:

- There was a lack of detail in the white paper
- There were concerns around proposals, resource implications and protection zones
- The Government had published the paper in the middle of a pandemic - the worst time to carry out this consultation
- No detail about employment land and support, there were implications for developments other than housing
- This would be a significant shift in the way planning was delivered
- The Government's national development policies would be a reduction in local planning control. The local plan design codes did not consider if there was no local buy in for the design codes.
- Communities needed to agree and were being consulted about the white paper proposals, but some people would struggle to get on line to complete the consultation.
- Public consultation at local plan stage would be undertaken online / digitally; some residents would have difficulty doing so in Sandwell if they didn't have digital access, and this was a significant risk for local involvement.

The Chair requested that all of the risks and implications raised in the discussion be included in the consultation response to Government. She highlighted that the Authority needed answers to the big questions, particularly around public digital access to respond to consultations and where extra resources were to be found.

**Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board –
24 September, 2020**

Resolved:-

1. That the Economy Skills Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board request the Executive Director Neighbourhood to include comments about risks and implications in the response to the consultation.

(Meeting ended at 18:51 pm)

Contact Officer: Deb Breedon Democratic Services Unit 0121 569 3896
