

# Economy Skills Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board

**19 November 2020 at 5.00pm**

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

**Officers:** Dr Alison Knight, Executive Director Neighbourhoods;  
Chris Ward, Director Education Employment and Skills;  
Kelly Thomas, Employment and Skills Service Manager;  
Adele Smith, Programme Manager, Employment and Skills.

**12/20      Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Hackett and Sandars.

**13/20      Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

**14/20      Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 September 2020 were agreed as a correct record.

**15/20      Reset and Recovery Update**

The Executive Director Neighbourhoods provided an update on the management of services that fall into the remit of the Economy Skills Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board.

Highways Services:

- Continued provision of statutory services and had operated with precautions, which had been monitored and adjusted when necessary.
- Service levels for infrastructure maintenance were continuing to put forward schemes such as Birchlee Island, lighting renewal, bridge work, utility works



and school crossing patrols work to ensure work on improvements were moving forward;

- Traffic levels had dropped initially under full lock down (at 30-40%), between July and September (at 50-60%). Traffic levels had increased to around 70 -80% and there was congestion and increased traffic levels.
- Emergency active travel work was under review, Government funding had been received to develop cycle and walking paths. Parking enforcement was in place and parking wardens were Covid aware and were wearing appropriate PPE.

#### Development Planning and Building Control

- Since March 2020 general services had continued to operate with many officers working from home. Some staff had been attending the Council building to carry out printing and photocopying on a rota basis. Where necessary staff had been released to work in other areas to support.
- There was a dip in planning applications due to lockdown.
- There was significant demand on land charges due to house sales now being completed and stamp duty.
- Health and Safety at sports grounds and planning committee site visits had been suspended. Officers had made use of photographs, google and technology to share images with planning committee members and public. Where a visit had to be made to premises staff were observing social distancing and PPE was used.

#### Spatial Planning and Growth

- Regeneration teams had been virtual working from home which had operated effectively. Office access was limited to essential access only.
- When teams were able to return to work at the Council House there would be an evaluation of which services could continue to work virtually.
- Teams had managed to submit Town Investment Plans and Business Grant Applications successfully and were continuing to work through new grants.
- Further work with the Chamber and businesses was planned to look at the extra pressures of Brexit and raise awareness.

#### Waste Services

- Waste services were changing daily, more than 30 staff were self-isolating, there were some returning to work and others starting self-isolating. There had been a few tested Covid cases.
- Overall, the teams had kept on top of the waste collection services, including the garden waste services.
- The tonnages had continued to be about 30% higher than normal, including garden waste. This had required an additional 5 support crews and regular overtime to deliver the service. There were daily briefings to check what was happening and that communications and staff were in place.
- The service was trying to keep street cleansing up to date, with falling leaves it was important to keep pavements free of potential trip and slip

hazards, whilst making sure operators were following Health and Safety procedures.

#### Strategic Assets and Land

- Markets had been operating again following lockdown, but had to revert back to essential retail within the market. Most essential retailers had been moved to the food hall in West Bromwich and the outdoor market traders were trading in essential retail only.
- Assets - the core buildings had remained open to essential workers and the building refurbishments workers, which had been allowed to continue and would provide a really good space in the main reception area at Oldbury Council House.
- Urban design building services work was ongoing, most of the contracts had continued and were on track, such housing in Tipton and the Aquatic Centre.
- Commercial estates team work was ongoing to look at where people may have difficulties paying and trying to work with tenants to maintain rental income stream.
- Facilities management had continued to operate to provide essential cleansing, provide hand sanitiser and put signage up etc and maintenance of the building.

The Board noted the following comments and responses to questions:

- Managers had spent time talking with the Unions about their members working safely to maintain services during second lockdown and should lockdown be extended past 2 December 2020.
- Caretakers had been going into communal areas and cleansing the area, which was essential to stop the spread of Covid, particularly in high rise buildings. Managers had agreed with the Unions that workers would have reduced working hours and would not congregate in communal areas during breaks.
- The guidance for second lockdown was different to first lockdown, services had been expected to continue, workers would be going into people's homes to carry out works. In the second lockdown schools were also open.
- There may be a need to utilise staff in neighbourhoods for other priorities to assist the roll out of testing, vaccines and help with the vulnerable. A lot of staff in Neighbourhoods had previously supported other roles such as Covid marshals. There was a need to prioritise services to see which could be moved into other areas.
- In terms of street cleansing, there had been a reduction in service when teams were out due to sickness (SERCO services), at the time it was unclear if all services would be able to continue however services had picked up and street cleansing was in place.
- Grounds Maintenance team carried out grass cutting, it had taken time for them to get around the Borough but that had taken place across the Borough.
- Play areas had previously been closed on the advice of Public Health, signs had been posted and grass had not been cut in the play areas to try

to deter people from using the area. The problem was that people had taken signs down because they were frustrated and lifted their children over barriers to let them play. The guidance now required play areas to be open and the grass had now been cut. The service had put notices in the vicinity reminding people to clean the equipment, it was not viable to put staff in place to cleanse between uses.

- There were some capacity issues in teams, the teams worked in small bubbles and if one team member had to self-isolate the whole bubble would have to.

The Chair thanked the Executive Director Neighbourhoods for all the work that had been done and highlighted the fact that the Council had managed to keep services at a normal level which was testament to all the hard work that had been done.

16/20

### **Sandwell Skills Strategy**

The Director of Education, Employment and Skills introduced the report highlighting that this was the first Sandwell Skills Strategy which had been developed collaboratively. The strategy set out a collective skills vision for the Borough and recommended actions.

The Board noted that the report outlined the overarching strategy and set out the key skills, challenges, opportunities and strategic priorities for the Borough. The Director outlined the reset and recovery strategic work that the Council would need to do. He advised that there had been wide consultation and participation to ensure the strategy represented the local community, businesses and engagement that had taken place with a wide range of stakeholders to contribute and identify skills required in the Borough.

The Director advised that contribution from this meeting was very important to the development of the strategy.

The Employment and Skills Manager and Programme Manager presented Sandwell Skills Strategy 2020-23 slides. The presentation highlighted the following:

- Sandwell's skills challenges – pre-pandemic data to baseline and key challenges highlighted in the strategy:
  - Low skill levels in the population
  - Issues of poverty for those in employment driven by low wage levels
  - Skills shortages faced by employers, particularly in advanced and higher technical skills
  - Lower attainment by young people early years, primary and secondary education
- Reset and recovery – additional challenges present due to Covid:
  - Large scale redundancies

- An increased need for digital skills and access to equipment
- Young people facing more competition for opportunities
- Mental health and lack of resilience
- Sandwell skills aspirations – collective vision for skills with ambitious aims for our residents and businesses:
  - Improve skills attainment at all levels
  - More people to move into sustainable employment
  - More people to move into higher skilled jobs
  - More skilled employees available to support business

The ambitions support Vision 2030, inclusive Economy and Community Wealth Building, economic growth, aligns to the Economic Growth Plan and high-quality education

- Skills for the future
  - Forward thinking, sectoral trends, future demands
  - Impact of automation, climate change, societal changes, pandemic effect and Brexit
  - Sector based action plans
  - Skills demand
  - Digital
  - Green – sustainable and resource efficient
  - STEAM – Science, technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics
  - Reset and recovery
  - Health and Social Care, Transport and logistics
  - The key actions were outlined
  - Reset and Recovery themes – emerging themes
  - Delivery of the Sandwell Skills Strategy

The Chair thanked officers for the comprehensive report and presentation.

In response to questions raised the comments were noted:

- The Chair indicated it would be helpful to have further detail about dates and timescales. It was recognised that specific dates were not known yet and these would be developed as part of the performance management framework. Officers had looked at data time series over ten years and there had been rises and falls which would need to be factored into performance targets to ensure they were realistic and sufficiently challenging.
- Once agreed at Cabinet 9<sup>th</sup> December 2020, the performance framework would be developed and the performance indicators agreed, to include some short term and some long term aims.
- In terms of the skills gap and the need to attract businesses to Sandwell, the Board considered that it was not that Sandwell did not attract businesses, more about 'how does the Council make sure that Sandwell residents get the jobs'.

- The nature of the Borough and proximity to the neighbouring authorities indicted the need to concentrate on how the jobs could be retained in the Borough for the people of the Borough.

The Chair welcomed that the strategy and ambitions aligned with everything the Council was trying to do and members agreed that it was important to say that with the Sandwell Skills Strategy.

The Board recognised that it was vital to develop the strategy in conjunction with everything else we do in Sandwell, including the offers for housing, employment, green spaces and the inclusive economy, to ensure that the strategy was not working in isolation and everything was complementing the other work to help progress in all areas.

It was considered that without nice houses, leisure facilities and schools, skilled people may choose to live out of Sandwell and there would be a greater skills gap in Sandwell.

The Chair welcomed that over recent years, the Council was improving the collaborative approach to deliver the wider plan for Sandwell.

**Agreed that:-**

The Economy Skills Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board receive the Sandwell Skills Strategy 2020-23 and that comments of the Board be referred to the Cabinet Member for Employment and Skills.

17/20

**Climate Change Strategy**

The Chair announced that a working group meeting of the Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board would be arranged to consider 'Implementation of the Climate Change Strategy', date to be arranged in January 2021.

Meeting ended at 18:25