

# Minutes of Economy Skills Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board

**25<sup>th</sup> March 2021 at 5:30pm**  
**Online Virtual meeting**

**Present:** Councillor Rollins (Chair);  
Councillors Chidley, Eaves, M Hussain.

**Also present:** Andy Thorpe – Healthy Urban Development Officer – Public Health; Elizabeth Stephens – Environmental Health Officer, Adult Community Services, Safety and Licensing; Jo Miskin – Climate Change Programme Manager – Neighbourhoods; Paul Fisher – Consultant in Public Health – Public Health Directorate; Sophie Morris – Environmental Improvement Officer – Public Health.

**6/21      Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Hackett, Sandars and Worsey.

**7/21      Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

**8/21      Urgent Item of Business**

There were no additional items of business to consider.

## **Air Quality Action Plan**

The Board received a presentation on Air Quality within Sandwell.

The Air Quality Action Plan (AQAP) was produced as part of the Council's statutory duty to work towards Air Quality Strategy (AQS) objectives, as required by The Environment Act 1995 (Part IV) and the Local Air Quality Management (LAQM) statutory process. In 2005, monitoring found that national standards were not being met, therefore Sandwell was declared an Air Quality Management Area (AQMA). At that time, the objective for Nitrogen Dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>) was being exceeded in 22 separate locations. In 2019, the Council's monitoring of NO<sub>2</sub> concentrations showed that they continued to exceed the annual mean objective in 7 locations with no significant evidence of a downward trend during the past five years.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs required Nitrogen Dioxide levels within Sandwell to be reduced. Furthermore, pollutants such as Carbon Monoxide, Sulphur Dioxide and Ammonia had contributed to the poor air quality in the borough.

The Board noted the following impacts of air pollution:

Health: -

- air pollution was associated with several adverse health impacts, with long-term exposure killing 1 in 19 people in the UK;
- it was recognised as a contributing factor in the onset of heart disease and cancer, plus recent research has suggested links between air quality and both cognitive and sight health;
- additionally, air pollution particularly affected the most vulnerable in society: children and older people, and those with asthma, pneumonia, diabetes and respiratory and cardiovascular diseases;
- people residing in more deprived wards were more likely to be exposed to high levels of air pollution;
- Sandwell had a higher than average emergency hospital admission rate for respiratory illnesses;

- Sandwell had the highest diabetes prevalence in the West Midlands, and the second highest in the UK.

#### Mental Health: –

- air pollution contributed to depression, a reduction in intelligence, which was equivalent to having lost a year at school, and aggressive behaviour;
- research suggested that exposure to air pollutants increased the risk of bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and personality disorders;
- in less affluent areas with poorer air quality, children had been found to be more anxious and suicidal;
- in 2015, Sandwell's estimated rate of 10.7% of 5-16 years with mental health disorders was the highest in the West Midlands region;
- children living in areas with high levels of air pollution had been linked to below average thinking skills and GCSE attainment rates.

#### Climate Change and the Environment: -

- CO<sub>2</sub> and local air pollution shared many of the same sources, including vehicle exhausts, factory chimneys, energy and heating;
- road traffic was one of the largest sources of both greenhouse gases and air pollution;
- according to the European Commission's Joint Research Centre, burning wood was degrading ecosystems and undermining climate goals. Therefore, there were both global and localised impacts of this activity;
- environmental impacts included acidic lakes and canals, depleting nutrients in soil, impacts on agriculture, climate change and biodiversity.

#### Covid-19: -

- there was a correlation between the higher rates of Coronavirus cases and deaths with areas with high levels of air pollution;
- long term exposure to air pollution was associated with an 11% increase in deaths from Covid-19;
- research suggested that 15% of Covid-19 deaths globally were attributable to dirty air;
- Sandwell was one of the worst Local Authorities affected by Covid-19.

In 2011, Sandwell had 190 hospital admissions for COPD and 244 asthma admissions - above the national average, this cost Sandwell £640,000.

Of the 72 areas with dangerous levels of PM 2.5, only Leicester and Sandwell were not in London. Sandwell had the highest morbidity burden in the West Midlands associated with PM air pollution and the highest attributable deaths percentage (6.9%) outside London.

The Board were informed of the costs of air pollution:

- healthy life expectancy in Sandwell was lower in less deprived areas, which meant people spent a lot more of their working life with ill health;
- the problem of maintaining a healthy workforce was exacerbated as the retirement age increased;
- growth in the 'green' industry sector would be beneficial for both employment and economic purposes and subsequent pollution improvement in Sandwell.

The Board noted the seven main areas of the AQAP.

The Air Quality Team had been successful in bidding for funding from DEFRA. This funding would be used to initiate a project with faith centres in Sandwell to encourage behavioural change and improve local air quality. This would involve placing approximately 20 air quality monitors placed in faith centres, schools and busy road in Sandwell, as well as a toolkit and questionnaire. This would enable the Team to monitor and use the data to encourage behavioural change, implement interventions, and deliver training and give residents ideas on how to adopt more sustainable habits.

Additionally, the Council had recently introduced Covid-19 Champions who encouraged residents to get vaccinated and follow government guidance. The Team were looking into working with schools, faith groups and the private sector and introducing Environmental Champions to work with local communities to be an advocate for environmental issues. Furthermore, Citizens Assembly for air pollution and climate change would provide an opportunity for residents to ask questions of the Council and partners and encourage behavioural change.

The Chair noted that this report would also be presented to the Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Board on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2021.

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

- The Team were working to amalgamate the borough, from 51 smoke free zones, to one large zone. This change would take approximately 12 months.
- Smoke control area legislation prohibited smoke from a chimney, unless it had been burnt from an authorised fuel or an 'exempt appliance' was used, for example burners or stoves.
- Smoke from bonfires would fall under nuisance legislation, depending on the merits of the situation.
- Educating residents on the impact of air pollution was pivotal for behavioural change.
- To lead by example by stopping bonfire events organised by the Council annually in Smethwick and West Bromwich. However, it was recognised that this may encourage people to hold bonfire events in their gardens, which would exacerbate the issue.
- The Team were awaiting more information on how to sufficiently implement plans to move from the current position to a more sustainable fleet. An update on timelines for these plans would be provided in 6 months.
- The Board were reminded that requiring developers to incorporate sustainable systems would be a building regulation issue, however would continue to encourage and work with developers to ensure that housing was as green as possible.
- The Government had launched a consultation on electric vehicle charge points in new residential and non-residential buildings.
- The Canal and River Trust had shown interest in abstracting water from the canal system to generate heat pumps for properties fronting the canal network in Sandwell. There was approximately 100km of canal in the Black Country, equivalent to generating 20,000 homes. While this strategy had not yet been adopted, it may be approved in the future.

- Policies on incorporating sustainable systems into new homes would be included in The Black Country Plan, which is to be introduced in the next few years.
- The Government had confirmed that building regulations would be changed. The Future Homes Standards would also require all new homes to be equipped with low-carbon heating and be zero-carbon by 2025. Additionally, the Government aimed to ban gas boilers in new homes by 2025. Homes built under the Future Homes Standard would produce 75-80% less carbon emissions compared with current levels.
- The West Midlands Combined Authority's 5-year plan sought to encourage housing developers to be as green as possible. The plan also aimed to implement a programme of retro-fitting in existing homes around the Black Country.
- The Team were looking to employ an officer to focus on installing electrical charge points around the borough. 100 electrical charge points per year were required to be installed over the next 5 years to meet the 2030 target. This would be addressed in the Black Country Transport – Ultra Low Emission Vehicle Strategy, which was to be subject to public consultation.
- Approximately 20 air quality monitors would be placed around Sandwell. The Team would also be engaging in educational sessions, working as partners with 8 key faith centres and sharing best practice and knowledge with local communities.
- Member input regarding where the air quality monitors should be placed around Sandwell was welcomed.
- A website was being created which would enable people to check their nearest air quality monitor and see what the air quality levels are in their area. Alongside this, the Team were aiming to launch a toolkit to encourage and educate residents on how to change their behaviour and mitigate the impacts of air pollution.
- The Board recognised that working remotely, due to the pandemic, had been successful and reduced emissions due to less people commuting and that the possibility of continuing this way of working should be considered.
- The Team informed the Board that they were working to ensure that the benefits of remote working were realised. They also recognised the need to encourage Council staff and other organisations to work from home in a

sustainable manner regarding heating their homes, waste disposal, etc. Additionally, the Team were considering the implementation of a behavioural change programme to promote ways more efficient ways of travelling.

The Chair welcomed the comprehensive presentation and submitted her thanks, on behalf of the Board, to all Officers involved in the AQAP and the work being done to mitigate the impact of air pollution in Sandwell. The Chair also highlighted that it would be beneficial to receive an update on the progress of the AQAP in 6 months.

**Agreed** that the Board receive an update regarding the Air Quality Action Plan in six months' time.

10/21

## **Climate Change Implementation**

The Board received a presentation on Climate Change Implementation.

An insight was provided into the background of climate change and the benefits of responding to climate change. The presentation explained Sandwell Council's climate change strategy, how progress was being made, and the potential solutions to address the challenges and impacts of climate change.

The Board was advised that climate change would have significant localised and national impacts:

- residents' health, particularly those more vulnerable, such as children and older people, and those with heart and lung conditions, would be more susceptible to the impacts of climate change;
- there would be an increase in people suffering from food poverty;
- an increase in rainfall would overwhelm the drainage system, leading to flooding of homes and businesses;
- residents with limited financial means would become vulnerable to the rise in food prices due to the impact on food growing areas;

- extreme temperatures would affect the health of sick and elderly people.

The Board noted that to address the impacts of climate change, various actions and approaches would need to be adopted. This included insulating and opting for sustainable forms of power and heating systems in Sandwell buildings, to ensure they were energy efficient. Additionally, investment in renewable forms of energy and infrastructure would be required to support a range of low carbon forms of transport. There would be a strong need to engage and communicate with residents to encourage efficiency and behavioural change, such as opting to use public transport and 'active travel'.

The Board was advised that there were extensive societal benefits of tackling climate change, beyond the environmental benefits. By ensuring that the borough could withstand the impacts of climate change would build a resilient borough and increase community cohesion. Furthermore, insulating homes and increasing home energy efficient measures would reduce fuel poverty. Economically, as the economy decarbonised, it would create further opportunities for employment and skills training from new green technologies and enable new businesses more effectively. As residents engaged in 'active travel' and other behavioural changes, it would improve both physical and mental wellbeing.

There was a range of policy that supported the measures that would need to be taken. In 2019, the UK Government set a 'net zero' target for 2050. Furthermore, the 2021 COP26 in Glasgow was likely to be proceeded by further commitments to ensure that countries were working collaboratively to address climate change effectively and efficiently and ensuring that the global temperature limit of 1.5 degrees is achieved.



The Board was reminded that Sandwell Council adopted a Climate Change Strategy in October 2020. The strategy outlined the targets and action plans in place and covered six areas, including:

- Council Estate and Operations
- The Built Environment
- Transport
- Waste & Recycling
- Adaptation and Resilience
- Natural Capital

To become a 'net zero' borough, significant cuts in the borough's emissions would be required, with any that remained being off-set. The Strategy set out the following two key targets:

- The Council achieving net zero by 2030
- The Borough achieving net zero by 2041.
- The Board were informed that these targets were aligned with the West Midlands Combined Authority's targets.

To achieve the above targets, Sandwell had a set budget of 9.1 million tonnes of carbon to use up within 80 years. If Sandwell kept within this budget, the above targets for carbon neutrality would be satisfied. Based on current emissions, 9.1 million tonnes of carbon would be used within 7 years. Over the past year, emissions reduced due to lockdown restrictions, but this was only by 8%. Sandwell needed to reduce emissions by 13% every year until 2100 to make a sustainable impact.

Within these targets, the focus was primarily on the direct emissions, resulting from the fuel burnt to heat buildings and power vehicles, and indirect emissions, from fuels burnt to generate power. The goods and services procured within Sandwell were not included within these targets.

Sandwell Council had agreed strategies and targets to continue the progress of the plans in place. Furthermore, a Member Steering Group, chaired by a Cabinet Member, and an Officer Working Group had been established. Additionally, a range of themed implementation groups were being developed, whose focus would be to implement specific actions within the action plan. Alongside this, a small team

dedicated to supporting the Climate Change programme had been established.

On a broader scale, Sandwell Council had become members of the West Midlands Combined Authority's Low Carbon Officer Group and other networks to gain access to examples of best practice. Furthermore, the Council were responding to additional offers of funding from Central Government to support the Climate Change programme. The Council had continued to work closely with Transport for West Midlands to reduce carbon emissions in public transport. It was also highlighted that several Sandwell businesses had demonstrated 'circular economy' principles, by eliminating waste and the continual use of resources.

The Board were advised that several steps would need to be taken to make progress towards implementing the Climate Change Strategy. This included:

- Embedding climate change within all corporate strategies, policies and operational functions.
- Encouraging commitment to climate change across the Council.
- Climate change needed to be a key consideration within decision making throughout the authority.
- Developing a Council-wide programme of Carbon Literacy to increase understanding and awareness of climate change.
- Establishing a borough wide strategic partnership to oversee the implementation of the strategy. The Council produced 1% of the emissions of the borough, in order to address the other 99%, it would be imperative to engage with communities and businesses.
- Developing a partnership/network of businesses to work towards the 2041 target.
- Developing a portfolio of base-line data sets which would support informed decision making around priorities.
- Establishing the implementation groups to work towards the Action Plans – Senior Leads/support.
- Investigating the resources that would be required to implement the Strategy.

The Board was advised that several challenges would need to be considered and managed to make progress towards the targets. The challenges included:

- Developing a strong corporate focus on climate change, despite the on-going pandemic.
- The scaling and speed of the emissions reductions required. Information from WMCA stated that there was a need to reduce emissions by 33% in next 5 years.
- Identifying the revenue and capital resources needed to deliver the Strategy.
- Engaging with residents, community groups, businesses, stakeholders and partner organisations to deliver the 2041 target.
- Recognising and responding to the behavioural changes needed across the borough.
- Making sufficient progress on our own 2030 target so that we can legitimately advocate for others to follow our lead.
- Pro-actively responding to offers of funding from central government and ensure that Sandwell does not fall further behind.
- Recognising that some areas of our response would need greater level of support than is currently available.

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

- The Chair provided an update on the Climate Change Working Group, who met in January 2021 – it was considered that all executive decisions and reports should explicitly consider climate change implications.
- Scrutiny support should be provided to the implementation groups, as and when required.
- The Working Group suggested that a standing item on specific issues arising from the implementation groups be included on every agenda for the Economy Skills Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board.
- The Board was advised that Carshare Sandwell would be promoted once Covid-19 restrictions were lifted and it was safe to do so. The Council were also looking to adopt other ways to reduce carbon emissions from transport with the Car Share system provider, LifeShare.

- Transport for West Midlands were in the process of introducing their bike share system. This would begin in certain local areas, before being rolled out across Sandwell in due course.
- Other sustainable transport options being considered included the hiring of vehicles. This would reduce car ownership, and subsequently, car dependency and emissions.

**Agreed that:-**

- (1) recommendations be submitted to the Cabinet to consider how climate change be explicitly considered in all Executive decisions;
- (2) a standing item on climate change and related issues be included on future agendas of this Board, including any items or issues arising from the implementation groups;
- (3) where needed, this Board would provide scrutiny support where it would be useful to any of the implementation groups.

The Chair thanked Members and officers for their contribution and hard work on the Scrutiny Board through the municipal year.

Meeting ended at 7:15 pm.

The meeting was broadcast live and is available to view [Economy Skills Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board - 25th March 2021](#)

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