



Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Minutes of a meeting of the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room, The Forum, Towcester on Tuesday 18 April 2023 at 6.00 pm.

Present:

Councillor Dermot Bambridge (Chair)
Councillor Jo Gilford (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Bob Purser
Councillor Anthony S. Bagot-Webb
Councillor Paul Joyce
Councillor Louisa Fowler
Councillor Enam Haque
Councillor Charles Morton
Councillor Kevin Parker

Substitute Members:

Councillor Andre Gonzalez De Savage, for Councillor William Barter

Also Present:

Councillor Adam Brown, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing, Culture and Leisure
Councillor Phil Larratt, Portfolio Holder for Environment, Highways, Transport and Waste Services

Apologies for Absence:

Councillor William Barter
Councillor Pinder Chauhan
Councillor Paul Dyball
Councillor Terrie Eales
Councillor Richard Solesbury-Timms

Officers:

Stuart Timmiss, Executive Director for Place, Economy and Environment
Nick Henstock, Assistant Director for Highways and Transport
Ian Achurch, Head of Economy and Strategy (NNC)
Carl Dorney, Head of Libraries, Museums and Community Hubs
Tracy Tiff, Deputy Democratic Services Manager
Maisie McInnes, Democratic Services Officer

103. **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

104. **Minutes**

RESOLVED: That the minutes were agreed and signed by the chair as a true and accurate record of the meeting.

105. **Chairman's Announcements**

There were none.

106. **Libraries**

The Chair introduced Councillor Adam Brown, Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing, Culture and Leisure, and Carl Dorney, Head of Libraries, Museums and Community Hubs, to the meeting and invited them to deliver the presentation on the West Northamptonshire Libraries Strategy 2024-2027. The Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing, Culture and Leisure, then presented information on the future aims for libraries as part of the strategy and the public library priorities. The Head of Libraries, Museums and Community Hubs displayed the Library Locations on a map of West Northamptonshire to demonstrate the coverage of statutory libraries and community libraries and presented the future plans for libraries.

Members asked if there would be a higher cost for running libraries if disaggregation took place between NNC and WNC, and who was responsible for making the decision to disaggregate the service. Councillor Adam Brown responded that there would be cost implications as it would cost the council more if disaggregation was to take place, and the Shared Services Joint Committee was responsible for making decisions.

Members discussed the possibility of a mobile library service, particularly for those in rural areas living further away from libraries and the need for inclusivity for all children and promotion of reading. In addition, it was suggested that the Library Services Manager could communicate with parish councils on transforming more telephone boxes and spaces into a bookstore to create access points.

Members commended the improvements to the libraries across West Northamptonshire and mentioned how the library area in Brackley would provide an active play space for children, separate to the learning space within the library. Members celebrated Abington library and asked if an event could be arranged in October to celebrate a centenary since it opened. Members discussed the positive impact of libraries providing multiple services and the customer service nature embedded in libraries providing help to residents experiencing poverty and providing advice with revenue and benefits and signposting to other services the council provides. Members suggested that there could be an online ordering service which delivered books to an access point that could engage families to bring excitement with the idea of ordering online and waiting in anticipation to receiving a physical copy of the book. In addition, members shared how vital libraries were for older generation and if libraries could help with booking NHS appointments, and for those convalescing in hospital.

Members shared how proud they were of the library service which did a tremendous job of connecting communities and promoting social cohesion. Members liked the warmer spaces initiative and reported that the NHS had formally recognised the health and wellbeing benefit of libraries. Members suggested the promotion of a 'cool space' for the summer months as opposed to warmer space and the revision of opening hours over the summer holidays as free place for children and families to use and promotion of the summer book challenge. Members praised that every person born in the county became an instant library member which helped to capture the new reader early in life to promote literacy and reading and suggested that libraries could be used as a place for school pupils to meet with teachers. In terms of recording data, members asked how the library service measured success. The Head of Libraries, Museums and Community Hubs shared that their biggest measure of success is visits and there was a recorded figure of 853,000 visits to West Northamptonshire libraries last year and this figure formed the baseline going forward. Members asked if data could be reported for each library to show trends, especially with the opening of the Kingsthorpe library as it would show movement. The Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing, Culture and Leisure added that it was anticipated that the opening of Kingsthorpe would encourage new people to use the library and massively increase footfall.

Members asked about the financial budget for libraries and what the council was spending and if this amount was increasing or decreasing over time. The Head of Libraries, Museums and Community Hubs responded that the budget was complex as it was currently recharged to NNC for 50% currently but the spend on books was estimated at an annual spend of £757,000 which has reduced over time. He explained that trends had changed over time in publishing, as non-fiction was more popular, but the books were more expensive, but fiction has become increasingly popular, and books are less expensive in comparison. He added that a lot of the information was also accessible online now. The Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing, Culture and Leisure expressed his commitment to protecting the libraries budget and ensuring this remained in place for future years.

Members asked questions regarding the IT Infrastructure in libraries and if art materials and collections were being well looked after and preserved. The Head of Libraries, Museums and Community Hubs responded that the libraries were struggling for IT support but did have the capital in place for IT investment as they needed help for futureproofing. In terms of the local studies material and collections they had not been looked after as well as they should have, but they were stored in safes with the right temperature and conditions. There was a resource in place now with the museums service helping with this.

The Chair expressed how impressed he and the committee were with the comprehensive presentation and what they had heard and thanked the Head of Libraries, Museums and Community Hubs and Deputy Leader and Portfolio Holder for Housing, Culture and Leisure.

RESOLVED: That the Place Overview and Scrutiny committee:

- (1) Noted the presentation on the Libraries Service.**
- (2) Reviews the Library Strategy in 12 months' time.**

107. **Broadband contract**

The Chair welcomed Ian Achurch, the Head of Economy and Strategy for NNC, Nick Henstock the Assistant Director for Highways and Transport and Councillor Phil Larratt, Portfolio Holder for Environment, Highways, Transport and Waste Services.

The Head of Economy and Strategy delivered a presentation on Digital Infrastructure IAA Progress Update.

Members discussed the presentation asked where the data for statistics relating to broadband coverage came from. The Head of Economy and Strategy responded that Think Broadband provided the data as the respective data source for the government to ensure consistent data across the UK. Members felt that the statistics did not accurately reflect the current coverage in rural areas and gave examples, such as Weedon where main streets had broadband installed but this had not been connected to local houses.

Members discussed connectivity in rural villages and expressed their discontent at the poor service experienced by residents provided by Gigaclear. Members discussed a new housing estate in Brackley where new pavements had been dug up again to install broadband by Swish and Gigaclear. Members asked a question surrounding road closures for broadband and utility providers. The Assistant Director for Highways and Transport responded that road closures were coordinated by his team but in the case of construction works for HS2 there was a separate system in place for this. Members felt that communication could be clearer for construction works relating to broadband and shared a story from a resident who had found a trench across their drive and unable to move their car to go to work.

The Executive Director of Place shared that West Northamptonshire had a great reputation for innovation and supporting businesses. The council were conscious of the need to be ahead of the curve and were ahead of government targets for broadband installation. He shared exciting news of a global brand that was preparing to use Northampton as a test area for IT infrastructure, which could see West Northamptonshire as a flagship for future technologies and artificial intelligence (AI).

The Chair thanked officers for their comprehensive presentation and thanked the Head of Economy and Strategy for attending the meeting.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee noted the presentation on Digital Infrastructure IAA Progress Update**
- (2) That the Head of Strategy and Economy would provide a progress update on Gigaclear at a future scrutiny meeting in 12 months.**

108. **Home to school policy changes**

At the Chair's invitation, the Assistant Director for Highways and Transport delivered a presentation on the Home to School Transport Policy Consultation April 2023.

Members asked a question surrounding entitlement and assessment for school transport. The Assistant Director Highways and Transport confirmed that there was no assessment and children were qualified by age, as children under 8 attending school that was more than 2 miles away from their home were eligible, or 8-16 year olds attending a school that was more than 3 miles away from their home or if there was not a safe route for them to walk from their home. Members asked if the transport for year 11s that would not be entitled unless the move was an emergency would apply to domestic violence cases. The Assistant Director Highways and Transport confirmed that any cases of domestic abuse would be considered as an emergency.

The Executive Director of Place emphasised to members that the policy update would bring the council in line with statutory government guidance, but whereas other authorities included SEND transport for children within their policies, WNC had made the decision at cabinet to continue their commitment to providing transport for SEND children.

Members expressed the need for the council to be fair and inform parents and make communications available that if a child was allocated a school that was further away then school transport would be provided but if the parents chose to send their child to a school further away then they would be liable to pay for their transport to school. Members shared that it was important to get the communications correct on Home to School transport, and to consult with schools and school governors, as well as parish councils. Members felt that the council needed to look at innovative ways to save money rather than cutting transport back to the statutory level and look at ways to encourage active travel, rural transport links and working in partnership with bus companies and other organisations to ensure that the education of children was not put at risk.

Members requested a full impact assessment to be taken to cabinet for consideration. The Assistant Director Highways and Transport confirmed that a draft impact assessment was in place, and work was being done internally to look at ways the council could reduce cost pressures by looking into route optimisation and save companies providing a transport service from profiteering from the council due to the lack of buses and drivers available.

Members asked if schools were in a position to operate their own bus service. The Assistant Director Highways and Transport confirmed that some schools did charge for a minibus service that they provided.

The Executive Director of Place shared that they were happy to bring Home to School Transport back to scrutiny for scenario based feedback and overall changes to the Home to School policy following the consultation.

The Deputy Democratic Services Manager added that Councillor Rosie Herring, Chair of People Overview and Scrutiny committee had been informed of the date of this meeting but was unable to attend and had provided email comments to the Chair for consideration.

The Chair thanked the Assistant Director Highways and Transport and Portfolio Holder for Environment, Highways, Transport and Waste Services for their detailed presentation and attending the meeting.

RESOLVED: That comments made by the Committee on the proposed changes to the Home to School Transport Policy are included in the consultation.

109. **Updates from the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Task and Finish Groups**

At the Chair's invitation, the Chair of the Highways Oversight Group, Councillor Bagot-Webb provided an update on the Highways and shared that an update on the Active Travel Oversight Group would be given at the next Place Overview and Scrutiny committee meeting.

Councillor Bagot-Webb delivered the update and highlighted the salient points:

- Highways was a complex area for the council to manage and the Assistant Director for Highways and Transport delivered a presentation on the performance matrix and contract management of the council's Highways contract with Kier.
- The issues with the highways were ultimately due to the financial cost required by the council. To maintain the roads at the current state a budget of £9-11m was required, and this was to ensure they remained safe and an estimated £220m was needed to fix all of the issues with the road network. Cabinet had awarded an extra £1m in this year's budget and the government had awarded £1.8m to be used to fix potholes which had helped towards highways works this year.
- The role of scrutiny was to look at the contractual performance backed up by the performance matrix and hold cabinet to account in relation to this.
- There were opportunities for the contract to be extended if Kier hit the Level 3 target, and currently they were not achieving Level 1.
- Going forward the council and Kier would be trialling electric vehicles and had agreed an electric gritting machine would be trialled this winter and were looking to trial vehicles under 3.5 tonnes.
- The council were looking to invest in a Pothole Pro machine and a second Thermal Road Repair machine.

The Assistant Director for Highways and Transport added that the team needed to drive efficiencies with Kier to close the funding gap as much as possible. Kier was showing a willing aptitude to this and were happy to embrace new technologies and ways of working more efficiently.

Members asked if we would share equipment with NNC. The Assistant Director for Highways and Transport confirmed that the council would buy the equipment and Kier would be responsible for the running of the vehicles and associated

maintenance requirements. Members asked if the pothole policy could be circulated outside of the meeting.

The Chair thanked the Chair of the Highways and Oversight Group and confirmed that the Oversight Group would continue with its work and would provide a report to this Committee at the appropriate stage.

RESOLVED: That members noted the update from the Chair of the Highways Oversight Group

110. **Update from the Chair of the Waste and Resources Strategy Members Working Group**

The Chair of the Waste and Resources Strategy Members Working Group delivered a presentation updating on the progress of Waste and Resources Strategy Members Working Group.

Members asked if the date for site visit had been arranged. The Vice-Chair responded that the date had not been confirmed yet.

RESOLVED: That members noted the update from the Chair of the Waste and Resources Strategy Members Working group.

111. **Review of Committee Work Plan**

The Chair invited members to review and discuss the Place Overview and Scrutiny committee work plan. He shared that there was a request for the committee to consider the Waste Strategy at its June meeting. The Chair explained that going forward a new WNC Scrutiny Framework had been produced and within this document was a proforma that must be used for Members to suggest ideas for areas to be added to the work programme.

In terms of the meeting agenda for June, the Chair stated that members would be providing input into the Local Plan for WNC and would receive the Annual report of the Committee.

In response to queries, the Chair confirmed that for future meetings he would suggest that presentations to the Committee would be limited to around ten minutes and would suggest a short report contain key points within the presentation.

RESOLVED:

- (1) That members reviewed the committee work plan.**
- (2) That members agreed for the Waste Strategy to be brought to the June meeting.**
- (3) That members noted the update from the Chair regarding the proforma for suggestions of items for future scrutiny input and review.**

112. **Urgent Business**

There were no items of urgent business.

The meeting closed at 9.28 pm

Chair: _____

Date: _____