

21st April 2022

Highways and Transport Services

HS2

Pre-app meetings involving local Members are now being held with HS2 Ltd and their contractors on planning, landscape, ecology, noise and highways matters related to the construction period and the permanent arrangements, in advance of formal consents being submitted to the Council. The Council continues to facilitate meetings of the HS2 Liaison Group, a forum for local residents and other key stakeholders to receive updates from HS2 Ltd and raise issues directly. This positive engagement with HS2 Ltd will, we hope, help to minimise as far as possible the impacts of the project on local residents as construction starts to accelerate. The majority of the HS2 Road Safety Fund schemes have now been completed with only the installation of Vehicle Activated Signs and a scheme in Aston le Walls outstanding. Both schemes are on schedule to be completed by Christmas. Funding for a HS2 Marshal for West Northamptonshire has been secured as part of the budget setting process and recruitment to the post has taken place, and the Marshall is expected to be in post in mid-May. There will also be a member briefing fairly soon regarding HS2, giving an overview of our powers in respect of Highways, Planning and regulatory matters.

North West Relief Road

Following Cabinet's approval in December 2021 to borrow against the funding shortfall created by the unsuccessful Levelling Up Fund bid, advanced works have now commenced on site. The initial works include setting up the site compound, creating access routes to the site and preparing for the detailed archaeological investigations which ensure that opportunities to learn more about the local history and heritage are not lost to the scheme.

These works are being undertaken under licence although the Authority has now exchanged contracts and is close to completing with four out of five landowners. The final landowner is the Althorp Estate and terms are agreed and the land agreement is close to being ready for exchange and we anticipate the final land parcel will be secured within the next two weeks.

The Growth Deal funding has now been fully approved by SEMLEP and this important contribution to the project is expected to be received by the Authority on March 18th.

Works are scheduled to last until February 2024 and the project team will be working hard to ensure that affected landowners, residents and the travelling public are all kept up to date with progress and any potential impact of the works.

Cliftonville Corridor

Work on Phase 2 of the Cliftonville Corridor has been completed and a post-scheme review is planned for Autumn 2022, which will assess the performance against the baseline traffic and air quality information collected prior to the scheme commencing.

New Highways Contract

The third and final phase of dialogue with bidders which will result in the procurement of a new contract for highways is now over. Bidders are now preparing their final submissions which will be evaluated and result in a recommendation to award from the procurement team. The new contract is scheduled to begin in September 2022, slightly later than originally planned and agreement has been reached with KierWSP about extending their current contract to ensure there is no gap between the two contracts.

Active Travel

We have secured money from the Department for Transport for funding to help develop a new Active Travel strategy for West Northamptonshire. This strategy can be used to identify improvements to our active travel schemes, which in turn ensure that we can prioritise key routes across our area, creating a network that will encourage more walking and cycling thereby reducing congestion and contribute to the Council's carbon reduction targets.

A briefing has been held with Place and Overview Scrutiny committee and an oversight group is in the process of being set up to help steer the development of this new strategy for West Northamptonshire.

Transport – Buses & Rail

Following agreement at our June Cabinet meeting to develop a Bus Service Improvement Plan, the plan was submitted to Government at the end of October. I thank Members for their input in finalising the plan. This is one of the key steps in delivering the Government's National Bus Strategy - Bus Back Better - within West Northamptonshire and allowing us to access the associated funding. Work is now under way on establishing the Enhanced Partnership with local bus operators and a further paper will be taken to Cabinet in April 2022.. A cross party steering group will continue to meet quarterly to help review and shape the work related to the implementation of the strategy.

It was very disappointing that our bid for Government funding was unsuccessful, but a majority of those bidding for funds were unsuccessful. We have requested feedback from DfT with regard to our bid and in light of the feedback we will prepare a further bid for funding as soon as we can.

A meeting has been held with East West Mainline Partnership to discuss better ways of integrating West Northamptonshire rail stations into their plans for a new / re-opened rail line between Oxford and Cambridge, and to Aylesbury and beyond.

Councillor William Barter has been meeting with the West Coast Partnership with regard to rail services on the West Coast Mainline post HS2, especially with a view to improving connectivity for Northampton and Long Buckby

Highways Maintenance

A schedule of highways maintenance in West Northamptonshire is published regularly and is available for all elected members. The maintenance team are using new technology to help improve the speed and quality of repairs, including the Thermal Road Repair Unit and the Roadmaster unit which have been bought using capital investment from the Council.

A number of highways 'members evenings' have been held over the winter period covering topics including Capital Funding and work prioritisation and Network Management operations.

Winter Service

Winter Service has now ended and following an unusually mild winter we can report that it was a successful season.

Waste Management Services

Waste Collections

Following some disruption to waste collection services in recent months due to the national HGV driver shortage, the services have recently stabilised with only a small number of service disruption issues.

The new chargeable garden waste service for the whole of West Northamptonshire has been launched. The payment system opened on 14th February and at the time of writing 33,400 garden waste permits have been purchased. The subsidised home composting scheme launched on the same day and to date, 1,233 residents have taken advantage of this offer.

Plans to introduce a kerbside collection of small electrical items in the Daventry area are coming to fruition. Cages have been fitted to the refuse collection vehicles and promotional bin stickers about the service about to be delivered to Daventry residents. The new service will commence at the start of April. All implementation costs of this new service have been funded by an external grant from VALPAK.

Farthinghoe Recycling Centre reopened on 19th March, with a new contractor (ACE Reuse Recycling). Some site refurbishments were carried out whilst the site was barely closed during the procurement process. The facility includes a popular on-site reuse shop.

Litter and Street Cleansing

Dialogue with and support for the Northamptonshire Litter Wombles is on-going and very positive.

£4,500 of Welcome Back funding has been secured to fund the purchase of additional litter picking equipment for use by community groups. We have also used this funding to print 500 copies of our "Guide to Undertaking a Community Litter Pick", to be given out to groups running a litter pick, which aims to make their event safer and more successful.

Environment

Management

In the finalised structure of the Assets & Environment Team, many of these services will be managed as part of a Public Realm & Heritage group. Recruitment from the protected group of staff was not possible. Formal recruitment under the usual Council processes will therefore commence.

Parks and Open Spaces

Disaggregation of Brixworth Country Park and the Everdon Outdoor Learning Centre will have been completed on 1st April 2022. There will be 11 members of staff transferring across from North Northants and both Brixworth & Everdon are very enthusiastic about working with West Northants Council and to the future expansion of their areas.

Work on the Parks Development Strategy is proceeding, and work is also underway to extend the Council's outdoor education offer.

Watermeadows Park in Towcester, which is currently under construction, will be completed by the end of March 2022. There have been new footpaths, benches, picnic tables, viewing platform and play equipment installed.

Tree Policy & Strategy

The Council is looking to employ a Tree Strategy & Projects Officer to lead on the development of the Council's new Tree Policy & Strategy. The new Policy & Strategy will include trees on the highway, parks and open spaces, and future projects for the planting of new trees throughout WNC, including street trees. The service is currently supporting an Overview & Scrutiny Task Panel on this subject.

Climate Strategies

Three strategies are in various stages of progress to support the Council's achievement of Net Zero by 2030:

- Estate Climate Strategy: Work is well underway, with an understanding of emissions the Council is responsible for being established and a range of measures to address these being explored.
- Construction & Maintenance Climate Strategy: Work is briefed and will commence shortly. It is not meaningful to establish a baseline as such, as the construction programme varies on a year by year basis.
- Fleet Climate Strategy: Work is briefed and will commence shortly.

All three Strategies seek to address scope 1, 2, and 3 emissions relevant to their functional scope. The Estate Climate Strategy will be expected to resolve any emissions which cannot be mitigated within the other Strategies.

Local Nature Recovery Strategy

The Council has been allocated a small 'new burdens' grant to commence work on a Local Nature Recovery Strategy. This work will be integrated with other Council work to maximise the benefits to the environment and people of West Northamptonshire.

Flood Management

The Council has a vital role as Lead Local Flood Authority and Land Drainage Authority. The service responds to large number of formal consultations, and investigates flooding incidents. Strategically it works to identify and secure measures to reduce the risk of flooding to homes and businesses.

The Council has been actively working with communities across the district, including Yelvertoft, Deanshanger, Collingtree, and many others, to better understand the risk of flooding and identify measures to improve their resilience. This will inform future bids for Flood Risk Management grants and the Council's capital programme.

In 2020, the Government announced a £200 million fund for innovative projects to help communities be more resilient to flooding and coastal change. The Flood & Water Team was successful in being awarded £6.2 million, subject to a satisfactory business case. This applies to areas in West Northants and North Northants. Work is continuing in earnest in preparation of the Outline Business Case for the project. The work is expected to deliver catchment, community and property-level flood resilience measures to communities in the Wootton Brook and Harpers Brook catchments. It is anticipated that engagement of the benefitting communities will commence in anger in the summer, once the business case has been approved by the Environment Agency.

The Council has experienced problems with the provision of services by its outsourced service provider. It has therefore taken interim steps of engaging agency workers. In the long-term plan, now approved through the budget, is to engage a full in-house technical team. This should deliver a better service through efficiencies and secure local knowledge.

Car Parks

Parking demand is gradually increasing, but remains well below pre-Covid levels. This is reflected in lower levels of income in 2021/22 and projected in 2022/23. During 2022/23 we will assess how demand is evolving. This may require changes of approach.

Work on the new parking payment system, which is designed to ease use and thereby encourage people to visit central Northampton and thereby also increase income, is well underway. The market appears to have a range of solutions. Tenders have been received and are being reviewed and scored. The most challenging part will probably be integrating modern systems with the legislation governing Council car parks, which was written in a previous era.

Short term actions relating to the service include:

- Renewing outdated lifts in St Michaels (All other MSCP lifts were all renewed, replaced, or refurbished in recent years).
- Supporting the new cinema in Daventry with providing customers up to five hours parking on the nearby short stay car park that would otherwise restrict users to three hours.
- Closing around half of Commercial Street car park to accommodate the market whilst works are undertaken on the Market Square.

During 2022/23 and into 2023/24 it is planned to develop a car parking strategy for central Northampton. This will provide a framework to take decisions such as on replacement or major refurbishment of the Mayorhold MSCP, pricing strategy, etc.

With the disaggregation of Brixworth Country Park from NNC we are having to set up a new contract with the card payment provider on the machines. This has proved particularly challenging and will interrupt the ability to take card transactions until resolved. We are working with the Communications team to ensure customers remain informed.

Councillor Phil Larratt

Cabinet Member for Environment, Transport, Highways and Waste Services