

**29<sup>th</sup> September 2022**

## **Highways and Transport Services**

### **Highways Service Disaggregation**

On 12 September the previous countywide highways service disaggregated into 2 teams – one for each authority and the team serving North Northants relocated from One Angel Square. The WNC team also has undergone a restructure which came into effect on the same day and is now led by Nick Henstock who has been appointed to the new role of Assistant Director for Highways and Transport.

I wish to put on record my thanks to Fiona Unett who has worked amazingly hard over the last 2 years leading both the Highways and Waste Teams – in future Fiona will lead the Waste team as she continues as the Assistant Director for Waste.

The Highways and Transport team is now beginning to recruit to roles that are necessary to allow the team to function independently.

### **North West Relief Road**

Works started on site in April 2022 and are programmed to last for 104 weeks. The project team continue to work 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.

After a slow start on site, work is now progressing well with the earthwork's operations in particular, benefitting from the recent dry weather. Other works since commencement include creation of haul roads, fencing, drainage and excavation of drainage ponds.

Archaeological investigations have progressed well, but the archaeological team has recently uncovered artifacts that are considered to merit further exploration. The impacts of this work on the overall programme, including costs, are currently being considered by the project team although it should be noted that the possibility of such finds was considered and is allowed for within the Council's risk and contingency allowances for the project.

Works to divert Rights of Way are ongoing and it is hoped that these will help to unlock commencement of development at Dallington Grange. The North West Relief Road team are working closely with the developers and their designers to ensure that both the new road and the development, which includes phase 1 of the relief road, are not delayed.

Tree and hedge clearance works are complete although the team have had to deal with a lot of criticism from local residents due to the sensitivity of removing trees from land the public have enjoyed recreational access to for many years. Tree and hedge clearance has been kept to an absolute minimum and the site team have managed to save 8 mature oak trees by introducing minor design changes on the ground which is very positive news.

Off-site mitigation works are required in Boughton village, and these have been agreed in principle with Boughton Parish Council following a series of very constructive meetings. Kier and WSP have now commenced feasibility work to assess the viability of the proposals agreed with Boughton Parish Council and we hope to implement these as soon as practicable to help mitigate the existing traffic problems experienced in the village which are predicted to be exacerbated by the North West Relief Road without intervention.

### **New Highways Contract**

Mobilisation of the new contract has progressed well, and the new service began on 12 September. I attended the induction event with the Kier staff to welcome them as our colleagues in this new venture together. Over the first 3-4 months of the contract Kier will be visiting all the communities in West Northamptonshire to carry out works to improve the environment for residents and all road users, this will include sign and bollard cleaning, white lining, footway clearance and vegetation clearance.

### **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 will 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.

Following the briefing held with Place and Overview Scrutiny committee, a draft ambition statement, the first phase of developing the strategy, has been prepared and this was presented at an oversight group on 12<sup>th</sup> September. Feedback will be used to steer the development of this new strategy. A draft strategy will be prepared by December 2022, with a further oversight group in January to consider it.

Work on the Daventry Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWIP) is well underway. Site audits were completed in August and draft proposals have been presented to stakeholders for their feedback. A first draft of the LCWIP will be available in October 2022.

Discussions are still ongoing between us, the Department for Transport (DfT), HS2, EKFB and National Highways around securing safe provision for active travel on the proposed A43 overbridge over HS2 in line with our vision to create an active travel route between Brackley and Silverstone. Following a review by DfT of draft design proposals for the bridge, a focused, technical workshop is being held in early October to take this forward.

Following submission of our Self-Assessment form to Active Travel England, we have received an indicative revenue funding allocation of £152,723 from the Capability and Ambition Fund 2022/23. The deadline for submitting our proposals is 30<sup>th</sup> September.

### **Transport – Buses & Rail**

Cabinet agreed to form an Enhanced Partnership with local bus operators in April 2022. This is one of the key steps in delivering the Government's National Bus Strategy - Bus Back Better - within West Northamptonshire. Unfortunately, along with many other authorities, we were unsuccessful in securing any Government funding to take forward improvements to our bus network.

We are currently progressing two key elements of work to progress our work on buses. The first is to work with commercial bus operators to co-design a sustainable network of services

following the end of Government financial support for the loss of passengers. This funding was originally expected to end in October, but Government has now announced that funding will continue until March 2023. The second linked piece of work is looking at how we improve the provision of bus services for rural areas. A cross party steering group will continue to meet quarterly to help review and shape the work related to the implementation of the strategy.

Arrangements have been made to continue financial support for the 200 bus service between Banbury and Daventry at least until January 2023, and subject to the recently announced Council spending restrictions, support may also be given jointly with Oxfordshire County Council to reintroduce the 500 bus between Brackley and Banbury on a Sunday.

The forthcoming possible loss of the 89 service, that serves villages bordering Milton Keynes, is a matter of concern, especially as it was operating on a commercial basis without subsidy. I'm engaging with the relevant cabinet member in Milton Keynes to establish what options may be available to provide services in this area.

Cabinet agreed in July a paper setting out our aspirations for improved rail services for West Northamptonshire once the opening of HS2 has released capacity on the existing rail network.

## **Waste Management Services**

### **Waste Collections**

The refuse and recycling collections continue to perform at good level with few complaints.

Current subscriptions to the garden waste service now stand at just under 90,000, with high levels of participation across the area. Around half of the unwanted bins in the South area have now been collected and this is due to be completed by the end of October. Unwanted bins are being repaired where required and re-used within West Northamptonshire.

Household Waste Recycling Centres continue to operate with no issues.

The team are starting to gear up resources to develop a new WNC waste strategy which will help align the future vision of the Council for waste services with our statutory duties, taking into account new and emerging legislation. Members and residents will be engaged with this work to ensure that the strategy reflects the Council's priorities.

### **Litter and Street Cleansing**

Crews continue to cleanse the public spaces in around West Northants, flytipping is still an issue in hotspots and colleagues continue to liaise with the Environmental Protection Team to reduce this anti-social behaviour. Dialogue with, and support for the Northamptonshire Litter Wombles is also on-going and very positive, the group have benefitted from funding from the Northamptonshire Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner to buy more equipment.

## **Environment**

### **Management**

It was not possible to recruit a Head of Public Realm & Heritage. In the light of the Council's financial challenges and the office optimisation programme, a merger of the Facilities and Public Realm & Heritage teams is being tested.

## **Parks and Open Spaces**

### **Community Garden Project at the Racecourse**

A community garden project has started in the fenced off grounds of the stand-alone depot known as the "White Building", which is located in the centre of the Racecourse. The project has been kick started by Groundwork, an environmental charity, and supported by Segro who have provided the initial funding.

The aim of the Groundwork Green Team will be to work alongside the WNC Park Ranger with a team of 10 learners recruited from the local area for two days a week for six weeks, equating to sixty hours of learning support.

The purpose of the project is to upskill disadvantaged, long-term unemployed and vulnerable members of the local community via landscaping and construction along with Carbon Literacy accredited training, and Health & Safety Level 1 accredited certification.

The site is intended to be utilised as a community focused food growing and educational facility complete with woodworking workshop, potting shed and storage facility.

### **Green Flag Awards**

In June the Green Flag Judges visited the parks that were entered for the awards, which were Bradlaugh Fields, Abington Park, Delapre Park, Daventry Country Park, and Brixworth Country Park / Pitsford Water in partnership with Anglia Water. All were successful in retaining their Green Flag status, and I thank our staff, especially our Park Wardens, for all their hard work in this achievement.

### **Borough Hill**

Borough Hill has a history of human habitation dating into prehistory. Remains have been found on the hill of two Bronze Age barrows, two Iron Age hillforts, one of which is the fourth largest found in Britain, and later there was a Roman villa and farming settlement. In the early 1920s the BBC erected a 720-foot transmission mast on top of the hill. This has now been removed. The hill is now scheduled as an ancient monument.

To ensure visitors to Borough Hill share in the knowledge and experience of this magnificent landmark, WNC has now installed a number of interpretation boards around the Hill.

### **Everdon Outdoor Learning Centre**

Everdon Outdoor Learning Centre is located in a superb rural setting in the attractive village of Everdon, near Daventry. The facility provides schools and groups with the opportunity to sample outdoor activities such as orienteering, cross-country navigation and team building games, on a residential or day basis.

The Team welcome groups from schools, nurseries, playgroups, Scouts, Cubs, Guides, Rainbows and Brownies. Since Covid, groups have realised the importance of being able to get out and about in the fresh air and to enjoy the natural wonders of the outdoors.

This realisation has boosted the number of bookings for the use of the Outdoor Learning Centre, as the Team are now taking reservations for 2024, and have had to recruit a Senior Educational Ranger to help with the increase in demand. The service is also using space at other WNC parks to enhance its offer.

### **Dry spell**

During the prolonged dry spell in our weather, unfortunately we have had some issues with fires within our parks. The worst ones being at Borough Hill in Daventry and in Northampton Bradlaugh Fields, Ladybridge Drive and Kingsthorpe Rec. Unfortunately, the latter two having play equipment badly damaged by the fire. It is the intention to replace all the damaged play equipment as soon as possible.

Water bodies in a number of parks suffered during the prolonged dry weather. As rain has returned these should begin to recover. However, we will seek to address these issues in the long term through our nature recovery plan.

### **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. In the light of the Council's financial challenges, it is proposed to accelerate assessment of potential for photovoltaic (solar cell) production of electricity.
- Construction & Maintenance Climate Strategy: Work is underway. A wide range of material exists and is being assimilated.
- Fleet Climate Strategy: We have secured a free Fleet review from the Energy Saving Trust. The Trust deliver a fully funded fleet consultancy programme on behalf of the Department for Transport, that will identify opportunities for WNC to decarbonise road transport fleets & transition (ideally) to zero emission vehicles, thereby contributing to our aim to be net zero carbon by 2030. Whole-life cost, and energy and carbon comparisons will underpin recommendations to change. In September, the initial meeting with the Trust and contract managers with fleet responsibilities will take place.

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**

July Cabinet approved the Council's desire to be the responsible authority for a local nature recovery area of West Northamptonshire. Changes within Government may have resulted in some delays, but it is hoped that the regulations, guidance, and funding will be announced this autumn. Further funding of perhaps £120-170k is expected.

## **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.

Due to ongoing issues with external providers and the cost of existing agency staff, the Council is now advertising to recruit a full in-house technical team, which should deliver a better service through efficiencies as well as securing local knowledge. Work will then also be able to commence on updating the Local Flood Risk Management Strategy, which will define how we plan to manage local sources of flood risk in the district. The additional capacity would also then allow for delivery of these measures. In the meantime, the Council is making progress with a number of communities including Long Buckby, Deanshanger, Collingtree and Yelvertoft.

The Resilience and Innovation Northamptonshire (RAIN) project, led by the Council, is awaiting final approval from the Environment Agency of its business case, before the delivery phase can commence. The project will deliver catchment, community and property-level flood resilience measures to communities in the Wootton Brook and Harpers Brook catchments.

## **Parking and CCTV**

We have completed a procurement exercise to introduce new parking payment systems in nine Northampton town centre car parks to improve the customer experience and introduce more flexibility for visitors looking to park, as well as reduce operating costs. Work will be completed before the Christmas season.

Work has started on producing tenders for a variety of contracts that are due to renew in April 2023, these include, CCTV monitoring, CCTV maintenance and car park cleaning contracts

As part of the roll out of new payment equipment in the town centre car parks, options are also being explored with the new provider to enhance the parking offer at both Brixworth and Daventry Country parks.

Councillor Phil Larratt

**Cabinet Member for Environment, Transport, Highways and Waste Services**