



Communities
Overview Committee

21st July 2021

1.00 p.m.

Item

3

Public

**MINUTES OF THE COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 15
MARCH 2021
2.00 - 4.46 PM**

Responsible Officer: Emily Marshall
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Present

Councillor Cecilia Motley (Leader)
Councillors Nick Hignett (Vice Chairman), Ted Clarke, Nigel Hartin, Roger Hughes,
Vivienne Parry, Keith Roberts, Leslie Winwood and Tina Woodward

20 Apologies for absence and substitutions

There were no apologies for absence.

21 Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

No disclosable pecuniary interests were declared.

Councillor L Winwood declared a non-pecuniary interest as Trustee of the Bridgnorth and District Transport Group.

22 Minutes of the meeting held on 25th January 2021

RESOLVED:

That the Minutes of the Communities Overview Committee meeting held on 25 January 2021 be confirmed as a correct record.

23 Public Question Time

There were no questions from members of the public.

24 Member Question Time

No questions had been received from Members.

25 Chairman's Update

The Chairman reported that following the Committee's meeting on 25th January 2021 she had met with Councillor Dean Carroll, the Portfolio Holder for Adult Social Care and Climate Change, regarding cemetery capacity. They had agreed that cemetery capacity was an ongoing issue that needed to be kept under review therefore regular updates would be provided to the Committee in future in order to ensure sufficient burial capacity. The need to maintain a dialogue with both Hereford and Lichfield Diocese was also recognised as crucial.

Continuing her update, the Chairman reported that she had made a presentation to Cabinet on behalf of the Committee in relation to the Affordable Housing Allocations Policy and Scheme and was confident that the substantive report, when presented to a future Cabinet meeting, would be supported. It was considered essential that those in need of housing were easily able to understand the Policy.

26 Public Rights of Way

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Lezley Picton, Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Culture, to the meeting and provided background to the agenda item, explaining that at the last meeting the Committee had expressed concern that the Rights of Way Service was unable to reinvest any income generated back into the service. The Team had limited income to halt the decline of the rights of way network and Cabinet had been asked to explore the possibility of income generated by the service being retained by the service.

The Portfolio Holder made the following points and stated that she would be looking to make improvements:

- Staff were being asked to work in a more commercial manner but were currently unable to reap the benefits
- Going forward to the 2021/22 financial year, consideration should be given to the possibility of allowing services to keep their earned income, for example, through the operation of some of the smaller contracts and maximising their work.
- Currently there was no depreciation in the rights of way budget. Given the amount of equipment used by this service, this would allow improved planning for the future.

The Chairman commented that the Covid-19 pandemic had resulted in a loss of staff in the Rights of Way team as they had been seconded elsewhere, Parish Paths Partnership volunteer groups had not operated but the use of the network had greatly increased with the resultant impact on the condition of some paths.

The Portfolio Holder added that the Parish Paths Partnership volunteer groups were very keen to re-start as soon as possible. She recognised that the increased use of the network had resulted in the need for a great deal of catch up repair work. Referring to bridge repairs, she understood the need for an ongoing maintenance plan in order to avoid significant costs and, along with capital monies, she acknowledged the need to request assistance for the Council's bridge engineer.

In answer to questions from members of the Committee, the Portfolio Holder made the following additional points:

- Volunteers on the Parish Paths Partnership had been well supported during the Pandemic, but volunteers were always needed.
- An increase in staff numbers in the rights of way team would result in an increased level of support going forward.
- It was vital to keep open the lines of communication.

It was noted that unfortunately the concerns raised could not be considered by Cabinet during the pre-election period but the Committee agreed wholeheartedly that the issue of the rights of way service area retaining its generated income should feature on a future Cabinet agenda following the local elections..

The Committee thanked the Portfolio Holder for her support on this issue.

RESOLVED:

- i) That, following the local elections, Cabinet be requested to explore the possibility of the Rights of Way Service retaining income generated by the service for reinvestment in the service;
- ii) That the update be noted.

27 Rural Transport

The Passenger Transport Group Manager gave a very informative presentation and update on trials of new ways of providing rural transport.

He made the following points:

- Community rural transport was in a precarious situation in 2018 and a European Court ruling increased regulation which may have made some groups unviable.
- The Task and Finish Group on Rural Transport, whilst no final report had been produced, had recognised that rural transport groups provided a vital role but could not be relied upon to provide a comprehensive service.
- This, together with the decline in the use of rural bus services highlighted to Shropshire Council the need to change how public transport should be provided in future, particularly in the rural areas.

The Passenger Transport Group Manager then provided a succinct update on trials of new ways of providing rural transport with the aim of building better in future rather than returning to what was provided pre pandemic.

Four trial areas would be established and would include:

- A modular approach to service delivery
- Inter urban connect
- Flexible bus networks
- Cross boundary intermediary
- Linking communities
- Connecting passengers to frequent bus and rail travel

- Possible funding through the National Bus Strategy and a reworking of the Council's own budgets.

Referring specifically to the possibility of funding through the National Bus Strategy, the Passenger Transport Group Manager explained that £3 billion was available and, in addition, £20M had been allocated in the September budget for rural mobility. The Government's aim was to encourage better access for disabled people, integrated ticketing schemes (i.e. one ticket for a journey that may comprise use of both bus and rail) and appropriate fare levels.

The Chair drew attention to the obvious advantage of forging links between services that were already available and promoted the synchronising of services, for example bus drop off at the appropriate time to meet rail services. Referring to rural transport issues, she stated that she was conscious that better use needed to be made of the existing infrastructure, travel to and from medical appointments needed to be improved and the use of new climate change friendly buses needed to be introduced as soon as possible; a very ambitious project.

In response to Members' questions and comments the Passenger Transport Group Manager made the following observations:

- Consultation on and understanding of travel demands were essential
- Ideally four trial areas to be introduced in 2021/22
- Models to be drawn up this year in order to be prepared to access the Department of Transport £3 billion funding pot quickly
- It was not yet known to which elements Government funding would apply but it would include packages for improvements, for example fare rates, good structure, frequency of services, climate change impact, access in rural communities.
- Need to take an holistic view and take into account the needs of both the elderly and young people (the provision of late night services for those living in rural areas currently denied opportunity and independence).
- Structure essential to meet the needs of users, 'First day it goes wrong is the last day you use it'
- The existing community transport network perform a valuable service and may well provide some of the solutions going forward.
- Conversations surrounding contracts will need to be held with rural community groups as they may be able to take on some functions. Developments to make these groups stronger and more resilient.
- Recognition of the importance of building on what already exists rather than trying to replicate.
- Importance of understanding new demand and movement patterns post pandemic.
- Public transport would become unsustainable left in its current format, change is essential.

In drawing the debate to a close, the Chair stressed the importance of taking an holistic view of transport operators of all sizes and making the maximum and optimum use of services already available. She was both optimistic and positive that transport in Shropshire and connectivity for rural areas could and would be transformed.

RESOLVED:

1. That the update on the provision of rural transport be noted, with thanks;
2. That progress made on the development of rural transport in Shropshire be reported to the Committee in 6 months' time.

28 Libraries Strategy

In opening the debate on this item, the Chair commented that this was a difficult time for libraries but also a period of transition with the aim of maximising the return on buildings and staff through better use of funding and better use of the service. She drew attention to the Library Transformation Strategy and was especially interested to learn how libraries would work within community hubs.

The Assistant Director stated that the future of the library service would build upon the developments following the pandemic; the aim being to provide a commercial, contemporary and adaptable service for the future providing facilities for reading, digital service, health and creativity and, ultimately a service about communities (community hubs) and not just buildings.

The Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Culture together with the Assistant Director Homes and Communities and the Library Service Manager answered Members' questions and concerns and the following information was provided during the debate:

- Bishop's Castle and Cleobury Mortimer libraries represented good examples of libraries operating within existing community hubs and were being used for more activities than may have been the case in the past.
- Recognition that libraries were a vital part of the community often located in an ideal position to allow people to access other services from these buildings e.g. council tax queries, issuing of bus passes. Co-working spaces could be developed and expanded and part of the library service transformation would look at ways of making the best use of the space available.
- The pandemic highlighted the need to balance digital and physical presence. On line take up increased markedly by 600% but there had also been a pressure to provide physical presence to obtain a book through Click and Collect. The Library development team would be working with individual communities to ascertain their needs.
- Understanding that face to face conversation was often preferred and services provided within libraries would be reinstated as soon as possible whilst maintaining safety for both customers and staff.
- Improvements to health and wellbeing within a library context was understood and whilst signposting such issues within the community it would take time to reinvigorate social spaces following the pandemic.
- Clear understanding that mobile libraries were an integral part of the Strategy going forward. To ensure a long-term future, the mobile libraries were currently being

updated to smaller, more fuel-efficient vehicles with a smaller carbon footprint. It was understood that they were greatly valued and had a positive impact on health and wellbeing and a step towards combatting rural isolation. As part of the transformation consideration would be given to providing other services on the mobile library.

- Referring to the funding of developments of the library service, it was noted that commercial aspects would be examined in the first instance in order to deliver transformation. The commercial aspects related to the buildings themselves and whether or not the space could be managed better in order to achieve income, for example, small cafes. The aim being to attract more users to the space available.

RESOLVED:

- i) That the feedback and comment from the Communities Overview Committee in respect of progress made to date and the next stages of the library transformation and the development of the new Library Transformation Strategy, be noted; and
- ii) That the Communities Overview Committee receives a further update in respect of the Library Transformation strategy project in Autumn 2021, including an update regarding progress on the development of mobile libraries and rural service provision.

29 Community and Rural Strategy

The Assistant Director, Homes & Communities provided a verbal update and made a presentation on progress in developing the draft Community and Rural Strategy following the consultation that took place between October and December 2020. She drew attention to the broad ranging priorities that covered a number of the Council's service areas.

She added that specific areas would need to be highlighted under the broad ambitions and underpinning principles of the Strategy together with a structure for its onward development. It was noted that this Strategy linked in to other Strategies and activities of the Council.

The Chair commented that the Strategy needed to be brought to grass roots level and recognise the huge resources available in rural parishes and towns. She advised that ongoing development of the Strategy should be undertaken with Parishes as they had a good understanding of their own needs and should not be imposed upon them. She suggested that low level financial input may be needed in order to enable them to provide support in their own locality and commended the document by the Rural Services Network entitled, 'Revitalising Rural', as a useful and informative reference.

The Portfolio Holder for Place, Planning and Community Services added that most of the work on the Strategy had been completed before the pandemic and this had forced a fast track of the issues and having to do things differently. He made the following additional points:

- The Strategy must be developed from the bottom up, partnership working was essential
- Delivery would be different in different parts of the county
- The Strategy was part of the big picture alongside the delivery of the Local Plan
- This represented a once in a lifetime opportunity to change the way things were done and bring everything together
- The Strategy had been endorsed by SALC
- Resource to a certain level may be needed e.g. provision of an infrastructure with others in the community to assist them to access funding.

Members were highly supportive of the 'bottom up' approach and, although not always easy, understood the merits of working with local communities.

RESOLVED:

That the Communities Overview Committee note the current draft Community and Rural Strategy and identify any potential areas for further development and sources of future financial support.

30 Date/Time of next meeting

Members noted that the next meeting of the Communities Overview Committee was scheduled to be held at 10.00am on Wednesday 23 June 2021.

In bringing the meeting to a close, the Chairman extended her thanks to all for their help and support and also gave thanks to the Overview and Scrutiny Officer and to Committee staff for their continued assistance.

Signed (Chairman)

Date: