

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

JOINT ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE AND ECONOMY AND ENTERPRISE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a **Joint Special Meeting** of the **Environment and Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Committee** and the **Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in the **Council Chamber, County Hall, Durham** on **Monday 16 May 2022 at 9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor B Coult in the Chair

Members of the Committees:

Councillors E Adam, L Brown, K Earley, J Elmer, L Fenwick, D Haney, C Hood, G Hutchinson, A Jackson, R Manchester, B Moist, D Nicholls, R Potts, J Purvis, J Quinn, I Roberts, A Sterling and S Wilson

Co-opted Members:

Mrs R Morris

1 Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors G Binney, J Charlton, I McLean, C Martin and Mr T Bolton.

2 Substitute Members

No substitute members were present.

3 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4 Any items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties

There were no items reported from co-opted members or interested parties.

5 Transport Policy and Activity in County Durham and the wider region

The Committee considered a report and presentation of the Corporate Director of Regeneration, Economy and Growth which provided an update on transport policy and activity in County Durham and the wider region (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

Dave Wafer, Head of Transport and Contact Services, introduced the presentation, informing the Committee that local transport issues are largely driven by national policy. At the centre of activity is the Regional Transport Plan which recognises that transport is fundamental to the economy and aims to connect all the individual policy drivers into a single, connectivity strategy.

In terms of active travel, the Head of Transport explained that Durham's Strategic Walking and Cycling Delivery Plan strives to embed cycling and walking as an integral part of Durham's culture and he outlined various projects taking place to promote active travel.

The Head of Transport explained that the National Bus Strategy, 'Bus Back Better' brought forward a number of requirements as to how local transport authorities and bus operators must engage, in order to access future funding. This led to Durham joining Nexus and Northumberland public transport authorities to form an enhanced partnership and the region had been awarded £163 million of funding, subject to implementation of the enhanced partnership. In terms of transport infrastructure, the service continues to ensure transport infrastructure is fit for purpose in order to achieve the long term ambitions, through the delivery of over £70 million of transport projects including Jade Enterprise Zone and Durham Bus Station.

The Head of Transport concluded his presentation by highlighting recent achievements including the successful round 1 levelling-up fund bid, considered a national exemplar and the three 'Restoring Your Railway' bids at Ferryhill, Consett and Bishop Auckland.

Councillor Elmer commented on the Department for Transport's prediction for an increase in car use, however, more recent evidence suggests car use has levelled off. He added that it would be useful to have a single, integrated network plan encompassing roads, cycle ways and bus routes, in order to plan the transition, as opposed to merely reacting to demands when they occur. The Head of Transport highlighted that the service aims to be proactive in its approach.

Councillor Wilson referred to bus services and observed that a divide exists within the county, with the north of the county being served by Go North East and the south of the county being served by Arriva.

He commented on the council's inward investment plans and asked if there was more work to be done to improve transport links and ensure employment sites are accessible via public transport. The Head of Transport agreed that more work is required to develop transport links to strategic employment sites and the enhanced partnership aims to improve engagement between bus companies. In addition, the Area Action Partnerships are represented on the county's Bus Board, to provide valuable feedback from service users.

Councillor Jackson referred to the ambition to increase the number of EV charging points across the county, expressing concern that this may not be sufficient to meet demand and he commented that this could be an opportunity to generate revenue for the council. The Head of Transport responded that there is an expectation that the commercial market will increase and he clarified that the additional EV charging points will be located in areas that currently lack facilities such as rural areas and areas with a high density of terraced housing. He added that the council expects to cover costs and make a small amount of revenue to maintain charging points.

In response to a question from Councillor Jackson as to whether consideration would be given in the future to the development of a single bus ticket to facilitate easier and more cost effective travel, the Head of Transport highlighted that the Bus Service Improvement Plan includes proposals for a single, price-capped ticket which could be used in multiple formats, county-wide.

Councillor Sterling asked that when large companies locate in County Durham, whether they are requested to provide assistance with funding for transport for employees. The Head of Transport confirmed that employers may be requested to contribute towards the provision of public transport for their employees for a specified period of time. Commenting in terms of tourism, Councillor Sterling suggested a tourist travel ticket could be introduced, to provide easy access to tourist attractions and accommodation. The Head of Transport agreed that the county has the potential to incentivise tourism, particularly in light of the City of Culture Bid.

Councillor Sterling referred to changes to working practices following the pandemic and spoke of those who may wish to work from home but are unable to do so as they lack the facilities and she asked if there were any plans to develop remote work-hubs within the county. The Head of Transport referred to the development of an overarching connectivity strategy which could have the capacity to establish facilities for remote-working, thereby relieving pressure on the transport network.

Councillor Adam commended the amount of work being done, however, he observed a focus on cars, roads and rail and he asked whether there should be a greater emphasis on active travel, to improve walking and cycling facilities and he asked if the service had sufficient resources available.

The Head of Transport replied that additional resources are being allocated to specific projects including the Darlington and Stockton Railway project. In addition, walking and cycling initiatives were being included in levelling-up fund bids.

In response to a question from Councillor Earley on the availability of charging facilities for electric buses, the Head of Transport informed the Committee that further investment for electric buses is being promoted and in respect of charging facilities, tests have shown that charging overnight at depots is the most efficient method.

Rosemary Morris voiced her concern that the strategy for electric vehicles is unclear and a large amount of work will be required in advance of the government's ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel cars in 2030. She requested a detailed forward plan to provide assurance that the infrastructure will be in place to support the purchase and charging of electric vehicles in the future. The Head of Transport advised that the service would look into this and feedback to the committee.

Councillor Nicholls raised concerns regarding the irregular bus service delivered by Arriva and informed the Committee that a response to a message placed on social media by the local members for Deerness had resulted in an overwhelming response from members of the public in the area, voicing their concerns. These included employees whose jobs were being put at risk as they were regularly late for work due to buses being delayed or cancelled at short notice and parents whose children had been left waiting in the dark and cold weather. Councillor Nicholls also highlighted the age of the fleet, with many buses in a state of disrepair. Furthermore, when he had contacted the company as a local Councillor, to raise these concerns, the company had failed to respond. The Head of Transport acknowledged that public transport services had been adversely affected by the pandemic, suffering a decrease in passenger numbers and a high number of drivers had left the profession. He informed the Committee that lost mileage was being monitored and services were gradually returning to normal levels. Representatives from Arriva and Go North East bus companies attend the Bus Board meetings and feedback from the public is provided through representation via the Area Action Partnerships. The Head of Transport encouraged members to inform the Public Transport Team of their concerns.

Councillor Quinn referred to the increasing number of charging points being installed in the county and asked how many of these will be rapid-charging. The Head of Transport pointed out that plans are in place to increase the number of rapid charging points, however, they require electricity infrastructure which is not available in all areas at the present time.

Councillor Moist referred to future plans for the Park and Ride schemes and suggested that consideration could be given to increasing the number of terminuses and to developing facilities to link locations and operate a single-ticket system.

He also asked whether plans were being considered to increase the capacity of the existing road structure, to accommodate bus lanes in the future. The Head of Transport highlighted the importance of analysing travel trends in order to target resources accordingly, adding that it is likely that the future will see the introduction of single ticketing and an increase in Park and Ride schemes.

Councillor Manchester asked whether the council could offer support to recruit more bus drivers to address the national shortage and the Head of Transport replied that bus companies were recently reporting an increase in recruitment, which will take time to come to fruition as recruits complete their training.

Resolved:

That the report and presentation be noted.

6 Highways, Footways and Bridge Maintenance

The Committee considered a report of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change which provided information on the highway asset management service delivery (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

Paul Watson, Strategic Highways Manager delivered a presentation, highlighting that the highway network is the council's highest value asset. He explained that the Highways Act places a duty on the local Highways Authority to maintain the adopted highway and he referred the Committee to the Highway Maintenance Plan which sets out the council's service levels for inspection, condition and routine maintenance and the Transport Asset Management Plan which is the long term plan for managing the highway through programmed maintenance.

The Committee noted the council's Highway Safety Inspection Manual and details of the inspections undertaken to assess the safety of the network. The Committee also received information on defects which are allocated a repair category, with those requiring immediate repair being repaired within 2 hours.

The Strategic Highway Manager also provided information on asset inspections which are annually reported to the Department for Transport. In terms of performance, in 2016 Durham County Council was one of three authorities to achieve the maximum band 3 rating which resulted in £1.6 million of additional funding.

The Committee also heard that innovation work takes place, such as that done in partnership with Rainton Construction, to reduce carbon emissions and a GOVTECH artificial intelligence project with the potential to reduce the need to review 800 sites per year, saving staff time and fuel costs. The Strategic Highways Manager highlighted that strong policies for managing the highway asset provides the council with a robust defence against third party claims.

Councillor Potts referred to safety issues caused by slippery footpaths, covered with algae and moss. The Strategic Highways Manager replied that rural link roads and urban connected footpaths have been identified for further investment over the coming year and the Clean and Green Team are investigating areas that require attention due to loss of access caused by overgrown vegetation, with defects to be repaired by a patching team.

Councillor Jackson spoke of a national chain which delivers goods to a building in his ward causing wear and tear to paving stones and he asked if the council has recourse against private companies causing damage to the surface of footways. The Strategic Highways Manager replied that the council has enforcement powers available in order to protect the digital and fibre optic technology located below the footpath. The Strategic Highways Manager said he would be happy to speak to Councillor Jackson to discuss the matter further.

Councillor Adam congratulated the team on the hard work and expressed the view that footpaths are a concern and he asked if there was a strategy in place to achieve the 5% target. The Strategic Highways Manager acknowledged there is work to be done to achieve the target however the service continues to drive the work forward through an annual programme of approximately 100 major footpath schemes with additional investment in areas of most need.

In response to an issue raised by Councillor Hutchinson regarding potholes in the Kelloe ward, the Strategic Highways Manager said he would be happy to speak to Councillor Hutchinson to investigate the issue.

Councillor Elmer referred to the ecological emergency and the competing demands of protecting species and wildlife habitats and improvements to the transport network and he asked what processes the Highways Service has in place to support wildlife habitats. The Strategic Highways Manager replied that the service is mindful of disruption to natural habitats and he added that measures are in place, for example, enforcement action to prevent verge parking. The service also works with experts to assess ecological impacts.

Councillor Earley referred to the number of potholes and asked if advances in technology were likely to improve processes and increase the longevity of repairs. Paul Anderson, Highways Maintenance Manager, referred to the inspection regime to determine timescales for repairs to be completed. He added that a three year investment programme will assist to maintain standards.

Resolved:

That the report be noted.

7 Street Lighting Energy Reduction Project II Update (SLERP)

The Committee considered a report and presentation of the Corporate Director of Neighbourhoods and Climate Change, delivered by Paul Watson, Strategic Highways Manager which provided a review of the Street Lighting Energy Reduction Project II (2021/2022) (for copy of report and presentation see file of minutes).

The Strategic Highways Manager stated the year 2 mid-project review, reported the project is progressing well despite delays due to COVID-19 and supply issues in respect of component parts. Providing background, the Strategic Highways Manager explained that the Street Lighting Policy implemented the removal of street lights where safe to do so and the dimming of street lights by 25% between 10 pm and 12 midnight and by 50% between 12 midnight and 5 am. Independent road safety auditors were commissioned to undertake risk assessments and they consulted with local members and Town and Parish Councils to ensure risk assessments reflected all factors. Phase 1 was completed in March 2019, financial performance exceeded expectations and significant energy savings were achieved.

A report to Cabinet in December 2019 recommended the commencement of the Street Lighting Energy Reduction Project II. However, year 2 faced problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of semi-conductors which resulted in a slight dip in performance. Members heard that, in total, the project aims to save 2.5 million kilowatt hours and to illustrate the scale of the project, the Strategic Highways Manager explained that 1 kilowatt hour equates to the toasting of 160 slices of bread. The Strategic Highways Manager also informed the Committee that a pilot scheme is underway to consider the impacts on ecology, recognising that actions taken should not have a detrimental impact on the environment and ecology.

Councillor Nicholls welcomed the ecology considerations and referring to the replacement of street lights in his ward, he raised an issue regarding a disused street lighting column which had been left in situ and a new column installed, causing obstruction. The Strategic Highways Manager expressed concern, however, he recognised that delays removing columns occur on occasions and he undertook to discuss the matter with operational teams.

Councillor Quinn asked whether the council had explored the use of solar panels on street lights. Darren Hubbard, Street Lighting Manager, explained that the lack of solar power is problematic however advances in technology have enabled the council to trial solar lighting in the West Rainton area and feedback on this project would be shared with the Committee in due course.

Councillor Adam was pleased to see the success in respect of carbon reduction and energy savings and he referred to the rapidly increasing energy costs and asked if this was likely to have an impact on the outcomes of the project.

The Street Lighting Manager explained how both costs and savings were increasing and he added that the extent of the impact was uncertain at this time.

In response to a question from Councillor Adam as to whether the County Council had carried out any safety studies to ascertain if dimming had a detrimental impact on pedestrians, the Street Lighting Manager agreed to share any information available on the matter with the Committee.

A further question was received from Councillor Adam regarding the cost of replacing street lighting with footway lighting, commenting that there seemed to be little difference between the two. The Strategic Highways Manager replied that the particular scheme Councillor Adam referred to had taken place at the request of residents and, as footway lighting columns are shorter than streetlighting columns, the residential area, rather than the carriageway, is illuminated.

Councillor Jackson thanked officers for the work carried out on the project and asked that if the second phase of the project could look to improve the reduced strength of light due to the distance between lighting columns. The Strategic Highways Manager responded that the service aims for the British Standard at all times and improvements will continue to be made as technology advances. Councillor Jackson also asked if the council had considered the use of motion sensors. The Street Lighting Manager pointed out that the use of motion sensors requires a high cost metered supply. The Chair commented that the issues raised would be included in the future work programme.

Resolved:

That a further project update on the Street Lighting Energy Reduction Project be considered, on completion of the scheme in 2023.