

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

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

At a **Special Joint 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 **Friday 5 May 2023** at **9.30 am**.

Present:

Councillor K Robson in the Chair

Members of the Committees:

Councillors E Adam, P Atkinson, L Brown, B Coult, L Fenwick, I MacLean, C Martin, J Purvis, J Quinn, A Reed, I Roberts and S Townsend

Co-opted Members:

Mrs R Morris and Mr E Simons

1 Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillors J Charlton, J Elmer, A Jackson, C Marshall, D Nicholls, D Sutton-Lloyd, R Ormerod and Mr T Cramond and Mr P Walton (co-optees).

2 Substitute Members

Councillor Deinali was in attendance for Councillor Nicholls.

3 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

4 Items from Co-opted Members and other Interested Parties

There were no items reported.

5 Regional and Local Transport: Policy and Delivery Update

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

The Committee welcomed Mark Jackson, Head of Transport and Contract Services who introduced the presentation, outlining the scope and scale of the work of the teams, namely Transport and Infrastructure Projects, Integrated Passenger Transport and Strategic Traffic Management. He explained that current national transport policy has a focus on plans for decarbonisation and the government's 'Bus Back Better' strategy aims to deliver better bus services for passengers. Sub-regional work with Transport for the North on the Strategic Transport Plan reflects the direction of travel in terms of reducing carbon outputs and improving air quality. Regionally, the north east has a North East Transport Plan and the Committee noted that it is anticipated that the North East Mayoral Combined Authority (NEMCA) will bring forward a revision of the North East Transport Plan.

The Head of Transport outlined plans being delivered locally including the County Durham Plan, the Rights of Way Improvement Plan and plans for EV charging and improvements in relation to air quality and carbon reduction as part of the Climate Emergency Response Plan.

The Committee received information on the powers and principles of the devolution deal and the Head of Transport explained the pipeline of interventions that Durham would like to see included within the North East Transport Plan. The Chair then invited questions and comments from the Committee.

Mrs Morris asked what assurance could be given that timescales, targets and infrastructure will be in place to support the ambitious plans, in particular, in relation to electric vehicles. The Head of Transport acknowledged that EV ownership is increasing at pace and he pointed out that targets are in place in relation to the number of EV charging points and highlighted that the evolving picture is not a 'step change' in relation to EVs and that EVs is one solution that is available. He also referred to the work being done to fully evaluate the transport network in advance of the devolution process. He continued that the network needs to provide connectivity with the correct frequency and that a simplified pricing system will, it is hoped, attract more users.

The Integrated Passenger Transport Manager explained that, in the current deregulated environment, bus operators may choose when and where to operate services and they bear the financial risk when passenger numbers decline.

Councillor Adam referred to the North East Mayoral Combined Authority and asked what action Durham was taking to ensure its plans have equal weighting alongside those of the other six authorities in the Combined Authority. Councillor Adam also commented on the lack of funding for Durham from the City Regional Sustainable Transport Fund and he asked whether this would impact on Durham's plans. The Head of Transport and Contract Services pointed out that the devolution deal will shift power from central government in terms of funding and responsibility, which will enable the Council to pursue its ambitions for growth. He also explained that devolution will provide more certainty on longer term funding, for example the multi-year settlement for the highways funding block and the integrated transport block. He added that, in terms of transport, there was not expected to be a great deal of change as the functions of the Joint Transport Committee will remain the same. He highlighted that the City Regional Sustainable Transport Fund is one funding stream and Durham will work with the other six authorities to look at the funding opportunities to bring forward the pipeline of projects which are ready to feed into the various funding rounds. The Head of Transport and Contract Services highlighted that he represents the authority on various workstreams, which ensures Durham's voice is heard.

Councillor Deinali raised concern that rural parts of the county which currently suffer problems with regard to public transport may be left behind and she also raised the point that if Durham lacks funding, its schemes may lag-behind those of the other authorities. The Head of Transport reiterated that whilst Durham does not have access to the City Regional Sustainable Transport Fund, significant funding is available through the Bus Service Improvement Plan which is aligned to County Durham, as well as funding in respect of highway maintenance, integrated transport and active travel.

The Committee then welcomed Victoria Lloyd-Gent, Senior Active Travel Officer to deliver a presentation on active travel, which, she explained, had been an area of investment by government, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The government had established the Active Travel England Inspectorate to work with local authorities to deliver on standards required for local walking and cycling links.

The Senior Active Travel Officer highlighted key policy documents, in particular, the LTN (Local Transport Note) 1/20 which sets out standards for infrastructure. She explained the vision and aims of the work included in the County Durham Strategic Cycling and Walking Delivery Plan.

The Committee noted the work on the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWIPS) and the development of LCWIPS for 12 main towns. The officer also explained the projects LCWIP Lite and Routes Within 5 Miles of Durham City which were being developed to address gaps in the network.

Councillor Townsend commented on the success of the 'Borrow a Bike' scheme in Shildon and spoke anecdotally of residents' concerns regarding the lack of street lights on walking and cycling routes. The Senior Active Travel Officer responded that street lighting was a key factor considered within LCWIPS in terms of the safety of routes and she agreed to pass Councillor Townsend's comment to the relevant team.

Councillor Adam expressed the view that he would expect some road space to be repurposed in order to ensure that active travel routes are safe and he expressed concern that some local walking routes are inaccessible. The Senior Active Travel Officer pointed out that the Active Travel Strategy aimed to change how the public take short journeys and the more recreational aspects of the strategy were the remit of the Rights of Way team. The Head of Transport and Contract Services highlighted that in some circumstances, it will be necessary to repurpose road space for active travel modes or bus priority and this may be a requirement of some funding streams. He assured the Committee that the aim is to balance provision and plans going forward will include investment in footway maintenance and improvements to rights of way to ensure that they are inclusive for those individuals with mobility issues. He also confirmed that all schemes are subject to consultation.

In response to a question from Councillor Coult as to how the Council encourages walking to school, the Senior Active Travel Officer highlighted the work of the Road Safety team which had engaged with approximately 90 schools on walking bus routes. He continued by highlighting a project in Newton Aycliffe, which involved Durham County Council and the Police working with the school and parents to educate in relation to safe walking routes to school.

The Chair observed that a number of short journeys in cars are made by commuters driving to and from local shops and he asked what could be done to change their behaviour. The Senior Active Travel Officer referred to recent talks with developers regarding mobility hubs which could deliver shopping to communities. In addition, opportunities for active travel are increasing and cargo and electric bikes are becoming more popular.

Councillor Deinali asked whether the work on the development of walking and cycling routes aligned with work done by public health in terms of levels of deprivation and obesity.

The Senior Active Travel Officer replied that areas of health deprivation score highly in terms of funding for LCWIPs and the LCWIP Light and Routes within 5 Miles of Durham City offer opportunities to adapt schemes to target specific areas.

The Integrated Passenger Transport Manager, Cathy Knight, introduced the presentation relating to bus services. She referred to the adverse impact on the service throughout the pandemic which had significantly reduced patronage. The Committee noted the service had worked with operators on recruitment campaigns and recent evidence suggested improvements, locally and nationally. The Committee heard that local bus services operate in a deregulated environment and circa 90% of bus services operate without financial support from the Council, however, the remaining 10% were supported by the County Council. Whilst bus passenger numbers had returned to 80% of pre-Covid levels, operators had reviewed their networks, some journeys had been withdrawn, with the Council supporting some journeys.

The Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) was published in 2021 in response to the Government's National Bus Strategy and the North East BSIP was selected to receive funding upon the condition of the implementation of an enhanced partnership. The Integrated Passenger Transport Manager outlined the projects to be delivered, including the introduction of a multi-operator fare cap, enhancement of the network and improved information on bus services. BSIP funding will also be used to introduce new services and increase frequency of existing services.

Councillor McLean expressed concern at the damage to the environment resulting from the manufacture and transportation of vehicle parts from overseas and he suggested that more could be done in relation to tracking the total carbon footprint of these parts and highlighted the need to use parts produced in the UK.

The Integrated Passenger Transport Manager responded that steps have been taken to encourage the Department for Transport to consider the 'Well to Wheel' approach.

Councillor Adam questioned how the public could be encouraged to 'talk up buses', as, whilst services had improved since the pandemic, they remained unreliable, information on Apps was inaccurate and bus interiors were often dirty. Councillor Adam also asked whether funding was currently available or whether it was conditional on implementation of the plan. The Integrated Passenger Transport Manager confirmed that the funding was being accessed and she acknowledged that bus operators had work to do, however, evidence suggests that services are improving. There had been engagement with the Department for Transport to address issues such as the shortage of drivers.

The Integrated Passenger Transport Manager highlighted that the Bus Service Improvement Plan includes plans to upgrade to new zero emission vehicles however the current BSIP funding could not be used for vehicle improvements. She added that work is taking place with operators regarding fleet replacement plans and she also referred to funding available through the Department for Transport's ZEBRA (Zero Emission Bus Regional Areas) funding to support the introduction of zero emission buses.

Mr Simons referred to the aim to increase patronage and questioned how performance could be measured and what targets could be imposed on bus operators if targets were not being delivered. The Integrated Passenger Transport Manager explained that the Bus Service Improvement Plan includes a number of key performance indicators including patronage, reliability and punctuality. She pointed out that the majority of the funding will be used for passenger benefits such as fare initiatives and capital improvements. Penalties could be imposed through contracts however, she noted that the work is very much a partnership and there may be valid reasons for underperformance which are beyond bus operators' control. She highlighted that it is a partnership approach working together to address problems.

Craig MacLennan, Transport and Infrastructure Projects Manager, delivered the presentation relating to current and future infrastructure projects including the Toft Hill Bypass, projects on the A19 corridor and Jade Enterprise Zone. Referring to rail opportunities, the officer highlighted that Durham was successful in three expressions of interest in respect of the 'Restoring Your Railways' fund at Ferryhill, Consett to Newcastle and Weardale. There are further policy ambitions for rail enhancement at the Leamside Line, Chester le Street and the Durham Coast Line.

Mrs Morris asked whether a cost estimate was available for the proposals for the Consett to Newcastle opportunity to reintroduce a rail passenger service. The Transport and Infrastructure Projects Manager explained that both options would cost approximately £750 million and Mrs Morris pointed out the cost in terms of the environment. The Transport and Infrastructure Projects Manager commented that feasibility studies would be carried out which would consider all issues, including environmental issues and he clarified that no announcement on funding had been made at that time.

In response to a question from Councillor Atkinson as to whether the new Bus Station at Durham was on schedule for completion in July, the Transport and Infrastructure Projects Manager replied that he expected that Members will be updated on progress in the near future.

The Committee then welcomed the Electric Vehicles Project Officer, Tracy Millmore who delivered a presentation on electric vehicle infrastructure. Introducing the presentation, the Project Officer reminded the Committee that the government will ban the sale of new petrol and diesel cars and in 2035 all new vehicles must be zero emission vehicles. Providing background, she explained that in 2019 funding was secured for the SOSCI (Scaling On Street Charging Infrastructure) project, for 100 EV chargepoints and further funding was secured for two on-street residential charging projects in 2020. In 2021 an EV community group was established with residents of Durham. 'Rev-up' project funding was gained in 2022 to investigate the approach to EV charging installation and successful project delivery led to the Council being awarded funding to deliver the LEVI (Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure) project. The project will test approaches for EV infrastructure which will support the Council's work to install new charge points at another 250 sites across the county. The team also supports 3 car clubs which provide an EV car to support communities.

Councillor Adam referred to the role of social landlords in relation to the installation of EV chargepoints and asked how they were being engaged. The officer highlighted that a meeting had been held recently with social housing providers and all had expressed an interest in working with the team. It is hoped that supportive evidence from the housing providers will help to gain capital funding to progress the work.

Mrs Morris asked whether the service had considered integrating EV charging points into existing street lighting columns and the officer explained that this had been considered however there may be issues with regard to trailing cables and the charging rate would be relatively slow.

In conclusion, the Head of Transport and Contact Services commented that it is hoped that the new Mayoral Combined Authority will encourage future funding opportunities and collaborative working.

Resolved:

That the information in the report be noted.