

Notes of **Informal Consultative Meeting** of the Economy Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 19 January 2022 via Zoom

Item 1 – Welcome and apologies

Attendees (12): Councillors Bob Felstead, Stephen Baines, Kaleigh Brooks, Zafar Iqbal, Susan Press, Audrey Smith, Richard Smith, Harpreet Uppal, Dawn Collins, Tony Hames, Olivia Rowley, Tony Wallis

Apologies (4): Councillors Aneela Ahmed, Manisha Kaushik, Jonathan Bentley, Andrew Hollyer.

Officers: Brian Archer, Liz Hunter, Justin Wilson, Khaled Berroum, Hannah Scales

Item 2 – Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary Interests

None.

Item 3 – Possible Exclusion of the Press and Public

None.

Item 4 – Minutes of Last Meeting Held on November 2021

Accepted subject to the amendment of noting the attendance for Councillors Rowley, Kaushik and Iqbal who sent their apologies at the last meeting.

Item 5 – Chairs Comments and Updates

Members were informed of the outcomes from the Scrutiny Chair's Steering meetings held in December to discuss the year and the potential for a workshop for members to discuss how they think scrutiny has gone this year so far, any potential changes and areas the Committee would like to explore further next year. Members were reminded of the Mayor's Question Time due to take place at the next committee meeting on 9 March 2022.

Item 6 – Rural Issues

Members received a report which provided an update on the rural context for West Yorkshire and highlight main policy challenges and delivery programmes in the region's rural areas.

Questions and discussion centred around:

- **Broadband:** Members discussed broadband viability in rural areas, how broadband needs are assessed, the thinking behind the 20% target – which was due to limited funding (£5b committed nationally by government out of £20bn needed) and the challenges with broadband provision on unadopted streets in relation to the Gigabit rollout. Members also discussed the need for businesses to be in hard-to-reach 'disconnected' areas and although business relocation was an option it was not something being advocated for strategically.
- **Tree Planting:** Members discussed what work was being done with rural communities to source land for tree planting and whether university courses on agriculture production were being promoted. It was noted that the recently published

Environment Plan related to nature which included tree planting as a major element, in particular as part of flood defence, although funding was a challenge. The Climate and Environment Plan focussed on working with farmers in order to establish their needs and gather data on their land and areas – this is a work in progress.

- **Fuel Poverty:** Members clarified which localities were accounted for in the four categories contained in Table 2 of the report, which was confirmed to be DEFRA statistics and every area had a classification. Members discussed why fuel poverty was affecting rural areas as opposed to urban areas, noting that it was generally due to proximity to the gas network and building types in rural areas usually being larger and older buildings.
- **Funding:** Members noted the continued uncertainty around funding as the Combined Authority waited to hear from government on continued growth hub funding and details of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, amongst others. The Growth Hub in particular was vital to cross-council working in business support and growth. Members also noted that the sick pay rebate had been extended for small and medium sized businesses.

Item 7 – Housing Pledge and Powers

Members were presented with a report which outlined early work on fulfilling the Mayor's pledge on affordable housing.

Questions and discussion centred around:

- **Housing role and powers:** Despite not being a planning authority, the Combined Authority supported local authorities on strategic planning matters. The Combined Authority responded to planning applications particularly with a transport focus and gave joint advice back to government and work with our district partners on their local plans. The Combined Authority was awaiting further guidance from Government with regards to planning at a regional level.
- **Targets:** Members discussed whether the target was achievable and the Combined Authority is currently identifying how to add value through a West Yorkshire Strategy without duplicating local strategies already in place. Members also discussed the importance of clearly defining “affordable” housing.
- **Funding:** It reported that whilst the Combined Authority had secured £67 million that would help, it wouldn't be able to address all brownfield site challenges such as viability and determining land ownership. The Combined Authority hoped Government would expand this funding while work is underway by partner authorities to map out the level of available funding across WY authorities.
- **Stakeholders:** Members discussed engagement with developers, the strength of existing Section 106 agreements and whether they yielded enough alignment in areas where developers and councils often diverge, such as affordable housing and use greenbelt land. The CA has produced a ‘developers note’ and guide which sets out relevant things developers should consider in their planning applications, such as infrastructure, transport, cycle lanes and climate impact. There is also a “WY House Alliance” which seeks to improve cooperation between key players – including ensuring the CA is able to comment on transport aspects of planning applications.

Item 8 – Covid-19 Economic Recovery

Members were provided with an update on the current economic situation in the region as a result of Covid-19 and the work of the Combined Authority and the LEP with regards to economic recovery planning and implementation.

Questions and discussion centred around:

- **Claimant count:** As stated in section 2.6 of the report the claimant count had decreased but remained higher than pre-pandemic, this was due to several elements such as the increase of the cost of living. It was noted that the claimant count was lower in West Yorkshire than it was in England.
- **Local recovery data:** Members learned that the local recovery for the most part was due to domestic demand for both goods and services increasing after lifting of Covid-19 Pandemic due to 'pent up demand' and in part due to shipping costs on imports. In terms of job retention, it was difficult to ascertain exactly where jobs had gone but it could be down to extended sick leave and some of the workforce not returning to previous jobs. Certain sectors were hit harder such as hospitality, and leisure services, which were sectors with a largely female workforce. In the Combined Authority's commissioning (such as the entrepreneurship programme) gender targets had been put in place and the first cohort was 60% female – following an increase in demand.
- **Business liquidations:** Members discussed why business liquidations had increased in recent weeks and it was explained that it was important to also look at new formation rates, there would be a number of individuals moving into more secure employment. There were a number of interventions the Combined Authority could pursue in order to support the businesses. The Business Accelerator Fund was due to start in 2023 which would hopefully be equity investment. Energy costs were difficult to mitigate but the Combined Authority does have a support programme which helps businesses reduced energy costs with an environmental audit.
- **In-work poverty statistics & inclusivity:** Members suggested in-work poverty statistics be included in future reports and discussed how the Combined Authority supported over 50s and 60s in finding work. Members were informed of the Skills Connect Programme and Employment Hub which support people get back into work.

Item 9 – Economy Scrutiny Work Programme

The Chair reminded Members of the Workshop due to be held on Wednesday, 16 February 2022 and the Mayor's Question Time due to be held on Wednesday, 9 March 2022.

Members asked whether there would be a policy on electric vehicle chargers and the involvement of the commercial sector. It was confirmed to be a combination of both sectors, the Combined Authority had some funding for electric charging, and it was suggested that colleagues in the Delivery directorate may be able to provide further insight. It was also suggested that analysis be done on the impact of the rising energy prices and any opportunity for subsidies.

Next meeting date – 9 March 2022, venue to be confirmed