



West Midlands Combined Authority

Environment & Energy Board

Thursday 7 March 2024 at 11.00 am

Minutes

Present

Councillor John Cotton (Chair)	Birmingham City Council
Councillor Craig Collingswood	City of Wolverhampton Council
Councillor Peter Hughes	Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
Councillor Majid Mahmood	Birmingham City Council
Matthew Rhodes	Energy Capital

Present Virtually

Suzanne Ward	Environment Agency
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In Attendance

Kate Ashworth	West Midlands Combined Authority
Craig Evans (Secretary)	West Midlands Combined Authority
Jackie Homan	West Midlands Combined Authority
Elspeth Sage	West Midlands Combined Authority
George Simms	West Midlands Combined Authority
Kieran Stockley	West Midlands Combined Authority
Mike Webb	West Midlands Combined Authority

In Attendance Virtually

Zabina Bi	West Midlands Combined Authority
Ed Cox	West Midlands Combined Authority
Ellie Hignett (Observer)	Birmingham City Council
Cheryl Hiles	West Midlands Combined Authority
Aqeel Rizvi	West Midlands Combined Authority

Item Title

No.

20. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Rob Clinton (Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council) and Councillor Jim O'Boyle (Coventry City Council).

21. Minutes - 21 December 2023

The minutes of the meeting were approved as a correct record, subject to an amendment on page 3, paragraph 5, that incorrectly noted the Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council scheme Wildlife Waste Project to be amended to Wildlife Ways Project.

Minute Item no 15. Local Investment in Natural Capital Programme

Councillor Hughes raised a matter arising from the minutes on page 3, paragraph 7, that noted that the Executive Director of Strategy, Economy and Net Zero would e-mail a list of the membership in terms of the governance arrangements for the Local Investment in Natural Capital Programme that Councillor Hughes did not recall receiving. The Head of Environment apologised and said that the list had been circulated to the Local Authority Net Zero Directors and would ensure that board members receive following the meeting.

22. Local Nature Recovery Strategy

The board considered a report and received a presentation from the Local Nature Recovery Strategy Co-ordinator to provide an update on the progress of the WMCA's Environment Team's work on the Local Nature Recovery Strategy and what the outcomes would be from the project.

The Local Nature Recovery Strategies were spatial strategies for nature and environmental improvement, required by law under the Environment Act 2021.

The Local Nature Recovery Strategies were explicitly regional in their scope, with a clear purpose of connecting nature recovery opportunities across boundaries to create a Nature Recovery Network across the entirety of England. They were also explicitly collaborative in their approach, involving public, private and voluntary sectors, working particularly with local authorities. The Local Nature Recovery Strategy Regulations identified local authorities and in the case of the West Midlands region (the seven constituent local authorities in the West Midlands Combined Authority area) as 'Statutory Authorities' as having a key role in the development of the Local Nature Recovery Strategies.

Each Local Nature Recovery Strategy would need to ensure the following:

- agree priorities for nature's recovery;
- map the most valuable existing areas for nature; and
- map specific proposals for creating or improving habitat for nature and wider environmental goals (adopting Nature Based Solutions).

The Local Nature Recovery Strategy would also help guide wider environmental and societal benefits through nature recovery such as air quality, flood risk, climate vulnerability, reverse species loss and restore habitats, deprivation and access to nature.

Across the West Midlands Combined Authority constituent authorities, much work had already been undertaken to map nature and develop strategies for nature recovery to support planning processes. This work and the knowledge developed by the constituent authorities at the local level, as well as stakeholder engagement, would form a strong basis from which a whole region strategy could be created. Rather than undermine existing local strategies, the Local Nature Recovery Strategy would provide a broader regional framework recognising that nature does not stop at authority boundaries. As this was a statutory requirement contributing to a national network, would therefore provide greater strength to local based actions and

a framework to assist in attracting public and private sector finance.

There was no published deadline for the delivery of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy, but the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs had confirmed funding would be provided until March 2025, when the aim was for the WMCA to publish the final strategy.

Councillor Mahmood welcomed the report as noted the mapping would form the base for local authorities to input their priorities for core ecological networks and opportunity areas that would prove valuable over the coming months, however queried that the financial implications of the report only noted funding to the WMCA and not toward local authority officer's supporting.

In response to Councillor Hughes who noted that the report did not emphasise the involvement of local and community groups enough to support the initial development of the strategies, the Local Nature Recovery Strategy Co-ordinator emphasised the importance role of these groups and that the strategy itself was at a regional level, building up to a national level that fed-in from local level's where a lot of actions would come from and that as part of the timeline would include public engagement and consultation.

Resolved:

- (1) The Responsible Authority role of the West Midlands Combined Authority in the delivery of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy be endorsed.
- (2) The progress of the West Midlands Combined Authority's work on the Local Nature Recovery Strategy be noted.

23. Local Area Energy Planning and the Planning Regional Infrastructure in a Digital Environment Project Update

The board considered a report and received a presentation from the Director of Energy Capital at the WMCA to update on the activity and findings of their local authority officers working collaboratively through the West Midlands Local Area Energy Plan Co-ordination Group and to understand how this was being used to shape future work and national energy policy.

The Local Area Energy Plan Co-ordination Group was established under the guise of Project PRIDE, an innovation project, funded by OfGEM which was looking at two things:

- how to provide the necessary information needed to enable effective energy; and
- what governance structures were needed to achieve effective energy planning.

The co-ordination group was considering how the West Midlands ensured it worked effectively together to undertake local area energy planning and to use this as a foundation to feed into regional energy planning, to ensure that investment would be appropriately channelled into energy infrastructure to

support the region's growth and decarbonisation objectives. The co-ordination group was trialling a digital spatial mapping tool known as LAEP +, to bring together all of the elements that were needed to enable effective energy infrastructure planning.

Currently OfGEM were undertaking the detailed design phase of development of the Regional Energy Strategic Planning. This meant that they were working with stakeholders to gather information to help them shape what the Regional Energy Strategic Planning would do, how they would be governed and what level of authority and power they would have. Energy Capital was feeding into this process, taking learning and insight from the Local Area Energy Planning Co-ordination Group and other governance structures established as part of the PRIDE project and sharing them with OfGEM. In the summer, OfGEM, would formally consult on the details of the Regional Energy Strategic Planning design and how local authorities would be expected to engage with it. Energy Capital would keep officers and members abreast of the issues and opportunities associated with this as they emerge and ensure the region was well placed to respond to the consultation later in the summer.

Members of the board provided positive feedback of the digital spatial mapping tool used by local authority officers.

Councillor Mahmood noted that Birmingham City Council was very supportive of the programme and were actively participating in both the co-ordination and subgroup, however Birmingham was not one of the initial cohort authorities with access to the tool and would appreciate an action plan with which the council could use the tool to reference and identify constraints and opportunities. The Director of Energy Capital acknowledged the comment from Councillor Mahmood and noted due to the small funding pot and size of Birmingham was not possible without taking the majority of all of the funding, however gave assurance that Energy Capital was very keen to continue to work with Birmingham officers to ensure exploration of all potential funding opportunities.

In response to Councillor Hughes who commented on the social value and resource provision from major energy companies to support local authorities in the Local Area Energy Planning Co-ordination Group work, the Director of Energy Capital noted one of the benefits of the Energy Capital Partnership being a slightly different model to other regions was the ability to work closely with the private sector who were all very keen to participate and would look to explore the social value element more with them.

Resolved:

- (1) The formation and work of the Local Area Energy Plan Co-ordination Group be welcomed.
- (2) The proposed regional approach to Local Area Energy Planning in the West Midlands be endorsed.
- (3) That the region will likely need to feed into further OfGEM

consultations later this year, on the geography of the future Regional Energy Strategic Planning function for the Midlands area and how the region wishes to organise itself to feed into a future model of Regional Energy Strategic Planning be noted.

24. Heat Networking Zoning Consultation Update

The board considered a report and received a presentation from the Energy Infrastructure Lead, Energy Capital, to update on the progress made in developing a heat network programme across the West Midland Combined Authority region and to inform the board about the WMCA's recent response to the Government's consultation of heat network zoning proposals.

The Presentation noted that heat from buildings was one of the biggest sources of UK carbon emissions, with hot water, space heating and cooling contributing to 21% of the UK's emissions in 2018. To achieve net zero emissions by 2050 in a cost effective way, the Climate Change Commission estimated that at least 18% of the UK's heat demand would need to be served by neat networks by 2050.

Following engagement with constituent local authority officers, the Energy Capital Team had had developed an 'umbrella response' for the region reflecting the consensus positions of officers of the WMCA and its seven constituent local authorities. The purpose was not to replace individual local authority responses, as some had chosen to submit their own response (in addition to the WMCA response).

The Energy Capital team would continue to work with constituent local authorities to explore what zoning and zone co-ordination would look like across the West Midlands Combined Authority region, including where the zone co-ordinator role may appropriately sit or be shared across the region; resources required to deliver this, how it will be governed and how it will be embedded into Local Area Energy Planning.

It was noted that there were existing initiatives for heat network zoning in Birmingham and Coventry and the Energy Infrastructure Lead, Energy Capital responded to note that the Energy Capital team continued to work with these local authorities to fast-track through the zoning pilot process and to provide that expertise to support the governance and informed decision making whilst sharing best practice through the Local Area Energy Plan Co-ordination Group.

Councillor Collingswood noted that there was a skills and technical knowledge in this particular area and queried how Energy Capital was addressing this to support and provide assistance to local authorities. The Energy Infrastructure Lead, Energy Capital responded to note that this was a known issue around skills, expertise and resourcing. There was funding available and training available through the Department for Energy, Security and Net Zero that the Energy Capital team were signposting local authority officers to achieve that foundation level of understanding, as well as disseminating opportunities to upscale and provide training through the Local Area Energy Plan Co-ordination Group.

Resolved:

- (1) The emergence of heat network zoning and endorse the proposed next steps to develop a West Midlands Combined Authority heat network programme be acknowledged.

25. Local Net Zero Accelerator Progress Update

The board received a verbal update from the SMART Hub Lead to note the progress that had been made on the Local Net Zero Accelerator following funding announced by government in November 2023 and a substantive discussion at the autumn 2023 Environment and Energy Board meeting.

The business case had been submitted to the WMCA's Single Assurance Framework (SAF) in January 2024, that was subsequently agreed at Investment Panel on 4 March and would go to Investment Board on 18 March for sign-off.

The WMCA was in the process of agreeing project stage gates with government, followed by mobilisation funding that should be in place by April to enable project kick off at the beginning of the financial year 2024/25.

Resolved:

- (1) The update be noted.

[The meeting ended at 12.20pm].