



West Midlands Combined Authority

Environment & Energy Board

Wednesday 1 March 2023 at 11.00 am

Minutes

Present

Councillor Ian Courts (Chair)

Portfolio Lead for Environment, Energy & HS2

Councillor Andy Mackiewicz

Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council

In attendance via Microsoft Teams

Councillor Rob Clinton

Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council

Councillor Peter Hughes

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

Councillor Majid Mahmood

Birmingham City Council

Suzanne Ward

Environment Agency

21. Minutes - 7 December 2022

The minutes of the meeting held on 7 December 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

22. WMCA Energy Programme Update

The board considered a report from the Executive Director of Strategy, Integration & Net Zero and the Director, Energy Capital, on the progress made on energy work by the Energy Capital team, including a forward look at priorities over the next three years.

The Energy Team's vision was 'a just energy transition, where investment was appropriately channelled to meet the needs of our diverse communities, enabling timely decarbonisation and creating a thriving market for clean-tech innovation and economic growth'. The current energy programme was broken down into three core components: energy infrastructure, domestic retrofit and policy & positioning. The report provided further details on each of these areas.

The Chair welcomed the report, but stressed that the challenges in respect of retrofit would be to scale up the work to deliver effective change. It was also important to persuade people why these works were required on their properties. Councillor Andy Mackiewicz considered the energy sector to be too risk averse, needing to be more agile and the national grid to be made more innovative. Councillor Peter Hughes highlighted the encouraging work of the Sustainable Energy Centre in Wednesbury and suggested that a future meeting of the board be held there.

The Chair highlighted the recent apprenticeship show in Solihull which had proved to be extremely well attended and offered an opportunity to attract new entrants into the energy sector. Suzanne Ward highlighted the need to ensure adequate consideration was given to environmental considerations relating to retrofit work, such as permits and other approvals. It was important that these were factored into work planning.

Resolved:

The progress across the WMCA energy programmes be noted.

23. West Midlands Hydrogen Policy Position Paper

The board considered a report from the Executive Director of Strategy, Integration & Net Zero and the Head of Environment setting out the context of the West Midlands Hydrogen Policy Position paper.

A consortium of CENEX and WSP were commissioned by a cross-departmental WMCA Hydrogen Working Group to produce a West Midlands Hydrogen Policy Position in November 2022. A draft of this paper has been produced following extensive research, analysis and stakeholder engagement. The paper established ten position statements, set out within the report, for future WMCA consideration.

The Director, Energy Capital suggested that there was a role for the WMCA in demonstrating system viability through innovative projects within the transport sector that could then be rolled out more widely. Councillor Rob Clinton stressed the importance of universities training expertise in students, and then retaining that expertise within the country to grow the sector. Suzanne Ward noted that if hydrogen was being produced from water, it was important to recognise that water was a finite resource that needed properly managing.

Resolved:

That the independently produced West Midlands Hydrogen Policy Position Paper be noted as a foundation for WMCA decision making on hydrogen related issues.

24. Commonwealth Games Legacy: Community Environment Fund

The board considered a report from the Executive Director of Strategy, Integration & Net Zero outlining the Community Environment Fund, which would be supported through Commonwealth Games legacy funding, and would form part of the Wellbeing & Sustainability Legacy Pillar and build on the success, and lessons learned, of the WMCA's Community Green Grants programme.

The proposal for the sustainability element of the Wellbeing & Sustainability pillar was to build on the already successful Community Green Grants programme (previously considered by this board at its meeting on 28 September 2022) and to broaden it out into a Community Environment Fund. This would have the same underlying purpose - to enhance community health and well-being through environment projects - but would extend beyond improving access to green space to other areas of the WMCA's environment programme. This would reflect the breadth of the work undertaken by the Commonwealth Games sustainability programme.

In response to a question from Councillor Peter Hughes, the Executive Director of Strategy, Innovation & Net Zero confirmed that the WMCA Board had previously agreed the overall allocations to each of the four pillars. The delivery programme within each pillar was to be agreed by the WMCA Board when it met on 17 March. Councillor Majid Mahmood requested that details of the grant applications be sent to councillors to help them publicise their availability.

Resolved:

The purpose and remit of the WMCA's Community Environment Fund be agreed.

25. West Midlands Forest Partnership

The board received an update from the Natural Capital Programme Manager on the latest developments with the West Midlands Forest Partnership.

Funding of £300,000 had been secured for an iTree survey in Birmingham, Coventry and Solihull and procurement was currently being undertaken to take this project forward. A Forest Partnership Co-ordinator was also being appointed to lead on this work. Councillor Rob Clinton noted that vandalism of small trees had been a problem in Dudley and wondered whether more mature trees could be planted to help with this problem. The Chair acknowledged that this was not an easy issue to resolve because he was aware of older trees also being vandalised.

Resolved:

That the update be noted.

26. Trailblazer Devolution Deal - Net Zero and Environment

The board received an update from the Executive Director of Strategy, Integration & Net Zero on the latest developments in preparing the Trailblazer Devolution Deal submission. The proposed submission to Government was to be agreed by the Mayor and Portfolio Leads at a meeting on 3 March. In respect of the net zero agenda, the deal was hoped to include important steps regarding local area energy planning, industrial decarbonisation, natural environment and air quality. The Chair thanked everyone who had been involved in getting the proposed deal to this stage.

Resolved:

That the update be noted.

27. Environment Team Funding Updates

The board received an update on recent funding that had been secured from the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs to support air quality work in setting up air quality statistics, publishing them on a dedicated website and running awareness campaigns. It was expected that this would be launched in April and it was intended to bring a further update on this to the next meeting of the board.

Resolved:

That the update be noted.

[The meeting ended at 1.00pm]