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West Midlands
Combined Authority

Environment & Energy Board

Thursday 21 December 2023 at 11.00 am

Minutes

Present

Councillor John Cotton (Chair)
Councillor Rob Clinton
Councillor Andy Mackiewicz

Birmingham City Council
Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council

In Attendance

Kate Ashworth
Ed Cox
Craig Evans (Secretary)
Jackie Howman
Elspeth Sage
George Simms
Tony Thaper
Ayushi Vyas
Mike Webb

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In Attendance via MS Teams

Councillor Craig Collingswood
Councillor Peter Hughes
Councillor Majid Mahmood
Aqeel Rizvi
Tristan Semple

City of Wolverhampton Council
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
Birmingham City Council
West Midlands Combined Authority
West Midlands Combined Authority

Item Title No.

13. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Jim O'Boyle (Coventry City Council), Matthew Rhodes (Energy Capital) and Suzanne Ward (Environment Agency).

The meeting was inquorate and therefore the decisions contained within the recommendations of the reports would be ratified at the WMCA Board on 12 January 2024.

14. Minutes - 26 September 2023

The minutes of the meeting were approved as a correct record, subject to an amendment to note the attendance of Councillor Peter Hughes at the meeting.

15. Local Investment in Natural Capital Programme

The board considered a report from the LINC Project Manager, Tristan Semple, to inform and update the board on the £1million Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) funded Local Investment in Natural Capital (LINC) programme that was supplemented with a presentation shared to the board by Tristan to note an overview of the programme.

The Government had set a goal to mobilise at least £500million in private finance to support nature's recovery every year by 2027 in England, rising to more than £1billion by 2030. The Government's Green Finance Strategy aimed to identify LINC programmes as one of the measures to support the transition to a climate resilient, nature-positive and net-zero economy. The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) had been selected as one of four regions in England to deliver Defra's LINC programmes and would run until 31 March 2025, supported by a £1million grant from Defra that was secured as part of the Devolution Deal.

The next steps of the programme outlined that consultants would be appointed in January/February 2024 to support LINC, whereby the WMCA and consultants would carry out stakeholder engagement and market research to understand the supply and demand-side opportunities for nature markets in the region. An options appraisal and Investment in Natural Capital Strategy would be developed in April/May 2024 and would be brought to the Environment & Energy Board for review and approval.

Councillor Mackiewicz noted that Solihull was key to local infrastructure projects in the West Midlands, due to the council's existing biodiversity net gain planning and provided the board with a brief verbal overview of projects undertaken in the borough such as tree planting, the creation of a new park in Shirley, biodiversity at Hope Coppice and in particular an urban biodiversity project at Kingshurst Brook where funding had been secured for de-culverting a stream and planting wildflowers in the creation of a mini park. In response, Tristan noted that the team were working with multidisciplinary teams across all of the local authorities, as well as a range of other key delivery partners to pull the opportunities together and to identify elements of existing good practices and linkages.

In response to Councillor Clinton who suggested whether it be better for each local authority to be allocated some funding to develop projects within the parameters set to allow for learning and local resident involvement as opposed to selecting several projects in the region, the Executive Director for Strategy, Economy & Net Zero, Ed Cox, recognised the fantastic projects already being undertaken in the region by local authorities and noted that the role of the WMCA was to scale up those projects and that the LINC and Net Zero Neighbourhoods programmes were designed to try and find a financial model that would enable scaling up projects in the future.

In response to Councillor Clinton who requested whether the WMCA could undertake a conference for attending on the findings and to bring experts from local universities to disseminate the information out into the higher educational facilities, Tristan noted a large part of the programme was about knowledge exchange and education, with the aim of capacity and capability building across all organisations and that the WMCA had been involved in events since January 2023 to enhance levels of understanding with future webinars and workshops scheduled to be planned of the nature market and green finance landscape for people to attend.

In response to Councillor Hughes who queried the membership in terms of the governance arrangements for the LINC programme, due to elements of the programme crossing between multiple portfolio areas and services at Sandwell, the Executive Director for Strategy, Economy & Net Zero noted that a list would be sent to councillors of the Environment & Energy Board of the named local authority officers representing the five or six working groups across energy and environmental programmes.

In regard to the climate vulnerability map of the presentation, Councillor Hughes noted that one of the ideas from government was to address the unequal distribution of environmental benefits and queried whether the programme could support Sandwell with proposed green projects as compared to other areas of the region due to Sandwell being largely urban and brownfield land, with very little green space, or lacking land identified for housing and employment. Tristan acknowledged Councillor Hughes' comments and noted that the programme was heavily driven by investment in an open and free market that could not be forced as investors would be seeking an evidence base to ensure where investment would have the greatest impact, however the WMCA would support local authorities with a strong narrative to try and achieve nature recovery investments for areas to link to other key drivers such as deprivation, access and climate vulnerability.

Councillor Mahmood highlighted existing and proposed key green projects for Birmingham City Council such as scaling up parks in deprived areas, the conversion of housing land to wild meadows and tree planting, as well as the Urban Accelerator Programme to increase tree coverage and canopy, as well as established meeting forums at Birmingham and recommended for the WMCA to link to such as the Nature Board, The Theme of Open Space Forum and Future Parks Celebrate, as well as external organisations such as the NHS in terms of health benefits from natural capital and Network Rail for the rail corridor between Solihull and Birmingham where a lot of fly-tipping occurred on land.

Councillor Mackiewicz reflected on the discussions and in particular addressed Councillor Hughes' concern of Sandwell being a heavily urban area and noted that Solihull had a working model called the Wildlife Waste Project which was an £18.6million project that was a completely urban project that delivered small benefits, sites and cycleways that may address Sandwell's concern and recommended for the WMCA to contact Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council to discuss the project further which was a working model, rather than to reinvent a new model.

Resolved:

- (1) The update on the Local Investment in Natural Capital Programme be received.
- (2) Input to the engagement and outreach process be provided.

16. Local Net Zero Accelerator

The board considered a report from the SMART Hub Lead, George Simms, and the Net Zero Neighbourhood Delivery Manager, Ayushi Vyas, to inform the board of the WMCA's decision to withdraw the Net Zero Neighbourhood Innovation project from the Innovate UK funding programme, in order to be awarded a larger sum of government funding for a Net Zero Accelerator pilot alongside Manchester through the WMCA's Devolution Deal. George noted that the new programme was about channelling investment and funding into creating net zero places and in doing so, creating much greater impact and potential for scale than individual grant schemes would do and was also highly relevant to the work of the WMCA on devolution, single settlement, energy system planning, as well as furthering the regions inclusive growth principles and investments.

The report was supplemented by a presentation that was shared to the board from Ayushi to provide an overview of the programme, project purpose, vision, delivery and next steps following endorsement from the board for a programme business case to be prepared and that would be forwarded to the WMCA's Investment Board in March 2024.

In response to Councillor Mackiewicz who suggested whether the WMCA was looking in to either the installation of solar panels on roofs or shared battery containers for reducing fuel poverty in net zero neighbours, Ayushi and the Energy Infrastructure Lead, Cheryl Hiles, confirmed this was being considered to be built in to the scope.

Councillor Clinton noted the importance for working with educational establishments and stakeholders in local manufacturing in the production of solar panels and battery containers without being reliant on other countries to support the region's economic growth and to support young people with the skills and jobs in manufacturing.

In regard to Councillor Mackiewicz and Councillor Clinton's observations, the Executive Director for Strategy, Economy & Net Zero noted that the single settlement that the WMCA was negotiating with government at the moment across a whole range of regional priorities included a large chunk of funding towards retrofit that would mean in the WMCA area a significant sum over a five year period should provide the manufacturing sector with a degree of certainty and for driving invest in the areas of manufacturing and skills.

Resolved:

The decision to accept the Net Zero Accelerator Pilot funding offered by the Department for Energy, Security & Net Zero (DESNZ) be endorsed.

17. Local Nature Recovery Strategy

The item was deferred to the next meeting of the Environment & Energy Board due to the conclusion of the meeting.

18. Community Environment Fund

The board received a presentation from the Community Environment Fund Manager, Tony Thaper, to provide an overview of the Community Environment Fund that was launched in October 2023 by the WMCA and that had £1m of grant funding available from The Government's Commonwealth Games Legacy Enhancement Fund to support communities in delivering initiatives that improve the environment and people's lives.

The Community Environment Fund was open to applications that was managed by the Heart of England Community Foundation and was based around five themes of natural environment, access to open space, circular economy, adaptation and environmental awareness.

The Grant Assessment Panel was due to meet in January/February 2024 and then every two months thereafter where it was hoped funds could be released with awards made and to anticipate the full allocation of funding to be used when the project completed in March 2025, followed by results and learning to report back to the Environment & Energy Board in achieving the outcome of a more energised community sector that was more engaged with environmental projects and to raise environmental awareness.

Tony further noted that there would be upcoming webinars in January/February 2024 to further promote the scheme and that his team were more than happy to visit applicants and potential projects to discuss further.

The Chair requested for a list of the webinar dates to be forwarded for board members information and Councillor Mackiewicz noted that it would also be beneficial for board members to receive an electronic brochure with full details of the scheme for councillors to forward on to their local authority officers that Tony confirmed he would do following conclusion of the meeting.

Resolved:

The details of the Community Environment Fund launched in October 2023 by the WMCA, that has £1m of grant funding available from The Government's Commonwealth Games Legacy Enhancement Fund to support communities in delivering initiatives that improve the environment and people's lives be received and noted.

19. Date of Next Meeting

Thursday 7 March 2024.

[The meeting ended at 12.44pm].

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