

ANNUAL REPORT 2022-23

ENVIRONMENT AND URBAN RENEWAL POLICY AND PERFORMANCE BOARD

**Councillor Bill Woolfall
Chairman**

I am proud to report on progress made over the last year. The Council continues to tackle climate change, for example promoting further phases of the rollout of on-street electrical vehicle charge points, measures to reduce energy use, and additional active travel routes linking places of work, schools, and retail centres. It is very positive to be able to report that air quality in Widnes has improved to the point that the air quality management areas (AQMA) established in 2011 can be revoked. Furthermore, in total over £5 million has been invested in improving the environmental quality of Halton via the Environment Fund.

Road safety remains a priority, Halton had achieved its performance targets as set by the Department of Transport and was one of the few Local Authorities to report a fall in both collisions and casualties, against a national picture where road casualties (all categories) increased by 11% in 2021.

Regeneration initiatives continue at pace, and the Board monitors the impact of successful schemes. For example the Mersey Gateway Bridge, Silver Jubilee Bridge improvements, and the Runcorn Station Quarter scheme have provided productivity gains for businesses and improved journey times for all. Schemes such as these also serve as the catalyst for wider regeneration and investment in the Borough.

As ever, I am grateful to PPB Members for their enthusiasm and valuable contributions at our meetings. The PPB plays a vital role in informing and improving the Council's policies to protect and enhance the local environment, drive forward regeneration, and ensure value for money in the delivery of the local services provided by the Council.

The Board has covered a variety of specialist themes and topics during the last 12 months. I hope that the short summary outlined in the annual report adequately captures this work. I am delighted that the Board continues to shape and champion initiatives such as those outlined in this report.

MEMBERSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The Board comprised eleven Councillors:-

Councillor Bill Woolfall (Chairman)
Councillor Mike Fry (Vice-Chairman)
Councillor Angela Ball
Councillor Dave Cargill
Councillor Sian Davidson
Councillor Robert Gilligan
Councillor Stan Hill
Councillor Geoffrey Logan
Councillor Tony McDermott
Councillor Tom Stretch
Councillor Sharon Thornton

The primary function of the Environment and Urban Renewal Policy and Performance Board (EUR PPB) is to focus on enhancing the local environment and championing the urban renewal / regeneration of Halton. The Board reviews Executive Board decisions relevant to its remit, and monitors the general activities and performance of Council departments against service plans.

The Board scrutinises performance and formulates policy in relation to the following areas:

- Highways, Transportation and Logistics (including road maintenance, street, lighting, road safety, traffic management, supported bus services and flood risk management)
- Environment Services, Parks & Countryside, Cemeteries & Crematoria
- Regulatory Services
- Major Schemes
- Economic Regeneration and Business Development
- Waste Management and Waste Strategy
- Contaminated Land
- Housing Strategic Policy
- Sustainability, Climate Change and Biodiversity
- Natural Environment

REVIEW OF THE YEAR

The Board met 4 times during the Municipal Year 2022/23:

- 22 June 2022
- 21 September 2022
- 16 November 2022
- 15 February 2023

Some of the main activities and issues that have come before the Board during the year are set out below.

ENVIRONMENT

- **Air Quality Management Areas (AQMAs)**

The Board considered proposals to revoke to the two AQMAs in the Borough, located in Widnes Town Centre. Halton's Air Quality Management Areas were declared in 2011 when routine monitoring identified exceedances of the Nitrogen Dioxide limits. This was a result of town centre congestion in Widnes and emissions from road vehicles. Since then, there had been notable improvements in traffic flows through the town centre as a result of the Mersey Gateway Bridge and the re-opening of the Silver Jubilee Bridge. Further actions included changes to sequencing of traffic lights to reduce congestion as well as improvements in vehicle emission technology which had also contributed to the reduced levels.

The Board noted the information outlined in the report which demonstrated the improvement in air quality between 2011 to date and also the sustained improvement in air quality over the last 5 years.

Given the improvements to air quality, it was proposed to revoke the air quality management areas and approval would be sought from Executive Board. It was also suggested that a 4 week public consultation be carried out in March 2023 where the public would be invited to submit comments to a dedicated air quality mailbox. Further information would be made available on the Council's website and consultation would be publicised via media channels. The Board would receive a further report on the outcome of the public consultation in due course.

- **Environmental Fund Update**

The fund has been in operation since 2015, and over that period has generated £5,035,120 for expenditure in Halton. A significant number of projects have received funding. Examples include improvements to open spaces across the Borough, the implementation of walking and cycling routes, pond improvements, enhancing play areas, dealing with fly tipping, refurbishment of War Memorials, and CCTV monitoring.

- **Climate Change Update**

The Board received an update on activities relating to the Council's Climate Change Action Plan. The Action Plan for 2022-2027 provided a clear direction for the Council and:

- Set a target to be carbon neutral by 2040 which included both short term and longer term action;
- Provided an initial focus on decarbonising energy use by buildings, transport, waste and enhancing the Borough's blue/green infrastructure; and
- Sought to embed climate change in Council decision making and develop partnership working as a lead into a borough wide approach to tackling climate change.

Members were advised on the action taken by the Council to reduce its carbon emissions, the introduction of electric vehicle charging, steps taken to embed climate change into decision making, the Big Halton Forrest Project, progress on Council climate change web pages and climate change training for members and officers. In addition, the report provided information on how the Council was facilitating to help climate change projects relating to private and social housing and green growth projects in the business and public sector.

It was noted that there were elements of the plan which were difficult to cost and a careful balance would need to be struck between the Council's carbon ambitions and the requirements it had placed on it delivering its statutory responsibilities. It was clear that significant resources would be required to enable the Council to reach its 2040 objective, much of which it did not have presently at its disposal. For these reasons actions would need to be prioritised in terms of resourcing, deliverability and cost.

As part of the Liverpool City Region Hydrogen Strategy for the region, the Board received a presentation from representatives from Cadent, who advised the Board on Cadent's HyNet North West Hydrogen Pipeline. The presentation updated Members on the project work to date and the statutory consultation process which would run from 29 September to 10 November 2022.

- **Review of Coppicing Works**

The Board considered it timely to establish a working party (WP) to look in to the procedures involved in the landscape management practice of coppicing. This is a pruning technique where a tree or shrub is cut to ground level, which results in regeneration of new stems from the base. Coppicing is a popular conservation practice and offers an excellent way to stimulate and increase the life of the tree, amongst other benefits, including those to wildlife.

The first meeting of the Working Party took place on 12 July and Members received a presentation on 'structure planting' and how the Council managed its plantations, including some of the issues the Council faced.

Following a discussion on the Council's programme for the management of structure planting and a number of matters raised by Members, it was agreed that a field study visit to be arranged for Members to observe previous structure planting works that had been carried out at a number of locations across the Borough that had been subject to previous enquiries from members of the public following coppicing works. The field study took place in September 2022.

A dedicated page is to be established on the Council's website that would provide general information and regular updates on the planned coppicing works.

URBAN RENEWAL

- Mersey Gateway Regeneration Strategy Plus - Update

Significant strategic benefits have emerged post Mersey Gateway Bridge construction, including the improvements to the Silver Jubilee Bridge, funding for the regeneration of Runcorn, and the Runcorn Station Quarter.

Positive feedback had also been received from businesses, for example, improvements in efficient transport movement within and beyond Halton, which subsequently improved economic activity. There had also been reports of positive impacts on individuals and the labour market, particularly by supporting and attracting highly skilled individuals to highly skilled vacancies and reinforcing workforce resilience by retaining individuals in these key posts.

It was noted that work was ongoing to deliver the following Key Impact Areas:

- West Runcorn Employment Growth Area;
- Astmoor;
- Halton Lea;
- West Bank;
- Widnes Waterfront;
- 3MG Ditton Corridor;
- Runcorn Old Town; and
- Southern Widnes.

A primary Council's policy objective was to ensure that the Mersey Gateway project was more than the construction of a bridge. Alongside productivity gains and improved journey times that had resulted from the new bridge, it had also served as the catalyst for wider regeneration and investment in the Borough.

- **Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO)**

The Board heard evidence from local Councillors regarding the problems currently being experienced in their wards arising from HMOs. Potential solutions were discussed, together with the powers available to the Council under planning and licencing legislation to tackle these issues. The use of an Article 4 Direction to remove 'permitted development rights' thereby forcing any proposal for the change of use from Class C3 (dwelling house) to Class C4 (houses of multiple occupation) to apply for planning permission was discussed. This process requires national Government to agree the Article 4 Direction.

Following consideration of the information presented, the Board agreed that a Working Party would be set up to discuss the issues raised and to consider away forward. The Working Party subsequently agreed an action plan which covered the following:

- Undertake a borough-wide exercise to gather evidence on numbers of small HMOs to identify locations and clustering (using Council data sources);
- Examine the level of clustering of HMOs at Frederick Street, Widnes;

- Use the West Bank area as a pilot area to test interventions;
- Identify small HMOs and private rented properties in West Bank and investigate options for discretionary (selective) licencing of private rented properties. The pilot would be used to inform options for any future Borough wide scheme;
- Investigate an Article 4 Direction for West Bank to remove 'permitted development rights' preventing single dwellings becoming small HMOs (note this does not prevent applications being made for planning permission);
- Improve the management of waste from HMOs in West Bank;
- Quantify the cost of these interventions for budget purposes; and
- Present recommendations to the Executive Board.

TRANSPORT

A key statutory duty of the Council is ensuring that the local transport network is well maintained, safe, and efficient for all users and is adapting to respond to the climate emergency.

- **Annual Road Traffic Collision and Accident Report**

The Board received a report on the latest road safety statistics released by the Department for Transport setting out the numbers of traffic collisions and casualties in 2021 and compares these figures with those from previous years. KSI (killed or seriously injured) figures show the number of adult and child casualties decreased by 2 (total decrease of 4).

Halton had achieved its performance targets as set by the Department of Transport and was one of the few Local Authorities to report a fall in both collisions and casualties, against a national picture where road casualties (all categories) increased by 11% in 2021.

In addition, the report highlighted the work the Road Safety Team had undertaken in 2021/22 and the programme for 2022/23 which would continue to cover road traffic reduction schemes, road safety education, training and publicity as well as engaging with Cheshire Police to target effective enforcement action. Members also considered information on the following road safety initiatives:

- Community Speed Watch;
- "Smiley SiD" Speed Indicative Device/Sign (SiDs);
- Speed Camera A562;
- Gyrotory Red Light Camera;
- Mobile Speed Camera Sites;
- Collision Sites;
- Safer Active Travel;
- Education;

- **Preston Brook Petition**

Preston Brook Parish Council submitted a petition, containing 52 signatures, which requested the reduction of the speed limit on both Windmill Lane and Chester Road

from 30mph to 20 mph and the removal of the section of Chester Road that was 40mph and the removal of unnecessary industrial signage.

In respect of petitions, the Boards role is to receive a report on any petitions received by the Council relevant to their respective PPB area, and covering any action taken or proposed to be taken by the Executive (or Portfolio Holder or an Officer acting under delegated powers).

The Board noted that Cheshire Police had stated that they would not support any speed reductions on the A56, Chester Road and they would only support a speed reduction on Windmill Lane alongside a full traffic calming intervention. There has not been an injury accident on the road in question in the past 5 years, and therefore in line with the criteria in the Council's Traffic Calming Assessment Policy, this location does not meet the criteria for intervention.

The report set out the position in the Department for Transport Circular 01/2013 (Setting Local Speed Limits) which states "*it is government policy that a 30 mph speed limit should be the norm in villages*", and that the Council's approach is also consistent with the policies in Local Transport Plan 3 on 20mph Zones. The Board were reminded that they received the Annual Road Safety Report in November 2022 and that this analysis did not highlight this location for intervention. Based on these reasons, there was no recommended action in response to the petition.

DURING 2023/24 THE BOARD PLANS TO FOCUS ON:

Key themes started in 2022/23 will run on into the coming year.

- Responding to Climate Change
- Assessing the impacts of Houses of Multiple Occupation on communities
- Improving performance indicators with negative trends.

Contact Officer for the Board

Members of the public are welcome at the meetings of the Board. If you would like to know where and when meetings are to be held or if you would like any more information about the Board or its work please contact Tim Gibbs, Operational Director, Policy, Planning and Transportation Department on 0151 511 7664 or via email tim.gibbs@halton.gov.uk