

ANNUAL REPORT 2023-24

**ENVIRONMENT AND URBAN RENEWAL
POLICY AND PERFORMANCE BOARD**

**Councillor Bill
Woolfall
Chairman**

The last year has been extremely busy. 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 road casualties remain below pre-covid levels when journeys and traffic flows were comparable to now.

Regeneration and investment in infrastructure continue at pace. The Council has big ambitions that are set out in its development pipelines for schemes and transport infrastructure. The Council remains concerned about the quality of its housing stock. It is imperative that homes are safe and affordable. The Board has therefore scrutinised specific forms of accommodation, like houses of multiple occupation (HMOs), and recognises that whilst this type of accommodation does have a role in a functional housing market, it must still offer good quality accommodation to those who reside in it, and not cause a nuisance to its neighbours.

All this work is undertaken against a backdrop of ever tighter budgets in the public sector. The Council has therefore embarked on a Transformation Programme to look at areas that are most significant in budgetary terms.

I am grateful to PPB Members for their 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. 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 Peter Lloyd Jones (Vice Chair)
Councillor John Abbott
Councillor Angela Ball
Councillor Noel Hutchinson
Councillor Kath Loftus
Councillor Louise Nolan
Councillor Mike Ryan
Councillor Aimee Skinner
Councillor Gareth Stockton
Cllr Sharon Thornton

The primary function of the Environment and Urban Renewal Policy and Performance Board (EUR PPB) is to focus on the work of the Council and its partners in 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)
- Waste Management and Waste Strategy
- Environment Services, Parks & Countryside, Cemeteries & Crematoria
- All aspects of the Council's Planning Policies that comprise the Development Plan
- Economic Regeneration, Business Development and Tourism Strategies
- Major Schemes
- Derelict / Contaminated Land Strategy
- Biodiversity
- Climate Change
- Transportation Policies (Local Transport Plan)
- Housing Strategic Policy Area renewal, availability, choice and mix.
- Urban renewal aspects of the Sustainable Community Strategy and Corporate Plan
- Physical Environment including powers and duties of Lead Local Flood Authorities,
- Regulatory Services
- Natural Environment

REVIEW OF THE YEAR

The Board met 4 times during the Municipal Year 2023/24:

- 21 June 2023
- 20 September 2023
- 15 November 2023
- 21 February 2024

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

ENVIRONMENT

Revocation of Halton's Air Quality Management Areas in Widnes Town Centre

Air Quality Management Areas (AQMA) were identified in 2011 when routine monitoring identified exceedances of the Nitrogen Dioxide limits in specific locations, attributed to town centre congestion in Widnes and emissions from road vehicles. Notable improvements to traffic flow in the town centre resulted from the Mersey Gateway Bridge and the re-opening of Silver Jubilee Bridge. Other influences that contributed to the reduced levels of pollutants include changing the sequencing of traffic lights to reduce stationary traffic, and improvements in vehicle emission technology. Air quality has improved over the last 5 years. Public Health undertook a four-week public consultation in March 2023. The consultation ran from 17 May 2023 – 7 June 2023 and received 7 responses. The Board consequentially recommended the revocation of the AQMAs. The Council will continue to follow the air quality action plan.

House of Multiple Occupation (HMO)

The Board continued its work on the HMO Action Plan, that was endorsed at the February 2023 Board. The Council has gathered intelligence to understand how many HMOs are in the borough. Meta Street and ORS were both commissioned to undertake research and assess the current level of private rent properties / HMOs, together with tenure change over time, information on the current level of unlicensed smaller HMO's (3-4 occupants), and information on housing stressors (including antisocial behaviour, crime, deprivation), and population changes including migration linked to the private rented sector.

The independent study undertaken by Meta Street and Opinion Research Services (ORS) concluded that there was only a small number of HMOs within the West Bank ward, however there was a high number of private rental properties compared to the rest of the borough. The survey response rate was 45% and a detailed analysis was carried out on the properties that did not respond.

The Board achieved the adopted of 'The Houses of Multiple Occupancy (HMO) Amenity Standards for Licensed Premises' policy (adopted on 14 September 23 by the Executive Board). In addition, the 'Houses of Multiple Occupation SPD (Supplementary Planning Document)' was agreed for public consultation. The document would apply to any planning applications submitted to create large HMOs and would introduce planning controls to ensure the amenity of neighbours was protected.

Environmental Fund

The Runcorn Thermal Power Station is subject to a legal agreement with a provision that the Council receives an annual payment into an 'Environmental Fund for Halton' based on every tonne of fuel received and processed. To September 2023 the fund had generated £5,924,470 and some of the projects that had benefitted from the funds are:

- Prescott Road playing fields – boundary and car park improvements.
- Wood Lane Pond – Improvements of open spaces facilities.
- Runcorn Town Hall Park – Install traditional fencing to improve security.
- Renewable energy – installation of solar farm at former St Michaels golf course.
- Victoria Park Glasshouse – restoration of Victorian style structure.
- War memorials conservation works to memorials in Hale, Runcorn and Widnes.
- Arley Drive Pitches.
- Halton Big Forest
- Madeline McKenna home.
- CCTV Cameras

URBAN RENEWAL

Housing and Employment Land

Annual housing and employment land monitoring surveys are undertaken by the Planning and Transport Department to assess the delivery of the Local Plan. Targets for the provision of housing and the supply of employment land are set out in the Local Plan: 350 dwellings (net gain) per annum and 180ha of land for development purposes between 2014 – 2037.

In April 2023, 368 housing completions with 6 losses / demolitions with a net dwelling gain of 362 units, 74% Runcorn and 26% Widnes. Employment land monitoring recorded the take up of 6.7ha in Widnes. It is important that a supply of land for development is maintained to meet the needs of Halton's communities.

Local Development Scheme

LDS underpinned Halton's Delivery and Allocations Plan that provided a timetable for a number of Supplementary Planning Documents in 23/24. Once approved by Executive Board it would be made available on the council's website.

Climate Change Supplementary Planning Document (SPD)

The revised Climate Change Strategy adopted in April 2022 set a target to be net zero by 2040, setting out both short term and long-term actions. The Council had successfully implemented a range of actions aimed at reducing the carbon footprint, and these actions included the production of a Climate Change SPD which would be a useful tool in assisting the Council to meet the targets set out in the Climate Change Strategy Action Plan. Whilst also introducing further guidance on measures to mitigate the negative impacts of climate change that may otherwise result from new development proposals. The Board endorsed a public consultation on the draft SPD, with a view to then seeking approval for the SPD from Executive Board.

Delivery and Allocations Local Plan (DALP) Annual Monitoring Report (AMR)

The Planning Acts require information to be published annually on the progress of local plan preparation, duty to co-operate, and also report on indicators in the Local Plan. The Board received and reviewed the latest AMR.

TRANSPORT

Infrastructure Update

At its meeting in June 2023, the Board reviewed the schemes to help improve the borough's transport infrastructure:

- Runcorn East Station Improvements
- Runcorn Station Quarter Station Building Improvements
- Floodlighting and Maintenance on Silver jubilee Bridge
- Refurbishment of Busway Viaducts
- West Bank Waterloo Road Slip Road – Widnes Loops
- A533 / M56 Overbridge Preston Brook – Bridge replacement
- Dukesfield / Runcorn Station Quarter Active Travel Link
- Busway Halton Lea to Murdishaw Active Travel Link
- Busway Murdishaw to Whitehouse and Norton Active Travel Link
- Busway Norton-Castlefields / Halton Lea Active Travel Link in design.
- Widnes Town Centre – Improvement to footway widths on North Albert Road

Future transport pipeline projects include the following;

- Runcorn Station Building,
- Wilmere Lane Slips HE – address current congestion issues.
- Hough Green and Widnes Stations – Address current congestion issues.
- Replacement rail bridge Ditton / Halebank – Improved Access
- 3MG Employment links – Encourage sustainable transport and access to employment and housing areas.
- Daresbury A558 Dualling – reducing congestion; improving access to Enterprise Zone and development sites in the East Runcorn.
- Whitehouse enabling infrastructure – create opportunities in east Runcorn area, reducing traffic impacts e.g. HGV routes.
- Local cycling and Walking infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) – Development of plan, car free routes, health promotion, improved connectivity.
- Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Strategy – reduced emissions, reducing health inequalities, climate change.
- Decarbonising the Fleet.
- Halton bus routes.
- Park and ride facilities.

Withdrawal of 62 Bus Service Monday – Friday

The Board received a petition against the withdrawal of the 62 Bus Service serving Moore Village. This followed the bus operator giving notice to withdraw the no. 62 service. The current operator's decision was on the basis the service operated at a loss and therefore no longer commercially viable. The Board noted that the Council provides a level of public funding subsidy towards the operating costs under a "de minimis" arrangement. A further tender exercise was completed due to no close alternative bus routes for Moore. Following the tender, Ashcroft Travel were awarded the contract to provide a service which would

operate a similar timetable starting 25th September 23. Funding was accessed from the Mersey Gateway Sustainable Travel Fund. The Board noted it is imperative that passenger use continues to be encouraged to ensure this new service remains viable.

Annual Road Traffic Collision and Casualty report

The Board received a report on the Department of Transport's annual statistics for road safety. This report compared figures from 2022 with previous years. The figures cover killed or seriously injured (KSI) numbers, and it was noted that the number of adult and child casualties increased slightly. However, due to the low numbers recorded in general on an annual basis in Halton, this number did tend fluctuate from year to year. It was noted that post-Covid casualty numbers had mirrored the increase in traffic levels. Halton's performance target was achieved. There were 157 Road traffic collisions involving personal injury within Halton, 9 more than previous year. The incidents resulted in 188 casualties, a 7% increase on 2021 figure, but 24% below 2019 when traffic levels were comparable.

Road Safety team continue to cover traffic reduction schemes, road safety education, training and publicity as well as engaging with Cheshire Police to target effective enforcement action. The Board noted the planned initiatives:

- Use of "Smiley" Speed Indicative Device/Sign (SiDs) for speed analysis.
- Speed Camera A562.
- Gyroscopic Red Light Camera.
- Additional Mobile Speed Camera Sites.
- Analysis Collision Sites.
- Safer Active Travel options.
- Education of drivers and at-risk groups, for examples in Schools

Bus Franchising in LCR

Following public consultation in Summer 2023, the City Region Mayor made the decision to build a London style integrated public transport network and bring bus services into public control to improve connectivity; facilitate social mobility and provide a lifeline to the most vulnerable. Proposed objectives of the scheme were discussed along with the timeline for implementation, and the change to roles and responsibilities, plus the scope and priorities of the franchise. A budget had been set for the transition work and further costs would be consulted upon. Non-electric buses would be phased out in line with net zero targets. LCR would own their own depots which would look differently in the future due to the technology required to work with net zero targets. Employees would be transferred across to the new set-up via TUPE.

Electric Vehicle Charging Strategy

This strategy sets out electric vehicle charging point infrastructure implementation plan, that would help the Council's long-term commitment to reach net zero by 2040, whilst also exploring a pathway to meet the future needs of residents and businesses in the Halton. The Board endorsed the strategy, which would allow officers to seek external funding opportunities from the LCR and other sources. The report outlined the vision for Halton's electric vehicle charging point network, identifying future need and delivery for electric vehicle charging infrastructure. By 2032 it was estimated that Halton would require 1520 residential charge point sockets across 312 locations: 496 destination charge points across 17 catchment areas (long stay hubs such as hospitals and schools) and 228 rapid chargers

over 18 catchment areas (short stay hubs such as supermarkets and fuel stations).

The Board noted the risk of inequality relating to electric vehicles (EVs), for example those on lower incomes, or those who do not have driveways upon which to install chargers at their homes, and those that do not own an EV but park in the charging bay, and inconsistencies in the price charged for electricity by the operator. Officers had worked with operators to cap charges, where possible, to be as equitable as possible, but without government legislation this can be difficult to control. Work had been carried out in Runcorn Old Town by Scottish Power Energy Networks to installed charging points, it was noted that the grid did need to be reinforced in places to cater for predicted increases in demand in power. Funding was being looked at to upgrade substations.

DURING 2024/25 THE BOARD PLANS TO FOCUS ON:

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

- Responding to Climate Change
- Refreshing the Council's Housing Strategy
- Transformation Programme
- 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