

Coventry City Council
Minutes of the Meeting of Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3)
held at 2.30 pm on Wednesday, 21 August 2024

Present:

Members: Councillor R Singh (Chair)
 Councillor P Akhtar
 Councillor J Blundell
 Councillor T Jandu
 Councillor A Kaur
 Councillor K Maton (substitute for Councillor F Abbott)
 Councillor B Singh
 Councillor D Toulson

Employees (by service area):

Law and Governance E Jones, M Salmon

Transport and Innovation C Knight (Director of Innovation), N Small

Apologies: Councillor F Abbott

Public Business

28. Declarations of Interest

There were no disclosable pecuniary interests.

29. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 17th April 2024 were agreed and signed as a true record.

Further to minute 26/23 headed 'Work Programme', Members noted that in respect of the 'Bus Franchising Options' item, this had been delayed coming to the Board pending a West Midlands Combined Authority Mayoral decision which it was anticipated would take place in early 2025. The item would remain on the Work Programme for an update later in the Municipal Year.

30. Cabinet Member Key Priorities 2024/25

The Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3) received a briefing from the Cabinet Member for Jobs, Regeneration and Climate Change outlining the priorities for his portfolio for 2024/25. The following areas were highlighted:

- **Economic Development** – inward investment work and continuing business support

- **Greenpower Park** – part of the wider West Midlands Investment Zone that included the Giga Factory, the Airport and other pieces of land that would offer investment and employment opportunities.
- **VLR** – progression of the Programme through tasks and stage posts for the ongoing release of the allocated funds. An innovative and revolutionary design concept, developed in Coventry with the aspiration for future marketing nationally and internationally.
- **Electric Bus City** – 140 electric buses in the city to date with a target of a complete electric bus city by the end of 2025.
- **Cycle Schemes** – successful cycle lane bids and installation of segregated cycle lane schemes across the city, with further planned, particularly in the North of the City.
- **Public Realm Work** – ongoing work including the opening up of the River Sherbourne in Palmer Lane.
- **Climate Change Strategy** – group of factors and themes being brought together. Report being submitted to Cabinet in October 2024.
- **Strategic Energy Partnership** – a Team, including EON, based at Friargate working on an Energy Masterplan and Retrofit Programme.
- **City Centre South** – progression of the scheme following work to establish single ownership of the site. Hoardings expected to go up later this year.
- **Friargate** – working with Homes England to obtain funding to help support the progress of Friargate, which was now different to the original scheme.

31. **Work Programme 2024/25**

The Business, Economy, and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3) received a report of the Scrutiny Co-ordinator that detailed the issues carried over from the Board's Work Programme 2023/24 and suggested for meetings of the Board in 2024/25.

Members had attended a Scrutiny Work Programme Planning Session on 12th June 2023 following which the Board's Work Programme had been updated to capture items suggested at the Session.

RESOLVED that the Business, Economy, and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3):

- 1) **Notes the issues carried over from the Work Programme 2023/24 and suggested for meetings of the Board in 2024/25 and also the suggested items raised at the Scrutiny Work Programme Planning Session.**
- 2) **Agrees that the Work Programme be updated to include the following items that arose from the Cabinet Member for Jobs, Regeneration and Climate Change key priorities briefing:**

Updates on:

- 1) **The West Midlands Investment Zone**
- 2) **Electric Buses 2025**
- 3) **The development of drone technology in the City**

32. **Very Light Rail Update**

The Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3) received a presentation and briefing note of the Innovation that provided an overview of the governance agreed with the Department for Transport (DfT) and West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) for the Very Light Rail Regional Programme, including Coventry Very Light Rail (CVLR). It also provided an update on the current status of the CVLR Programme.

The presentation and briefing note highlighted the following:

- New system could deliver affordable urban mass transit across the UK and beyond
- The cost cutting game-changer trackform
- Coventry Very Light Rail Scheme promoted by Coventry City Council (£40.5m)
- Dudley Very Light Rail National Innovation Centre (VLRNIC) had been promoted by the Black Country Innovative Manufacturing Organisation (BCIMO) and Dudley Council (£12m)
- A mass Transit Options Appraisal Study which would include an assessment of urban VLR promoted by Transport for West Midlands (TfWM) (£5m)
- VLR Dependencies - three schemes within the business case: CVLR was the pilot scheme; VLRNIC supported the CVLR Research and Development Programme; TfWM exploration of the using CVLR technology.
- CVLR governance – Coventry VLR approval process proposals
- Secured and unsecured funding
- The completion of Stage Gate 1 – December 2023
- Track test sites at Warwick University, Coventry City Council's Whitley Depot and VLRNIC, and lessons learned
- City Centre Demonstrator 2024/25 – railway Station to City Centre
- City Centre Traffic Management Plan
- Cost benefits of CVLR vs Light Rail
- Very Light Rail Opportunities – Autonomy, development of trackform, decarbonisation, global and national exploitation

The next steps for the Scheme were:

- Prove the new track form could be installed with minimal disruption to the city and utilities at circa £10m/km
- Operate the CVLR vehicle as a working showcase of the technology for both national and global customers and investors
- Continue to engage with Stakeholders to build the market for the vehicle, track and integrated system at regional and national events
- Develop and implement a commercialisation strategy
- Use the evidence from City Centre Demonstrator to support future business case submissions
- Seek to secure funding to support the installation of a first commercial route in Coventry

In considering the presentation and briefing note, the Board questioned officers, received responses and discussed matters as summarised below:

- £40m Government funding allocation – funding released following a stage-by-stage process. Each stage needed to be achieved and evidenced before further funding applications could be made.
- £40m was for the 1st round, issued for 2022-2027, and the 2nd round, currently being worked on, would be for 2027-2032.
- Scheme first began in 2016 – delayed due to COVID pandemic. The Authority was now on target with the Programme.
- Commerciality – track and vehicle patented. Propose to market in the future, nationally and internationally. Would generate revenue for the Authority.
- Stake in intellectual properties – the Local Authority had the majority stake of 85% and TfWM had 15% stake. The Authority had a good working relationship with TfWM.
- Light rail compared to very light rail – VLR was half the vehicle weight of LR Vehicle per linear metre.
- Passenger no.s - 56 people carried on VLR vehicle with passenger stops expected to be similar to West Midlands Travel bus stops.
- Track – would be double track, running with other traffic in places and would work with conventional systems – compatible with other tracks.
- Autonomy – technology developed; however, legislation was slow but progressing.
- Prototype vehicle won't be 'kitted out' to be autonomous. Next Generation Vehicle would be autonomous.
- Track test site at Warwick University – redundant car park used to test the laying of the track.
- The Council's Whitley Depot - 40 metres of track laid at Depot – 44 HGVs had been over that track at the Depot to ensure it could take the weight without being adversely impacted. 1m tonnes had now been over the track and the slabbing performed beyond expectations.
- VLRNIC at Dudley - loop track used to test vehicle on track. A milestone test that proved the Authority could deliver.
- Fast track installation – estimated 2–3-week installation that would limit disturbance whilst the highway was taken up and the track laid which was an important factor in a busy City Centre.
- City Centre Demonstrator – The track would be installed from the Coventry Railway Station to the former Ikea building, Croft Road – Part 1 anticipated to begin in December 2024 and be completed by March 2025 and Part 2 anticipated to be installed by end of 2025.
- The evidence from City Centre Demonstrator would support future business case submissions.
- Track Installation – Risk Based approach taken. No track installation over a major water supply to minimise risk however, modern piping needed far less work.
- Would work with utilities to ensure the programme for installation didn't impact adversely on any programmed work they may have.
- Fuel source – work undertaken around batteries. Electrification was big for Coventry. Hydrogen could be considered in the future. Options open.

- VLR line to the Hospital from the City Centre – a favoured route option that would be considered in the future along with ensuring that areas that were growing and needed serving on the outskirts of the city, were also included.

Members requested that in respect of the commerciality of the system, a summary of the anticipated revenue for the track and the VLR vehicle, be circulated to them.

The Board thanked officers for their informative presentation and briefing and indicated their full support for this exciting Programme.

RESOLVED that the Business, Economy and Enterprise Scrutiny Board (3) notes the content of the briefing note and presentation and the progress with the delivery of the Coventry Very Light Rail Programme and the next steps on the Project.

33. **Any other items of public business which the Chair decides to take as matters of urgency because of the special circumstances involved**

There were no other items of public business.

(Meeting closed at 4.30 pm)