

Stronger City Economy Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 10 September 2020

Attendance

Members of the Stronger City Economy Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Philip Bateman MBE
Cllr Payal Bedi-Chadha
Cllr Dr Paul John Birch J.P.
Cllr Craig Collingswood
Cllr Claire Darke
Cllr Val Evans
Cllr Christopher Haynes (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Rupinderjit Kaur (Chair)
Cllr Barbara McGarrity QN
Cllr Susan Roberts MBE

In Attendance

Cllr Stephen Simkins (Portfolio Holder for City Economy)

Employees

Martin Stevens (Scrutiny Officer) (Minutes)
Richard Lawrence (Director of Regeneration)
Heather Clark (Strategic Projects and Funding Manager / Digital Co-ordinator)
Isobel Woods (Head of Enterprise)
Joanne Keatley (Head of Adult Education)
Liam Davies (Head of City Development)
Julia Cleary (Scrutiny and Systems Manager)
Earl Piggott-Smith (Scrutiny Officer)

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 Apologies**
An apology for absence was received from Councillor Jonathan Yardley.

An apology for absence was received from the Portfolio Holder for Education and Skills, Councillor Dr Michael Hardacre.
- 2 Declarations of interest**
There were no declarations of interest.

3 Minutes of previous meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting held on 5 February 2020 were approved as a correct record.

4 Matters arising

There were no matters arising from the minutes of the previous meeting.

5 Project Relight

The Director of Regeneration gave a presentation on the Directorate's response to Covid-19 and the plans for "Relighting our City." With respect to the Directorate's response to Covid-19 the update focused on Planning, Enterprise and Skills, Adult Education and City Development. On the "Relighting Our City" aspect the focus was on Connected City and other activities undertaken during the pandemic.

The Director of Regeneration stated that during the course of the pandemic to date there had been an overall rise in planning applications, the Council's Planning Service performance had been unaffected by Covid-19. The comparable figures compared to previous years were as follows: -

Applications received July – August

2018 – 269

2019 – 274

2020 – 287

The increasing number of planning applications was positive as it was an indicator of future jobs, homes and investment. They were processing the applications effectively working from home and had received many compliments. Planning Committees were taking place virtually online.

The Director of Regeneration presented a slide on Business and Employment. All engagement and delivery had been moved online. The authority had successfully paid out £44.9 million of grants to a collective total of 4,247 businesses. They had launched an online portal called 'Wolves in Business' which could direct businesses, in any sector, to the correct level of support. In August alone, the Business Support helpline had received 7,120 calls. Ten grants had been awarded for Aim for Gold – ERDF (European Regional Development Fund) SME (Small and Medium Sized Enterprises) Support Package, to businesses who had adapted to access new markets as result of Covid-19. Since lockdown had commenced in March, the Council had supported in the creation of 800 new jobs. 84 residents had been supported into employment since March using the Wolves at Work Programme. The Twitter feed for Wolves at Work had seen on average 8,000 views per week.

The Director of Regeneration stated that Culture and Libraries fell within his area of responsibility. The library function had seen a vast rise in E-books / audio available (13,888) and also 3,934 downloads. Online reading and story sessions had been delivered. They had also reintroduced the home delivery service through the Citizens Advice Bureau in August. They were currently reviewing the reopening of the library service in line with Covid-19 safety measures. Any reopening would be phased. The Art Gallery had created considerable online content and downloadable family packs for school holidays. The Art Gallery, Bantock and the Archive had re-

opened in July with Covid-19 safety measures in place. The Art Gallery improvement project had however been paused due to Covid-19.

The Director of Regeneration presented a slide on adult education. They had been able to enrol students remotely and there had been an increase in content available. An online course offer had been developed. Nine new courses were available to support residents with mental health, employment and study skills development. They were hoping to introduce face to face learning in September in line with the Department for Education guidance. They were planning to capitalise on the innovation and development achieved during lockdown and develop a Digital Transformation Strategy.

The Director of Regeneration presented a slide on the subject matter of City Development. He stated that during the lockdown period there had been an increase in interest from the developer and investor market. A number of current schemes had been paused, but he was pleased they had now all restarted. Phase one of the Interchange project was now complete and opened in May 2020. Phase two of the project was currently underway and would include the demolition of the remaining station building. The development of the i9 building had been paused. The Council had however worked with the developer Ion and the contractor Grahams and construction was now progressing. The Civic Halls project had also been paused due to Covid-19, but site works had recommenced following a 12-week suspension with the contractor Willmott Dixon. Piling works had been completed in August 2020.

The Director of Regeneration remarked that during the lockdown period the Council had submitted bids for the Future High Street Fund (FHSF). They were hoping to have a response from Government back in September on their proposed £23 million bid to support, primarily public realm improvements in the City Centre West area. The Council on behalf of the Towns Fund Board had submitted a bid for up to £48 million in July to transform the City Centre, Bilston and Wednesfield. They hoped to have a response from Government by the end of October. The bid aimed to support education and skills and better enterprise culture through the City Learning Quarter, National Brownfield Institute, 5G application accelerator and Wolves at Work employment programme.

The Director of Regeneration presented a slide on “Relighting Our City.” The concept of “Relighting our City,” was structured around five key areas. These were:-

- Support people who need us most
- Create more opportunities for young people
- Support our vital businesses
- Generate more jobs and learning opportunities
- Stimulate vibrant high streets and communities

The five key areas were supported by three cross cutting themes, “Climate Focused”, “Driven by Digital” – “Connected City and Fair and Inclusive Environment”.

The Scrutiny and Systems Manager presented some slides on the Connected City cross cutting theme which had been agreed for the Scrutiny Panels at the meeting of Scrutiny Board on Tuesday, 14 July 2020. This meant that connectivity and digital considerations were to be considered as part of all items added to the Work Programme. Outcomes and recommendations from all the Scrutiny Panels would

then be fed back to Scrutiny Board to unify into one comprehensive report based on the Connected City theme. The report and any recommendations could then be submitted to Cabinet for consideration. She referred to the Digital Divide, which Covid-19 had highlighted more issues than had previously been realised. She cited figures of 59,000 Wolverhampton citizens not having access to basic digital skills and 35,000 citizens having not been online in the last three months. Only 52% of the workforce had the necessary digital skills for work.

The Scrutiny and Systems Manager stated that in the context of a stronger city economy, the question was how we used and engaged connectivity and digital to help with the following :-

- Generate more jobs and learning opportunities
- Help people into work
- Future proof the economy
- Build skills for the future
- Grow vital local businesses
- Stimulate vibrant high streets and communities
- Drive investment in communities
- Reimagine our highstreets
- Enhance the cultural offer of the city to connect with a wider audience

The Director for Regeneration presented some slides on the work they had been undertaking as a Directorate to support the Connected City agenda. The first slide related to Adult Education. Some of the highlights were

- Increased digital skills and learning opportunities by 52% from 109 ICT qualifications in 2019 to 168 in 2020.
- Over 60% of students would have a digital literacy assessment leading to an appropriate educational response to improve and develop their digital skills.
- At enrolment, a digital capacity assessment would be undertaken. A hardware and / or data loan would follow for those in need and where resources permitted.
- Increased blended learning opportunities were planned across the curriculum to support and enhance face to face learning.
- The impact of the measures would be assessed using student voice / surveys.

The Director of Regeneration presented a slide on the Connected City Theme relating to Business and Employment. The highlights were: -

- All engagement had moved online.
- Wolves in Business – website with advice and guidance had enabled the Council to reach a wider audience.
- Webinars had been presented by businesses in the city on recovery, adapting and coping during Covid-19.
- Grant applications were all managed online.
- They were preparing a CRM (Customer Relationship Management) system to assist business relationships.
- Engagement with residents had moved online, this had highlighted the challenges with digital access.

- Let's Talk Jobs – An online discussion with employers, talking about new ways of working and current vacancies.

The Director of Regeneration with reference to the Arts and Libraries commented that website engagement had increased from April to July by 35%. Facebook likes and Twitter followers had also increased. The online offer to schools for Autumn 2020 was being produced. He was pleased to report that 184 people had signed up to the Virtual Librarian Service in the four weeks since it was launched. They had also undertaken a Digital Story Time, which had received over 800 views. “We select, you collect” service had been launched, which had received over 1500 enquiries.

The Director of Regeneration presented a slide on the Connected City theme in relation to City Development. The i9 building had received wired scored Gold accreditation. This accreditation scheme was a commercial real estate rating scheme that empowered landlords to understand, improve, and promote their buildings' digital infrastructure and connectivity. Discussions with prospective developers and investors were now taking place virtually. They were progressing Memorandum of Understandings with some developers who were keen to enter the City. All profile raising was taking place virtually including the Business Breakfast and Business Week. The acquisition of Qualcast Road as part of Canalside South had taken place virtually.

A Panel Member stressed the importance of climate change and the importance of taking this into consideration when Scrutiny Panels looked at items. They added that the libraries being closed had prevented some people having access to digital resources that they would ordinarily obtain from visiting the library. The Director of Regeneration responded that they were looking at the phased re-opening of library services. The Head of Enterprise added that Wolverhampton Homes had an initiative called “Click Start”, which offered IT training and support for 10 weeks. They were currently securing further equipment for the project.

A Member of the Panel asked a question regarding adult education availability for people suffering with mental health issues. The Head of Adult Education responded that the general environment of adult education was supportive of people with mental health issues. There was also a programme called “Like Minds,” for people with low to moderate mental health issues. People were referred onto this programme by mental health practitioners. The primary medium was arts and crafts. Each person assessed their mental health at the start and at the end of the programme to see if there had been any improvement. There was some excellent case studies of how the programme had resulted in a positive impact on a person's life.

The Portfolio Holder for City Economy paid tribute to all the staff who had worked to keep people safe, and to restart projects. He also praised all the work that had taken place in obtaining and distributing grant funding. He regarded libraries as being key to the community, when they were safe to re-open, they would do so. The uptake in e-books had shown the importance of digital in the library service. He stressed the necessity of the Wolves at Work Project which was helping people back into work.

A Member of the Panel asked about footfall and vibrancy in the City Centre in the Covid and post Covid world. The Director of Regeneration responded that the “Relighting our City” project was key, this was all about repositioning the City in the

new era. The five pillars to the strategy were central to creating vibrancy in the City Centre. Getting people back into work and working with the business community to stimulate investment in the City Centre was key to ensuring vibrancy moving forward. There was also opportunity for residential development within the City Centre. The Portfolio Holder added that the Council needed to plan how the City Centre could evolve in the Covid era and he suggested it as a potential topic area for scrutiny in the future.

6 **Future Work Programme**

The Scrutiny and Systems Manager gave a short presentation on the future Work Programme for the Scrutiny Panel. She listed some questions, included in the presentations slides, which were good to consider when considering items for the Work Programme. She detailed the remit of the Panel which included: -

- Enterprise and Skills
- City Development
- Visitor Economy
- Adult and Cultural Learning
- Economic Inclusion
- Service Development

The Scrutiny and Systems Manager detailed the new approach to Scrutiny which included a Connected City theme for the remainder of the municipal year. She then went through the Work Programme items for the remainder of the year.

The Scrutiny Officer stated that the Work Programme was very much a live document and Members could contact either the Chair or himself throughout the year to suggest items for the Panel to consider.

The Director for Regeneration commented that he was happy to bring regular updates on the general activity of the Directorate to the Scrutiny Panel.

A Member of the Panel stressed the vital nature of the remit of the Panel including the visitor economy, which was so important to the City. He hoped that the Scrutiny Panel could focus some of its time on this area in the future.

Members of the Panel praised the work of Officers during the Covid-19 crisis.

7 **Future Meeting Dates**

The Chair confirmed the future meeting dates of the Stronger City Economy Scrutiny Panel as follows:-

12 November 2020 at 6pm
21 January 2021 at 6pm
18 March 2021 at 6pm

The meeting ended at 7:06pm.