

Stronger City Economy Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 14 October 2021

Attendance

Members of the Stronger City Economy Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Philip Bateman MBE
Cllr Adam Collinge (Via MS Teams)
Cllr Claire Darke (Via MS Teams)
Cllr Christopher Haynes (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Keith Inston
Cllr Rupinderjit Kaur
Cllr Barbara McGarrity QN
Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman (Chair)
Cllr Gillian Wildman
Cllr Jonathan Yardley (Via MS Teams)

Employees

Earl Piggott-Smith (Scrutiny Officer)
Richard Lawrence (Director of Regeneration)
Liam Davies (Head of City Development)
Julia Cleary (Scrutiny and Systems Manager)

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 **Apologies**
Apologies for absence was received from Cllr Craig Collingswood and Cllr Paul Birch BEM, J.P.
- 2 **Declarations of interest**
The Chair acknowledged that Cllr Paul Birch BEM J.P, prior to the meeting had declared a pecuniary interest in agenda item four because of his links with the Arts Council and therefore would not take part in the item and had sent his apologies for the meeting.
- 3 **Minutes of previous meeting**
The minutes of the meeting held on 15 July 2021 were confirmed as a correct record.

The Chair commented that the minutes referred to trying to understand why people did not invest in the City of Wolverhampton and that understanding supply and demand was important moving forward. She asked that the analysis and the deeper extrapolations of the comment be brought to a further meeting of the Panel next year.

A Member asked whether the breakdown of the £4.4 billion investment in the City was ready to send to Members of the Panel. In addition, he asked for the details of the 50,000 job ready students. The Director of Regeneration responded that the information had been updated regarding the £4.4 billion investment but had not yet been published in Z- Card form. The information would be updated on the Invest website. Regarding the 50,000 job ready students a response had been provided to Members of the Panel by email before the meeting.

A Member commented that they had received some ONS data in response to the question he had put about metrics at the last meeting of the Panel. He also wanted to know what the Council could judge projects and investments on. Citing examples such as whether there were metrics on job growth, footfall, business start-ups, retail start-ups. The Director of Regeneration commented that he was happy to speak to the Councillor directly and that some of the information would be discussed during the next item.

- 4 **Update on key emerging work within Culture, Creative and Visitor Economy**
The Director of Regeneration displayed two videos which had been shown at the business week. The presentation, a copy of which is attached to the signed minutes, provided an overview of the work emerging within the Culture, Creative and Visitor Economy, incorporated within the themes of Play, Live and Work.

The Director of Regeneration remarked that in 2016 a company called BOP had been commissioned to carry out a rapid piece of strategic planning for culture and the creative industries in Wolverhampton. The aim was to support the economic investment in culture and the creative industries in Wolverhampton and to understand the overall pattern for development of culture in the City. The report had recommended five priorities for development. Since the BOP report the City had been active in progressing a number of cultural projects in response to the points highlighted by the BOP report. A number of funds had been secured and the Council was in the process of bidding for more. This contributed and supported investment in the City's cultural offer. He gave an update on three projects in particular, the Green Room, the Art Gallery and Box Park.

The Director of Regeneration stated that Wolverhampton had been announced as 1 of 50 cities in the UK whom Arts Council England wanted to work with to develop the City's cultural engagement and investment. In 2022, the City would be hosting an event for the Commonwealth Games and be holding the prestigious British Art Show 9. A new City Culture Strategy was being shaped around Partnership, Productivity, Placemaking Pride and Participation. It would work with the City Cultural Compact a board of cultural and non-cultural organisations, that would align with the Relighting Our City plan, connecting with communities, place shaping, economy and environmental objectives of the City.

The Head of City Development presented a slide on hotels. Work was well underway on a hotel delivery strategy for the City. A strong hotel offer was good for business, visitor, leisure and the cultural economy. There were only 16 hotels in the Wolverhampton market area, accounting for 1,101 bedrooms. In the last 14 years, only 2 hotels had opened (209 bedrooms). Therefore, in the last 10 years, the total room supply had declined by 4.5% due to the closure of 4 hotels. By comparison,

over the last decade, hotel room supply had increased by 10.5% and 11.2% in the UK and West Midlands respectively. International travel accounted for 28% of overnight stays, this was set against a West Midlands average of 14.5%. A strong hotel brand demand existed but there were viability challenges.

The Head of City Development commented that living in the City was crucial for its vibrancy. It helped to create a day and evening economy. He spoke about the Canalside Developments. With reference to business engagement and Investment, the Council had focused on business continuity throughout Covid, with over £70m of grant issued. The Relight Business Programme had been launched to build resilience. The Ebay programme had concluded in 2019, as the company had chosen a different direction after Retail Revival. The newly built i9 Office was now fully let as was the new HQ for DLUHC (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities). The Wolves@Work initiative had secured five years of further funding.

The Head of City Development presented a slide which posed some questions for the Scrutiny Panel. These were: -

- 1) How do we make sure evening economy in the City and the businesses and leisure within it have a forum for innovation?
- 2) How can we ensure the next generation supports and shapes the future?
- 3) How do we ensure the people of Wolverhampton are engaged with our activity and agenda?

A Panel Member commented that in order for Wolverhampton to move forward it needed a new hotel footprint. He believed the Council did need to intervene and it couldn't afford to leave it for another year. He wanted Wolverhampton to have a good night life like it had previously in the past. There had once been a commercially run night time bus service. In the past people would travel on public transport from Bristol to enjoy the Wolverhampton night life. He wanted the whole authority to support the idea of better hotel provision in the City. He believed one way of achieving this aim was through a resolution at Full Council, put forward by Scrutiny Board.

The Chair felt there needed to be an analysis as to why in the last 10 years, the total room supply had declined by 4.5%, due to the closure of 4 hotels and only 2 new hotels had opened in the City. It was clear that people were not investing for specific reasons and it was important to understand them. She added that one of the reasons why Wolverhampton had not been successful in progressing the City of Culture Bid was due to a lack of hotel provision within the City. She asked Officers to find out if this was the case and to report back to the Panel.

The Vice-Chair stressed the importance of a fully operational Civic Halls, which would bring people into the City and therefore increase the demand for hotels. He was unsure on what the word "intervention" would mean in any resolution. A focal point for attracting people into the City was required before the Council invested in hotel provision.

A Panel Member referred to the increased footfall on canal towpaths which was a real success story and a great plus for the City.

A Panel Member referred to Wolverhampton's new train station. She felt it had been a long process and was not fully finished. A detour was still required to access the car park and there was no tram to the station at the present time, with works still ongoing outside the station. She thought progression was needed, as it was the first view of the City when you arrived. She asked for some more details about the Box Park, referred to in the presentation and the 50 cities working with the Arts Council. She praised the fact that the i9 Office was now fully let.

The Director of Regeneration responded that there was a lot of interest regarding hotels in the City from potential investors. The Box Park was a temporary development. The train station was in its final development phase (phase 4). The tram company were developing the final track ahead of operation. It was hoped these works would be completed early in the New Year, with trams running on the line early next year. The new train station had suffered because of the pandemic. There had been a number of retail providers who had agreed to be part of the new station but because of the pandemic had withdrawn their investment. Interest however was once again starting to develop. They were also in discussions about improving the internal side of the train station with the train operating companies.

The Director of Regeneration offered to provide some more details on the Arts Council processes for identifying the 50 cities for investment. He thought Wolverhampton had been chosen because they had accelerated the City's cultural position through the Cultural Compact. A number of schemes had been put forward through the Town's Fund and the Future High Street Fund. The Arts Council could therefore see the activity taking place in the City.

The Head of City Development remarked that the City could not continue to lose the revenue to other areas through a lack of hotel provision. In terms of what intervention could entail, the Council owned some of the best assets in the City which could be used for a hotel. The Council intervening would allow the private sector to flourish, such as bars, restaurants and the leisure offer. An evening economy would be great for the City. They had received some strong interest from some of the hotel brands. A business case was being developed which would be reported to Cabinet.

The Head of City Development commented that the Box Park initiative echoed a number of cities across the country which allowed flexibility for events, street food and incubating spaces for new businesses. The Box Park programme in Wolverhampton had been agreed and funding had been allocated. He was happy to provide any further information as requested.

A Panel Member referred to the importance of Civic pride in the City. She cited the example of what Barnsley had done in their museum. She referred to the Future Parks initiative which the Arts Council were involved in. The project included greening up spaces such as rooftops. She thought this fitted in well with the Council's green agenda. She asked when the Bandstand would be finished in West Park.

The Chair stated that if the Panel Member had any ideas about how Officers should engage with different stakeholders in the arts then could she suggest them in writing to Officers and Panel Members. She thought it was worth a discussion in the future.

The Director of Regeneration commented that they could provide an update on the West Park Bandstand and he would ensure the relevant Officers provided a response. As one of 50 cities working with the Arts Council, the Council had the opportunity to see how best to engage with them on different projects.

The Chair asked for some more details on the Cultural Compact and its purpose. The Director of Regeneration responded that the Cultural Compact was created with the Arts Council. It was cultural based organisations coming together as a group, to collaborate with the Arts Council in an organic approach. He offered to provide more details on the membership of the Cultural Compact, the Chairmanship and how often they met. He would provide any feedback from Central Government on why the Council had not been successful in furthering their bid for City of Culture, as soon as it was received.

A Panel Member referred to the fact that Wolverhampton had the highest youth unemployment in the country. The overall unemployment rate was the sixth worst in the country. He thought these two facts were indicative of the state of the economy. This was why projects were so important as they helped to tackle unemployment within the City. He raised a concern about certain projects which seemed to have been going on for a very long time and over their projected time schedule such as the train station works, the Civic Hall and the Royal Hospital. A new Hotel had been discussed since 2011 but had not been delivered. He commented that the delivery mechanism was very important and he wanted to understand how projects were monitored moving forward, to ensure they were delivered on time and in an effective way.

The Panel Member agreed with the Chair that it was important to understand why bids for funding had been unsuccessful. He commented that the Council were not committed to the Slade Rooms. The Slade Rooms had been a replacement for the little Civic. He thought the Slade Rooms should be used to showcase bands before they reached global heights and to be used as comedy club venue and other entertainment. He considered the Slade Rooms to be part of the offer as Wolverhampton as an Events City. He asked for an update on them to be provided. He remarked that the Relight Festival tickets sales had been poor. He was aware that Scrutiny Board would be considering this in the future. He expressed concern that the report did not reference the West Side project. He believed footfall was critical to making Wolverhampton a successful events City. He wanted to ensure the next ten years were much better than the previous.

The Panel Member asked for more detail on the claim in the report that the Events Programme would improve footfall significantly over a three year period through 16 additional events, leading to increased local expenditure of approximately £10 million. On the Box Park project he asked how many jobs, retail start up's and footfall that it was projected to create.

The Head of City Development responded that in the last 18 months the Council had been very successful in attracting funding and had secured well over £53 million in funding. An ambitious long term regeneration project was important. Many Council

projects were in the final stages of completion. The statistics provided in the report regarding the £10 million local expenditure had been robustly checked. The Director of Regeneration offered to provide a breakdown analysis and send it to Panel Members. He also offered to provide some written responses on other matters raised by Panel Members.

In response to the question put regarding how to make the City a forum for innovation, a Panel Member stated that the Council should involve the Business Champions. He thought their strong views could lead to success for the City. A quality hotel was critical for the City and he thought the realisation of this aim was more likely with the help of the Business Champions.

The Chair recommended that she along with Cllr Phil Bateman, Cllr Stephen Simkins (Cabinet Member for Inclusive City Economy) and the Director of Regeneration have a meeting about how the Business Champions can be used for the benefit of the City in a strategic targeted approach. The Panel agreed with the recommendation.

The Vice-Chair suggested that Council Regeneration Officers should speak to the people who owned the Robin 2 in Bilston about how they made their enterprise successful, this learning could then be used for the Slade Rooms. He asked if the Council were going to apply for the new national rail centre. The Director for Regeneration responded that Robin 2 was a very good example of a successful private sector commercially led operation. He wasn't aware of whether they had considered using the Slade Rooms in the City Centre. The Council had lodged their interest in the new National Rail Centre. They were waiting for further guidance to be received from Government.

A Panel Member asked about any action the Council was taking to encourage people to live in the empty properties within the ring road area of the City. He thought in order for the City to be successful people needed to live within the ring road area and use the facilities. The Director of Regeneration responded that as part of the green agenda there was the ability to retro fit, which the Council needed to address. A balance needed to be struck between new build and retro fit. Good quality accommodation supported by a leisure offer and job opportunities was critical. The Head of City Development added that they were working with the WMCA and Homes England on housing provision.

Resolved:

- a) That the Chair of the Stronger City Economy Scrutiny Panel have a meeting with Cllr Phil Batman, Cllr Stephen Simkins (Cabinet Member for Inclusive City Economy) and the Director of Regeneration regarding how the Business Champions can be used for the benefit of the City in a strategic targeted approach.
- b) That the Panel recommends that Scrutiny Board explores the idea of putting forward a purposeful motion to a Full Council meeting, that the Council should intervene to ensure an improved hotel provision within the City.
- c) That the report be noted.

- 5 **Draft Work Programme**
The Chair asked Officers to contact Members of the Panel well in advance of the next meeting, if there were any questions which Officers wanted to receive input and guidance from Members.

Resolved: That the Work Programme for the Stronger City Economy Scrutiny Panel be agreed.

The meeting closed at 7:46pm.