

Economy and Growth Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 17 February 2022

Attendance

Members of the Economy and Growth Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Philip Bateman MBE (Via MS Teams)
Cllr Dr Paul John Birch J.P.
Cllr Adam Collinge
Cllr Craig Collingswood
Cllr Claire Darke
Cllr Christopher Haynes (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Keith Inston
Cllr Barbara McGarrity QN
Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman (Chair)
Cllr Jonathan Yardley

In Attendance

Cllr Dr Michael Hardacre (Cabinet Member – Education, Skills, Work)
Cllr Stephen Simkins (Cabinet Member – City Economy)

Employees

Martin Stevens DL (Senior Governance Manager)
Richard Lawrence (Director of Regeneration)
Julie Obada (Head of Skills)
Joanne Keatley (Head of Adult Education)
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 and Substitutions**
There were no apologies from Members of the Scrutiny Panel.
- 2 **Declarations of interest**
There were no declarations of interest.
- 3 **Minutes of previous meeting**
Resolved: The minutes of the previous meeting, held on 14 October 2021 were confirmed as a correct record.

4 **Jobs, Skills and Learning Opportunities**

The Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Work opened the presentation on Jobs, Skills and Learning Opportunities. He gave a brief history on the education system in England over the last 100 years. There was currently not a unified education, training or skills system. It was an incredibly splintered, often poorly funded system and where control almost always seemed to be somewhere else. He commended the report to the Panel.

The Head of Skills remarked that she had been appointed to the role in April 2021. She stated it was important to generate jobs and learning opportunities in Wolverhampton as the City had high levels of unemployment at the fourth highest in the country and economic inactivity exacerbated by the pandemic. Youth unemployment was the highest in the country, with over 2,660 young people aged between 18-24 not in education, employment or training. This was from the Data used for the City Summit in November 2021.

She listed the barriers to employment or training as being: -

- Lack of engagement with the job and learning opportunities.
- Low skill levels, low academic attainment.
- Lack of clarity over what opportunities available.
- Ineffective careers information, advice and guidance.
- Mismatch between supply and demand of job vacancies, leading to skills gaps and skills shortages.
- Low aspiration and inter-generational unemployment.
- Covid-compounded issues around low confidence, mental health and social isolation.

The unemployment Claimant Count for Wolverhampton Local Authority area in the month of December 2021 was 13,345, this was 8.2% of the working population. This was an improvement from the height of the Covid-19 pandemic when it had gone up to 17,435.

The Vice-Chair commented that the slide showing the working age claimant count and rank referred to the closure of the Goodyear Plant in 2016. He commented that most of the workforce had left by 2004 and so the job losses in 2016 were minimal.

The Head of Skills stated that Wolverhampton had the highest percentage unemployment claimant count in the UK by Local Authority for people aged between 18-24. This was using the figures from December 2021. 10.6% of people in this age group were claiming unemployment benefit. The 16-17 year old participation rates were good and the City's NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) levels were low. The City consistently sat in the top quartile in the country for low NEET and not known figures. The question to be asked was, "What happened at age 18."

The Head of Skills presented a slide on skill levels. The percentage of people with no qualifications, using the data from January 2020 – December 2020, was a lot higher than the West Midlands and for Great Britain as a whole. The Wolverhampton figure of 12.3% was almost double that of the Great Britain figure of 6.4%. Wolverhampton did however have a high percentage of people with other Qualifications, this figure was at 11.35%. These qualifications often related to overseas qualifications or industry and manufacturing - specific training. The number

of people with no qualifications had been reducing as an overall trend, with some spikes, in Wolverhampton since 2008. There had been a sharp increase since 2019 of the people undertaking a level 4 qualification. This was a promising trend.

The Head of Skills remarked that between January 2021 and December 2021 the number of unique job postings per month had increased by 4,828 or 75%. There had been a general upward trend in the number of unique postings since February 2021.

A Panel Member commented that he had reviewed the Ofsted report ratings for Wolverhampton Further Education College over the last 8 years and compared them to Walsall, Dudley and Sandwell. Walsall had received a good and an outstanding. Dudley had an outstanding and a good. Sandwell had received two good ratings. Wolverhampton College had received a requires improvement and an inadequate. In the most recent year Wolverhampton College had received a good. He described the Ofsted ratings over the last 8 years a whole, as a failure for the City. He understood that Directors of the Council had been on the Board for the College in the past and the Chief Executive of the Council was currently a Board Member. They asked for an explanation.

The Cabinet Member for Education, Skills and Work responded that the College was now rated good. The College had over and above enrolment for what it had been targeted for throughout the last 8 years. If the Local Authority had not worked closely with the Governors, the College would have been in a very different position. The College had previously had a lot of financial challenges. He was now confident that it was moving in the right direction. He wanted to ensure the College had a good healthy future.

The Head of Skills presented a slide on demand for hard and common skills. Communications Management and Customer Services had consistently been the most in demand skills in job postings in each of the year's quarters since September 2020. She spoke about some of the future workforce challenges and opportunities. Employee expectations had changed since the pandemic, staff were looking for flexible working opportunities, which some employers cannot or did not provide. Some people were still hesitant about returning back to the Office, whilst others preferred not to work from home. Some employers were reporting hesitancy to return to work from furloughed staff. Some staff had found other employment resulting in recruitment issues and skills gaps particularly in sectors such as hospitality.

The Head of Skills referred to a lack of investment in skills and training. Some employers were not succession planning sufficiently which was resulting in recruitment issues, unmotivated workforces and impacting on productivity. She referred to the concept of social value, there was value in supporting inward investment in key regeneration projects to maximise employment opportunities for all residents.

The Head of Skills described seven main key issues: -

1. Challenges remain the same – Covid has exacerbated the barriers.
2. Digital inclusion – access to the right technology and skills to use it.
3. Skills eco-system – complex and difficult to navigate.
4. Communication Gap – between employers and particularly young people.

5. Mental health and wellbeing – pandemic has had a negative impact.
6. Local business base – still struggling post pandemic with recruitment
7. Government employment schemes – mixed opinions.

The Head of Skills described the ways in which the Council were addressing these issues and the impact this activity was having. The City Council was leading and facilitating a one-city approach to increasing youth employment, focusing on young people aged 18-24, claiming Universal Credit. This was backed by the Wolves at Work 18-24 Programme of targeted interventions, funded by an initial £3 million budget, from a combination of the Recovery Reserve and Covid Emergency Grant. Over 100 people had attended the City Summit in November 2021. There had been 60 pledges of support received from employers, training providers and voluntary sector organisations. As part of the City Ideas Fund, two projects were underway and others were coming forward. Two Youth Summits had been arranged for March 2022, these had been postponed from January due to Covid restrictions. One of these would be held at, The Way and the other at Low Hill Community Centre.

The Head of Skills referred to the Black Country Impact Programme which had been extended until June 2023. This programme to date had helped over 2,500, 18-24 years old into sustainable employment or training. The Kickstart Programme was scheduled to end in March 2022. The programme had been of mixed success. There had been 72 placements on offer, 42 in external companies, 30 within the Council. The Wolves at Work team were working with young people currently in a placement to secure employment either in their existing role or within another area. The Cabinet Member for City Economy commented that Wolves at Work was funded locally by the Council. It needed sustainable funding for the future. It was a good model, the WMCA had adopted it themselves. He expressed the view that Wolves at Work needed to be delivered at a local level rather than at a regional level.

The Head of Skills stated that Wolves at Work had supported nearly 7,000 people into work with just over 4,000 sustaining that job for 3 months or more. The team worked with over 600 businesses on their recruitment and skills requirements, this included working with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to recruit to posts in their new HQ in the City. The DWP (Department for Work and Pensions) were committed to the Wolves at Work Partnership which had started in 2017. The model was currently being reviewed to ensure it continued to meet labour market needs and was fit for purpose.

The Head of Skills spoke on the European Social Fund (ESF). These projects would continue until 2023. The Council was working with the Black Country LEP and the WMCA as to what would follow the ESF, through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. On the matter of digital inclusion, the Good Things Foundation had won the bid for the CRF project – Community Digital Skills Pathway. It was aimed at the unemployed, economically inactive and low paid residents. It would be led in the City by the Voluntary Sector Council.

She spoke about the Wolves Workbox which was the City's employment and skills online resource, owned, hosted and maintained by the City Council's skills team. As part of the 18-24 employment initiative, Workbox was being developed to allow for more targeted marketing.

The Head of Adult Education presented on the subject of improving skill levels. The number of residents with no qualifications had reduced significantly since 2004. The gap between Wolverhampton and Great Britain as a whole was also reducing. Areas that were working well included a strong framework for lifelong learning and commitment from partners to work together across the City. There was a good continuum of learning initiatives and opportunities from informal through to higher level qualifications. She spoke on the Wolverhampton City Learning Region. Wolverhampton was a member of the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities, building a learning City through the Wolverhampton City Learning Region (WCLR) initiative. It was a partnership that included the Council, the University, the College, Adult Education, the Learning Platform and the Learning Communities Partnership. Wolverhampton had participated in the annual WCLR Learning festival.

The Head of Adult Education commented that the core purpose of the department was to upskill unemployed, low skilled and the most deprived residents. Delivering core skills such as English and Maths was a key part of the work. Informal learning was also provided for softer skills such as mental health and working on digital inclusion. In 2020-21, Adult education recorded 26% of students moving to full or part time employment and 50% progressed to full-time or part-time education or volunteering. A short video was played showing how residents had benefited from the work of adult education.

The Head of Adult Education remarked that the Council had 4 years of Government funding to support community integration through English language learning. 400 residents engaged over the 4 years with 35% progressing to formal language and other learning opportunities. The project was aimed at people with a very low level of English and was being targeted geographically in Wolverhampton. She posed a question to Panel Members, which Officers wanted to receive feedback on which was:-

“How can Levelling Up and Shared Prosperity Fund help us to continue existing successful activities and / or help us overcome key barriers to improving skills and increasing employment?”

A Panel Member referred to the presentation received and asked if there were any details of the people who had initially obtained employment through the Wolves at Work scheme but did not sustain that position as it seemed that this was the case for quite a high proportion of people. He added that average wages were proportionately quite low in Wolverhampton compared to other areas. He also raised the question of mobility, questioning whether people that were receiving training and obtaining qualifications were leaving the City or remaining in the City. From looking at the historic data, he was interested to see what Officers views were on future projections, for example, what jobs would be created and how many start-ups. He stressed that matching skills to jobs was of utmost importance.

The Head of Skills responded that the data on travel to work patterns was available and they were aware that some residents of Wolverhampton did travel out of the City to go to work and some people travelled into the City to work. Since the Covid-19 pandemic had commenced some people were being recruited from overseas and were working virtually from home. There were transport implications if people were working at home. Transport was sometimes a barrier to employment, but home working negated that particular issue, it could also help people with childcare

responsibilities. She could ask key employers in the City, the percentage of people working for them that were resident in the City and those that travelled into the City. The Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities were completing some work on a profile of the new staff working at their HQ in Wolverhampton. Officers were looking to the future economic data. They were obviously aware of some of the future investments coming up with some of the City's key businesses. She cited the Green economy as being a big growth area as was HS2. The College had their own train railway learning centre, where an actual piece of HS2 track was used for learning. The College also had a project on electric vehicles to help train mechanics on their operation. She highlighted the importance of transferable skills.

The Cabinet Member for City Economy raised the importance of Civic pride within the City. He also spoke about the entertainment economy and the visitor economy and ensuring there were people with the right skills to carry out roles within these sectors.

Members of the Panel discussed different types of jobs, the skills required to fulfil them and how this was linked to inward investment. Finding solutions to make the City more attractive in all of these aspects was critical.

A Member of the Panel praised the analysis that had been given in the presentation. It was important to build on this analysis into the future.

A Member commented on the complexity of the system and the importance of good career advice at schools. The Head of Skills agreed that the system people entered when trying to find work was complex. Spending time with people to make the system easier to navigate was what the Council tried to do. They were also trying to simplify the system using the Wolves Work Box. They were mindful of making the resources as accessible as possible because not everyone had access to digital.

The Head of Skills referred to the national careers strategy which placed a duty on all Local Authorities to ensure that all pupils had access to independent, impartial advice and guidance. The responsibility to make sure that happened lay with the Schools, how good Schools fulfilled this responsibility was variable. More positively there was a career's advisor in every secondary School, every Special School and in alternative provision. They also ensured that people who lived out of the City, but were in the City's care, received career's advice. If she had more resources, she would introduce a career's advice service to younger age groups. She spoke about the Black Country Careers Hub.

A Member asked when all the initiatives relating to jobs, skills and learning opportunities would see an improvement in Wolverhampton's unemployment ranking for younger people and overall. The Head of Skills responded that the initiatives were already having an impact. The latest figures released by DWP and about to go to press showed that Wolverhampton was no longer the worst for Youth unemployment percentage. The City had improved its position to number 3. For the first time since March 2020, the unemployment figure for younger people was under 10%, it was at 9.9% (2,060). It had been at 15.3% (3,270) in March 2021.

A Panel Member asked about the support the Council offered people with SEND needs to obtain employment after they left education. Working with businesses to ensure they had wrap around support for people that had SEND needs was critical.

The Head of Adult Education responded that there was a national initiative of supported internships which was an excellent way of moving people into employment. It was difficult for people who had SEND needs after the age of 18 or 19 to find employment, but she found the supported internship product very worthwhile. It was an area which needed to develop and grow. The Head of Skills added that the Black Country Careers Hub had a SEND specialist. The Wolves at Work team were working with Adult Social Care to bring the employment support service back in house.

The Chair raised a point about working with data at Ward level or place level. Information at Ward level was being worked on by Officers and she intended to receive information on this in the future. A member endorsed the Chair's desire for this data as it was central to ensuring improvement in the future. The Head of Skills confirmed that the DWP had recently agreed to give the Local Authority localised data.

The meeting closed at 6:55pm.

