

# Stronger City Economy Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 26 September 2017

## Attendance

### Members of the Stronger City Economy Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Harman Banger  
Cllr Philip Bateman MBE  
Cllr Payal Bedi-Chadha  
Cllr Tersaim Singh  
Cllr Jonathan Yardley (Vice-Chair)

### In Attendance

#### Employees

Stephen Alexander  
Julia Cleary  
Charlotte Johns  
Kevin Moore  
Helen Tambini

Head of Planning  
Systems and Scrutiny Manager  
Head of Service, City Economy  
Regeneration Manager  
Democratic Services Officer

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## Part 1 – items open to the press and public

*Item No.*      *Title*

- 1      **Apologies**  
Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Paula Brookfield, Udey Singh, Sweetman, Waite and Warren.
- 2      **Declarations of interest**  
Councillor Banger declared an interest in item 5, Bilston – Local Economic Development and Growth as a trader in the town centre.
- 3      **Minutes of previous meeting**  
That the minutes of the meeting held on 20 June 2017 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Vice-chair, subject to the addition of a recommendation to minute 5, to refer to the need to encourage media and cultural students to remain in the city after graduating.
- 4      **Matters arising**  
Councillor Phil Bateman referred to the suggestion made by Phil Birch, Chief Executive of Revolver Records, regarding the possibility of converting the Magistrates Court building into a five-star hotel and asked if the idea would be

pursued. He stated that it would be a significant step for the City; however, all the financial implications would have to be considered.

The Vice-chair reiterated the comments made by Phil Birch that the conversion would help invigorate the city centre and it should be pursued.

## 5 **Bilston - Local Economic Development and Growth**

The Vice-chair welcomed Councillors Gibson, Leach, Leach, Simkins and Russell, representatives from local business, community and resident groups and invited them to sit at the table and take part in the discussion.

Charlotte Johns, Head of Strategic Programmes introduced the report and stated that the Group was being asked to consider how the Council could help to support the development and strengthening of the local economy in Bilston.

Ian Edwards, Samantha Butler and Carl Butler from the Remember Gods Acre group referred to the fund raising undertaken to provide additional Christmas lights and a tree, to improve the festive atmosphere and bring the community together in Bilston. They had raised £3,600 in six months; however, they were concerned that the estimated costs were extremely high.

Ann Ramsbottom from the Community Action Partnership referred to the significant problems faced in the town centre. Both the market and centre required extensive regeneration to make the centre vibrant again and it was a concern that if action was not taken soon, it would be too late. There was also uncertainty regarding the future of several key old buildings, including the Town Hall, the old Art College, Bilston Library and Pipe Hall.

Councillor Russell advised that she was the Chair of the newly formed Action for Bilston group which had already raised £4000 and was looking to raise more through grants. It was hoped that the group could integrate with other groups and work in all areas of Bilston.

Councillor Simkins referred to the ongoing problems with the market. The market was in decline, with empty stalls and lost revenue, there were no incentives to keep current traders or to encourage new traders to the town. Rather than giving discounts for traders to stand on a casual basis, there should be an incentive to sign a long-term lease and that would help to bring stability. Bilston needed to be promoted as a market town and hold activities and events to encourage people to visit, such as speciality markets. The centre was full of charity shops and needed to attract new businesses. Parking problems were exacerbating the current situation and the introduction of car parking charges would make it worse. Bilston also had good transport links which usually encouraged growth and development; however, in Bilston the tram line was surrounded by derelict buildings which increased the poor perception of the area. The tram line had also been out of action for many months which was adding to the problems. There were strategies and action plans in place; however, there was a lack of coordination and leadership from the BID. There was significant investment coming into the area, with new houses and a school and that was welcomed; however, the infrastructure of the town required improvement, to allow new residents to integrate with local residents.

The lack of a regular Police presence was also a severe concern as residents did not feel safe going out in the evening, with no one to enforce the Alcohol Drinking Zone. There was a perception that Bilston was not a safe or attractive place to visit and that perception needed to be changed. A strategy was required to improve late night entertainment in the centre.

Councillor Leach stated that although the free car parking could be an advantage to encourage people to visit Bilston, it could also be a disadvantage, with some people using it to park for work all day and then commute elsewhere. The tram needed to be safer, especially to encourage people to use it at night and one of the taxi ranks was not ideally located in a dark side street. The lack of a Police presence had led to increased ASB and the centre was visually run down and not attracting new businesses. There was also a lack of a community centre for children and young people to go to.

Councillor Banger agreed with the comments made by fellow councillors and he advised that Bilston needed to be recognised in its own right and offered support in the same way as Wolverhampton.

Pat Mc Auliffe reiterated the concerns regarding the increasing number of people moving into Bilston and the lack of infrastructure. The new school was simply an extension of the existing school, the health clinic planned for the new urban village was now not being built and the lack of a Police presence was worsening the situation.

Councillor Page referred to the 400 new properties that had been built and the chronic lack of school places, with some children being allocated a school place on the other side of Wolverhampton which was unacceptable.

In answer to a question regarding the work of community groups and the support they received, Ann Ramsbottom confirmed that several groups met on a regular basis and had a fair representation from the three local wards. A start up fund of £10,000 had been made available to each ward; however, that funding had finished. Plans had been drafted and people were being asked to get involved, with advertisements in the Bilston magazine. However, additional support was required from the Council.

Atam Ram Ojelay, Chair of the Traders Forum referred to ongoing issues with the Bid and the lack of coordination and organisation between groups. People were parking and going elsewhere because they could not find what they wanted in Bilston. As referred to previously, the market was in decline and although there were Council staff working at the market, no one was acting to solve the problem of low occupancy. The decline in the market was affecting other local businesses and traders were very unhappy about the current situation and the lack of action from the Council. Some creative input was required to promote new ideas and themes; however, appropriate advertising would be required.

Ann Ramsbottom suggested that that some of the stalls currently using the piazza should be relocated to the market to increase the occupancy. She also stated that several notices from local community groups had been removed from notice boards by the Council for unknown reasons.

Councillor Simkins suggested that the local park was an asset and should be used for events, for example a summer proms concert.

Julia Cleary updated the Panel on behalf of Colin Parr, the Head of Governance, who oversaw the markets. It was confirmed that the indoor market currently had 99% occupancy. Occupancy rates for the outdoor market were considerably lower and officers were working to try and encourage regeneration. Traders' views had been canvassed regarding promotional events and they had confirmed that they preferred funding to be spent on advertising campaigns rather than promotional events. The market had also been given a Certificate of Excellence on TripAdvisor. Colin Parr suggested that the Panel could consider the possibility of employing a specialist Commercial Development Manager to improve the market.

Carl Butler, Remember Gods Acre, suggested that the outdoor market should be demolished and a new outdoor market should incorporate a space canopy, for dual functionality.

Councillor Phil Bateman referred to the great local community spirit and independence of Bilston residents. Bilston could be a strong and vibrant centre again if it was re-organised around its strengths and good communications was the key.

Councillor Gibson referred to the importance of employing the correct BID Manager who would have the skills and expertise to help improve the commercial viability of the town, including the markets.

Members of the Panel concluded that given the breadth of local knowledge and existing officer expertise, it would not be necessary to employ a specialist and improvements could be made if everyone worked together.

In answer to a question regarding the status of Pipe Hall, Stephen Alexander, Head of City Planning confirmed that the new owner of the property was hoping to bring the property back into use and was consulting with officers regarding the matter.

The Vice-chair referred to the extensive discussion and the following key issues raised:

- Lack of Police presence and associated increase in ASB and safety issues.
- Improvements to car parking and discussions on charging.
- Improvements to Christmas lights and decorations.
- Improvements to the outdoor market, to increase the regeneration of the town centre.
- Increased promotion of Bilston, including specialised events.
- Use of the Piazza.
- Removal of community group notices from notice boards by the Council.
- Additional support from the Council to improve the overall wellbeing of Bilston.

He suggested that to assist the Panel, Keren Jones, Service Director for City Economy, Colin Parr, Head of Governance and representatives of the market traders be invited to the next Panel meeting.

Councillor Phil Bateman referred to the importance of understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the economy and to look at the figures to understand the wider picture.