

Stronger City Economy Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 26 June 2018

Attendance

Members of the Stronger City Economy Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Philip Bateman MBE
Cllr Payal Bedi-Chadha
Cllr Alan Butt
Cllr Christopher Haynes
Cllr Barbara McGarrity
Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman (Chair)
Cllr Jonathan Yardley (Vice-Chair)

Employees

Martin Stevens (Scrutiny Officer) (Minutes)
Charlotte Johns (Head of Local Economy)
Isobel Woods (Head of Enterprise)
Paul Lakin (Head of City Development)
Heather Clark (Manager Strategic Project
Funding)

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 **Apologies**
Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Craig Collingswood and Cllr Ian Angus.
- 2 **Declarations of interest**
There were no declarations of interest.
- 3 **Minutes of previous meeting**
The minutes of the Stronger City Economy Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 17 April 2018 were approved as a correct record.
- 4 **Matters arising**
There were no matters arising.
- 5 **Work Plan**
The Chair referred to the Annual Scrutiny Work Programme Event scheduled for Thursday, 28 June 2018 where the work programme would be discussed at length and was a further opportunity to suggest items for the programme.

The WMCA Scrutiny Committee - Mayor's Policy Question Time event would be hosted by the City of Wolverhampton Council on Friday, 28 September 2018 in the Council Chamber at the Civic Centre. The session would commence at 9am and she encouraged all Members of the Stronger City Economy Scrutiny Panel to attend. Ideas for questions could be submitted to Cllr Simkins the Council's representative on the Committee or herself as his nominated substitute.

Members suggested the impact of Brexit and footfall as items for the work programme. The Scrutiny Officer stated that the Black Country LEP (Local Enterprise Partnership) had setup a Brexit Group which was working with businesses on the potential impact of Brexit. It was suggested that the Chair of this group could be invited to a future meeting of the Panel.

A Member suggested the action plans which arose out of the meetings where, the local economy of Bilston, Wednesfield and Tettenhall were discussed, should be monitored by the Panel.

6 **Enabling a vibrant city centre**

The Head of Local Economy presented a report on enabling a vibrant City Centre. The report was particularly pertinent due to the recent announcement about the closure of Beatties House of Fraser and Poundworld. The paper set out the national restructuring of the retail sector and the impact on cities and town centres as a consequence. The report outlined the Council's proactive strategy to respond to the changes and to repurpose the City Centre. These included increasing the amount of city living, the increase of office space and an enhancement of the leisure offer. A task force / action group approach was proposed in the report.

A Member stated he was pleased the Panel had received the report on enabling a vibrant City Centre, which was a most important item for the Panel to be considering. He was saddened that House of Fraser had announced they were closing the Beatties store in the City Centre, which he saw as a dire blow to the retail sector in the City. He was also concerned about the future of the Debenhams store. He stated that the Council needed to do more to promote the City Centre and its overall importance to the Wolverhampton area.

A Member stated that Wolverhampton City Centre had a huge amount to offer. They were interested to hear more about how the City was marketed and the discussions which were taking place with partners for the marketing to be more effective. The Head of Enterprise in response said marketing was very important and the Council needed to effectively convey the opportunities available in the City Centre. Strengthening communications was key, as was forming a strong identity for the City of Wolverhampton.

A Member stated Wolverhampton City Centre faced significant competition, as referred to in the report, which included Southwater in Telford. The Southwater development had new squares, a hotel, a cinema and a number of popular restaurants. The development could be reached within 15-20 minutes for people living on the westside of Wolverhampton and the car parking was free of charge. He felt the Council were gambling too much on the Westside development. He asked when the development would commence. In response, the Head of City Development stated the project would commence when the developer could align all

the necessary key parts to enable the scheme to make a profitable return. The Council met regularly with the developer and they had made significant progress in their communications with the market. The timing of when the scheme would commence was dependant on the formal signing of leases by key anchor tenants on the scheme. He thought the overall health of the scheme was quite good, particularly as within the overall general investment market there was currently a cautious attitude. His discussions with the company which ran the Mander Centre often centred on customers expecting an overall experience and not the availability of consumer goods to purchase.

The Head of City Development stated Wolverhampton had a large amount of space which could be utilised in the centre through the creation of large squares for events. It also had a significant amount of live music venues. If the right public realm was created in the centre, the Council would be able to organise more events as would third parties. 18,000 tickets had been sold for the food festival, which was encouraging as the local economy would receive a boost across the City.

A Member asked if any formal contracts had been signed by prospective tenants of the Westside development. In response the Head of City Development stated no formal contracts had been signed, but operators were being lined up to do so. There was an agreement with the developer that the scheme had to be brought forward within a certain time period. They were actively working with the developer to help progress the scheme.

A Member stated there was £3.7 billion due to be invested in the City. He commented that funding was often planned or aspirational and was concerned whether some of the funding would come to fruition. In response, the Head of City Development stated the new train station development was commencing in the following week. The Mander Centre investment had also been completed by Benson Elliot. The Westside development would happen in the future and the Council were investing in the office market as part of the interchange project. There was a good opportunity in Wolverhampton to enhance the office market. i10 had been successfully leased and this had given confidence to the i9 office development. The level of interest in office development was good, it was however difficult to finalise deals due to current uncertainties in the national economy.

The Chair asked if there was a joined-up approach between plans the Council had for marketing the City Centre in terms of its use and marketing Wolverhampton as a place to invest. The Head of City Development responded that he thought the Council did have a joined-up approach. There was already a strategy in place for i9 to be fully occupied before it had been built. A strategy was in place to try and seek a central government re-location which would ensure the building was occupied quickly. They would also be actively targeting agents the Council was currently working with, which included companies in the south-east market in professional business services.

The Head of Enterprise stated Wolverhampton had a local identity and regional identity. The Council were heavily involved in the Midlands Engine to ensure Wolverhampton's profile was strong within the regional investment market. Research was currently being undertaken on the subject of the brand for Wolverhampton.

A Member stated that the perception of Wolverhampton was not a particularly good one in the County of Shropshire. He asked how the City could attract people from Shropshire. The Head of City Development commented that the heart of the strategy for the City Centre should be to re-connect with people who had not visited Wolverhampton for a significant amount of time. One of the problems the City Centre faced was it being quiet after 6pm, which meant people felt less safe when walking in the Centre. The City Centre also had a problem with rough sleeping. He commented that bringing new restaurants and bars into the City Centre would make a significant difference to the City. There were however a range of areas to focus on to attract people back to the City. A Member commented that the night time economy of Wolverhampton in the 1990s had been excellent. It was therefore clearly possible to attract people back to the City. The Head of City Development stated the night time economy had evolved. It was no longer focused on night clubs, but more around attractive restaurants and bars. The West Side Link project was actively working on creating an environment which would allow a different type of leisure economy to evolve within the City. The Head of Enterprise stated it was important for businesses and the local media to continuously promote Wolverhampton and help to change and challenge negative perceptions of the City.

A Member praised the events that had taken place within the City following the promotion of Wolverhampton Wanderers Football Club. 80,000 people had attended the Party in the City event. The joint working with the football club and media outlets had been a credit to the City and had boosted the local economy. The positive media coverage lasting several days had been great promotion for the City. He felt more similar type events could be held to help attract people to the City Centre and promote the City within the local media. The Council could communicate with the Express and Star newspaper to see what work could be done to make them part of the visitor experience.

A Member of the Panel asked what the situation was regarding the possibility of new hotels within the City. The Head of City Development commented that there was a requirement within the market for another budget hotel within the City Centre. The Council were in communications with the agents who were considering delivering the scheme. The Council were also working to see if there was a space within the market for a mid-range hotel. Whether a mid-range hotel would be deliverable, depended in part on the development of the leisure sector. The market wanted to see a more robust events programme and a stronger office sector within the City. Novotel had submitted a planning application for an extension and both Premier Inn's had successfully extended in the City. It was certainly desirable for a hotel to be part of the Westside Scheme. The Head of Enterprise remarked there was a growing hospitality market which needed to be grasped.

A Member stated there had been some success in the retail sector within the Wolverhampton area. Bentley Bridge was about to let all its units. There were currently 636 jobs at the Bentley Bridge site and approximately 50,000 people visited each week. A Member added that part of the success of Bentley Bridge was down to easily accessible car parking. He felt the City Centre needed to improve its car parking facilities and have appropriate pricing. The Head of Enterprise responded that how people entered and left the City could form a work stream for the proposed action group. The tram system was an important area to consider and other public transport routes. Car parking could certainly feature as part of the work.

A Member commented that the quality of slabbing in parts of the City Centre, particularly Dudley Street, left a lot to be desired and empty retail units did nothing to enhance the City Centre experience. The Head of City Development responded that the proposals being brought forward on the Westside Link project included new works to Queen's Square and potentially Victoria Street to create an event and circulation space within the City Centre. The designs would ensure a sufficient budget to ensure the works would be completed to a high quality. The retail units on Dudley Street had suffered from a fractured ownership. The Head of Enterprise responded that the action group proposed, would work actively with the shop owners and landlords of the buildings to improve the City Centre. One proposal included businesses promoting themselves in a certain way on Wolverhampton Wanderers Football Club match days.

The Chair stated she was keen to understand how the proposed action group would manage collective partnerships within the team and how it would manage its overall effectiveness. The Head of Enterprise stated that the structure would be determined if the Panel agreed with the action group approach. It would certainly involve a number of different Council departments and service areas. It then needed to be decided which external stakeholders the action group would work with and the framework and approach to be taken. There had already been engagement with the Business Improvement District (BID), Wolves FC, the Grand, the Lighthouse and some of the promoters. A Member asked if there would be any engagement with the Business Champions and the Voluntary Sector. The Head of Enterprise responded that the Business Champions would be an excellent network for the Action Group to collaborate with and the voluntary sector were an important sector in the overall approach to enhance the City.

The Head of Local Economy remarked that an important area for the City was in relation to the digital economy. The Council had spearheaded a number of important initiatives which included the £5 million ultra-fast fibre broadband project to connect public sector premises.

The Chair stated that the work of the Action Group should be directly linked to the Council's marketing strategy. She requested that Members of the Panel contact her or the Scrutiny Officer if they had anything further they wished to be taken into account during the formulation of the action group.

Resolved:

- A) That the Stronger City Economy Scrutiny Panel endorses the current approach to diversify the City Centre's role and focusing on making the centre a desirable place to visit and spend time.
- B) That the Stronger City Economy Scrutiny Panel endorses an action group approach to continue to proactively respond to the repurposing of the City Centre.

Meeting closed: 7:25pm