

Stronger City Economy Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 6 October 2015

Attendance

Members of the Stronger City Economy Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Philip Bateman
Cllr Payal Bedi
Cllr Val Evans
Cllr Welcome Koussoukama
Cllr John Rowley
Cllr Paul Singh
Cllr Tersaim Singh
Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman (Chair)
Cllr Martin Waite
Cllr Daniel Warren

Employees

Mark Blackstock	Head of Visitor Economy
Deborah Breedon	Scrutiny Officer
Keren Jones	Service Director - City Economy
Crissie Rushton	Marketing and Development Manager

Witness

Adrian Jackson	Chief Executive, The Grand Theatre
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Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 Apologies**
Apologies for non-attendance were submitted on behalf of Cllrs Jonathan Yardley
- 2 Declarations of Interest**
Cllr Phil Bateman declared a non-pecuniary interest in item 3 relating to the visitor economy relating to public transportation
- 3 Visitor Economy**
Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman, Chair welcomed to the meeting Mark Blackstock, Head of Visitor Economy, Chrissie Rushton, Marketing and Development Manager and Adrian Jackson, Chief Executive Grand Theatre.

Keren Jones provided an overview and update of the Visitor Economy report highlighting that section three of the report provides the current evidence base, as follows:

- Understanding our markets
- Shoppers
- Cultural visitors
- Students
- Business developers and investors

She advised that section four builds on the assets that the City has which sets Wolverhampton as distinctive from others highlighting the three defined areas: Central, East and West. She emphasized the importance of business improvement and the need for City ambassadors and that Panel would hear more detail about this later in the meeting from the Head of Visitor Economy who would talk about the cultural offer and from the Chief Executive of the Grand Theatre who would talk about the Grand Theatre.

The Service Director referred to section 4.4 'Wolverhampton West' and advised that the planned improvements to Bantock House would need to be done under reducing resources. She referred to section 4.5 'Wolverhampton East' and advised that the Bilston Business Improvement District had been secured. She referred to the geology and fossils exhibition at the craft gallery and that Dudley Council were looking at developing a geopark.

The Service Director highlighted that section 4.6 'Visitor Week' had been very useful and that a summary was appended to the report (Appendix 3). She advised that each time the process is useful to improve on the Wolverhampton offer and to provide opportunity to support industries involved in the visitor economy, of particular interest is to build on the hospitality and hotel sector.

The Service Director referred to Section 5 'Improving our visitor offer', she highlighted the following:

- City centre regeneration
- The Canal Side Quarter
- Hotels and hotel study
- Business conferencing
- City of Wolverhampton Council owned venues
- Complimentary visitor offer
- Marketing and publicity

She summarised that improving the visitor offer is partly about leisure, and less obviously about improving the housing offer, to support the local economy. She highlighted that new developments are spreading the areas of interest to the Springfield Brewery site, the new Youth Zone and she emphasized the need to make

sure things connect, creating real reasons for people to move from one place to another.

Presentation - 'Visitor Economy', Mark Blackstock, Head of Visitor Economy

The Head of Visitor Economy reminded the Panel that the Council are not the only organisation to provide visitor attractions. He highlighted that the Racecourse holds concerts and shows; the Monmore Green Dog track holds events and racing is filmed and transmitted around the world; Television has recorded five programmes of 'Flog it' in Wolverhampton and the Civic Halls and Grand Theatre are being transformed to increase footfall. He highlighted that each of these attractions positively increased the Wolverhampton Visitor Offer and that they were responding to change with different business models, considering licensing laws and capacity in the Civic Hall and Grand Theatre. The panel noted that increased planning and licensing fees also adds value to the City centre.

In response to a question about increasing the number of concerts, the Head of Visitor Economy advised that artists performing at concerts or festivals allocate so many dates to the UK and that the arrangements are complex.

In response to a question relating to a 'City Visitor Ticket' or discount offer the Head of Visitor Economy advised that the offer does not currently exist and that negotiations would take place between attractions. He did however acknowledge that Cineworld could link with the Lighthouse theatre.

The Head of Visitor Economy advised that the visitor economy supported over 700 jobs, recruited 286 volunteers, taught 92 students on site and was visited by 7500 school children.

In relation to the integration of services Panel were advised that there is a new regime moving away from the cultural offer and toward a local community offer balanced with proactive commercial activity, in the form of family activities, puppet shows, fossil exhibits and increased sales at Bantock Park. He advised that smaller community based shows and exhibits will be displayed at several venues including the Lighthouse Theatre, Billston Art Gallery and others, to raise community attendances. Cllr John Rowley welcomed the opportunity for community groups to exhibit arts and crafts, the Head of Visitor Attractions indicated the community groups will bring friends and families to visit and that this is an opportunity to connect with local groups.

The Scrutiny Panel highlighted that no visitor attractions are open on a Sunday and suggested perhaps closing on a Monday or Tuesday to facilitate the visitors to the City. Cllr Phil Bateman asked if a list of venues and facilities was available to the public. The Head of Visitor Economy advised that there had been a list but that it was no longer available but that it is the intention of the section to create a hire section

Cllr Daniel Warren referred to the struggling night-time economy in Wolverhampton, he highlighted the Slade rooms and Lighthouse theatres as being in the same area of

the City and shared some examples of how businesses work to support each other, such as in Sheffield showrooms you buy a meal and a bottle of wine with a cinema ticket for £30, he asked if Wolverhampton has fully explored these types of offers. The Head of Visitor Economy clarified that cross over marketing has been considered but that the offer would be different in every City.

The Head of Visitor Economy referred to the old post house and the move to develop into incubation space for creative businesses. He advised that this year every Council property has a business plan and that the business plan can be developed to consider cross over marketing to see how income streams are growing. He advised that Wolverhampton is getting there, but not quite there yet, he shared that The Art Gallery was being considered as a wedding venue amongst other initiatives.

Cllr Waite referred to this as a cluster opportunity and suggested that to a certain extent this was happening; he referred to the Lichgate, Slater's and Boughs Brewery. The Service Director confirmed that this is happening and it was touched on last time, the Council can create a buzz in the proximity of buildings by managing public buildings differently; the next phase will be to look at Private sector. Cllr Martin Waite indicated that if he was a top end food outlet he would want to know that there is a market five days a week and there needs to be retail in the mix. The Chair suggested the scrutiny panel should visit the racecourse as part of the visitor economy scrutiny.

In relation to the threats identified through the Swot analysis outlined in the presentation the Head of Visitor Economy indicated that in the long run there should be greater success through entrepreneurialism, he highlighted an example that you can book an act easily but it can be the hardest thing to get them to make money. An example of this was the City Show that lost money this year because it rained and half of the fee was lost. The Service Director highlighted that there is a risk with most things but that the Council is addressing it by not letting the fear of risk stifle creative thinking. She highlighted that the Council can make bids as a public organisation to fill the funding gap, providing a public benefit and managing risk in a different way can make a huge difference. The Head of Visitor Economy gave an example of changing things around to create opportunity, he identified that the curators flat was on the ground floor at Bantock Park; it has moved opening up the ground floor opportunity for visitor space.

In response to points raised the Service Director advised that the savings proposals are really challenging and that partners are working together there are challenges but they are getting there.

The Head of Visitor Economy advised that in the new business model change is been driven by a reduction in funding, but also the fact that society is changing at a huge rate and expectations are rising given the competition. He advised that Visitor Economy Services were challenging every service.

Wolverhampton's Cultural Offer – The Grand Theatre Case Study

The Chair welcomed Adrian Jackson Chief Executive of the Grand Theatre (GT). The Chief Executive GT highlighted four aims of the strategy of the GT:

1. Artistic and Creative
2. Education and Community
3. Commercial viability
4. Visitor Economy (making GT a destination venue)

He advised the Panel that the aim is to make the GT a venue of choice.

1. Artistic and creative

The Chief Executive advised that he aims to push the boundaries of the theatre from 2017. He revealed that GT would be developing intermediate theatre to penetrate the area of the community not touched before.

2. Education and Community

He advised that confidence building life skills are things that are really key to audience participation. He planned to develop good and strong confidence building through education. He indicated that GT can expand into schools and community. He shared his experience as a Stafford Magistrate and his frustration that young people get into trouble when they could be involved in the theatre through school or community. He shared that this is key to the GT objectives.

3. Commercial Viability

The Chief Executive GT shared the need for GT to develop and bring in more revenue. He advised that the expansion and spend had to bring returns. He advised that the GT is making enquiries about buying and developing the neighbouring premises, the old post office. He advised that the location of the GT means that this ground floor space is the only opportunity for expansion of the GT and GT is currently trying to develop a proposal.

4. Visitor Economy

The Chief Executive compared the GT with larger theatres and highlighted that GT shares the same audience, the product is the same. He advised that the difference for GT will be the funding from LEP and Match funding to move GT into the destination of choice, perhaps with jazz bands playing in front of house and a great restaurant right next door.

Cllr Phil Bateman indicated that during the development of the bus station and road disruption GT had lost coach loads of visitors. He asked how the GT was

going to look at ticket booking and coach liaison; he felt that coach liaison is a key part of group booking.

Cllr Sweetman, Chair, welcomed the information and asked if there was a lot of work going on to secure the visitor offer and how far this work was at the GT and if it was integrated. The Chief Executive advised that there is more work to do and he expressed an interest in working with other organisations. He advised that there are three other venues, also slightly in different in the makeup but core offer is the same and there were also lots of similarities and synergies. He said there is a need to look at the GT as producers and venues, people will be supportive and that there is a journey to go on.

In response to a question from Cllr Martin Waite relating to the show hours 7.00 – 10.30 and having appropriate other facilities the Chief Executive GT advised that one of the reasons that the alterations have to happen is enable the other facilities. He identified preshow entertainment as a must to enhance the theatre offer, such as 'Champaign reception before the ballet'; he highlighted the need for a good restaurant to provide a meal to make a full evening in Wolverhampton which would add economic impact. He highlighted the need to publicise the whole offer and gave some examples of income spend as follows:

- GT £38 in the City ; £13 at the venue
- Civic Halls £44 in the City ; £15 at the venue

In response to comments made about capturing coaches at the GT, Mark Blackstock, Head of Visitor Economy advised that in 2014 two coach trips had been running, one to Bantock House, one to the Art Gallery; He advised that the coach trips had been failed by the catering facilities, they simply were not big enough to cope with the amount of people descending. The Chief Executive GT advised the Panel that he will demonstrate how this can be done, how putting more resources in and thinking differently can help synchronicity and turn things around. Cllr Martin Waite indicated that customer database can be revisited to get customers back, which is easier than starting afresh with the aim to sell more tickets and products.

In response to questions from Councillors about the synchronicity of marketing the City the Head of Visitor Economy advised that there had been a monthly meeting of representatives from top venues in the City to consider event timetabling; He advised the group had failed in October 2014 but had been re-established in March 2015 and that there was a meeting coming up; He advised that Websites are also to be completely redesigned to develop a joined up approach across the City for potential visitors looking at Wolverhampton using the internet. The Service Director advised that part of the funding for the Civic Halls was to look at the closure period how we communicate and support the visitor economy through business.

The Chief Executive GT shared the launch of GT TV with the scrutiny panel, highlighting the need to change the way GT works, to diversify and reach out and promote the visitor economy.

Resolved:

That the Scrutiny Panel endorse the approach to developing Wolverhampton's visitor economy.

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