

Stronger City Economy Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 22 November 2016

Attendance

Members of the Stronger City Economy Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Philip Bateman
Cllr Val Evans
Cllr Mak Singh
Cllr Tersaim Singh
Cllr Udey Singh
Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman (Chair)
Cllr Martin Waite
Cllr Daniel Warren
Cllr Jonathan Yardley (Vice-Chair)

Cllr John Reynolds was also in attendance

Employees

Keren Jones	Service Director
Heather Clarke	Service Development Manager
Martin Fox	Finance Business Partner
Julia Cleary	Scrutiny and Systems Manager

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 Apologies**
Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Malcolm.
- 2 Declarations of interest**
There were no declarations of interest.
- 3 Minutes of previous meeting**
Resolved: That the minutes of the previous meeting be agreed as a correct record.
- 4 Matters arising**
Visit to the Custard Factory

Officers confirmed that work was being carried out regarding the creation of a creative hub in the City and that a bid had been submitted in relation to this for the Gen-Y City project which included activities dedicated to diagnosis and support for young, creative businesses as the means of reviving city centres. Officers confirmed

that representatives from the University were also involved in the Gen-Y project and that a more detailed report would be provided for the Panel in March.

The Visitor Economy Strategy

The Hotels Study had been circulated to members prior to the meeting, the study included information relating to overnight stays in the City and the length of time visitors were staying.

The Visitor Survey had been completed and contained some interesting information regarding the cultural and creative sector. A piece of work was also being finalised to benchmark the City's cultural offer and it was thought that the offer provided by Wolverhampton was strong in relation to similar areas.

Visitor information and footfall

Officers stated that the recording of footfall was expected to be carried out by the BID and that staff were currently struggling to collate data and evidence in a meaningful way. The Service Director confirmed that agreement had been reached regarding the production of a Strategy for the Visitor and Creative Economy.

Officers stated that the last Strategy had been produced in 2011 and there had been a lot of changes since then and that the new piece of work would be carried out over the next 5 months. It was stated that the new strategy would require a strong evidence base and that this would be time consuming to pull together in the first instance. The Strategy would include detailed sections on areas such as the visitor economy and the creative industries and would link into work across the entire Council including the City Wide Financial Strategy.

Councillors considered that it might be useful to have information regarding who was visiting the City. The Service Director stated that some work had been carried out regarding this during the refurbishment of the Civic Halls when focus groups had been consulted.

Members queried how the Council would drive the project through the Communications Framework and it was stated that the communications strategy would be refreshed and that partners would be involved in the process. Officers stated that backing from Partners was crucial in relation to the future branding of the City and that it was vital that information was provided to residents to enable them to know what was going on in the City and the future benefits.

Councillors stated that information was now becoming more available to Members and that they were now able to start to understand how the building blocks of the visitor economy fitted together and worked. The Panel thanked Officers for the provisions of the information.

Members also considered that the information available would improve further once the new Civic Hall box office had been installed, this would enable Officers to record where people were visiting from and for what purpose. Unfortunately this system would not be available in the Grand Theatre but officers considered that this could be worked around. Officers stated that the ultimate aim would be to have One City Economy Budget which would include information on non-Council run organisations as well as those run by the Council.

The Panel noted the improvements that were being made and the investment that was coming into the City such as the recent opening of an H&M store in the City Centre and the on-going refurbishment of the Mander Centre.

Councillor Phil Bateman had carried out a survey at Bentley Bridge Moorings on the Wyrley & Essington Canal in Wednesfield. Boaters were spending in total of £20,000 during their stay in Wednesfield. There had been three organised cruises and around 120 Narrow Boats overnighing in this mooring. Boaters had suggested that the noise generated by the ring road and the railway in Wolverhampton made Wednesfield more attractive.

The Panel were pleased to see a growing relationship with the Canal and River Trust.

Resolved: That the matters arising be noted.

5 **Draft Budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy 2017/18 - 2019/20**

A report was submitted requesting Members to provide feedback to Scrutiny Board for consolidation and onward response to Cabinet on the Draft Budget 2017/18, in particular the elements that were relevant to this Scrutiny Panel.

The Panel noted:

- That the focus was more on increased income than cuts.
- The increased business rates and it was confirmed that these were based on an assumption of expected growth in the City but the Westside development had not been factored in yet (this would be in the next few years).
- That it was clear from planning work that more applications were being received.
- That any cuts were disappointing but there was a good accounting vision and we were not closing attractions such as art galleries which other authorities were considering. The Council was instead aiming to keep these places open and transform them to increase income and footfall.
- That it was the Council's responsibility to ensure that the City grew.

Resolved: That the above comments be forwarded to the Scrutiny Board for consideration.

6 **Skills and Employment Update and the Wolverhampton Workbox**

A briefing note was submitted to update the Panel on skills and employment activities in Wolverhampton, building on the last update which had focused on statistics.

The Panel considered the following areas:

1. The City Work Place

There was now a skills and employment board made up of partners including the College, University, Schools and the DWP. It was recognised that due to the complexity of the City a focused action plan was required regarding a small number of big initiatives. The main aim was to improve the support given to businesses to help them recruit, grow and retain skilled local people, resulting in more jobs and more successful enterprise.

2. The City Work Box

This consisted of a website where an individual could start their employment journey. The aim was to create a virtual system that made it easier for local people to obtain information, advice and guidance, resulting in more local people accessing local employment and progressing in the workplace. There was a need to engage partner organisations in this process and events were planned towards the end of March which would include around 90 partners.

3. The Learning City

Officers stated that this would be discussed in more depth at the next meeting of the Panel when an overview and demonstration of the Work Box would also be provided. The Learning City aimed to create a dynamic learning environment across the city centre, with strong connections into local communities. It was seen as the first step in putting learning at the heart of the city's overall development

The Panel considered that these areas were very important and placed the Council in a perfect position as an honest broker and in a unique position to highlight the benefits of partnership working to businesses in the hope of bringing them on board. The Panel also considered that this way of working would not only provide employment opportunities but greater support for individuals in the first few months of employment, helping to make young people more resilient regarding the pressures that could arise in the work place and hopefully resulting in them to remain in employment.

Resolved: That the update be noted.

7 Update on the Implications of Brexit

A briefing note was considered in relation to the potential impact of Brexit on Wolverhampton in terms of the impact on EU funding, short term business confidence as well as one scenario of longer term risk to foreign investment.

Officers stated that a clearer picture was now beginning to emerge and that the Council currently had 4 bids in regarding funding from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Two of the bids had now been signed, one was due to be signed imminently and one was still going through the process.

Recently however, the DCLG had been encouraging the local European Structural and Investment Fund (ESIF) Partnership to develop the pipeline of projects for submission right up until the day we leave the EU. Most projects run two-three years, so delivery may now run up to 2022. To benefit from this opportunity, the Council and partners were currently:

1. Developing a strong pipeline of "off the shelf" projects ready for funding, assuming quick start

2. Highlighting potential bids to maximise a last chance of EU funding, including continuation funds for existing projects
3. Exploring other funds (national, government, international) to fund priority projects.

The Government had also indicated that they would continue to fund successful projects that were currently funded by Europe; therefore strong project management was being built into EU funded projects.

It was noted that a paper regarding Brexit had been considered at the last meeting of the Audit Committee and it was agreed to distribute this to the Panel.

The Panel commented that it was encouraging to have positive feedback and congratulated the Council on recent achievements including the Lichtenstein Room at the Art Gallery which had received good press and on-going work with public sector organisations.

Resolved: That the update be noted.