

Stronger City Economy Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 24 January 2017

Attendance

Members of the Stronger City Economy Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Harman Banger
Cllr Philip Bateman
Cllr Payal Bedi-Chadha
Cllr Val Evans
Cllr Hazel Malcolm
Cllr Mak Singh
Cllr Tersaim Singh
Cllr Udey Singh
Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman (Chair)
Cllr Martin Waite
Cllr Daniel Warren

Employees

Heather Clark (Economics)	Manager Strategic Projects/Funding
Keren Jones	Service Director - City Economy
Angela McKeever	Head of Skills
Joanna Grocott	Project Manager

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

- 1 Apologies**
Apologies were received from Cllr Yardley.
- 2 Declarations of interest**
Cllr Mak Singh declared an interest in that he worked for one of the training providers.
- 3 Minutes of previous meeting**
Resolved: That the minutes of the previous meeting be agreed as a correct record.
- 4 Matters arising**
The Chair stated that she would like the Panel to look at visitor information and footfall again in more detail in the next municipal year and also the communications framework and marketing plan.
- 5 Presentation on the Wolverhampton Workbox**

The Chair welcomed Joanna Grocott, Project Manager and Angela McKeever, Head of Skills to the meeting.

Officers stated that the approach was important regarding helping people back into work and providing them with necessary skills. The Council needed to simplify and improve access for residents and businesses. The action plan contained three key areas and tools for residents and staff to enable more engagement with clients and those with low skills.

The Panel received a presentation in relation to the Wolverhampton Workbox. Officers stated that the Workbox represented a virtual front door that provided a one city, one brand, one offer base for clients. The scheme had been recognised as good practice by OFSTED.

The Workbox would help to address the skills gap in the City by supporting residents' needs to access basic skills and match them against local provision and job opportunities along with local media tools. It was a tool that would help people to think and act differently regarding accessing skills, training and job opportunities.

Interest had already been shown by some over fifty organisations and the scheme had been showcased at the One City Event where feedback had also been received from over 90 parties.

The Workbox was currently being tested and a demonstration was provided to the Panel. The Council was currently working with providers to include videos advertising the Workbox on their websites. As the programme developed further it was intended to include more information on how the Council could act as a facilitator to broker services between businesses and providers and to track progress in relation to this.

The Panel thanked officers for the presentation and demonstration and stated that the success of the project would be very dependent on getting people to actually look at the website in the first instance. Officers stated that a lot of publicity would be carried out through social media and that there were 12 to 14 computer spaces in the hub that were never empty for people who were unable to access the internet at home. Additional support and publicity for the service would also be provided by hard publicity including through the voluntary sector and Wolverhampton homes. Officers stated that possible clients would also be approached through front line staff and be included in contracts with the voluntary and community services.

The Panel queried whether signing onto the Workbox website would count towards the DWP job search requirement. Officers confirmed that this would count and would help to provide a consistent approach.

The Panel considered that the Workbox was a very good tool for helping job seekers or low skilled adults or late learners but queried whether the Council was also approaching issues from the start and addressing problems at under performing schools and poor education both at school and in the home.

The Panel questioned what would make people want to use the Workbox. Officers stated that the Workbox was not a fix all solution but one of a number of tools and approaches that the Council and the Director of Education were adopting. There was concern about high levels of youth unemployment and unemployment in the 50 plus age group and the workbox would resonate with some people in these groups but not all.

It was stated that the job density in the City was good but that it was often the case that the available jobs did not go to local residents.

The Panel requested that an update be brought back to the Panel once the Workbox had been launched with information on the uptake of the service and statistics on the use of the website.

The Panel queried how the Workbox would address groups such as those who had suddenly lost their jobs and were now un-expectantly back on the market. Officers stated that this issue would be address in the next item on the agenda which included information on the DWP.

The Panel considered that the Workbox represented a good model and could give youngsters the required tools but it was still dependent on the passion, drive and interest of those involved and those it was trying to reach to avoid a high dropout rate. Officers stated that this was the reason it was so important to find a good match between the client and the provider or employer. Officers stated that this would be enhanced by the use of a single CRM system working behind the Workbox that could track the journey of those using the system for at least 6 months and that this would help to target services to individuals.

The Panel queried how it was planned to approach areas such as depression and mental health concerns. Officers stated that there was a Mind at Work programme and that the Combined Authority was helping to design a health at work programme which would run alongside this. Officers stated that the voluntary services would also play a part in this and support would be provided where necessary for those on an individual placement.

Members queried what sort of companies were being targeted for the initiative and Officers stated that this was being driven by sectors including retail, health and social care, construction, engineering and manufacturing. It was also considered that the Council needed to have a good understanding of business needs and ensure that the service was tailored for individuals.

Officers stated that the service was due to be launched to businesses the next day through Wolves at Work and that ERDF funding would allow the Council to focus on SMEs and carry out diagnostics of business requirements and needs and connect these with the skills agenda.

Resolved: (a) That the presentation be noted.

(b) That an update on the uptake of the service and statistics relating to the use of the internet site be provided to a future meeting.

6 **Skills and Employment Update**

The Panel received a report from the Head of Skills to update it on the skills and employment agenda in particular the Wolverhampton skills and employment action plan, the retention of high level skills, the Area review for Further Education skills and engaging businesses to take up training and skills opportunities.

The Action Plan had been developed outlining the following programmes:

- Programme 1, the City Work Place: aims 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.
- Programme 2, the City Work Box: aims to create a virtual system that makes it easier for local people to obtain information, advice and guidance, resulting in more local people accessing local employment and progressing in the workplace.
- Programme 3, the Learning City: initially aims to create a dynamic learning environment across the city centre, with strong connections into local communities. This is the first step in putting learning at the heart of our city's overall development.

Officers stated that they were also aware that residents were getting jobs but were not then able to keep them.

Care also had to be taken to not rush people into work and the Council was therefore working with the DWP to attempt a cultural shift to provide more support early on to get residents work ready first which might then enable them to stay in work for longer.

Some members considered that there were many jobs available in the transport industry but that it was hard to recruit people into these roles (bus drivers and HGV drivers) with very little focus on the skills required to do these jobs. Officers agreed that they would investigate this through the Council's interaction with employers and it was thought that it might be just one of the areas where additional work was required and where there might a need for additional focus at college and university level. It was stated that work was also being done with HGV and Rail track and officers agreed to bring information regarding this to a future meeting of the Panel.

The Panel queried how the Council was addressing developments on the City boundaries such as on the border with Staffordshire County Council where there were thought to be around 2000 jobs in goods distribution and other sites in Telford, Shrewsbury and Walsall. Officers confirmed that the Council worked closely with other Councils and that this was especially true regarding those involved in the Combined Authority.

The Panel expressed some concern in relation to unpaid work placements as they were not always productive or fair. Officers stated that the workplace model was curtailed and limited to 2 to 8 weeks but was not a guarantee of a future job but an opportunity to gain skills and references. The Panel stated that it was important to ensure that workers were not exploited and used to fill gaps in the workforce with no chance of a permanent job or any opportunities to develop and grow. Officers stated that the Council would be employing 5 employer work coaches and 25 employee work coaches who would be managing the processes and brokering discussion if events were not going to plan. The Panel also requested that working conditions be taken into consideration. The Service Director stated that she was aware of the many challenges but that if the Council could get the process right it would represent a big change for the City and might allow officers to push the case for more funding for longer term initiatives.

Resolved:

That the Scrutiny Panel note progress in delivering Wolverhampton's Skills and Employment Action Plan.

7 **Briefing Note - Skills and Employment Statistical Update**

The Panel received a briefing note updating it on skills and employment statistics within Wolverhampton.

The Wolverhampton City Strategy 2011-2026 had set the target of achieving an employment rate of at least 70% by 2026 from a baseline of 61.2% in 2010. The Panel queried how Wolverhampton compared to statistically similar areas and how wards compared with wards.

Resolved: That the update be received.

8 **Actions Against Recommendations from Scrutiny Review Employment and Skills 2015**

Resolved: That the update be noted.