



Enterprise and Business Scrutiny Panel

Minutes - 30 September 2014

Attendance

Members of the Enterprise and Business Scrutiny Panel

Cllr Harbans Bagri
Cllr Philip Bateman
Cllr Payal Bedi
Cllr Craig Collingswood
Cllr Val Evans
Cllr John Rowley (Chair)
Cllr Tersaim Singh
Cllr Jacqueline Sweetman
Cllr Martin Waite

Employees

Jim Cunningham	Interim Head of Enterprise and Skills
Sheila Dixon	Development and Regeneration Surveyor/Officer
Marianne Page	Section Leader - Transportation
Earl Piggott-Smith	Scrutiny Officer

Part 1 – items open to the press and public

Item No. *Title*

1 **Apologies**

Apologies were received from the following Councillor(s)

Cllr Michael Heap

2 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest received.

3 **Minutes of the previous meeting (15.7.14)**

That the minutes of the meeting held on 15.7.14 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 **Matters arising**

Cllr Bateman commented on the report on Black Country Working and the issue of limited resources available to bring forward developments to regenerate the City. Cllr Bateman queried if the land designation could be changed rather than leave the land or buildings undeveloped if there was limited interest by developers.

The panel welcomed the success in bringing forward the plans for the development of the former Springfield Brewery in economic use but accepted the ongoing problem of attracting the required investment.

5 **Approach to Business Support and Investment**

Jim Cunningham commented on the Council's approach to business support and the work being done to support existing business and also help set up new businesses.

Jim explained that it is not a statutory responsibility for the Council to provide business support. Jim gave an overview of the work to support business and attract investment. Jim briefed the panel about the findings of Wolverhampton Economic Review which predicted that Wolverhampton was set to outperform the rest of the UK in the next few years. A copy of the report would be shared with panel.

Cunningham commented on the aims of the Wolverhampton Business Week and the work being done to attract new businesses and investment.

Wolverhampton was given £3.1 million to establish the Black Country Growth Hub. Jim commented that the service will be based in the Business Solutions Centre to deliver a one-stop service. In addition, five staff will be relocated from the Civic Centre to the business solutions centre to support the initiative. Jim commented that it was important to help businesses innovate.

Jim commented about the potential for private sector businesses to bid for Council contracts valued at £200 million annually and the importance of giving them opportunities to bid for contracts. Jim commented that businesses prefer contracts rather than grants which will help enable it to grow.

Jim commented on the importance of Wolverhampton playing to its strengths such as connectivity and access to other markets. Jim outlined the benefits of 'one door' approach to business support and providing an initial point of contact. The focus will be firstly attracting businesses to Wolverhampton, but if this was not possible the focus would be to attract them to move to another part of the Black Country region to support efforts to bring jobs.

Jim explained that £57 million investment in infrastructure developments at i54 had attracted £500 million return on investment and the area is continuing to attract international businesses to the site such as Porsche.

Jim commented on the positive response to Wolverhampton business week events such as Wolverhampton: a City of Business Opportunities Breakfast and that there was an open invitation to attend.

The panel commented about whether the 'one door' information and advice policy approach would mean the Council was less able to provide a speedy response to an enquiry. Jim acknowledged the need for a quick response and based on his experience businesses would welcome the Council saying no, rather than the alternative 'slow no' which prevents them looking at alternative options to resolve their issue.

The panel commented on the issue of low skills and the work being done to create an infrastructure that supports and develops the working population.

The panel commented on the issue of jobs density and the issue that a lot of high skilled jobs are filled by people living outside the City and there were fewer opportunities for local people. The panel commented on the long standing nature of the problem in building a skilled workforce and the challenge in creating local jobs for people.

Jim accepted that this was an issue and commented on the work done with UKTI to attract inward investment and to secure commitment to recruit and train local people. Jim explained that he is leading on the skills agenda, which is supported by budget of £250 million. The funding is split between skills and employability which will aim to improve the skills situation.

The panel commented on the opportunities to bring superfast broadband to Wolverhampton to improve connectivity and support businesses. Jim commented on the physical connectivity in terms of road and rail links offered by Wolverhampton. Jim agreed to look into the issue of increasing broadband speeds and report back findings to the panel.

The panel commented on the research which stated that 95% of businesses in Wolverhampton were small and queried the work of the Council to help them develop and the specific support available to entrepreneurs looking to expand their business.

Jim accepted that there was more that the Council can do to improve delivery to entrepreneurs and business start-ups generally. Jim commented on experience in Glasgow of Nat West Bank who fund a scheme called the Entrepreneurial Spark. The scheme provides a support programme aimed at making businesses more investable.

The panel commented about whether the Council was doing enough to encourage investors to take up opportunities for new build or to regenerate sites. Jim commented that the challenge for Wolverhampton is lack of Grade A office space. The development at the Interchange is part of efforts to improve business confidence. The developments at I54 are acting as a magnetic to businesses.

The panel welcomed the report, but queried the lack of reference in the report to the role of Wolverhampton College in the proposals detailed in the presentation. Jim explained that both Wolverhampton College and Wolverhampton University are represented on the City Board. Wolverhampton Council is the accountable body for the growth hub and is responsible for effective delivery of the programme

The panel commented on how well the Council is getting message out to businesses about the support available to them. Jim commented on discussions with Business Champions and the challenge to them to suggest ideas about what the Council can do to help shape the business offer.

The panel requested that they were not aware of the Business Week and would like to have knowledge of future events.

Resolved

The panel welcomed the report and supported the planned work

The panel agreed to receive a planner detailing future business events in Wolverhampton.

The panel agreed to receive a briefing on any planned work to develop super broadband service for Wolverhampton.

The panel to be included in future mailing distribution lists.

6 **North Wolverhampton Enterprise Zone and corridor**

Shelia Dixon presented a report and presentation on the background to the development of the Black Country Enterprise Zone (EZ) and listed the benefits offered to businesses that set up within the site.

Shelia explained that Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership is the body responsible for the delivery of the EZ in partnership with other local authorities involved.

Shelia briefed the progress on work being done to encourage developers to take up vacant land opportunities.

Shelia commented on the number of new jobs created to date and the work being done with business to bring forward the developments on the vacant sites in the EZ. Shelia commented on the work done to minimise risks by undertaking site investigations which may deter potential landlords from not taking up the offer.

The panel queried the link between the investment strategy and the EZ developments. Jim Cunningham commented on the investment in education and training opportunities on the site and the work being done with other organisations. Jim commented on the change in practice and the importance to focus on looking after existing and future clients.

Shelia commented on the issue of contaminated land affecting some of the sites within the EZ and acknowledged the challenge in persuading businesses to invest in areas where demand is currently weak. Shelia explained that there are funds available from the EZ to fund 50% of the cost of any remediation work required.

Resolved

The panel welcomed the information on the Enterprise Zone and the update on the working being done to bring forward developments.

7 **Old Steam Mill and Cornhill Road Closure**

Marianne Page presented an overview of the developments at the Old Steam Mill and the closure of Cornhill Road. Marianne detailed the three options that would enable to the Council to meet its responsibilities to protect the building and lead to the re-opening of Cornhill Road.

Marianne reported on a recent meeting with the representatives of Gladedale, and the discussions about the work to remove external scaffolding. The work will hopefully start in April 2015.

The panel commented on the length of time that Cornhill Road had been closed since a fire at the Old Steam in 2008 and the lack of progress in reaching a satisfactory conclusion which would lead to its re-opening. The panel commented on the disruption to the residents wanting to travel into the City centre and also financial costs to the City as a result of the closure.

The panel welcomed the recent work to progress the matter and the positive response from Gladedale to engage with the Council, but expressed concern that the options were not sufficiently robust given the length the time that has elapsed since the fire at the building.

The panel acknowledge the difficulties in making progress and the work done by the Council to make use of its powers to add conditions which will hopefully result in the scaffolding being removed from the highway.

The panel would like specific actions linked to each of the options that make clear the action the Council would consider if the necessary progress is not made to remove the external scaffolding. The panel agreed that they would like their concerns sent to the Cabinet.

Resolved

The panel would like more details on each the options presented in the report, which specific the actions to be taken if their no progress in the owners of the Gladedale to remove the scaffolding.

The panel to receive a draft timetable of key dates and actions till May 2015 relating to the removal of scaffolding on the highway and options for regenerating this area of the City.