

BUSINESS AND FINANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the Business and Finance Scrutiny Committee held on Tuesday, 10 May 2022 at 6.00 pm in Addenbrooke House, Ironmasters Way, Telford, TF3 4NT

Present: Councillors E J Carter, A Lawrence, S J Reynolds (Chair),
G C W Reynolds and K S Sahota.
Co-optees: None

Also Present: Councillors L D Carter (Cabinet Member: Neighbourhood
Services, Regeneration and the High Street)

In Attendance: C Critchell (Growth Hub Manager), E Harvey (Lead
Lawyer: Property & Commercial), K Kynaston (Director: Housing, Employment
& Infrastructure), K Mulholland (Service Delivery Manager: Inward Investment
& Business Support), and, S Yarnall (Democracy Officer (Scrutiny))

Apologies: Councillors N A M England, J E Lavery and Co-optee R Williams

BFSC51 Declarations of Interest

Councillor Sahota declared an interest regarding the Wellington Market and
familial business interest in the market.

BFSC52 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

**RESOLVED - the minutes of the meeting on the 16 March 2022 have
been signed by chair.**

BFSC53 Business Support Programme (Scene Setting)

The Committee heard from the Service Delivery Manager: Inward Investment
& Business Support and the Investment & Business Support Team Leader
who presented the Business Support Programme (Scene Setting) item.

Before the presentation, the Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Services,
Regeneration and the High Street outlined to the Committee that the Business
Support Programme and Pride in Our High Street had been a decade long
project and had seen many successes and changes in recent years. He
praised officers for their work over the last few years. The Cabinet Member
highlighted that Newport was championed in the Borough and nationally and
that the local authority is one of three councils in the country to be involved in
international trade partnership for businesses. It was highlighted that the
number of vacant units had fallen below the national average in the Borough.
Members heard that following the recent Queen's Speech there could be
more legislation going forward that provides local authorities with more power
over highstreets.

The Investment & Business Support Team Leader started the presentation by explaining the team structure for Business Support and Pride in Our High Street. It was highlighted that the team had specialist skills such as supporting businesses with grant funding.

The Committee also heard about the Business Support Services and three areas the presenting officer's team provided support in. The first was investment and it was that that promoted the town to external investors as well as supported existing businesses to expand. The second was business support, which provided support for businesses of all sizes and sectors across the Borough. The final service discussed was Pride in our High Street. This offered targeted support for high street businesses as part of a high street regeneration strategy. Members heard that this service was going to be discussed in more depth later in the presentation.

Members heard that there were three delivery mechanisms that helped to fulfil the services offered. These were the Telford Growth Hub; Account Management; and, Project Management. Each of these were discussed individually.

Regarding the Telford Growth Hub, members heard that the Growth Hub offers support for businesses with the aim to grow the local business both in development and networking. It was said that before the Covid-19 pandemic, the growth hub had developed a business community and that from Covid-19 it has had to develop this community to one that takes place online. Following this, Members heard that this has adapted once again to take a hybrid approach to the Growth Hub. A combination of both in-person and online support was available.

Members saw a video from a Senior Account Manager to discuss the Account Management delivery mechanism that was offered. It was said that they worked with local businesses to build connections and network for growth. It was also explained that Account Management helped with investment opportunities with national and international businesses. It was explained that the team provided this support in various forms ranging from but not limited to grant funding support and account management support.

Finally, Members heard about the final delivery mechanism for the team to fulfil their delivery services. Members heard about the Project Management Mechanism offered by the Business Support Team. There was a range of support available under this mechanism, such as direct business support to grant based programmes like the Marches Growth Hub Project. The Marches Growth Hub Project had provided a £1.3m funding project that had helped 400 new enterprises. In addition, members heard that as part of this mechanism there was funding for £10K to £1.3m grants as part of the Telford Growth Recovery Programme following Covid-19 and this this offered one-to-one support to businesses. Members also heard about the Hello Telford project. This was an innovative approach to supporting businesses in Telford that was adopting a hybrid approach that aimed to support businesses. The plan was

to launch this initiative in the Summer of 2022. The project was in the final stages of testing and businesses could engage in three ways: using a directory, seeing local opportunities and receiving local news for local businesses.

The Business Support Team use a variety of different promotional channels to communicate with local businesses, these included newsletters; social media; press & PR; and events & exhibitions.

Members then heard case studies of local businesses that have used the service, this was received through videos and presentation updates.

Members were informed about the results regarding the Business Support Programme. Since 2019, the support had helped local businesses to secure £3m in financial support and this had created over 230 jobs. 85 SME's have benefited from the one-to-one specialised support offered by the scheme, and in the last year, there had been 109 skills and recruitment specific interventions. In 2021/22 the team had supported over 150 start-up businesses.

Following the Business Support Programme, the presentation continued and discussed Pride in Our High Street. Members first heard about The High Street Challenge. Failing highstreets were not just a local issue but also a national one. Local highstreets had felt this in the form of disappearing stores and high levels of empty retail units. It was highlighted that the six borough town highstreets (Wellington, Oakengates, Dawley, Madeley, Ironbridge and Newport) required intervention. Some of the interventions noted were aspects such as quality and condition of retail properties being poor as a result of a lack of investment. The final challenge that was highlighted for the high street was a growing threat from online trading.

On the ambitions of the Pride in Our High Street team, Members were informed that work was being actively undertaken with the Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Services, Regeneration and the High Street. The ambitions were to diversify high streets so that they could benefit everyone; to provide a vibrant and mixed night-time economy; to make high street businesses digitally aware and help them to gain digital skills; to contribute to the net zero carbon agenda; and to promote more green/environmentally friendly space.

Members then heard about the Grant Programme, which was part of the Pride in Our High Street scheme. One of the grants discussed was the Start Up Trial Grants a £2,500 grant for trial businesses in established markets to provide the potential for growth. Diversification Grants of up to £4,000 were discussed, offering online trading support for new products as well as re-branding and marketing of eco-packaging. The final grant discussed was the Empty Retail Start Up Grants of £10,000 for new businesses. Each of these could be supported from the Telford Growth Hub.

Members also received a Grant Programme Update for 2022/23. One of the grants discussed was the property façade improvement grant of up to £2,000. This grant was aimed at helping to improve the quality of the façades in high streets. This included painting the façades and having new signs for retail units. Work for this grant started prior to the COVID-19 pandemic but was delayed and the work is to continue across the summer of 2022. Another grant was the digital grant. This was a grant of up to £4,000 for support in creating a website and to have an overall online presence or to introduce a new system for payment. Members also heard about the eco grants of up to £1,000 to introduce energy saving measures, eco packaging, and to reduce a businesses use of plastic in their production. It was also heard that part of the 2022/23 Grant Programme Update was support to local businesses through the Growth Hub.

Members heard grant testimonials from local businesses that illustrated the support that they received ranging from networking support, on-line growth support and financial support that helped them to expand their business.

The Committee then heard about the youth engagement in the Pride in Our High Streets programme. There had been an intensive four week course that gave young people the opportunity to work with top companies such as Capgemini and Fat Face with a final event held at Wrekin College. There was a targeted engagement with deprived communities to provide a dynamic and inspiring learning experience for 15-19 year olds from which 70 students graduated.

There was also a 'Young High Street Challenge' designed to encourage young people to engage with the high street. More than 1,000 young people had participated in this challenge. Some of the impacts that this challenge had had were the transformation of the Wellington Market to include late night opening and events such as music and engagements that are targeted for young people. It was highlighted that support through Pride in Our High Street start up grants had implemented ideas from young people such as a food court in the market and new businesses like the Red Brick Urban Café that opened in late 2021.

Members then heard about the achievements of the Pride in Our High Street programme.

- 60 new businesses were supported to open with a grant value of £476,000;
- 300 jobs were created;
- More than £1.9m investment leveraged from the private sector;
- The programme had engaged more than 1,000 young people; and
- There had been further developments in CCTV and Wi-Fi to make high streets a safer and more connected place.

Following the presentation, Members discussed and posed questions.

Had many businesses that have received support and grants from Pride in Our High Street gone out of business?

The Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Services, Regeneration and the High Street stated that the number of companies going out of business in the country are at a national high but in the Borough since the start of the programme in 2019, there had only been three companies that had gone out of business. It was explained that the Pride in Our High Street programme was a robust programme and local businesses needed to produce a business plan to access funds.

It had been noted that some businesses that are eligible for the eco grants are hesitant to engage, how do you propose engaging with them?

Members heard that there are already a number of companies that aim to be eco-friendly and reduce their usage of plastic but often this was a supplier issue. It was heard that there had been a positive move forward and the grants had supported local businesses. It was also heard that there was a new officer that had joined the business support team that had offered a more personal engagement to get local businesses to engage with the grants that are on offer to local businesses.

Market towns like Wellington have seen a lot of development, what are the plans to bring this level of development to other market towns in the Borough?

Members heard from presenting officers that Wellington had an infrastructure for this development which made it easier for the development in the Wellington Market. It was heard that development takes time and that the grants support local businesses with a grant agreement for support and development for a minimum of 12 months. Examples in Dawley High Street were highlighted and explained that commitment was needed from businesses for effective development.

How do some market areas attract more users to the markets?

Members heard that marketing is key for this. It was explained that marketing can help promote market towns for what they are recognised and known for. Local businesses could network with those with a marketing background to provide a better presence for advertisement of the businesses. It was heard that the Telford Growth Hub could provide support with this.

What work is to come knowing that the programme has one year remaining?

It was heard that over the next 12 months there are projects that are being continued such as the Façade programme. That there will be more development in safety features in market towns to make people feel safe in the high streets. Some of the work highlighted was developing and improving the quality of signage. Further work in developing market town identities is to come in the next 12 months.

Once part of a working group to receive regular updates on business support and development, is there ways of having regular updates on the programme?

Members heard that a further update could be brought to the Scrutiny Committee in the following municipal year.

How do we entice retailers outside of the Borough into the area and could external models work within the Borough?

It was heard that not all of the Pride in Our High Street and the Business Support grants are local and that they are to promote outside organisations to develop within the Borough. They were using a targeted approach to identify gaps within the market and try to entice them to work within the Borough. In terms of external models and examples of partnerships with businesses the Shrewsbury area was identified.

This part of networking growth was to help local businesses to develop, learn and expand their business. Each location can promote this and bring more business into the respective areas. Alongside that, it was noted that this had also been in partnership with town councils to use local funding to talk more positively of local areas.

BFSC54 Chair's Update

The Chair thanked all presenting officers, the Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Services, Regeneration and the High Street and the Director: Housing, Employment & Infrastructure for presenting to the committee.

There was an interest in receiving further updates on the impacts of this programme.

Members would receive an update on a following workshop from the presentation heard at the Committee meeting and the Democratic Services Officer would be in contact when details had been finalised.

The meeting ended at 6.58 pm

Chairman:

Date: Wednesday, 20 July 2022