

Minutes of the Economy, Skills, Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board

25th June, 2020 at 5.30 pm
Virtual meeting

Present: Councillor Rollins (Chair);
Councillor Sandars (Vice-Chair)
Councillors Allcock, Eaves, Hackett, M Hussain,
Padda, Singh and Worsey.

Apologies: Councillors L Giles and Millard.

In attendance: Dr Alison Knight, Executive Director
Neighbourhoods;
Chris Ward, Director Education, Skills and
Employment;
Alan Caddick, Director of Housing and
Communities;
Kelly Thomas, Employment and Skills Services
Manager;
Gareth Owens, Business Growth Team Leader.

5/20 **Minutes**

Resolved that the minutes of the meeting held on 4
February, 2020 be approved as a correct record.

6/20 **Moving to Reset and Sustain an Inclusive Economic
Recovery in Sandwell**

The Board received a report and presentation from the Business Growth Team Leader and the Employment and Skills Services Manager to provide context of the economic recession caused by Covid19 and to consider the activity that the council had undertaken to support the local economy during this period.

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The Board noted that the Councils approach to the Reset and Recovery Plan had been approved on by [Emergency Committee on 27th May 2020](#) and that priorities set out in the Plan were shaped by engagement with public and partners.

The Board noted that the Economic and Social impacts of Covid - 19 were already severe in Sandwell. The Board was advised that Business Growth and Employment and Skills teams had commenced planning for the economic recovery and that economic intelligence was being provided by partners, government agencies and other business and academic organisations in the West Midlands to inform planning for the recovery.

The Board noted the main messages of the report:

- our most vulnerable communities and self-employed would most likely be hit by the Covid-19 recession, the self-employed have a reduced demand for their services due to reduced business and consumer spend;
- unemployment was increasing, it was anticipated that many self-employed would return to work, but it was still unclear how many of people furloughed would be made redundant and how many businesses would not be re-opening;
- young people had been disproportionately impacted, they were more likely to be in unstable jobs and apprenticeships remained vacant;
- over 50's were also likely to be impacted, unemployment trends would be monitored;
- it was anticipated that redundancies would be of a higher skill level and provision would need to be tailored to need. This would result in more competition for jobs and the potential for individuals moving further away from the labour market;
- digital exclusion was a major barrier for residents wishing to train or upskill, many platforms required laptops or tablets and were not compatible with smart phones;
- mental health and anxiety was an issue for people considering going back to work or starting employment, especially if

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shielding vulnerable people or if they have children not in school;

- it was now more essential for the Council to champion an inclusive economy and community wealth building. An action plan was being developed;
- the scale of the economic downturn was unprecedented and there was a need for the Council to turn attention towards supporting businesses, entrepreneurship, activities promoting employability and skills and to intervene to create new inclusive economy to protect livelihoods and help employers retain jobs through progressive policies.

The Board noted the main messages from the presentation relating to the Sandwell's Economy and Skills Offer, officers highlighted what steps the Council was implementing and working on in relation to the following:

- **Economy in Distress** – the challenges of lockdown, furlough and economic package, financial and cashflow challenges, social distanced workplace and high street and business closures and redundancy;
- **Economic Vulnerabilities** – Sandwell had the lowest gross disposable income per head and a lower number of high growth firms per population in the West Midlands. The predicted productivity drop of 36% in Quarter 2 was of concern and the need for stronger business support during downturns had been identified to promote recovery. There was concern that 25% of SME business closures were expected in 2020 and that 6.8% of people in Sandwell who were self-employed were particularly vulnerable during the crisis.
- **Financial Support to Businesses** – The Council was working hard to assist businesses during the crisis. Revenue and benefits and business rates services had been working to support applications and to publicity promote the grants. This had encouraged lots of enquiries from the public. The Council was reaching out to businesses that had not yet applied and to advise SMEs of other grants for businesses that had missed out on first round of funding. Aim for Gold European funding

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had been adapted to Covid grants – the new version focus was to help make the workplace work better, reach new markets, adapt, train staff in digital skills and buy machinery. Intervention rates currently were 70% match funding, but it was hoped to change this to 55%, they would pay 55% and the grant would pay 45% if approved by Government.

- **Partnership support and recovery plans** - intelligence gathering and work with regional partners was established and working well. It was planned to host a virtual Black Country Business Festival in October 2020. Sandwell worked with other Black Country Authorities and a lot was happening in the WMCA, the Strategic Economic Development Board and the West Midlands Growth Hub. The knowledge account managements at the Growth Hub provided niche knowledge on the economy, and there was wider work with the international Department of Trade to work with overseas businesses that were investing or looking to invest in the area.
- **Outreach and Communication** –The Council had contacted 144 businesses in a PPE outreach exercise, 26 businesses had offered PPE and 31 offered support to help out with food delivery shopping or voluntary work in Sandwell. Think Sandwell Business Support Website had made information, communication and support available using a range of social media, calls and emails. The main messages related to grants and loans, Covid Safety, support and contact details. Funding was available from the Re-opening High Streets Safely Fund (ERDF) and would be used to strengthen communications and publicity around hygiene and social distancing, together with offering more consistent messaging and safety advice to businesses and consumers.
- **Community Wealth building**- the three elements to progress were to develop the Social Value Procurement Portal, the new economic strategy with consideration of the economic development plans and to develop the local supply chain, encourage people to spend locally, hold virtual meetings and build up the supplier contracts base.
- **Labour market Information** – The number had increased across the Country however the percentage of out of work

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benefits claimants in Sandwell was 9.1% (1.8% above west Midlands region). The 18 - 24 year olds claiming out of work benefit had been harder hit in Sandwell at 13.7%, which was 4% higher than the West Midlands and 5% higher than the national figures.

- **Redundancy Support** – The Council had been engaging with local employers, working across the Black Country to set up a redundancy triage service alongside the Black Country Growth Hub and the LEP. It was another way for businesses to share potential redundancies, to support impacted residents and share vacancies. There was also a SERCO programme 'Response to Redundancy' which provided training provision for those impacted by redundancy.
- **Apprenticeships** – Redundancy support, recruitment, existing apprentices and apprenticeship levy transfers
- **Training provision** – Adult Education had a menu of on-line provision for unemployed and employed learners and where ever possible virtual training was provided, recovery plans were in place for a return to face to face delivery. Black Country Impact had provided support for young people 16-29 including advice and guidance for careers advice and job search support. Colleges were closed but continued to provide online provision for completion of qualifications. The work experience programme was currently suspended but potential for virtual work experience was being explored.
- **School Leavers** – Connexions have provided a range of support for school leavers including 1:1 freephone support and guidance for years 11 and 13. A September offer survey will consider career intentions, and appointments have been arranged for parents and young people to discuss options. Schools apprenticeship presentations have taken place and advice and guidance provided on apprenticeship options. In addition, virtual events have been arranged a careers Expo on 17th July and an employment and skills event in August.
- **Emerging trends** – There was an expected spike in redundancies coming out of lockdown, and it was anticipated that there would be disproportion impact on young people and over 50's and that the skills and employment support demand

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would be different with higher skilled people looking for work the disadvantaged would move further away from the labour market. In addition, digital skills would be a major barrier for some residents to complete training and upskill. The adverse impact on mental health was of concern, particularly the anxiety about returning to work or getting a job.

The Board noted the following comments and responses to questions:

- In terms of the turnover of grants the Board was advised there were two ways for business to contact the Council to get grants:
 - Business rates grants - this depended on how straightforward the application was and how much information was supplied. There was a lot of checking to do to make sure an application was legitimate. There were fraud risks and a need to check for Covid-19 fraudulent claims;
 - Discretionary grants - these had been averaging a four week turnaround and over 5000 claims had been dealt with. The Board was advised that it takes longer on average due to the size of the team administering the grants. There were 10 people to process and sort out the finance. It was acknowledged it was very hard and cumbersome work getting through 5000 claims.
- Councillor Padda highlighted that Sandwell had significantly higher numbers of out of work benefit claimants than other authorities and asked for clarification whether this was due to the pandemic or whether Sandwell was generally worse affected. The Employment and Skills Services Manager; advised that Sandwell tended to hold a higher unemployment rate, but that Sandwell would be quite comparable in the West Midlands. She highlighted that some had more people on furlough and that there was unstable employment in Sandwell.
- Councillor Singh appreciated the detail in the report relating to people claiming benefit and the regional numbers compared with neighbours. He paid compliment to and commended the Covid-19 Business Grant Team for their work and being very prompt in

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responding to queries, he requested that the Boards appreciation be passed on to them.

- Councillor Hackett advised the Chair that he worked for a training provider which he had previously declared as an interest.
- Councillor Allcock requested clarification of the checks carried out on training providers and whether any had become insolvent. The Business Growth Team Leader advised that a government organisation would carry out checks on that issue. He advised that the furlough had been a bubble to protect lots of companies, once back to work in September the situation may become clearer and by October it may be that they cannot save staff. Businesses were worried that they would have to lay people off and that some businesses were concerned that they have to continue to pay staff and overheads;
- the Board was advised that Business Growth and Employment and Skills teams would work together and look at Black Country West Midlands level data. The data may not be available at local level, but the Black Country LEP would have data;
- the Board highlighted concerns relating to apprenticeships replacing substantive staff had not been an issue in officers experience and the Board was advised that the Council wanted to bring fresh apprentices in, but not at expense of the staff;
- Councillor Rollins requested more information about what the general feeling from business was and what support the Council has offered. The Business Growth Team Leader advised that businesses had been very grateful for the financial help and for the support, they had indicated that it was not nice to be in this situation without someone to talk to and although many may have been frustrated with what the Government had done or not done, the Council had been there to help them out;
- In relation to number and type of vacancies available the Board was advised that there was currently a sharp decrease in vacancies. Many businesses had ‘pulled’ their vacancies to reserve resources whilst in lockdown and were waiting to see if in time things would pick back up before determining whether to fill vacancies and to see if the economy was going to bounce back;

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The Board was concerned that businesses may not feel able to commit to apprenticeships in the current climate and Sandwell hospital had confirmed it would not be taking apprentices this year. They noted that there would be a period of getting back to normal and that businesses need a recovery period.

The Chair asked officers present to thank everyone in their teams for the support given and for the innovative ways of adapting to working arrangements during this time.

7/20

Rewilding Grass Verges Update

The Board received a presentation from the Director Housing and Communities relating to the rewilding of grass verges. The Director advised Members that prior to lockdown, evidence had been gathered and arrangements made for an Inquiry day to consider Rewilding grass verges on 17 March 2020. The meeting was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, when lockdown commenced on 23rd March 2020.

The Director highlighted that since lockdown, there had been no scheduled mowing of grass, nature had taken its course and allowed grow the verges and open spaces to grow. The contrast had provided new and vital evidence to consider in the Inquiry Session.

The slides presented to the meeting included photographs of grass verges and open spaces that had not been maintained during lockdown and it showed how quickly nature had taken a new hold and given a totally different perspective on some areas. There were Bee Orchids growing in a new location in Sandwell and the landscapes had changed in a relatively short period of time.

The Board noted that rewilding had started to happen by default and there was a need to think about how we use our spaces moving forward and consider with the Wildlife Trust the way forward.

The Chair welcomed the natural change to the environment and that it was lovely for residents to have something different to look

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at other than mown grass; she also welcomed that another site had been identified with bee orchids growing in the area.

The Board noted that there had been complaints from residents about verges not being maintained and not tidy, also that mice and rats had been seen in the longer grass. The Chair indicated that the long grass was not causing the problem and that mice and rats would move around more freely with fewer disturbance and that they may inhabit some areas that they had not previously. The Board recognised that there would be challenges, to face from the perception of residents that the verges looked untidy.

Councillor Allcock supported the re-wilding philosophy and acknowledged that the presentation of litter on the verges was an issue to be addressed. He gave an example of an uncut field that was flourishing and how a natural path had formed around the outside of it. He indicated that officers would have to think carefully which places to re-wild across the Borough.

The Director acknowledged that if the grass was long litter would collect and he advised that Board that the Council was working with SERCO services to pick and collect litter. The Board welcomed the move to get litter picking to balance the perception of some residents, that growing wild is untidy. The Chair acknowledged what the Council was trying to achieve, to link into the Ecology and environment of Sandwell.

Councillor Hackett suggested that areas for re-wilding should be identified on a Town by Town basis. The Executive Director welcomed any suggestions and highlighted that the proposed Inquiry day would be useful to gather information. He indicated that Inquiry events could be held at Town level and agreed that there should not be a uniform approach to rewilding across the Borough. The Board acknowledged that the evidence gathering would be important in identifying areas that would warrant re-wilding.

The Chair welcomed that the timing in terms of the lockdown had demonstrated which areas in our Towns had blossomed and flourished and that there had been some real environmental achievements. She was pleased that work with Re-wilding Britain had started across the Country and that they were pulling

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together local forums for people to speak about their area. Although no-dates had been released yet there were plans to start talking to people in the Autumn 2020. She recognised that this was an opportunity for people to get involved in forums and events about re-wilding and to pull interested parties together and to link to the work of the Scrutiny Board.

The Chair reminded Members that the Inquiry session had been planned for 18 March 2020, the lockdown had given the environment in Sandwell a chance to start to recover.

The Chair indicated that there was a need to review and refresh the Inquiry scope to include a series of Town Inquiry sessions, and that there was a need to work with other organisations to gather evidence to consider the impact of lockdown, the potential sites, the pros and cons of rewilding with the aim of gathering evidence to inform future policy re-wilding grass verges in Sandwell and wider environmental work.

Resolved

- (1) That the Economy Skills Transport and Environment request that arrangements for Re-wilding Inquiry sessions be put in place.

(Meeting ended at 6.35 pm)

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