

Minutes of Economy Skills Transport and Environment Scrutiny Board

4th February 2021 at 5:30pm
Online virtual meeting

Present: Councillor Rollins (Chair);
Councillors Chidley, Eaves, M Hussain.

Also present: Simon Hall, Interim Growth and Spatial Planning Service
Manager;
Tammy Stokes, Interim Director Regeneration and Growth.

01/21 **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor L Giles.

02/21 **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

03/21 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 19 November 2020 were agreed as a correct record.

04/21 **Urgent Items of Business**

There were no additional items of business to consider.



05/21

Reset and Recovery – Update Presentation

The Interim Director of Neighbourhoods provided an update on the work of the Business Growth Team and the Planning Regeneration Team.

The Interim Service Manager presented the Reset and Recovery Update on the approaches and activities utilised over the last few months to address the impacts of Covid-19 and support Sandwell's businesses.

Business Growth Team:

Grants and Funding Schemes-

The team prioritised the following activities:

- Providing support to business through the distribution of discretionary grants and other business support funding schemes.
- The Board noted that under the first national lockdown, £2.9m was distributed to 315 businesses, and £96k was provided to market traders.
- The Board acknowledged that under the second national lockdown (November 2020), different grants regimes were introduced by the government. £629k of Additional Restrictions Grant were provided to support 554 businesses. This grant sought to provide support to those who had not been eligible for other grant regimes.
- Schemes such as AIM for Gold business growth programme grants and the Black Country Small Grants were utilised to distribute funding.

Signposting and Advice-

The team were focused on the following activities:



- Advising and signposting businesses to partner services, who provided specialist support, such as the Black Country Growth Hub and Department for International Trade.
- Working with organisations such as Skills Work and Enterprise Development Agency (SWEDA) to support business start-ups.
- Utilising economic intelligence to remain updated with the current situation.
- Working with workshops hosted by partner organisations, such as the Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses, to keep updated with the current situation and to provide continued and informed support to businesses.

Communication with the Business Community-

The team were focused on the following approaches:

- Utilising Sandwell Business Ambassadors to communicate effectively with the wider business community to ensure engagement and understanding of the Council's approaches and activities, advocate on behalf of other businesses, and support the Council's plans.
- Actively using Think Sandwell Business Support Website, Made in Sandwell Magazine and Social Media to facilitate the communication of key messages and deliver positive stories across the business community.
- Reviewing the potential projects Sandwell Council could offer to support businesses, with a focus on what response would be most beneficial to businesses and partners.
- Creating a link between growth plans and existing strategies, in terms of inclusive economy deals, social value and community wealth building. This enabled an understanding on how to best implement these processes in a simple but coherent manner.

Employment and Skills-

The team collaborated with the Employment and Skills team on the following:



- Securing employment opportunities, in light of the furlough scheme, closure of businesses and the difficulty that young/mature people experienced in accessing job opportunities.
- Working alongside businesses to ensure they were aware of the Community Benefit Clauses and the benefits of providing social value and creating jobs.
- Understanding how to attract local and national businesses into Sandwell. This presented opportunities for the local community, businesses, and employment.
- Understanding how to encourage businesses to invest in Sandwell, Black Country and West Midlands.

Supporting Local Supply Chains to Secure Procurement Opportunities-

The team prioritised the following activities:

- Arranging 'meet the buyer' events, procurement clusters around industries such as construction and retail, and networking opportunities to ensure that peers can provide advice to one another and build a buying community.
- Measuring the local spend to support the community to enhance procurement opportunities within the borough.

The Planning Regeneration Team:

Town Investment Plans-

The Plans focused on the following:

- Sandwell Council were invited to bid for three town fund applications, namely for West Bromwich, Rowley Regis, Smethwick.
- If all three bids are successful, this would bring up to £25m per town. This could give a total investment of £75m to be used across Sandwell.
- £750,000 per town was awarded through Accelerated Funding.

Town Investment Plan Priorities-

The team prioritised the following proposals:



- Reinvigorating the town centre, which in turn would benefit the community.
- Investing in a new hospital, aquatics centre, and the Commonwealth Games.
- Aiding regeneration to enhance future opportunities.
- Regenerating local assets.
- Focusing on connectivity to ensure that Sandwell could access digital communities.
- The creation of inclusive town centres that present a range of opportunities for the community.
- Collaborating with and supporting young people in terms of skills and employment.
- The creation of more housing.

Accelerated Funding-

The team prioritised the following projects:

- Enhancing connectivity across the borough.
- Redeveloping the market and approving the cycling and walking infrastructure in West Bromwich.
- Creating pedestrian and cyclist connectivity and improving outdoor spaces in Rowley Regis.
- Approving the cycle and walking scheme to create accessibility and job opportunities in Smethwick.

Priority Regeneration Projects-

The project focused on the following:

- In Wednesbury, Friar Park would create 700+ new homes in partnership with the West Midlands Combined Authority. The Wednesbury Heritage Action Zone would build on the current heritage community to enhance engagement.
- The West Bromwich Masterplan focused on the redevelopment of the town. The Planning Statement would set out Sandwell's ambitions and how they would be delivered. The Towns Fund Programme and development of future high streets would be a part of this process.
- In Smethwick, the masterplan would present the opportunities that the framework will generate, such as the creation of more homes, primary schools, and more job



opportunities. The Towns Fund and Rolfe Street would also be a part of this project.

- There would be a focus on the creation of new homes, job opportunities, and development of new green spaces in Oldbury.

The team was focused on supporting the survival, resilience, and growth of the local economy by recognising the impact and challenges of Covid-19, and taking the necessary steps through working with stakeholders, businesses, residents and communities, to ensure that the economy is withstanding post Covid-19.

The Board noted the following comments and responses to questions:

- It was difficult to ascertain exactly how many eligible businesses had received support, as the team were uncertain how many businesses were still operating. However, over 50% of businesses contacted by the Council had received the grant. Applications for the grants were still being received and the team were actively distributing the grant, therefore this figure was likely to rise.
- There were difficulties in determining the turn-around time for applying for the grant. The team recognised the urgency of the situation, therefore was working to meet demand as efficiently as possible and aimed to approve applications within a month.
- Meetings with partnership organisations were arranged to identify what businesses understand about the Council's plans within Sandwell. Partnership organisations recognised the significance of Community Wealth Funding, however challenges with finances and furlough had caused issues with how businesses were responding.
- The Town Investment Plan was reviewed and amended to ensure it remained viable and reflective of the most current situation with Covid-19.
- Under the Rowley Regis Town Investment Plan, although complete pedestrianisation would not be viable, there were



proposals to make Blackheath Town Centre a safer and more suitable environment for cyclists and pedestrians, which would reduce pollution. In turn, this would complement the agenda for Climate Change in Sandwell. There were no proposals in place to pedestrianise Oldbury Town Centre, however there were plans for sustainable transport in Oldbury.

- Councillor Chidley to be sent the Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan report for more information on these proposals.
- The Board acknowledged that economic recovery would involve engaging in both economic and environmental activity. Economic recovery plans would need to be planned in consideration of Sandwell's climate change plan.
- In terms of bus provision, it was noted that this was under the management of bus providers and Transport West Midlands, it was anticipated that there would be investment in zero-carbon buses in the imminent future.
- Information regarding when buses were to become electric in Sandwell would be sent to Councillor Chidley.

The Chair expressed her gratitude, on behalf of the Board, to all those involved in supporting businesses in Sandwell and for adapting their way working during this time.

The Board noted that the Climate Change Working Group would continue to consider and review the Town Investment Plans moving forward.

Meeting ended at 6:00pm.

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