

GROWING THE ECONOMY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY, 12 FEBRUARY 2020

PRESENT:- Councillors Emma Famarzi (Chair), Nick Burns-Howell, Paul Dixon, Jenny Jefferies, James Robbins, Roger Smith, Imtiyaz Shaikh and Rahul Tarar

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Mark Dempsey.

25. Declarations of Interest

The Chair reminded Members of the need to declare any known interests in any matters to be considered at the meeting. No declarations were made.

26. Public Question Time

No public questions were received during the meeting.

27. Minutes

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 6th November 2019, be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

28. Business Engagement

The Chair welcomed Mr Les Durrant, President of Swindon Chamber of Commerce and Group Chairman DPDS, who had agreed to attend the Committee to provide some insight to the business environment in Swindon.

Mr Durrant thanked the Committee for the invitation to address them. He outlined his history of working on behalf of Thames Valley and Swindon Chamber of Commerce and its predecessor Swindon Chamber of Commerce as well as DPDS Consulting. Mr Durant raised the following points and responded to Members questions in respect of:

- The role of the Chamber of Commerce in liaising with stakeholders and Local Authorities to understand the priorities and issues faced by the local business community.
- The role of the Chamber of Commerce in advocating for the strengthening of regional infrastructure networks.
- The priorities of the Thames Valley and Swindon Chamber of Commerce including, improvements to Swindon town centre, a long term vision for employment land, the promotion of the OxCam Arc Growth Corridor, long term spatial planning, engaging local authorities regarding impactful foreign investment, support for new business and businesses that export goods/services, the development on innovation base knowledge, and to foster business links with education.
- The need for joint working between the private and public sector in order to grow the local economy and to keep it as an attractive location for business (although at times there would be differences of opinion and priorities).
- The success of Swindon Borough Council and its predecessor Thamesdown

Borough Council, in driving economic success and creating an environment to attract and retain businesses and in promoting the town.

- That in a recent survey Swindon was ranked third in GDP per capita.
- Although Swindon was classed as being within the South West Region increasingly businesses, whilst not ignoring this region or the Midlands, were looking towards the South East and the Thames Valley business links, Oxford and the M4 corridor.
- The need to collectively identify manufacturing companies to establish themselves on the Honda site once Honda had left Swindon in order to maximise the skilled workforce in the town.
- Should the Honda site be used solely for employment purposes (which the Chamber supported the Council's commitment to its use as employment land) the Honda Site was the best employment site in the South of England due to its size, rail connectivity and access to the M4 motorway.
- The need to identify and make available additional employment land through the Local Plan within the town and to improve the range and variety of sites available. This was not only for inward investment but also to allow existing firms to expand.
- The need to provide an environment to create new job opportunities and especially in the innovative sector and to plan for job growth which would also benefit the construction industry.
- The need for increased long term infrastructure planning and vision with a plan for up to 2050.

Mr Durrant responded to Members comments and questions in respect of:

- The benefits of a long range infrastructure and economic strategy including providing certainty for businesses, linking into investment with neighbouring authorities and accessing Government funding in a structured manner.
- That other Local Authorities were starting a longer term vision in respect of strategic planning, including the OxCam network.
- Linkages with the Wiltshire and Swindon Local Enterprise Partnership and that organisations economic role moving forward.
- How business and business groups could better focus representations into one voice.
- The role of the Swindon Chamber of Commerce, as the accredited Chamber for Swindon, in organising business responses and promoting a single business response.
- The need to ensure consultation periods for Council Policies and Strategies gave business adequate time to respond.
- The success of the Council in recent years in obtaining Government monies for infrastructure projects within the Borough and the likely Government Grant structures moving forward.
- Cross border work and links to other Local Authorities and Government Bodies when considering infrastructure development.
- The need to make provision for innovative and knowledge bases business development which would require land, connectivity and infrastructure.
- A potential role for Swindon Chamber of Commerce to lead work on producing a long term development and spatial vision.

Resolved – That Mr Les Durrant be thanked for attending the meeting and his

interesting presentation.

29. Honda Task Group Update

The Chief Executive and Cabinet Member for the Economy and Place updated the Committee in respect of (i) work of the National and Local Honda Task Groups, including the outcomes of a Ministerial visit to Swindon, (ii) the focus on the needs of Honda employees, (iii) support available for employees in the Honda supply chain, (iv) continued work with Honda, and (v) the use of monies approved by the Council in respect of supporting Honda employees including work with the Local Enterprise Council.

30. Mentorships and Start-Up Support

It was agreed - that consideration of this report be deferred until the March meeting of the Committee.

31. North Star Development

The Committee considered a report of the Cabinet Member for the Town Centre and Head of Property, previously considered by the Scrutiny Committee on 9th December 2019, concerning progress on the North Star Development trigger points. The Committee considered an introduction by the Cabinet Member for the Town Centre and discussed:

- Challenges on financing the project following Brexit and General Election and the Cabinet Members' comments on the delivery of the project.
- The Cabinet Members' offer to forward Member questions to the developer.
- How the delay in the scheme might be used to join up infrastructure for the rail station and accessing the site from the town centre.
- Timescales for the commencement of the development of the site.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

(Councillor Jim Robbins made a personal and non-prejudicial declaration of interest in respect of this item as he worked for United Kingdom and Innovation.)

(Councillor Roger Smith made a personal and non-prejudicial declaration of interest in respect of this item as he worked for Savills.)

32. Work Programme

The Committee considered a report by the Chief Legal Officer setting out the Committee's proposed Work Programme for the Municipal Year 2019/20.

Resolved – (1) That the report be noted.

(2) That a report on assets owned by the Council in the Town Centre be submitted to the next meeting of the Committee.

(3) That a report be included in the 2020/21 Work Programme on the establishment of a long term economic strategy.

