

GROWING THE ECONOMY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY, 11 MARCH 2020

PRESENT:- Councillors Roger Smith (in the Chair), Nick Burns-Howell, Jenny Jefferies, James Robbins, Roger Smith and Bazil Solomon.

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Emma Faramarzi (Chair).

33. 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.

34. Public Question Time

No public questions were received during the meeting.

35. Minutes

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 12th February 2020, be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

36. Business Engagement

The Chair welcomed Mr James Gregory (Alder King), who had agreed to attend the Committee to provide some insight to the business environment in Swindon.

Mr Gregory thanked the Committee for the invitation to address them. He outlined his employment history in Swindon over the previous twenty-five years and raised the following points and responded to Members questions in respect:

- That whilst he felt the Council was performing well given the restraints it faced he felt additional work was required in respect of the perception of the town although he felt this had improved in recent years.
- That it was important that any development and positive news, whether it was infrastructure development or attracting new businesses, was disseminated to the regional and national business community.
- The benefits arising from the electrification of the rail line together with the potential for a second station serving Swindon although it was important that this did not interfere with the delivery of other infrastructure projects that would benefit the town.
- The development of the bus boulevard which, even given the four to five year development phase, was positive news.
- Private sector developments such as the ski dome on the current Oasis leisure centre site and the Locarno site which need to be brought forward to the construction stage.
- The challenges of office development within the town which were not unique

outside of the major cities.

- The benefits to the town of having a diverse range of companies and mix of size of employers compared to some town and cities that were reliant on one major employer either private or public sector. This provided an element of stability and offered the opportunity to refresh employers when necessary.
- The continued need to identify employment land; it was noted that the timescales for development and future use of the Honda site was unknown.
- The importance of considering as wide a range of industrial, manufacturing or other employment opportunities for the Honda site once this was made available to maximise its use on a local, regional and national basis.
- The increasing challenges facing the majority of town centres across the country, including Swindon's, especially given the convenience of on-line shopping. The shrinking of the town centre to make it more vibrant and to provide an enhanced shopping experience would be problematic due to the number of landowners.
- The improvement in the town's housing stock which was important for the retention and expansion of employment to maximise Swindon's geographic location.
- Improvements such as the maintenance of gateway to the town, keeping them litter free, would be financially relatively minor but would greatly benefit the visual enhancement and first impression of the town for potential new business and visitors.

Ways to make the town centre more attractive and diversify its use to encourage people to it and compliment the variety of shops, this might include more targeted and positive promotion, bringing forward the new bus boulevard project, possibly the use of shorter leases to allow more innovation and to maximise trends as well maintaining it and keeping it free of litter.

- The benefits arising from the development of the Oasis site, which was different and would help to positively promote the town and help bring visitors into Swindon.
- The need to link this development with the town centre through the creation of a golden triangle linking the Oasis site, the Outlet Centre and town centre and to enable visitors to have a quality journey and experience throughout the town.
- The adverse effect of the closure of the Honda manufacturing site on the local supply chain providers and on land availability.
- The potential for attracting new types of business to Swindon with the availability of the Honda site, especially given the high skill base of workers who might be available, such as television or film production.

Resolved – That Mr James Gregory be thanked for his interesting and useful presentation.

37. Business Start Up Support Summary

The Business and Economy Manager, Growth and Regeneration setting out the

current and proposed Business Start-Up Support programmes and drew Members' attention to:

- The current business start-up support offered by the Council and set out within the report.
- National support programmes which tended to concentrate on hard to reach businesses or individuals who required additional support to start up a business through programmes, phone lines and online.
- The Council had supported the Swindon and Wiltshire Growth Hub since its creation and this was where most of the reactive and/or straightforward enquiries made to the Council were directed.
- New or existing companies could register themselves in the Growth Hub profile. If company details and the type of information required was included in the company profile the welcome page when logging in would be tailored to the company. Email and social media would also be forwarded.
- Companies and inward investment requiring land could be made to the Council who were supported in this work by a number of companies.
- Tech Swindon also had clustered development and was supported by the Council. This was centred on recently established companies, including not restricted to the Workshed in Swindon. It facilitated newly established companies to meet to interact and learn from each other.
- There were also Swindon founder events on social media which were growing and were led by the founders of companies themselves to pass on experiences in setting up and establishing companies. These were tech themed and speakers were tech founders. These meetings were held at various venues across the town and were intended to allow the development of relationships across tech companies.
- The Business and Economy Team account management service which worked with a number of companies of varying sizes that were strategically important. The Council would try to facilitate introductions between companies if requested.
- The Workshed was the Council owned incubation space for digital technology companies was operated on a concession contract by Wiltshire Council as part of the enterprise Network. All the offices were let and occupancy of co-working spaces was increasing. Meeting rooms at the workshop were also increasing being booked by outside organisations.
- The Swindon & Wiltshire Local Enterprise Partnership, supported by both Swindon and Wiltshire Councils, has applied for £2.7 million SIF funding for the SME Competiveness Programme as is expected to hear the bid outcome imminently. The programme support training programmes and would offer start-up and scale up support and has a specific Honda-related element with match funding.

Following the presentation Members discussed:

- The importance of SMEs in the national and local economy.
- The importance of the support available for SME tech start-up companies and that was particularly relevant when the company was first created and when they were often most vulnerable.
- The potential effect the Corona virus might have on start-up companies and self-employed entrepreneurs and how government guidance and advice might be disseminated to small companies through the Growth Hub and

other sources.

- The recent budgetary announcements by Central Government in support of small businesses during the Corona virus crisis.
- The Council's role in firstly dealing with the impact of the corona virus and then later in the town's economic recovery.
- The future management of the Workshed when the current contract came to an end.
- Work by officers to attract high tech companies to Swindon both through European Funding for companies outside of Swindon and UK based companies and in creating the environment that would encourage relocation to Swindon.

Resolved – That the existing national and local provision for business start-up support and planned support be noted.

38. Learning Town Update

With the agreement of the Committee this item was deferred.

39. Town Centre Parking on Sundays

With the agreement of the Committee this item was deferred.