

## **GROWING THE ECONOMY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**WEDNESDAY, 4 NOVEMBER 2020**

PRESENT:- Councillors Kevin Parry (Chair); Junab Ali, Jenny Jefferies, Vinay Manro, Roger Smith, Rahul Tarar and Timothy Swinyard.

Also in attendance Councillor Dale Heenan (Cabinet Member for the Town Centre, Culture and Heritage) and Councillor Gary Sumner (Cabinet Member for Strategic Infrastructure, Transport and Planning).

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Abdul Amin, Nick Burns-Howell and Mark Dempsey.

### **9. Declarations of Interest**

The Chair reminded Members of the need to declare any known interests in any matters to be considered at the meeting.

Councillor Kevin Parry made a non prejudicial declaration of interest in respect of Agenda Item 5 as he was employed by Honda.

Councillor Roger Smith made a non prejudicial declaration of interest in respect of Agenda Item 5 as he was employed by Savilles.

Councillor Junab Ali made a non prejudicial declaration of interest as he was a Non-Executive Director for Business West.

### **10. Public Question Time**

No public questions were received during the meeting.

### **11. Minutes**

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 13<sup>th</sup> September 2020, be confirmed and signed as a correct record.

### **12. Swindon Employment Land Review**

The Cabinet Member for Strategic Infrastructure, Transport and Planning, Director of Economy, Growth and Place and Director of Strategic Planning submitted a joint report updating the Committee on the work with business and other partners in support of ensuring that the Borough has a sufficient supply of employment land to meet our short and long-term needs through the Local Plan Review.

The Cabinet Member for Strategic Infrastructure, Transport and Planning and the Council's Planning Manager highlighted the following issues as part of their presentation and members' scrutiny:

- The Council's Local Plan was currently under review, including existing and

future employment land sites within the Borough.

- An overview of current employment land within the Borough which included, the optimisation of key employment areas, improving the quality of key employment areas, better marketing those employment areas and planning for longer term growth.
- Forward planning would take account of Government initiatives such as the Economic Heartland and improvements to the A419 which had a long-term effect on Swindon's employment offer and infrastructure to support employment land.
- The 36 employment areas in the town covering approximately 2 million square meters of floor space, including Offices (19%), Factories (33%) and Warehouses (48%).
- The town offered a strong industrial location with transport links, with a number of high performing sites with quality buildings.
- There were challenges with aging stock and some underperforming employment areas and the conversion of some aging office buildings into residential usage.
- The COVID-19 pandemic had seen an acceleration of the trend towards homework working and the flexible use of office space. Other trends saw a demand for larger units to accommodate automation and for large Grade "A" logistics and warehousing floor space.
- Examples of new employment developments such as (i) the Zurich Offices which offered high quality accommodation with a focus on staff wellbeing, collaboration space and which had high sustainability credentials, (ii) the BMW manufacturing building comprising a 0.8 hectares footprint, 3 mezzanine levels, 13,000 square metres of floor space and which was highly automated, and (iii) The Hub at Symmetry Park which was a 27 hectare site with 218 square metres of floor space over 4 storeys and which would create between 1,500 and 2,000 jobs.
- Work to market Swindon through digital and other approaches.
- The strategy responded to changing market needs through (i) optimising key employment land, (ii) opportunities to subdivide or assemble sites and (iii) a focus on bringing forward long time vacant buildings and/or sites.
- The underlying principles of the employment land review to promote and optimise employment land within the Borough.
- The current and potential future trends relating to retail both with the urban setting and in district centres and workshops with developers to promote retail and office opportunities.
- The improvement of the quality of employment areas including engagement with occupiers and site owners, improvement to maintenance, signage and upkeep, wider environmental enhancements, and facility and infrastructure improvements.
- The marketing of key employment areas through the identification of unique or key selling points such as fibre optic cables, the branding of employment areas and the promotion of sector clusters and collaboration between agents, businesses, owners and the council.
- An outline of current work in relation to the current Honda site, the Cheney Manor Industrial Estate, the R&D Hub at Wroughton Airfield, the Blackworth Business Park to fully utilise these.
- The need to repurpose ageing office accommodation in the town centre.
- The development and marketing of the Carriage Works and the creation of a

knowledge cluster at this site and the use of a historic building to create a distinctive offer.

- The development of an employment land register and how this might be utilised in the future.

Resolved – That work on the Swindon Employment Land Review be noted.

### **13. Town Centre Recovery Plan Update**

The Director of Economy and Growth submitted a report updating Members on the progress of developing the Town Centre Recovery Plan which sets out the activity being undertaken by Swindon Borough Council in partnership with local business to lead safe reopening of the high street, and the recovery in the town centre.

In presenting the report the Cabinet Member for the Town Centre, Culture and Heritage and the Director of Economy, Growth and Place highlighted the following issues and responded to Members' questions in relation to:

- The impact on the town centre recovery plan arising from the current COVID-19 pandemic.
- Work with partners on an adapted version of the Institute of Place Management Recovery Framework going through crisis, pre-recovery, recovery and transformation phases and an explanation of each of these elements.
- The mission of the recovery plan to attract people and businesses to Swindon post COVID-19.
- The Plan's Strategy to position Swindon as a top UK town for quality of life, to attract investment and funding, to challenge perceptions and to react quickly as a collaborative network.
- The Plan's objectives to increase footfall levels, economic activity, and level of investment to reduce crime rates and other objectives that might be agreed by the Plan Ahead Teams.
- The establishment of shareholder networks and leadership group.
- A shared comprehension that these work could not be undertaken by one organisation but would require partnership working.
- The creation and work of plan ahead teams including (i) Retails (campaigns, advertising, events, empty units), (ii) Community (engagement strategy, art and pop-ups, social media), (iii) Leisure (outdoor seating, performance space), (iv) Commercial (flexible use of space, incubation hubs, promotions), (v) Public Space (markets, soft landscaping/window dressing, outdoor seating), (vi) Transport (EATF, ways to encourage visitors, liaison with bus and taxi operators), (vii) Marketing (communications plan, shared promotional events for the town centre), and (viii) Public Space (RHSS, active travel, social distancing, public health, enforcement).
- The diversification of the current town centre retail area to address the current perception of the town centre and its offer.
- The recovery of footfall in the town centre following the end of the initial lockdown period which had proven stronger than many other towns and cities.
- The identification of funding opportunities for businesses and to improvement the town centre environment.
- The use of social media to promote the town centre, businesses situated

within it and activities being promoted.

- The use of click and collect services to help support business through lock-down scenarios.
- The creation of safe areas in a landscaped setting to promote café/leisure type culture which could help extend patrons visits to the town centre.
- The promotion of the town centre through a number of business and Council social media and other opportunities such as Switch onto Swindon.
- The need to consolidate the number of retail outlets and area of the town centre area and how the wider area might be utilised.
- An increase of 15 new businesses in the town centre following the end of the first lockdown period.
- That only two of the vacant units in the town centre were owned by the Council and the role therefore, of the private sector, in the town centre regeneration process.

Resolved – That the report outlining work to support the recovery of Swindon Town Centre by working in partnership with local business and community groups to create safe, attractive and successful public spaces and to support local businesses as they reopen be noted and supported.

#### **14. Apprenticeship Task Group - Plan of Action**

The Head of Skills, Employment and Lifelong Learning submitted a report updating Members on work relating to Apprenticeships that has taken place to date, outline the key opportunities and challenges and to present the Plan of Action, outlining the recommended activity to achieve an increase in Apprenticeship opportunities.

In presenting the report the Head of Skills, Employment and Lifelong Learning and the Higher Education and Apprenticeships Project Manager highlighted the following issues and responded to Members' questions in relation to:

- Work undertaken by the Apprenticeship Task Group to address ongoing issues, both locally and nationally, since the previous meeting of the Committee.
- That the chairs of this Committee and the Children's Health, Education and Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee had agreed to be champions for this work.
- The report outlined progress made by the Task Group in engaging employers and employer representatives (including schools).
- The percentage of apprenticeships against Government targets started since 2015 had largely been above the national figure but below the target set.
- Some of the reason for the reduction in apprenticeships against target had been due to significant changes in national regulations (funding and delivery and quality of apprenticeships) around 2017.
- This had required employers to reconsider funding of apprenticeships as well as their development and apprenticeship strategies.
- An overview of Intermediate, Advanced, Higher Level and Degree Level Apprenticeships following Government reforms.
- A breakdown of apprenticeship starts since 2015 which had only seen increases in Higher Level and Degree Level apprenticeships during that period.

- Reasons for the decline in Intermediate Apprenticeships included small and medium enterprise companies had previously focused on the 16-18 year age group and this funding had been reduced and business administration apprenticeships had also ceased.
- The government focus on Higher Level and Degree Level apprenticeships had seen these increase.
- A breakdown in the number and percentage of apprenticeships by sector within the Borough since 2105 with Business, Administration, Law and retail showing the greatest number of apprenticeship starts over the period.
- Challenges highlighted by employers included (i) the complexity of the apprenticeship landscape, particularly to Small to Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) who have limited resource, time and consequently expertise within their organisations, (ii) that although the profile of apprenticeships has been raised in the last few years, increasing the awareness of apprenticeships as a pathway to both acquiring new skills and as a route to upskilling and reskilling continues to be a challenge, (iii) that Higher Level and Degree Apprenticeships are not regarded consistently across schools as an alternative route into Higher Education and acquiring the skills required by employers, and (iv) ensuring that from entry level through to Higher Level apprenticeships have an inclusive range of options in the town, providing pathways for all residents to progress in their chosen career.
- Opportunities with apprenticeships include (i) apprenticeships provide the opportunity to recruit and train for those difficult to fill positions and skills shortage areas, (ii) apprenticeships enable employers to upskill and re-skill their existing workforce ensuring a solid pipeline of talent for the future, (iii) apprenticeships are a key route for residents to continue learning while working, helping them to progress in their chosen career, (iv) apprenticeships are now available at degree and Postgraduate level, enabling higher level skills to be achieved through an additional route to the traditional university one, (v) that there are more options for routes into apprenticeships through schemes such as Kickstart and enhanced Traineeships, as well as employer incentives.
- Key areas of the action plan which included (i) support to enable all businesses, and in particular Small and Medium enterprises to access the expertise and resources to navigate the apprenticeship landscape, (ii) increasing awareness of the benefits of apprenticeships to both employers and within the wider community, (iii) increasing awareness and engagement consistently across all Borough schools and colleges, particularly at Higher and Degree Level, and (iv) ensuring that the local range and quality of provision meets employer demand, and that employers are better able to understand the offer.
- Sharing best practice in respect of creating apprenticeships.
- How business representatives were chosen to serve on the Apprenticeship Task Group and how the Task Group could encourage and support smaller employers in employing apprentices.
- The need to identify how small business can be offered additional support, including levy transfers, when employing apprentices.

Resolved - That the progress to date, the challenges and opportunities and the draft Plan of Action in Appendix 1 to the report be noted.

**15.**

**Work Programme 2020/21**

The Committee considered a report by the Chief Legal Officer setting out the Committee's proposed Work Programme for the Municipal Year 2020/21.

Resolved – That the report be noted and Work Programme for the current Municipal Year be approved.