

GROWING THE ECONOMY OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY, 31 JANUARY 2018

PRESENT:- Councillors Emma Famarzi (Chair), Wayne Crabbe, Mark Dempsey, Oliver Donachie, Dale Heenan (Vice-Chair), Gemma McCracken, Jane Milner-Barry, Gary Sumner, and Chris Watts.

11. Declarations of Interest

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

No such declarations were made.

12. Public Question Time

There were no public questions.

13. Minutes

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 8th November 2017 be confirmed and signed.

14. Business Rates

The Corporate Director Resources and Transformation submitted a report providing an update on relevant Business Rates issues. The report considered that effective management of financial resources through robust financial management underpins the Council's ability to achieve its plans and priorities and that responsible budget management underpins the Council's strategic objective of consistently making the best use of all available resources.

The report stated that:

- It was the intention of the government to bring forward the planned switch in the indexation of business rates from RPI (which is the measure of inflation currently used) to the main measure of inflation, currently CPI, by two years to April 2018.
- The frequency of revaluations would be increased to every three years, following the next revaluation due in 2022.
- The pubs relief scheme would be extended by a further year.
- No additional funding is being provided in relation to the extension of the pubs measure and the government expects local authorities to have all the necessary arrangements in place.
- Local business rates retention will move from 50% to 75% in 2020/21 and that a reset of the business rates retention system will take place in the same year.
- The Council has implemented schemes to help businesses having large increases in rates to pay following the revaluation.
- For the 2017 valuation list the government has introduced a new appeals system if ratepayers disagree with their rating assessment.

At the meeting, Gavin Calthrop, the Head of Place Marketing, commented that the Council was actively promoting Swindon as a place for business to relocate to and that there was a targeted drive to encourage inward investment from businesses already located in Swindon. He undertook to circulate to Members of the Committee a copy of a report “Centre for Cities”, which sets out to identify which cities will be affected the most with the emergence of technological advances.

The Committee discussed the possibility of Dyson and other businesses from China relocating to Swindon.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

15. Apprenticeships, Higher Education and Skills

The Corporate Director, Children’s Services, submitted a report in response to a request from the Committee for officers to report on progress on key elements of the Skills and Employment Strategy relating to Higher Education and Apprenticeships. The report supports Priority Two of the Council’s Vision to “offer educational opportunities that lead to the right skills and right jobs in the right places, Pledge 18 (increase the number of businesses employing an apprentice and Pledge 19 (secure a range of options to access Higher Education in Swindon).

The report detailed:

- The Skills and Employment Strategy which was endorsed by Cabinet in September 2017. The strategy was developed to summarise the skills and employment priorities and activities that need to take place to achieve the vision and overall aims for skills as outlined in the draft Economic Strategy.
- The Higher Education Strategy which outlines the key activity to secure a range of options to access Higher Education in Swindon that is responsive to employer need, contributes to narrowing the participation gap and makes sustained improvements in participation rates of young people whilst offering an opportunity for up-skilling for residents in employment.
- A Swindon and Wiltshire Local Enterprise Partnership (SWLEP) wide Apprenticeship Growth Strategy will be presented to the Swindon Skills and Employment Board on the 31st January 2018. The strategy includes an Action Plan, outlining actions for all key stakeholders with the SWLEP Skills and Talent sub group, supported by the two local authorities being responsible for co-ordination and monitoring of the plan.

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Sally Burnett, Commissioner, Routes to Employment advised the Committee of the need to make businesses aware of the benefits of employing apprentices and undertook to circulate to Members of the Committee the drop-out figures for apprenticeships.

Resolved – That the report be noted in terms of progress on Apprenticeships and Higher Education.

16. Business West

Gavin Calthrop advised the Committee that Business West hold a bi-monthly meeting with local MP’s and the Leader of the Council. He invited the Chair and one other Member of the Committee to attend the next meeting to be held on March 1st.

He advised that a visit had been arranged for Members of the Committee to Woking Borough Council on the 8th March to meet with their Leader of the Council, Chief Executive and senior Officers to discuss how Woking has been successful in accelerating town centre regeneration projects, what can Swindon learn from this and the role of elected Members.

17. Work Programme 2017/18

The Committee considered its work programme for 2017/18 and felt it would be useful if the next meeting of the Committee was re-arranged after the visit to Woking Borough Council.