

ECONOMY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Thursday, 1 April 2021

PRESENT – Councillors Durham (Chair), Bartch, Boddy, Crudass, Harker, L Hughes, Mrs D Jones, McEwan, Paley, Renton and Tait

APOLOGIES –

ABSENT –

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE – Councillors Johnson, Keir and Marshall

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE – Elizabeth Davison (Group Director of Operations), Mark Ladyman (Assistant Director Economic Growth), Mike Crawshaw (Head of Leisure and Cultural Services), Christopher Mains (Town's Fund Programme Manager), Andrew Perkin (Business Growth and Investment Manager), Jochen Werres (Planning Policy Officer) and Shirley Wright (Democratic Manager)

ER26 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Tait declared an interest in Minutes ER31 and ER32 below as an employee of BT and EE. There were no other declarations of interest reported at the meeting.

ER27 MINUTES

Submitted – The Minutes of a meeting of this Scrutiny Committee held on 4 February, 2021.

RESOLVED – That the Minutes be approved as a correct record.

ER28 PERFORMANCE INDICATORS QUARTER 3 2020/21

The Managing Director submitted a report (previously circulated) providing Members with information in relation to performance against key performance indicators for quarter 3 2020/21 for those areas within the remit of this Scrutiny Committee.

It was reported that the indicators were measured against targets and were compared to previous years, however, Members were requested to note that this had been a very different year in view of the Covid 19 pandemic and that whilst the Council's response to the pandemic had been extremely positive, there had been an impact on some services which needed to be taken into account.

Further specific detailed information on the performance in areas across Revenues, Governance and the Local Economy was contained within the submitted report.

Discussion ensued on the performance in relation to sickness absence within the Authority which was showing an improvement against the same period last year and the possible reason for that due to people having the flexibility to work from home, the actions being taken in relation to the management of stress related absence which

remained the highest absence reason; evidence which suggested that stress related absence nationally was more prevalent in women than men due to loneliness, anxiety and depression, although from the analysis undertaken within the Local Authority, there was no evidence to suggest that working from home did have a negative impact on the figures; the 76 per cent return rate of the Working from Home Survey which had been undertaken and was currently being analysed and which showed that approximately 80 per cent of employees were comfortable working from home, the need to monitor the effect of any return to the office on employees, whether there was any indication of any potential increase in staff turnover once normality returned; and the reduction in the number of reportable accidents which was positive.

Reference was also made to those performance indicators in relation to the employment rate, the average annual income of Darlington residents and Darlington employees and clarification was given that the indicator in relation to the annual average income of Darlington residents was inclusive of unemployment, pension incomes etc. Following a question by a Member about whether there may have been an uplift in lower paid jobs in the Town as although the employment rate had increased by six per cent in 2019/20 the average employee income had decreased, it was reported that there were a number of influences which affected the outcome of this indicator and a full analysis could be undertaken to understand those reasons.

In relation to the Planning indicators and the delay in determining both major and minor applications which had shown a drop in performance, it was reported that as the authority did not receive many major applications, any delay would have a detrimental impact on the indicator and that, in relation to the minor applications, this was due to resource issues in the current circumstances and Members were reassured that performance would improve.

RESOLVED – That the report be received.

ER29 RE-OPENING OF TOWN CENTRE BUSINESSES

The Assistant Director Economic Growth and the Head of Culture gave Members a verbal update on the work currently being undertaken to support the re-opening of Town Centre businesses when restrictions began to be lifted.

It was reported that although there was still some uncertainty around the actual dates for the lifting of some restrictions, work was on-going in preparation of the expectation that hospitality, non-essential retail and other businesses would be able to open from 12 April 2021 and that support was being given around that and ensuring that businesses were equipped to open in a safe manner.

Members were advised that following the successful re-opening of the Town Centre in August last year, it was planned to follow those principles again and specific information on how this would be achieved was presented to Members, including options being looked at to assist businesses being able to trade outside safely and taking into account any accessibility issues; engagement and networking between businesses to assist and share learning with each other; promotional campaigns to welcome people to Darlington, based on the spring theme; and events planned within the Town for the remainder of the year, particularly over the next few weeks, which were focussed on street theatre and roving entertainment to create an atmosphere of

warmth and welcome and ensure that static crowds were not gathering.

RESOLVED – That the update be noted.

ER30 COVID-19 - BUSINESS SUPPORT GRANTS UPDATE

The Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report (previously circulated) updating Members on the current position in relation to the various Government funded support grant schemes allocated to local authorities to enable them to support local businesses adversely affected by the Covid 19 restrictions. Information was also provided on a number of other business support measures which had been announced in the March 2021 Budget.

It was reported that although some of the schemes had now closed of the six support schemes which had been operating £11,272,736.81 had been awarded to date to Darlington businesses.

Members were advised that, with effect from today, a new scheme of support had been launched, which included £5 billion in Restart Grants to support local economies as they emerged from the pandemic and lockdown restrictions and commenced a path of recovery. It was reported that the restart grant which superseded the existing wide range of grants, with the exception of the Additional Restrictions Grant, would offer those businesses which had been forced to close during lockdown, one-off financial support with grants of up to £6,000 for non-essential retail and up to £18,000 for hospitality, leisure, personal care and accommodation businesses, however the Additional Restrictions Grant was only available to those businesses which had received support under the National Local Restriction Support Grant Schemes.

Discussion ensued on how much of the £5 billion restart grant would be allocated to Darlington; how those grants would be awarded; the support given to local businesses to ensure they applied for any grants they were entitled to; the current criteria in Darlington for entitlement to the Additional Restrictions Grant which did not include the construction industry as a priority sector; the challenges faced by the local authority in prioritising sectors to receive support and to regular reviews of the scheme to review those priority sectors; the intention that all the government funding which had been allocated would be utilised and allocated to local businesses and the need to ensure and support all businesses in applying for any eligible grants to ensure the schemes were maximised.

RESOLVED – That the update be noted.

ER31 TOWNS FUND - UPDATE

The Towns Fund Programme Manager gave a verbal update on the progress, to date, in relation to the use of the £1 million of accelerated funding as part of the Towns Fund – Forward Funding.

The presentation covered four projects within the overall project which included improvements to the historic Yards, Town Centre lighting enhancements, Town Centre WIFI and the acquisition of Northgate property and reference was made to the positive feedback which had been received on those individual projects and the

successful engagement with local businesses both in the Yards and along Skinnergate.

Reference was also made to the £22.3 million which had been secured through the Town Deal to fund the Town Investment Plan which aimed to drive the sustainable economic regeneration of the town to deliver long term economic and productivity growth; the nine intervention projects within the Heads of Terms Agreement; the detailed prioritised project information which had been provided to the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government; the completion of the business cases which were required for each intervention; and the Town Deal Summary Document which needed to be submitted to the Government within twelve months of agreeing the Heads of Terms.

It was also reported that the Authority had been successful in receiving additional capacity funding of £70,000 which would go into the fund to assist in its delivery.

Discussion ensued on the Adult learning project, a project with Darlington College which was one of the nine interventions and which had been fast tracked and funding of £575,000 allocated and the next steps in relation to engagement and project development as part of the overall investment plan.

It was suggested that Members could undertake some visits to see some of the work which had been and was continuing to be undertaken.

RESOLVED – That the current position be noted.

ER32 BROADBAND INFRASTRUCTURE IN DARLINGTON - UPDATE

The Director of Economic Growth and Neighbourhood Services submitted a report (previously circulated) updating Members on the current position in relation to Broadband Infrastructure and roll out across the Town. It was reported that the infrastructure rollout and upgrades to gigabit enabled speeds on fibre to premises was taking place via three different routes, namely commercial roll out; publicly funded and the current Rural Gigabit Voucher Scheme.

It was reported that some areas of the Town and rural areas were not currently well serviced by Broadband and the submitted report outlined what was currently available to communities; the commitment to ensure that any new build had access to gigabit enabled broadband; to work which was being undertaken with partners and providers; to the challenges which were faced with the infrastructure having a mix of private and public sector providers and to the view that that the infrastructure should be undertaken by the public sector to ensure that all citizens have fair access.

RESOLVED – That the report be noted.

ER33 WORK PROGRAMME

The Managing Director submitted a report (previously circulated) on the work programme of this Scrutiny Committee for the Municipal Year 2020/21.

It was reported that, at this stage in the Municipal Year, the Scrutiny Committee had

undertaken the majority of work included within its work programme and that the scheduled items had been included in the archived section of the submitted report. Those items would however, be brought forward again at the start of the 2021/22 Municipal Year for Members to consider if they wished to include them in the work programme for the next Municipal Year.

Reference was also made to two items which had not been brought to this Scrutiny Committee this year due to resource issues associated with the work being done in relation to the current pandemic and timing issues and it was reported that these would be brought to the Scrutiny Committee later this year.

In relation to the Performance Indicators within the remit of this Scrutiny Committee it was suggested that Members meet to discuss which indicators they would like to see as part of the future work programme.

RESOLVED – That the report be received.