

Minutes

Corporate Services, Commerce and Communities
Policy Overview Committee
Tuesday, 5 November 2019
Meeting held at Committee Room 5 - Civic Centre,
High Street, Uxbridge



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Members Present:

Councillors Richard Mills (Chairman)
Wayne Bridges (Vice-Chairman)
Lindsay Bliss
Nicola Brightman
Farhad Choubedar
Alan Deville
Scott Farley
Martin Goddard

Apologies:

Jazz Dhillon

Officers Present:

Sheryl Dixon, Economic Development Officer
Fiona Gibbs, Stronger Communities Manager
David Knowles, Transport & Projects Senior Manager
Inga Spencer, Senior Economic Development Officer
Luke Taylor, Democratic Services Officer

27. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Jazz Dhillon.

28. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

29. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 10 OCTOBER 2019

RESOLVED: That the minutes of the meeting held on 10 October 2019 be agreed as a correct record.

30. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

It was confirmed that all items were marked as Part I and would be considered in public.

31. REVIEW C: LOCAL COMMERCE, EMPLOYMENT, SKILLS & JOB CREATION

Mr Mike Langan, Chairman of the Hillingdon Chamber of Commerce, and Mr Jonathan Seymour, Treasurer of the Hillingdon Chamber of Commerce, were in attendance at the meeting to give evidence to the Committee.

Mr Langan confirmed that the Chamber of Commerce was established in 1908, and currently has nine people sitting on the Committee in a voluntary capacity fulfilling various roles.

Councillors were informed that the Chamber had worked alongside the Council on a number of issues over the years, including the decision to introduce 30 minutes of free parking in the high streets across the Borough and a special rate for Hillingdon First card holders. The Chamber also runs a number of networking events with partners, seminars on various topics, and has been involved in the Heathrow summit, which is a supply chain for businesses and obtained contracts from the airlines and airports that has been running for 26 years, and the Chamber holds an annual review every November.

The Committee heard that the Chamber also has an annual event with West London Film Studios, based in the south of the Borough, and an annual barbeque at Brunel University, of which proceeds are donated to the Mayor's Charity, in addition to a yearly visit to the Mayor's Charity. Mr Langan stated that the flagship event for the Chamber of Commerce was its annual Expo, which has run for five years, and a sixth will take place in 2020.

Mr Seymour noted that Hillingdon's economy was made up on 99.3% small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and that the benefits of developing a strong local supply chain were enormous. The Committee heard it was important to prioritise local SMEs to ensure they received work, and this in turn helps to build strong local businesses in the Borough. Additionally, a strong local supply chain leads to more economic growth and minimises the impact on the environment, as the businesses involved are local and the supply chain requires less travel.

Members were informed that the visibility of future projects may help improve the supply chain, as it would allow local businesses to see where large projects take place and who they would be working with, while the ability for local SMEs to engage and work together would also help the supply chain's development.

The Committee asked how the relationship between the Chamber of Commerce and Council was, and were informed that there was a close working relationship, with the recent work on improving shop front in town centres and example of this, along with the work done to help train inexperienced shopkeepers to help them run their businesses.

Responding to Councillors' questioning, Mr Langan noted the Chamber's hopes that the supply chain will bring together the 13,000 plus microbusinesses in the Borough and encourage them to look for bigger contracts. Members heard that this has been achieved using the Heathrow Airport supply chain, which helped to introduce businesses together. Mr Seymour noted that the Chamber of Commerce was funded

by modest subscriptions, and its funding meant it was limited in terms of its reach, so there was no opportunity to develop right now.

Mr Langan noted that there were over 300 members of the Chamber, including affiliated members (about 16 in Hayes and 30-40 in Ruislip Manor), and this was a good proportion, and encouraged other Chambers to also work alongside them.

Councillors questioned whether there were any common concerns among members, and were informed that the most common issue raised for the high streets was business rates. Mr Langan noted that this had been a topic of concern for twenty years, as shops have paid rent and business rates, but big companies have never had to pay rates, which means there is not a level playing field. The Committee also heard that another common concern was getting people to work for them, and the Chamber of Commerce work to help get people ready to work in retail, through work with Brunel University and others. Mr Langan informed the Committee that due to low rates of unemployment in Hillingdon, shops had to look further afield for staff, while Mr Langan believed that roughly 50% of shopkeepers living outside the Borough. Additionally, the uncertainty surrounding Brexit was also a concern for members.

Responding to the Committee, Mr Langan said the Chamber of Commerce retained a strong relationship with a number of schools through the Hayes and Ruislip business forums, but in the rest of the Borough, schools tended to act independently. On occasions, the Chamber of Commerce have gone into schools, but there is a lack of careers advice in some schools. Mr Langan explained that, currently, this was not a priority, as such, but the Chamber would help out where possible, and engaged closely with Brunel University and the Central Research Laboratory (CRL).

Members heard that it, in terms of people coming to the Borough, it was important to look outside the high street and focus on initiatives, such as the CRL. If this formula could be replicated across the Borough, it would lead to a very vibrant economy and a more engaging business community in Hillingdon.

Mr Langan informed the Committee that the area with the largest skills shortage was in construction, and while it was clear that a lot of construction would be taking place across the UK in the last ten to fifteen years, which led to a lot of overseas workers in the industry, as the lack of investment in colleges to train people with the skills needed in construction. Mr Langan noted that there was a big construction academy now established on the Southall Waterside development, and something similar in Hillingdon would be helpful as there is still a large amount of construction taking place in the Borough.

The Committee questioned whether the internet has been a friend or foe to local shops, and were informed that it was seen as a threat to the high streets and was very difficult to compete with. Mr Langan stated that the internet was bad news for high street stores, but in general, Hillingdon was doing well. However, if this were to change, a strategy is needed to help the high streets regenerate if required, and one way of doing this would be to drive traffic into high streets.

Members were informed that planning policy benefitted big stores and local high streets suffered, but the introduction of 30-minute free parking in Hillingdon helped hugely. In addition to this, it was helpful to have services such as doctors and dentists on high streets, and this should be included in planning policy, as it would bring people to the high street and thus shops benefit from the local activity and foot traffic. As such, it was vital that Councils move people towards the high streets to help their survival.

The Committee thanked the witnesses for their time and contributions, and noted the evidence given.

RESOLVED: That the Committee noted the evidence heard at the witness session.

32. COMMUNITY COHESION

The Council's Stronger Communities Manager and Prevent Lead introduced a report that outlined what action the Council took to reach out to all communities to promote cohesion.

Members heard that the promotion of community cohesion by the Council was underpinned by partnerships, not only with other statutory agencies, but also alongside the voluntary sector and diverse communities, and this work is done through partnership working with the Council's communications team, and also events and activities that are provided to Hillingdon residents.

The Council identified three key groups to engage with, and these were women, particularly isolated women from different community backgrounds, faith communities, and children and young people. It was noted that if the work can reach young people, it can often reach their parents, families and wider community.

It is important to ensure that all communities have access to services, and Members heard that it was important to utilise libraries and community events to help people engage, not just from different faith or ethnicities, but also ages, genders and residents with disabilities, as the events were a good way of bringing people together.

The Committee commended the comprehensive report before them, and noted that it highlighted the huge amount of work the Council do on community cohesion.

Responding to Councillors' questioning, the Stronger Communities Manager and Prevent Lead confirmed that the Stronger Communities Partnership, predominantly made up of external partner agencies, meet quarterly and aim to look at how the Council is working to develop its programmes that feed into local strategic priorities.

Members asked how the Council was reaching those women who were not part of women's groups and may have been identified as in need of extra support, and were informed that the Council works alongside a lot of different community organisations and voluntary sector groups, and the library services are also involved in comprehensive work that includes people with dementia or mental health needs. The

Committee heard that activities are promoted by many different areas to bring people together, and community events are a good opportunity for this.

The Stronger Communities Manager and Prevent Lead stated that to reach isolated people in the Borough, many different parts of the Council were involved. It is hard to map exactly where all these opportunities are, but there is a strong grants sector which is funded by the Council that can help to reach out to these people too. Members heard that it building relationships with communities that do not engage the Council.

The Committee were informed that the Stronger Communities Manager and Prevent lead worked alongside colleagues, leading on Hayes Fun Day, and have worked hard to get a lot of people involved. However, across the voluntary sector it is harder to get people to volunteer at events such as the Fun Day, but there is still a good level of diversity that is increasing at the event, despite these challenges.

Responding to questioning from Members, the Stronger Communities Manager and Prevent Lead noted that there used to be a national survey that was used to measure the levels of success with community cohesion, but as this no longer takes place, other measures must be used. The Council considers factors such as social unrest, groups that promote divisive ideals and hate crime, but as there are few instances of this in Hillingdon, it is important to look at other factors that may not be as prevalent as community engagement. The Committee heard that should tensions arise, it was quite usual for communities to come together, but it was difficult to find this fact out before the tensions arose, so it was important to keep tabs on community dynamics with the police to mitigate any issues. However, the way that partnerships work across the Borough was very positive and there were a lot of services on hand to help.

Members asked what action the Council took to prevent disharmony, and were informed that the Stronger Communities Manager and Prevent Lead works with officers and the Police to monitor social media, and where issues arise, look at how the issue was being challenged by others on social media. Councillors heard that it was important to see how others are responding and let the issue play out, and then action to intervene can be taken if necessary, but this action must be a measured response. However, if others from Hillingdon's communities are already challenging this behaviour, it can be much more powerful than a response from the Council. The Committee was informed that officers look at what is going on and escalate where required, but communities must feel empowered to take these issues on themselves, and the Council is good at allowing this.

The Stronger Communities Manager and Prevent lead, responding to questioning, noted that safeguarding children who were not in mainstream education was a challenge, and officers work collaboratively, and be aware of who are utilising venues, before putting early alerts in place should there be concerns, but there are challenges in terms of the Council's statutory powers.

The Committee thanked the Stronger Communities Manager and Prevent Lead for their report, which was noted.

RESOLVED: That the Committee note the report on Community Cohesion.

33. FORWARD PLAN

Members sought clarification on the item regarding Assistance to Hillingdon's Local Voluntary Organisations, regarding the timing and consultation with the Committee, and requested a written update outside of the meeting.

RESOLVED: That the Forward Plan be noted.

34. WORK PROGRAMME 2018/2020

RESOLVED: That the Work Programme 2018/20 be noted.