

Economy and Regeneration Task Force: Options and Recommendations

Introduction

'Wirral's Future' is the largest and most far-reaching consultation exercise ever undertaken by the Council. The decision to develop it was initiated at a meeting of the Council's Cabinet on the 24th June 2010 in response to the existing budgetary challenges faced by the local authority. The level of engagement undertaken within the scope of the consultation has been significant, with over 40,000 paper questionnaires being distributed, as well as being available online. Through the consultation road show, 10,000 people were directly engaged.

Four independent Task Forces were established with a remit to review the Council's services in relation to four areas: Economy and Regeneration; Living in Wirral; Adult Social Services and Children and Young People's Services. The Task Forces were independently chaired. Task Forces were asked to develop a series of options papers which would form the basis of a wider public consultation and programme of engagement with residents, staff, businesses and stakeholders in the voluntary, community and faith sector. The key mechanism for consultation and engagement activities was a questionnaire based on the options papers which contained a general Part A (including questions about satisfaction with Wirral as a place to live) and four themed sections relating to each of the Task Forces. Information relating to the Task Forces and the how the public consultation was undertaken is available at www.wirral.gov.uk/wirralfuture

Economy and Regeneration Task Force

Discussions took place across the following areas:

People

- An increase in self-employment
- Tackling barriers to work and linking people to jobs
- Equip residents with the relevant skills to match employer demand

Places

- Planning for investment
- More and better business space
- Creating the environment for economic growth
- Greater awareness of the Wirral 'brand'

Business

- Increase the number of businesses
- A larger stock of VAT registered businesses
- More trading in national and international markets
- More inward investment

Further to these discussions, the Task Force agreed a series of options that they wished to be considered and for consultation with the public. The section of the questionnaire relating to Economy and Regeneration was developed in accordance with the options proposed by the Task Force. The questions asked and the consultation responses can be found at www.wirral.gov.uk/wirralfuture

This document re-visits the original options proposed by the Economy and Regeneration Task Force, and makes recommendations for the Council's Cabinet. These have been agreed following consideration of the consultation responses at a final meeting of the Task Force. The Task Force has also undertaken a prioritisation exercise to indicate to Cabinet how it would rank the options highlighted as a 'must' for the Council.

Options and Recommendations

In relation to People the Task Force suggests
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The Council **must**:

Option 1

Ensure that business growth is linked to reducing worklessness. When we attract new developments, or grow businesses, there is a need to ensure that we link the demands of the investor (in terms of recruitment and workforce) with the local supply side, to help address economic inactivity. This is both in relation to local unemployed people and also for local businesses and the supply chain.

This option was upheld by the Task Force as a recommendation to Cabinet.

Option 2

Continue to tackle barriers to work and low skills so that people move from benefits into employment. If this is not addressed, Wirral's economy will continue to under-perform. However, the bulk of any resources and activity to reduce unemployment are driven by Central Government, and are outside the Council's direct influence. It is therefore essential that any Council resources are only used to fill gaps and add value to such mainstream provision.

This option was upheld by the Task Force as a recommendation to Cabinet.

Option 3

Ensure that any future Council programmes to tackle worklessness are directly linked to increased employment opportunities, with clear contractual targets for success. It is essential that such Programmes have robust performance management processes in place to ensure that tangible outputs are achieved.

This option was upheld by the Task Force as a recommendation to Cabinet.

Option 4

Commission effective outreach and engagement activity to directly target those people and groups who may be 'hard to reach'; or who may not access mainstream services; or may have specific multiple barriers to accessing employment.

This option was upheld by the Task Force as a recommendation to Cabinet.

Option 5

The Task Force recommended that the successful Wirral Apprentice programme should continue but that the current eighteen month Council subsidy should be reduced to twelve months.

This option was upheld by the Task Force as a recommendation to Cabinet with the clarification that the aim of this is not to reduce the funding but to get more people through this programme.

The Council **should**:

Option 6

Ensure a clear understanding of Wirral's existing skills base in terms of what skills Wirral residents have, and where the gaps are. With huge regeneration underway in Wirral, residents who have traditionally commuted out of the area to find work, or are unemployed, will need the right skills to be able to benefit from new opportunities.

This option was upheld by the Task Force as a recommendation to Cabinet.

The Council should **stop**:

Option 7

Using any resources for projects that do not relate to hard tangible job outputs. It should rely on mainstream Government Funding through Organisations such as Jobcentre Plus, the Skills Funding Agency and the National Apprenticeship Service to plan and fund programmes and should only intervene itself when there is a clear need and linked to the filling of available employment opportunities.

This option was upheld by the Task Force as a recommendation to Cabinet.

In relation to Place , the Task Force suggests

The Council **must**:

Option 8

Market a clear 'brand' for Wirral, to raise awareness of the place and what it has to offer to investors nationally and internationally, and centred on the importance of making Wirral a really good place for business. This includes developing a strap-line which can be used by businesses to help market them and Wirral. This was consulted on as part of the business survey.

This option was upheld by the Task Force as a recommendation to Cabinet.

Option 9

Continue to play a key role in growing Wirral's economy. There was general agreement that Wirral's economic regeneration needs to be driven by the private sector; private sector growth is the key, but it should be publicly enabled.

This option was upheld by the Task Force as a recommendation to Cabinet.

Option 10

Develop a single, seamless approach to supporting investment. It is important that a good structured investment support mechanism is in place to ensure a smooth transition through each stage of the process; a 'One Stop Shop' for investors. This would include dealing with the initial inquiry; to identifying land or premises; to assisting with recruitment and also helping with financial business planning. It is also recommended that the task force and wider business community is kept abreast, and consulted on, the development of this strategy.

This option was upheld by the Task Force as a recommendation to Cabinet. It was also recommended that the Council should also keep the business community informed about how this is being taken forward.

The Council should:

Option 11

Increase the amount and quality of business space. This includes developing 'incubator' space with shared facilities and business support to help businesses to start up, grow, and become sustainable.

This option was upheld by the Task Force as a recommendation to Cabinet. It was also recommended that grants for carbon-reduction schemes linked to developing premises should be accessed were possible.

Option 12

Consider how better integration between the Wirral Biz contract and Invest Wirral activities can be delivered to enable a more coherent and efficient business support offer.

This option was upheld by the Task Force as a recommendation to Cabinet.

The Council should stop:

Option 13

Funding skills/training programmes that do not lead directly to job outputs.

This option was upheld by the Task Force as a recommendation to Cabinet.

In relation to Businesses , the Task Force suggests
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The Council must:

Option 14

Continue to fund Economic Regeneration to support businesses and grow Wirral's economy. A 3-year Investment Framework for Economic Regeneration should be put in place, with secured costs. If Wirral's economy is successfully grown, this should ultimately generate reductions in the overall Council budget, given the wider impact that economic inactivity and related deprivation currently have on other services.

This option was upheld by the Task Force as a recommendation to Cabinet.

Option 15

Build in a strategic, staged approach to economic regeneration for the short, medium and longer term.

This option was upheld by the Task Force as a recommendation to Cabinet.

Option 16

Continue to offer business support, but review how business grants are targeted to ensure maximum impact on the business in terms of supporting business growth and/or sustainability.

This option was upheld by the Task Force as a recommendation to Cabinet.

Option 17

Continue to support business start ups. However there is also a need for a model that supports (i) sustainability and (ii) growth. It is particularly important to support businesses to become employers, as this will help to tackle economic inactivity.

This option was upheld by the Task Force as a recommendation to Cabinet.

Option 18

Offer support in the form of advice and grants to enable small businesses to cross the VAT threshold. This is important, given that Wirral's business base is made up a significant proportion of non-VAT registered businesses.

This option was upheld by the Task Force as a recommendation to Cabinet. It was also recommended that this support should be targeted for high-growth businesses.

Option 19

Facilitate a volunteer business network to harness the wealth of business skills and expertise that exists in the Borough. This will enable a rich source of support to new and fledgling businesses at various stages of the business cycle.

This option was upheld by the Task Force as a recommendation to Cabinet.

The Council **should**:

Option 20

Play a lead role in supporting International trade links so that Wirral businesses can access new markets and opportunities.

This option was upheld by the Task Force and it was recommended that it should be moved into the 'the Council MUST' section above.

Option 21

Develop a Single Account Management service to improve how businesses are supported throughout the business life cycle. Further consideration should be given to how this is funded – i.e. through Council resources or by charging for the service.

This option was upheld by the Task Force as a recommendation to Cabinet.

Option 22

Explore the increasing role of social enterprises and/ or Mutuals to Wirral's economy. This is not only in terms of their contribution to the wider business community, but also their increased role in the future delivery of some Council services.

This option was upheld by the Task Force and it was recommended that it should be moved into the 'the Council MUST' section above.

The Council should **stop**:

Option 23

Investing in the current arrangements for Inward Investment, and explore alternative options to ensure more effective delivery and greater impact and value for Wirral. Robust performance management processes, including use of performance indicators, should be embedded to ensure a demonstrable return on investment.

This option was upheld by the Task Force as a recommendation to Cabinet.