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ECONOMY AND REGENERATION OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 5 September 2012

<u>Present:</u>	Councillor	M Johnston (Chair)	
	Councillors	A Cox P Kearney R Gregson D Realey	M Sullivan S Whittingham J Williamson
<u>Deputies:</u>	Councillors	D Dodd (In place of J Stapleton) D Elderton (In place of A Hodson)	
<u>Cabinet Member:</u>	Councillor	P Hackett	

15 MEMBERS' CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST/PARTY WHIP

Members were asked to consider whether they had any disclosable pecuniary interests and/or any other relevant interest in connection with any item(s) on this agenda and, if so, to declare them and state the nature of the interest.

Members were reminded that they should also declare, pursuant to paragraph 18 of the Overview and Scrutiny Procedure Rules, whether they were subject to a party whip in connection with any item(s) to be considered and, if so, to declare it and state the nature of the whipping arrangement.

Councillor Darren Dodd declared an interest in agenda item 7 – Town Centres Update (see minute 22 post) as he was a member of the Central Liscard Town Team, which had submitted an albeit unsuccessful bid for Government Town Team funding.

16 MINUTES

The Acting Director of Law, HR and Asset Management submitted the minutes of the meeting held on 7 June 2012. The Chair commented that the first meeting of the Green Economy Working Group (minute 7 refers), which was formed to support the development of the Green Economy, would be held on 27 September 2012.

Resolved –

- (1) That the minutes of the meeting held on 7 June, 2012, be approved.**
- (2) That the Conservative Group be requested to advise the Chair of its nominee to the Green Economy Working Group.**

17 **BUSINESS PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION - MEMBER OF THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY**

The Chair advised that he had invited David Downing, Chairman of drivecompare, to give a presentation to Members, to highlight the issues that affected his business and to indicate the factors that led to it being located in Wirral.

David outlined the nature of his business which essentially, aimed to connect learner drivers to instructors. He commented upon the car driver training market and, particularly upon the challenges faced by independent and small schools which, with 85% of active instructors often struggled to attract pupils, with stiff competition from large franchised driving schools. New learner drivers readily embraced new technology, often more so than instructors and David advised that drivecompare's core service offering was to provide new learner drivers and a software platform for driving schools and instructors. The software business service package included the use of social media, diary management, lesson progress and reports and analysis. It also provided essential learner resources, including theory questions, hazard perception advice, videos and driver games. In response to comments from Members in relation to instructor rating, David indicated that the star rating was based entirely on feedback from pupils, although there was an opportunity for instructors to challenge negative feedback. The feedback data also enabled drivecompare to provide an evaluation to instructors and schools with a clear indication of what aspects of their driver training needed to be improved.

David advised that as the software had been developed in Edinburgh, there had been initial contact with Scottish Enterprise before a decision was taken to locate the Head Office and Contact Centre in Liverpool. However, he had found the processes for start-up businesses to be very complex with various funding streams ultimately being unavailable. He advised that it was a chance contact with the Director of Regeneration, Housing and Planning at an event in Bromborough that led to him being put in touch with Invest Wirral. He praised the team, who had taken time to understand the business model and had focused on his immediate needs namely, premises, recruitment and HR systems. He had also received support from Job Centre Plus and the Apprentice Scheme and was pleased to advise that the company's Head Office and Contact Centre were now located at the Price Street Business Centre. A soft launch had taken place on 2 August 2012 with staff having been recruited from the local area.

In response to a question from Members as to what could be done better in engaging with start-up businesses, he commented that, elsewhere, he had received too much information, much of it either not relevant or, ultimately funding being unavailable. Many people setting up a small business were unaware of what they needed and David commented that his experience with Invest Wirral was that the guidance offered was focused and relevant.

Resolved – That the thanks of the Committee be accorded to David Downing for his informative presentation and best wishes for the continuing success of drivecompare.

18 **BUDGET CONSULTATION - SCRUTINY WORKSHOPS**

By way of a presentation, the Council's Corporate Performance Manager referred to a series of budget consultation Scrutiny Workshops that had been arranged during September and October, to consult on principles and to engage with the public, staff and stakeholders to inform improvements and budgets and the development of the

three year Corporate and Financial Plans. Outline savings options would be the subject of further consultation in November/December prior to decisions.

She commented that the Authority faced a significant challenge in dealing with government cuts to its budget, adding up to around £100m over the next three years. A public questionnaire, together with detailed background information would be released on 10 September 2012 and the Scrutiny Workshops would seek the views of Members, external partners and experts, as to how the Council's priorities may be achieved in the light of budget cuts. They would look in detail at the budgets within their remit and report back to the Cabinet. Their scope was to understand the scale of the challenge and to discuss options for delivering services differently.

In response to comments from Members, the Director provided assurance that officers would take steps to ensure that a fully representative response was sought to the options within the consultation exercise, including hard to reach groups. Members' involvement in the process was crucial and he proposed to circulate the background information to Members, prior to the publication of the questionnaire.

The Chair indicated that the Economy and Regeneration Workshop would take place on Tuesday 25 September 2012 and he urged Members to attend if it was possible for them to do so.

Resolved – That the presentation be noted.

19 **TRADE CENTRE SCRUTINY REVIEW: UPDATE**

Further to minute 8 (7 June 2012), the Chair and Members of the Trade Centre Scrutiny Panel provided an update upon progress in relation to the Trade Centre Scrutiny Review, which aimed to provide an informed response to the Notice of Motion, approved by the Council on 16 April 2012. Panel Members had considered the scope of the Scrutiny Review and had recommended that it should focus on the following issues –

- What is the provision of local services available to Wirral companies as they prepare to trade with new companies and emerging markets?
- How can Inward Investors be made to feel most welcome in Wirral?
- What are the business support needs of companies operating in the International Trade Centre?
- How is the International Trade Centre to be marketed and what role can the Council play?
- How can cultural links be developed?
- What are the issues regarding language and education barriers/opportunities?
- What needs to be done to ensure adequate cultural awareness and training among Council officers and members?

Members considered the methods to gather evidence that had been identified by the Panel and the Chair indicated that the final report was expected to be completed before the end of 2012.

Resolved – That the progress to date be noted and the Scope for the Trade Centre Scrutiny Review, be approved.

20 **QUARTER 1 PERFORMANCE MONITORING REPORT**

The Director of Regeneration, Housing and Planning presented a report, which set out performance of the Council's Corporate Plan 2011-2014, for April – June 2012. The report provided an overview of performance, resource and risk monitoring and detailed the performance of projects and performance indicators that were relevant to the Economy and Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee, under the Corporate Plan themes of 'Your Economy' and 'Your Neighbourhood'. The report provided details of 'What's working well', exceptions in performance against Corporate Plan targets (projects that were awaiting data or that had missed their targets and been assessed as red or amber) and resource implications. Future challenges and risks were also highlighted for each Corporate Plan theme. Members referred to the challenges associated with the achievement of income targets within planning and building control and expressed a view that more realistic targets should be set.

The Director reported also that, as a result of Cabinet decisions to date, the projected General Fund balance at 31 March 2013 was £14m. In addition, slippage agreed by the Cabinet of approximately £34m for a series of schemes within the 2011/2012 Capital Programme had resulted in an increased 2012/2013 programme. Forecasts based upon the first quarter's position indicated that there would be further slippage from 2012/2013 into following years. A number of schemes within DASS, Regeneration Housing and Planning and Law, HR and Asset Management were likely to be rephased with some expenditure in later years. Expenditure on disabled facility grants within the year was also likely to be lower than the original approval.

Resolved –

- (1) That the report be noted.**
- (2) That a report be presented to a future meeting regarding the Sub-Regional Choice Based Lettings Scheme.**
- (3) That the thanks of the Committee be accorded –**
 - (i). to the Invest Wirral Team for their work in exceeding targets for membership of the Wirral Business Forum and;**
 - (ii). to the Warmer Wirral Team for the insulation scheme, which received national recognition by winning an award at the 2012 Gas Industry Awards.**

21 **FEEDBACK FROM MEMBERS' REGENERATION/HOUSING TOUR - 3 JULY 2012**

The Chair referred to the Regeneration/Housing Tour, which took place on 3 July 2012 and thanked the officers for the detailed and informative itinerary. Members were pleased to see areas of significant improvement and progress, particularly in the North End area of Birkenhead and in other parts of the Borough. In response to comments from Members, with regard to the relativity of deprivation in parts of West Wirral, the Director indicated that high levels of deprivation were not confined to the East of Wirral and that regeneration was required in wards across the Borough.

Resolved – That the thanks of the Committee be accorded to the officers for the detailed and informative Regeneration/Housing Tour.

The Director of Regeneration, Housing and Planning provided an update report on Wirral's retail shopping centres, which focused particularly upon the challenges they were facing and the initiatives that were being pursued to support them. He commented that there were a number of external constraints that needed to be considered in respect of supporting the development of sustainable shopping centres and national reports had shown that across the country there was an over-capacity issue in the market, resulting from matters such as the growth in the use of the internet for shopping, banking, travel and betting.

The impact of the global economic recession and difficult trading conditions that were prevalent across the Country were also being faced by traders in Wirral and the increased number of vacant shops could not be solved quickly due to the complexity of issues which affected the shopping patterns of people and the ability of businesses to continue trading.

The Director outlined the guidance contained within the National Planning Policy Framework issued in March 2012 and highlighted the importance of local shopping centres. However, whilst the Council had, and continued to support as many shopping areas as it could, it was not an issue that the Council could solve in isolation and required the support and involvement of local traders to drive and deliver many elements, as well as the local community to rally and support their local businesses. Wirral was a member of the Association of Town Centre Managers and the Director highlighted a number of initiatives developed by the Association, in conjunction with recommendations from the review undertaken by Mary Portas (the Government's advisor on the high street) upon issues affecting shopping areas.

The Director referred to the hierarchy of shopping centres in Wirral that had been updated as a result of consultation as part of the Local Development Framework Core Strategy process and he commented upon the range of issues that were to be addressed by shopping centre action plans.

He provided an update with regard to the work of the Local Town Teams and commented that there were a number of areas with very high percentages of empty shops that were significantly higher than the national average. There had been a number of projects for empty shops funding that had been used primarily to support the costs of refurbishment, to bring them back into use and to contribute towards the first year rental costs. However, an increasing number of shops had been converted to residential use and work was being undertaken in relation to use classes to ensure that such conversions were appropriate.

In response to concerns expressed by Members with regard to the increasing numbers of vacant shops opening as bookmakers or payday loan shops, the Director confirmed that planners were asked to look at the impact of such proposals on local communities. Members also expressed their disappointment that none of the Wirral bids for town team funding had been successful, whilst noting that the funding that might have been made available would not have been sufficient to secure real and lasting improvement to Wirral's shopping centres.

Resolved –

- (1) That the partnership work being undertaken to address the complex issues in Wirral's Town Centres, be noted.**
- (2) That the Strategy for Retail, Town Centres and Commercial Leisure, produced by Roger Tym & Partners in 2009 be circulated to Members.**
- (3) That progress reports be presented to future meetings of the Committee upon the Deep Clean Scheme and the operation of the Free after Three parking scheme.**
- (4) That an evaluation of projects for Empty Shops funding, be presented to the Committee after twelve months of operation.**
- (5) That further reports be presented to a future meeting of the Committee upon the progress of the Shopping Centre Action Plans.**

23 UPDATE ON INVESTMENT MANAGER POST

The Director of Regeneration, Housing and Planning provided Members with an update in relation to the appointment of Investment Manager. He indicated that following a recruitment exercise, the post had been offered to the most suitable candidate. However, the offer had been declined and the post was not subsequently offered to any of the other candidates. The duties of the post continued to be undertaken by existing staff and the Director awaited instruction as to how to proceed.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

24 REVIEW OF SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME AND FORWARD PLAN

Further to minute 12 (7 June 2012), the Chair indicated that he had sought the views of Members as to what issues should form the basis of the Committee's work programme and he outlined the issues that had already been identified for scrutiny.

He referred also to minute 7 of the Scrutiny Programme Board held on 18 July 2012, which requested Scrutiny Chairs and spokespersons to review their work programmes to prioritise work consistently with the Council's Corporate Plan, and to consider also, the work programmes of other scrutiny committees to identify areas of work that involved, or potentially involved, cross-cutting issues and/or clear synergies (in law, fact or issue) with areas within their own work programme. The Chair commented that the only area he had identified as a cross-cutting theme was in relation to the Child Poverty Strategy and he sought the views of Members as to whether it should be undertaken by the Children and Young People O&S Committee. However, the Director commented that economic issues were a key contributory factor to child poverty.

The Forward Plan for the period September to December, 2012 was published on the Council's intranet/website and Members had been invited to review the Plan prior to the meeting in order for the Economy and Regeneration Overview and Scrutiny Committee to consider, having regard to its work programme, whether scrutiny should take place of any items contained within the Plan and, if so, how it could be done within relevant timescales and resources.

Resolved –

- (1) That the Work Programme for the remainder of the municipal year be agreed, subject to the inclusion of the following items –**
 - Further scrutiny work being undertaken on the impact of Welfare Reform on both private and social housing sectors and in particular, on under-occupancy in the social sector (minute 49 (8 March 2012) refers).
 - A further update upon the effect of the economy on Youth Unemployment.
- (2) That the Scrutiny Programme Board be thanked for its referral and be advised that the potential cross-cutting theme of Child Poverty should remain within the remit of the Economy and Regeneration O&S Committee. (10:0)**
- (3) That the Forward Plan be noted.**

25 REGENERATION UPDATE (PART 1)

The Director of Regeneration, Housing and Planning provided an update on major development schemes within the Borough. Members commented that all development schemes should have regard to their implications for voluntary, community and faith groups and the use of grant funding.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

26 EXEMPT INFORMATION - EXCLUSION OF MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC

Resolved – That in accordance with section 100A (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following item of business, on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined by the relevant paragraphs of Part 1 of Schedule 12A (as amended) to that Act. The public interest test has been applied and favours exclusion.

**27 REGENERATION UPDATE (PART 2)
(Exempt by virtue of paragraph 3)**

The Director of Regeneration, Housing and Planning provided a further update on major development schemes within the Borough and referred specifically to grants awarded under the Think Big initiative, and to the provision of high speed broadband.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

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