

**NORTH EAST DERBYSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL**



**North East
Derbyshire
District Council**

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
ENGAGEMENT WITH BUSINESS
MARCH 2023**

DRAFT

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Chair's Foreword

I am pleased to present this report on behalf of the Growth Scrutiny Committee. It details the findings, conclusions, and recommendations of the Committee from its Review into the Council's engagement with business.

Members of the Committee felt that following the pandemic, and the emergence of uncertainties surrounding the domestic economy and geo-political events, it was vital that businesses in North East Derbyshire were supported by the Council. A crucial part of demonstrating this was effective engagement.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Committee for their input and also the stakeholders who helped inform the review. Additionally I would like to thank the Senior Scrutiny Officer for his support of the Committee's work and Democratic Services for the help they provided.

*Councillor Bentley Strafford-Stephenson
Chair of Growth Scrutiny Committee*

Review Panel

The review panel comprised the following members:

Cllr. B Strafford-Stephenson	-	(Conservative) – Review Panel Chair
Councillor A Platts	-	(Conservative) – Review Panel Vice-Chair
Councillor N Barker	-	(Labour)
Councillor M Roe	-	(Conservative)
Councillor P Parkin	-	(Independent)
Councillor S Cornwell	-	(Labour)
Councillor D Hancock	-	(Liberal Democrat)
Councillor L Hartshorne	-	(Labour)
Councillor P Wright	-	(Conservative)

1. Recommendations

The Committee agreed that the Council was currently struggling to effectively define and communicate what exactly the Council offered to businesses. To address this, the Council should:

- 1.1 Simplify access to available business support in the District, such as through a business advisor or dedicated responsibilities within existing teams to improve uptake;
- 1.2 Introduce initiatives and projects such as networking events that increase business engagement across the District; and
- 1.3 Improve online engagement with businesses, ensuring available information and support is easily accessible and up to date such as through improvements to the website or the creation of a dedicated microsite.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 At its meeting on 24 January 2022, the Growth Scrutiny Committee agreed to conduct a Review into how the Council engaged with local business.
- 2.2 Economic Development and general business support provided by Local Authorities is a discretionary service and subject to the resources available.
- 2.3 Initially, Members intended on conducting the Review as a Spotlight Review. This is an intensive and short review where a briefing paper and other supplementary documents were considered, evidence gathered and triangulated, and recommendations considered in one meeting. This meeting took place on 14 March 2022.
- 2.4 The Committee then subsequently agreed to extend the review and consider additional evidence. Members agreed that the ways in which the Council engaged with business was often complicated, and extended into a number of different services. Additional evidence was considered at meetings on 09 May 2022, 31 October 2022, and 16 January 2023.
- 2.5 The review panel thought that a review on this issue could assist the Council in better engaging with local business, following low response rates to previous attempts of engagement, and to support them given the challenges they now faced. Members did, however, recognise that business support spanned across multiple organisations and that extensive business support was not the sole responsibility of North East Derbyshire District Council.

3. Scope of Review

3.1 The overall purpose of the review was intended to improve the Council's service offered to local businesses in order to improve the offering to businesses within North East Derbyshire and contribute to the District's economic growth. An understanding of the Council's current relations with local businesses was therefore essential to understand engagement, and thus the review aimed to:

- Review how the Council had engaged with local business;
- Determine what had worked well, and what not so well;
- Listen to the views of local business; and
- Suggest improvements to achieve better engagement with business in the District.

4. Method of Review

4.1 The review panel met to consider the scope of the review, key issues they wanted to discuss and key people they wished to interview. They then considered evidence and formulated their recommendations.

4.2 Evidence was gathered in a variety of ways including written sources and interviews with a range of stakeholders.

5. Evidence and Research

5.1 A number of documents and evidence were provided to the review panel for consideration. Details are provided below:

- Scene Setting Presentation by Gill Callingham – Director of Growth, and Bryan Harrison – Senior Regeneration Officer and Urban Designer.
- Presentation and interview with Karl Apps – Assistant Director – Economic Development, Regeneration and Housing Delivery.
- Briefing paper on business engagement.
- Business advisor programme project update.
- NED business network evaluation May 2018.
- NED business skills audit – lessons learned.
- Case Study: O'Connor & Co
- Business advisor project update May 2022
- Business Sector analysis of North East Derbyshire provided by Bryan Harrison - Senior Regeneration Officer and Urban Designer
- Stakeholder interviews with NEDDC Officers and external business representatives

6. Key Findings

6.1 Strengths/Observations

- 6.1.1 The Committee noted that the appointment of a Business Advisor, although on a temporary basis, had significantly assisted the Council in reaching out and engaging with local business. A Business Advisor was able to be a single point of contact for businesses who were contacting the Authority and help signpost them to other organisations who offered support.

Marie Cooper, the CEO of CBE+ commented that this was something that businesses often found frustrating with the Council, in that they often could not find the right person to talk to.

Another stakeholder, Ann Turner (owner of Amber Mill Furniture Rural Enterprise Centre), gave similar evidence to the Review Panel in that Mark Ross (Business Advisor) had been extremely helpful in pointing her in the right direction when she had applied for funding.

Both business representatives agreed that a central point of contact links the various Council departments together, making it easier for businesses to contact the Council. Members noted that something similar was done in the private sector.

The Business Advisor was, however, a temporary resource that was funded through covid-19 grants and this was due to end in June 2022. Members agreed that the Council should consider providing its own resources to fund the role once the D2N2 funding had ended.

- 6.1.2 The Business Consultant was currently conducting a skills audit in the District, and Members were informed about generally low response rates which were around 10%. The most effective way of engagement was through door knocking as face-to-face meetings gave more exposure and an ability to gain feedback. Social media was also useful, however this needed to be developed further with a more targeted approach. For example a dedicated social media and/or website channel for businesses would allow them to receive targeted information that would not get lost as the Council promoted its wider services, which were not always relevant to business. The least effective were passive forms of communication such as leaflets and emails. The Authority was also encouraged to continue and increase attendance at networking events so it could update businesses in the region.

- 6.1.3 The Assistant Director – Economic Development, Regeneration and Housing Delivery discussed some of the ways in which the Council supported business which included signposting to other organisations, networking, distributing grants and assisting with grant applications, assisting with start-ups and business unit rentals. The Council had also attempted to associate itself with trusted organisations such as East Midlands Councils to improve its perception. Members also noted the partnership work done with D2N2 Growth hub, Vision Derbyshire Start Up, and University of Derby in encouraging new

business start-ups. For example a support event was recently held and hosted by the Council.

6.1.4 The Committee heard from the Assistant Director – Transformation and Communications about the work of the Partnerships Team in supporting businesses in the District. The Team was responsible for distributing Covid-19 discretionary grants to eligible businesses from May 2020 – April 2022. Over 700 businesses had been supported with a total of 1,985 grants distributed totalling £4,894,510. This involved multiple schemes and bidding rounds with work done including developing online forms, publishing guidance, publicising the grants, assessing applicants and assisting with the process, and delivering payments.

6.1.5 Members heard about the support offered to businesses through the LEADER programme which was EU/UK funding through the Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE). The funding was to assist businesses on priority areas such as rural tourism, farming productivity, micro and small enterprises and farm diversification, and support for cultural and heritage activities. 37 projects were contracted/approved and the total value claimed was £1,222,169.47.

Ann Turner (owner of Amber Mill Furniture Rural Enterprise Centre) spoke highly of the Partnerships Team who assisted her business in accessing the funding which allowed her to conduct restoration work to the Mill. The Committee heard that Ann had heard about the funding in the NEDi news and was subsequently approved for funding after contacting the Council.

6.1.6 The Revenues and Benefits Manager informed the Review Panel about the mandatory business rates relief grants that were provided by Central Government and distributed by his team during the Covid pandemic. The Council was amongst the Country's leaders in fast payments, ensuring that eligible businesses were supported through challenging times. The Committee was impressed by the perseverance of the team, which included writing to businesses, phoning them, and using social media and the website to ensure that qualifying businesses didn't fall through the gaps. North East Derbyshire District Council ranked 17th in the Country at distributing those grants, with 97% of the funding available successfully given out to those eligible.

6.1.7 The Assistant Director of Environmental Health discussed the work of the Environmental Health Team in building relationships with businesses in the District. Members heard that Officers often engaged in face-to-face contact with businesses when carrying out the regulatory role of the Council when inspecting premises. It was stated that this had allowed Officers to build relationships and offer advice, pointing them in the right direction if they needed support from the Council. The Review Panel heard about positive survey results, where 88% of businesses who received a regulatory visit in a 6 month period stated they were satisfied with the services that the Council provided, including 96% of them stating that Officers were polite and friendly.

6.1.8 Members were also impressed with the use of technology such as gov.delivery to better engage with businesses in the District. This involved automated messages to businesses and individuals who have given their consent to be contacted by the Council.

6.1.9 The Director of Economic Growth informed the Committee about Coney Green Business Centre. Coney Green has 94 small business industrial units that are developed, managed and maintained by the Council to ensure that the District's small and micro businesses have space to develop and grow. It was stated that without the Council this type of business accommodation was unlikely to be provided by the private sector. The interim Assistant Director of Property Services discussed the units with Members who heard that the units were very popular and were nearly always fully occupied.

Areas for Improvement/Observations

6.2.1 Evidence given by all stakeholders during the interviews pointed to issues surrounding the Council's image and perception. It was often the case that businesses only dealt with the Council in regards to transactional or regulatory arrangements or when something specific was needed. There was also suspicion when it came to grants and other initiatives in respect of eligibility, and that businesses were often busy and focused on other issues. The Assistant Director of Environmental Health commented that businesses often saw the Council from a regulatory or transactional viewpoint, and that this could overlook the other work that the Council does in supporting business. Thus, businesses could see the Authority as a hindrance as opposed to something that is helpful and provided support.

6.2.2. The current Business Advisor was only a temporary resource and that the Council may want to consider a similar role as a permanent position if it wished to better engage with businesses. Evidence given by stakeholders suggested that business often found a lack of a single point of contact frustrating, and that an advisor would allow a consistent approach to developing relationships and networking.

The Committee also heard during the interviews that response times to general queries could be slow which was mainly due to the time taken to find the right person to speak to, but that this could be rectified with a business advisor or a similar officer who was both reactive and proactive to business need. Members acknowledged that whilst they could understand frustration with long processes when it came to grants, the Authority was obliged to follow due process and protect public money.

6.2.3 The Review Panel noted the existing challenges with recruitment and retention due to a highly competitive labour market. This was affecting services and the ability of the Council to 'go above and beyond' its statutory functions. A number of service managers commented that this was a barrier to

a success. For example, Members noted that effective engagement was challenging when there was currently only a small team of five employees within the economic development team. There were also recruitment issues in a number of key services such as Environmental Health. The Committee was impressed by the attitude of Directors and Service Managers in developing our own staff, which included apprenticeships and career progression roles so talented staff had a pathway to management opportunities.

- 6.2.4 Members agreed that the Council was struggling to define and communicate what exactly it was offering to business, and questioned if the support was being packaged in an effective way. It was suggested that a more targeted approach through its website (such as a micro-site), social media or a mission statement could address those issues. For example, Members noted that the City of Doncaster Council had a micro site themselves that was specifically targeted towards business ([Business Doncaster: The place to do Business](#)).
- 6.2.5 The Committee was informed about networking events which were previously organised by the Council. Both business representatives who gave evidence to the Review Panel agreed that these were useful and often helped them be put in touch with similar businesses, as well as Council Officers. It was also a great way in which the Council could put out there what initiatives and support it was currently doing to assist businesses in the District.

7. Conclusions

- 7.1 The Review Panel heard from a number of stakeholders including external businesses, a business advisor, a business consultant, and internal officers. Members considered a wide scope of opinion to assess how the Council engaged with businesses in the District. The Review process highlighted what the Council was doing to support business and how this was being communicated.
- 7.2 It was, however, determined that a number of changes could be made to improve business engagement such as improvements surrounding image and perception and the way the Council defined and communicated its support. It was apparent that businesses were not fully aware of what the Council offered.

Appendix A

Stakeholders Engaged During the Review

- Gill Callingham – Director of Economic Growth*
- Karl Apps – Assistant Director – Economic Development, Regeneration and Housing Delivery*
- Bryan Harrison – Senior Regeneration Officer and Urban Designer
- Marie Cooper – CEO of CBE+
- Mark Ross – Business Advisor (D2N2)
- Ian Hands – Business Consultant
- Steve Lee – Assistant Director – Transformation and Communications
- Andrew Gascogine – Revenues and Benefits Manager
- Ken Eastwood – Assistant Director of Environmental Health
- Ann Turner – Amber Mill Furniture Rural Enterprise Centre (AMFREC)
- Anthony Kimber – Interim Head of Property and Estates*

*Refers to an Officer who is no longer employed by NEDDC