

GROWTH SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON MONDAY, 16 JANUARY 2023

Present:

Councillor Alex Platts (Vice-Chair) (in the Chair)

Councillor Nigel Barker
Councillor Lee Hartshorne
Councillor Michael Roe

Councillor David Hancock
Councillor Paul Parkin
Councillor Philip Wright

Also Present:

K Eastwood	Assistant Director – Environmental Health Service
A Gascoigne	Revenues and Benefits Manager
B Harrison	Senior Regeneration Officer and Urban Designer
D Stanton	Senior Scrutiny Officer
T Scott	Governance and Scrutiny Officer
A Turner	Founder of Amber Mill Furniture Rural Enterprise Centre

GSC/ Apologies for Absence

21/2

2-23 Apologies for absence were received from Councillor S Cornwell and Councillor B Strafford-Stephenson.

GSC/ Declarations of Interest

22/2

2-23 Members were requested to declare the existence and nature of any disclosable pecuniary interest and/or other interest, not already on their register of interests, in any item on the agenda and withdraw from the meeting at the appropriate time.

There were no interests declared at this meeting.

GSC/ Minutes of Last Meeting

23/2

2-23 RESOLVED – That the Minutes of the previous meeting of the Growth Scrutiny Committee held on 31 October 2022 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

GSC/ Scrutiny Review - Business Engagement

24/2

2-23 The Chair welcomed Ann Turner (owner of the Amber Mill Furniture Rural Enterprise Centre) to the review interviews. The Chair explained that the following questions had been identified by Members to ask:

1. How does the Council update or inform you about available grants and initiatives and does this approach work?

2. Why do businesses contact the Council and do you get support when you do so?
3. How do businesses view the Council and the support that it offers?
4. Do you have any ideas on raising the Council's profile with business?
5. How can the Council better communicate and support business?
6. Do you have any other opinions or suggestions?

In response to Question 1, Ann Turner explained to the Committee that she received funding from the LEADER grant funding programme which she heard about in the NEDi news. Ms Turner felt that the Council could do more when promoting its business support.

In response to Question 2, Ann Turner found that getting hold of the correct officer within the Council for support could sometimes be difficult, and that several officers would need to be contacted before getting through to the right person. It was suggested that a dedicated officer could help solve this. It was stated, however, that the Officers she had been in touch with were very helpful and friendly, and that she was thankful for the help she received in accessing funding.

In response to Question 3, Ann Turner felt that businesses sometimes viewed the Council from a transactional viewpoint, and they were simply not aware of the support being offered. She suggested that more advertising could be done to make people fully aware of the business support the Council offered. She added that the Council had to gain a reputation amongst businesses for being user friendly and ready to help financially.

Members enquired if the Amber Mill Furniture Rural Enterprise Centre had liaised with the Chamber of Commerce. Ann Turner explained that she had been invited to a Derbyshire networking event from the Chamber. The Senior Regeneration Officer and Urban Designer added that the Council used to attend these networking events but ceased in 2018.

Members discussed the spaces offered by the Council for businesses to use, and felt it would be helpful for the Council to maintain a database which included the addresses and cost of each space.

In response to Question 6, Ann Turner suggested that the Council could join the KuKu Connect business networking. Members discussed the suggestion and felt that the Council needed a business enabler to join the network. The Senior Regeneration Officer and Urban Designer added that an evaluation of the Council's networking events would be circulated to Members.

The Chair explained that Ann Turner had provided answers to all of the questions and thanked her for attending the meeting.

The Chair welcomed the Assistant Director – Environmental Health Service to the review interviews. The Chair explained that the following questions had been identified by Members to ask:

1. What are the main elements of the Council's strategy when communicating

with businesses?

2. How does the Council update or inform businesses about available grants or initiatives? Has this approach worked?
3. How do you support businesses that contact the Council for support?
4. What feedback have you received about the way the Council communicates with business?
5. Are there any barriers to success?
6. Do you have any opinions on what the Council could do better?

In response to Question 1, the Assistant Director – Environmental Health Service explained that the Service provided businesses with support, direction and compliance checks. The chief method for the Environmental Health Service to interact with businesses was face-to-face communication, although this had moved more towards e-mail communication because of COVID, and the Service was hoping to use the Council's new GovDelivery service to deliver e-mail bulletin messages to businesses.

The Chair enquired which specific initiatives for businesses had been undertaken by Environmental Health. The Assistant Director – Environmental Health Service explained that recent examples of campaigns were gas safety and taxi safety.

Members enquired how the Service had been in terms of resources. The Assistant Director – Environmental Health Service explained that it was recently helped by an accepted request for funding, but there were still recruitment issues. Members asked if there were any suggestions to improve the recruitment issues, and the Assistant Director – Environmental Health Service suggested that the Council could give more promotion to the package offered by its Environmental Health Service, particularly in terms of development.

In response to Question 4, the Assistant Director – Environmental Health Service explained that satisfaction surveys from businesses were usually positive about communication. Members were also informed how the Service had sought to always keep dialogue open with the taxi trade, particularly during the recent CCTV installation programme.

In response to Question 6, , the Assistant Director – Environmental Health Service felt that the Council could improve engagement with businesses by investing time in a forum and utilising the aforementioned GovDelivery e-mail bulletin service.

Members enquired if the Assistant Director – Environmental Health Service had any ideas about additional ways the Service could support businesses. Members were informed that there was not currently much compliance support on offer for businesses, so this could be an area to expand. Members asked if any other local authorities received a grant to offer additional compliance support, and the Assistant Director – Environmental Health Service stated this would need to be investigated.

The Chair stated that local food retailers had been asked by the Government to produce Safer Food, Better Business (SFBB) information packs, and asked if the

Council helped with these packs. The Assistant Director – Environmental Health Service explained that Environmental Health had helped retailers produce these packs during the COVID pandemic.

The Chair thanked the Assistant Director – Environmental Health Service for attending and providing answers to the Committee's questions.

The Chair welcomed the Revenues and Benefits Manager to the review interviews. The Chair explained that the Revenues and Benefits Manager would be presented with the same questions as the Assistant Director – Environmental Health Service.

In response to Question 3, the Revenues and Benefits Manager explained that the Revenues and Benefits service collected business rates from businesses, and a grant was offered to them during the COVID lockdowns. The service also made sure businesses received (and were informed of) any Business Rates Relief they were entitled to.

Members asked what was done by the service to ensure all businesses were aware of receiving grants. The Revenues and Benefits Manager explained that the service wrote to all businesses eligible for grants during COVID and placed information on the Council website about how to claim them, which was why the Council was 17th highest in the country in the amount paid out to businesses during the COVID pandemic.

Members referred to Relief Grants and asked if the Council could control the amounts. Members were informed that this was now the responsibility of the Business Improvement Districts.

In response to Question 5, the Revenues and Benefits Manager explained that the most significant current barrier for the Council helping businesses was the national economic situation. It was also difficult for the service to forecast anything because the Government was changing rates all the time.

In response to Question 6, the Revenues and Benefits Manager explained that the Council could help struggling businesses by wiping off their rates, but this would have to come out of Council funds.

Members enquired if there was a difference in the number of struggling businesses this year compared to previous years. The Revenues and Benefits Manager explained that collections from businesses this year had stayed at a fairly similar level, but spending a COVID relief fund on businesses in past years meant it was difficult to measure the exact number, because the relief fund meant that some businesses had their rate paying deferred.

Members enquired how the Council reported on the amount of funds given to businesses every year. The Revenues and Benefits Manager explained that the service had to submit a return to the Government for every quarter, and these returns were available on the Council website. Members suggested that these returns could be used to compare amounts given each year and categorise the

different sectors the amounts had been spent on. The Revenues and Benefits Manager agreed that the viability of this suggestion would be investigated.

The Chair thanked the Revenues and Benefits Manager for attending and providing answers to the Committee's questions.

GSC/ 25/2 **Scrutiny Review**

2-23 The Committee considered all of the evidence which it had received during its review of the Council's engagement with local business.

The Committee identified areas of good practice such as:

- The issuing of grants had been very proactive
- Good feedback from the businesses the Council deal with
- Good use of technology
- Potential for revenue generating
- Promoting Council staff

Members also highlighted a number of areas for improvement. These included:

- The Council was not selling itself enough
- Finding the correct officer to contact for business advice was difficult
- Better utilisation of networking events
- Disconnect in communication between the Council and businesses
- Some businesses had a negative perception of the Council because of regulatory work
- A sub-site or dedicated area could be added on the Council website specifically to help businesses
- More campaigns to bring businesses into the District
- More looking at how other local authorities attract businesses
- Recruitment issues

RESOLVED – That the draft report on the Committee's review be prepared and submitted to Committee for approval.

GSC/ 26/2 **Forward Plan of Executive Decisions**

2-23 The Committee considered the Forward Plan of Executive Decisions.

RESOLVED - That the Committee noted the information.

GSC/ 27/2 **Work Programme**

2-23 The Senior Scrutiny Officer explained that a draft report for the business engagement review would be presented to the Committee at its next meeting on 13 March 2023.

The Senior Scrutiny Officer gave Members an update on the 'Connectivity in the

District' item scheduled to be considered on 13 March 2023, and advised them that the Assistant Director - Regeneration and Programmes did not believe the Council had control over placement of the phone masts. Members agreed for the item to remain on the 13 March 2023 agenda, because they believed mobile black spots was an issue the Committee still needed to consider. The Senior Scrutiny Officer stated that he would talk to Senior Officers further about the issue and look into the possibility of a Planning officer attending the 13 March 2023 meeting. He would also hold further discussions with the Chair who was absent from the meeting.

RESOLVED – That the Committee agreed the work programme for the 2022-23 municipal year.

GSC/ Additional Urgent Items

28/2

2-23 None.

GSC/ Date of Next Meeting

29/2

2-23 The next meeting of Growth Scrutiny Committee was scheduled to take place on 1.00pm 13 March 2023.