

AGENDA ITEM

REPORT TO CABINET

17 DECEMBER 2020

**REPORT OF PLACE
SELECT COMMITTEE**

CABINET DECISION

Lead Cabinet Member: Leader of the Council – Cllr Bob Cook

SCRUTINY REVIEW OF BUSINESS SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT

SUMMARY

The attached report presents the outcomes of the Place Select Committee's review of Business Support and Engagement.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S) / DECISION(S)

This topic was included in the Scrutiny Work Programme for 2019-2020, though as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the evidence-gathering was paused during the review which had an impact on the originally intended timescales for reporting to Cabinet. The review is now complete, and the recommendations have been endorsed by the Place Select Committee for submission to Cabinet.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Committee recommend that:

- 1) SBC raises awareness of the existing information system enabling current and prospective business owners to search for available property and land, and ensures that those using this facility know where to go for further advice, guidance and support.
- 2) SBC strengthens communication of its business support offer via dedicated social media platforms.
- 3) A review of local business networks (including Stockton Business Forum), and how these can best operate in the current and post-pandemic environment, is undertaken.
- 4) Consideration is given around developing support for businesses which are run from home (e.g. encouragement of 'co-working spaces' where people who work on their own could come together to chat / brainstorm).
- 5) There is an increased awareness and understanding of the business needs of groups with protected characteristics, particularly with regards the impact of COVID-19 on sectors that employ significant numbers of people from these groups (e.g. taxi drivers, hospitality).

- 6) SBC evaluates its existing retail support programme:
 - a) to ensure it fits with the current and likely future needs of local businesses;
 - b) to consider widening the programme to businesses based outside of Town Centres;
 - c) to consider similar support packages for non-retail business (e.g. start-up support in view of the anticipated rise in such ventures).
- 7) A future update on the SBC Business and Enterprise Team's intended work around employment, education and skills with schools, colleges and universities be provided to the Council's Children and Young People Select Committee.
- 8) A future update be provided to the Place Select Committee around the *Inclusive Growth* agenda, and how this has impacted upon the people of the Borough.

DETAIL

1. To aid the realisation of economic objectives, the Council undertakes a number of business support activities across the Borough, from advice and guidance, to direct financial support. In recent years, the focus of this activity has changed, with a greater emphasis placed on targeted evidence-led support and creating a single point of contact ('one conversation') policy for businesses liaising with the Council. However, current challenges, largely around resources, have led to a concentration on reactive rather than proactive activity.
2. This review was therefore initiated to examine the Council's overall business support / engagement role, how this was utilised and viewed externally, and whether the necessary resources were in place to satisfy existing and future demand. Of further consideration was the key interface with the Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA), both in terms of their business support activity and the funding streams that they either manage or can access.
3. The Committee took evidence from representatives of the Council's Business and Enterprise Team, as well as from a range of wider business support partners including the Tees Valley Combined Authority, the North East England Chamber of Commerce / Department for International Trade, and Teesside University. To gain insight into the impact of the Council's support offer, the Committee also received contributions from local businesses, though the intended visits to the Fountain Shopping Mall, Drake the Bookshop and Fusion Hive were unable to take place due to COVID-19 restrictions.

COMMUNITY IMPACT IMPLICATIONS

4. As documented within the Committee's report, this review began in the 'old' (pre-COVID-19) world, reflecting on previous support provision from the Council, and with the impact of Brexit at the forefront of many people's minds. Businesses now face very different challenges, for some their very existence, as the country battles to suppress the spread of the virus. Previous focus on growth and profits has, for many, been replaced by a simple aim to continue trading, and it is with this in mind that the immediate future priorities of the Council's Business Support and Enterprise Team will need to be shaped. Acknowledged as part of this review was the impact of the pandemic on specific groups including young people and those with protected characteristics.

CORPORATE PARENTING IMPLICATIONS

5. There are no direct implications in the report.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

6. The recommendations within the Committee's report include a review / evaluation of several different aspects of business support and engagement (e.g. local business networks, developing support for businesses which are run from home, existing retail support and the potential for a similar package for non-retail business) – the findings of these pieces of work may have a financial impact upon the Council's future business support provision, though to what extent remains uncertain, not least due to the ongoing pandemic.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

7. There are no legal implications identified at this stage.

RISK ASSESSMENT

8. The review is categorised as low to medium risk. Existing management systems and daily routine activities are sufficient to control and reduce risk.

WARDS AFFECTED AND CONSULTATION WITH WARD/COUNCILLORS

9. The review concerns businesses across the whole Borough, therefore was not Ward-specific.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

10. None.

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