



PRCC.15 13/14

Prosperous Communities
Committee

Date 3 September 2013

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Subject: Open For Business Working Group

Report by:

Director of Regeneration and Planning

Contact Officer:

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Purpose / Summary:

In 2012 the Prosperous Communities Committee established a task and finish group to examine how “open for business” the council was and to make recommendations on how it could become more open to business through the services it delivers, the support it offers to businesses and how it procures goods and services.

Also in 2012/13 the Council asked a “best practice” Economic Development Council to peer review the service it offered. As part of that review the Council's interaction with local businesses was assessed. This process and the recommendations it made will replace one of the final steps in the work of the Open for Business working group.

On the 30th July 2013, the work undertaken was reported to the Challenge and Improvement Committee and the group held a workshop and recommends three short term matters to be progressed and also three longer term issues to be developed.

RECOMMENDATION(S):

- 1. Review the work reported to Challenge and Improvement Committee**
- 2. Agree the three short term matters to be progressed and also three longer term issues to be developed in line with the table at Appendix 1.**
- 3. Agree that those issues be developed by the Head of Service and reported back to this Committee with options appraised at the earliest date possible, including how the work links to the economic, social and environmental profiles of the six areas of the District.**

IMPLICATIONS

Legal: If procurement processes need to be reviewed then that will need to be done in the context of current procurement regulations.

Financial: Changing what the council charges for services which impact upon local businesses will have a financial effect. The precise impact of this will depend on the views members take on the recommendations in the report.

Staffing :None

Equality and Diversity including Human Rights :
The report is set at a high level and seeks to examine how the council can make itself open for business to all businesses irrespective of whom they serve. The successful implementation of any recommendations it makes should benefit all sectors of the community.

Risk Assessment : Low

Climate Related Risks and Opportunities: By increasing local employment opportunities by being more open to the expansion of local businesses and encouraging inward investment the recommendations have the potential to reduce the need to travel by those seeking working thereby reducing carbon emissions.

Title and Location of any Background Papers used in the preparation of this report:
None

Call in and Urgency:

Is the decision one which Rule 14.7 of the Scrutiny Procedure Rules apply?

Yes No /

Key Decision:

Yes No /

Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Open for Business task and finish Group was set up in 2012 to examine how business friendly the council is in the way it delivers its services, how it supports businesses, whether it offers relief to businesses operating in its area and how good it is at procuring goods and services from local businesses.
- 1.2 It set about this task by agreeing its scope and deciding the key actions it needed to take in order to address its brief. These included:
 - Questioning council heads of service about the services they manage and how they ensure they are business friendly
 - Meeting key local businesses
 - Learning from national best practice.
- 1.3 Actions one and two have been completed and the conclusions drawn from them are set out in the report. Action three was more difficult as it proved impossible to find a representative national best practice provider who was willing to attend a meeting of the group. However through contacts the council has, Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council were invited to carry out a peer review of the way the council delivers its economic development and regeneration activities. Whilst this was a wide ranging review (with recommendations) it addresses the question of how open for business the council is. Therefore the conclusions of the peer review have been used, where they are relevant to the open for business question, and are set out in the report.
- 1.4 The council has a wide ranging and significant influence on how the District is perceived as being “open for business”. This influence ranges from how attractive it makes its town centres, through the approach it adopts to car parking charges (although car parking charges did not feature in the comments received from businesses) to how it attracts inward investment from national and international companies.
- 1.5 The principal themes emerging from the work carried out are divided into short term /operational and long term strategic.
- 1.6 The short term/operational matters that are emerging from the work carried out were:
 - Consider offering free planning advice to businesses
 - Consider how the council can help businesses with marketing
 - Consider how the council can offer direct business advice – rather than simply sign posting
 - Consider how the council can offer direct support for training
 - Consider how the council can offer discounts on NNDR and in what circumstances
 - Consider how the council could pump prime direct investment in projects

- Consider how the procurement and tendering processes at the council could be improved to make them more business friendly
- Consider how documents could be improved to make them more accessible (use of plain English)
- Consider streamlining how businesses contact the council (such as a single point of contact)
- Consider how the council can promote local skills and training providers to local businesses.

1.7 The long term/strategic matters that are emerging from the work carried out were:

- Consider improving the strategic road network
- Consider improving broadband speeds within the District
- Consider the development of business/manufacturing start up units in the District
- Consider how the skills of the workforce could be improved
- Consider developing a tourism strategy and greater support for tourism
- Ensure all council resources are aligned to support businesses and business growth
- Consider developing a marketing and inward investment strategy - highlighting the advantages and the District as a place to do business – using a development prospectus approach
- Consider developing a Business Form/Employment and skills partnership with local businesses
- Consider streamlining decision making on key economic decisions

1.8 The recommendations from the Challenge and Improvement Workshop were:

- (a) the top three short term /operational matters to be further progressed be:
 - (i) consider offering free advice to businesses including planning advice;
 - (ii) consider streamlining how businesses contact the council (such as a single point of contact – to be manned at all times) and
 - (iii) consider how the council can promote local skills and training providers to local businesses.

- (b) the top three long term /strategic matters to be further progressed be:
 - (i) consider streamlining decision making on key economic decisions;
 - (ii) consider developing a tourism strategy and greater support for tourism; and
 - (iii) consider the development of business/manufacturing start up units throughout the District.

1.9 At the workshop and subsequent discussions, it was agreed that these three issues, in each area, need significant additional work in relation to developing the options further and that will be completed as part of the progression of the action plan highlighted in this report.

1 Introduction

1.1 The Open for Business task and finish Group was set up in 2012 to examine how business friendly the council is in the way it delivers its services, how it supports businesses, whether it offers relief to businesses operating in its area and how good it is at procuring goods and services from local businesses.

1.2 It set about this task by agreeing its scope and deciding the key action actions it needed to take in order to address its brief. These included:

- Questioning council heads of service about the services they manage and how they ensure they are business friendly
- Meeting key local businesses
- Learning from national best practice.

1.3 Actions one and two have been completed and the conclusions drawn from them are set out in the body of the report. Action three was more difficult as it proved impossible to find a representative national best practice provider who was willing to come to the District. However through contacts the council has, Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council were invited to carry out a peer review of the way the council delivers its economic development and regeneration activities. Whilst this was a wide ranging review (with recommendations) it will address the question of how open for business the council is. Therefore the conclusions of the peer review have been used where they are relevant to the open for business question.

1.4 At the same time as developing this work the Council have been developing an Economic Development Strategy for the District. The strategy will be evidence based and identify the key economic priorities for the District. The Strategy will develop a vision with stakeholders from the business community, for the District and will be based on four key themes, those being:

- Inclusion, Regeneration and Renewal
- Economic Growth
- Sustainable Development
- Knowledge and Learning

Initial findings include, identifying that the key sectors for the economy are: tourism, construction, retail and whole sale.

Evidence gathered so far has shown that commercial activity in the District is characterised by small businesses employing less than 50 people; 90% are micro or small office, home office (SoHo). These characteristics will

inform how we design our services to be business friendly and demonstrate that they are open for business. The development of the strategy with stakeholders will ensure that the relationship the Council has with its businesses matures.

1.5 The strategy will be developed during 2013 and will include stakeholder engagement and involvement.

2 Meeting with Heads of Service

2.1 In all seven heads of service filled in questionnaires and attended a meeting of the group, these were:

- Revenues and Benefits (Allan Robinson)
- Environmental Protection (Chris Allen)
- Finance (Russell Stone)
- Localism (Jo Riddell)
- Operational Services (Glyn Pilkington)
- Strategic Growth (Grant Lockett)
- Neighbourhoods and Development (Suzanne Fysh)

2.2 A wide range of interaction with business was discussed which included the following;

- Revenues and Benefits:
 - Working with businesses on accounts, debts and rateable value
 - Offers relief to businesses, but limited in scope – relief available to charities and not for profit organisations
 - Non-payment is enforcement on a case by case basis. It is not in the services or councils interest if the business is forced into administration
 - Sources goods and services locally where possible
- Environmental Protection
 - Offers advice to food businesses
 - Enforcement regime is based on working with the owners of businesses to seek compliance
 - Offers coaching, advice and training to food businesses
 - Buys local but within procurement regulations
- Finance
 - Limited engagement, mainly through the budget engagement process
 - Buys local subject to the procurement regulations.
- Localism (which includes community safety)
 - In the process of establishing relationships with key businesses in the six areas
 - Enforcement is applied in a proportionate way
- Operational
 - Trade waste collection (could be improved)
 - Mechanical cleaning could be extended to businesses

- Buys local but within procurement regulations
- Neighbourhoods and Development
 - Planning application advice (charged for)
 - Processing and assessing planning applications
 - Tourism
 - Building Regulations
 - Land Charges
 - Advice on trees and listed buildings
- Strategic Growth
 - Offers help to businesses by guiding them through the planning process
 - Adopts a multi-disciplinary approach to business support
 - Business support in the field
 - Networking through a programme of business lunches
 - Speed networking events
 - Offer advice on procurement for businesses through events
 - Encourages inward investment
 - Helps to develop employment and skills through organising periodic Fares
 - Supports businesses within Gainsborough
 - Has developed a “Think Local First” campaign

The Service Doesn't Offer

- Direct financial support to business either through grant or loan finance or equity stake
- Free planning advice to businesses
- Help with marketing
- Direct business advice service (relies on sign posting)
- Direct support for training
- Discounted NNDR
- Pump priming investment

3.0 Meeting with Local Businesses

- 3.1 The meeting took place in Hemswell Cliff and representatives of sixteen local businesses attended.
- 3.2 The meeting took the form of a workshop where the businesses were asked to answer a series of questions

Question 1.

“What’s good about running your business in WL?”

- 6 businesses stated it was due to the good skills base of the areas reputation
- 1 stated accessibility to excellent schools, colleges and Lincoln University
- 1 stated “nice place to live”
- 1 stated low running costs
- 1 stated lots of development potential
- 1 stated accessible location

- 1 stated Marshall's Yard
- 1 stated friendly people.

Question 2

“What's bad about running your businesses in WL?”

- 11 businesses stated transport related issues – road network, public transport and road conditions (potholes)
- 6 Stated planning related issues – pre-application advice charging, application processing time
- 3 stated lack of reliable and speedy broadband infrastructure
- 1 stated procurement and tendering process not geared for SME's
- 2 stated lack of skilled workforce
- 1 stated no manufacturing start up units

Question 3

“What services at the Council does your business use?”

- Bins – refuse
- Planning
- Environmental Health/enforcement
- Economic development/events
- Building Control
- Fly tipping
- Premises search
- NNDR – empty business rates
- Tourism – brown signs

Question 4

“What areas of the Council do you feel performs well?”

- 5 stated enthusiastic team which try to positively engage with business

Question 5

“What areas do you think improvements could be made?”

- 4 stated invest in broadband
- Website – use plain English, make it easier to navigate
- 3 stated issue e bulletins on grants/funding streams
- Have a single point of contact for businesses (confusing at the moment)

Question 6

“Anything else the Council could do to improve things for business operating in WLDC?”

- 2 stated abolish pre-application advice charging
- 2 stated more involvement in strategic planning.

4.0 Peer Review Findings – In Relation to “Open For Business”

4.1 The original brief for the Group included a session with members to explore “best practice” nationally. Efforts were made to contact best practice councils through representational bodies and known contacts. However it did not prove possible to attract sufficient interest to run a session in West Lindsey.

4.2 Through other contacts officers visited Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council to assess their approach to economic development and regeneration. It was clear that the council had a proactive approach to regeneration in the borough and had achieved notable successes in recent years. As a result of these contacts the Director responsible of economic development and growth at Hinckley and Bosworth agreed to conduct a “peer review” of this council’s approach to these areas.

4.3 The peer review was undertaken by the Deputy Chief Executive (Community Direction) of Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council. It was a wide ranging review of the Economic Development and Growth Service. However there were recommendations in the review which specifically related to how open for business is the council. These recommendations are set out below:

- *“Tourism is important to members of the Council and local businesses need to develop a Tourism Strategy which sets out how the Council will work with the industry and engage visitor attractions to ensure that it is supported.*
- *Need stronger alignment at corporate level to support growth and the Departmental contributions*
- *Need to develop a marketing and inward investment prospectus which highlights the key selling points of the District – schools, environment etc.*
- *Lack of internal and external awareness of the economic development strategy – need for a marketing campaign for the strategy*
- *Need to working in partnership with local businesses to develop projects – the council doesn’t need to do everything itself*
- *Priorities for growth and supporting businesses need to be clear and concentrated on*
- *Establish a District wide Business Forum/Employment and Skills Partnership*
- *Need to improve decision making on key economic initiatives – town centre development*
- *Promote local skills and training providers*
- *Need to improve response times when major opportunities arise*

- *Be more proactive in keeping members/public informed of key regeneration projects”*

5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 The council has a wide ranging and significant influence on how businesses perceive the District as being “open for business”. This influence ranges from how attractive it makes its town centres through the approach it adopts to car parking charges (although car parking charges did not feature in the comments received from businesses) to how it attracts inward investment from national and international companies.

5.2 The principal themes emerging from the work carried out so far can be divided into short term /operational and long term strategic.

5.3 The short term/operational matters that are emerging from the work carried out so far are:

- Consider offering free planning advice to businesses
- Consider how the council can help businesses with marketing
- Consider how the council can offer direct business advice – rather than simply sign posting
- Consider how the council can offer direct support for training
- Consider how the council can offer discounts on NNDR and in what circumstances
- Consider how the council could pump prime direct investment in projects
- Consider how the procurement and tendering processes at the council could be improved to make them more business friendly
- Consider how documents could be improved to make them more accessible (use of plain English)
- Consider streamlining how businesses contact the council (such as a single point of contact)
- Consider how the council can promote local skills and training providers to local businesses.

5.4 The long term/strategic matters that are emerging from the work carried out so far are:

- Consider improving the strategic road network
- Consider improving broadband speeds within the District
- Consider the development of business/manufacturing start up units in the District
- Consider how the skills of the workforce could be improved
- Consider developing a tourism strategy and greater support for tourism
- Ensure all council resources are aligned to support businesses and business growth
- Consider developing a marketing and inward investment strategy - highlighting the advantages and the District as a

place to do business – using a development prospectus approach

- Consider developing a Business Form/Employment and skills partnership with local businesses
- Consider streamlining decision making on key economic decisions.

5.5 The recommendations from the Challenge and Improvement Workshop were:

(c) the top three short term /operational matters to be further progressed be:

- consider offering free advice to businesses including planning advice;
- consider streamlining how businesses contact the council (such as a single point of contact – to be manned at all times) and
- consider how the council can promote local skills and training providers to local businesses.

(d) the top three long term /strategic matters to be further progressed be:

- consider streamlining decision making on key economic decisions;
- consider developing a tourism strategy and greater support for tourism; and
- consider the development of business/manufacturing start up units throughout the District

APPENDIX 1

Short term matters

Matter	Objective	Action	Responsible officer	Timescales
Consider offering free advice to businesses including planning advice	To encourage businesses to develop within the District	Undertake cost and benefit analysis	GL and SF	By September 2013
Consider streamlining how businesses contact the council (such as a single point of contact – to be manned at all times)	To ensure that the Council is more “open for business” and the process for contact is transparent	Review the structures within the team and ensure that roles and responsibilities are clear and publicised	GL	October 2013
Consider how the council can promote local skills and training providers to local businesses	To ensure that business needs and that of employees is being effectively met	Under take mapping of current provision and identify needs of businesses	JW	Dec 2013

Long term matters

Matter	Objective	Action	Responsible officer	Timescales
Consider streamlining decision making on key economic decisions	To ensure the process is as “lean” as possible and appropriate decisions are made as quickly as possible	Review process as part of the IDBR	BI Team	December 2013
Consider developing a tourism strategy and greater support for tourism	To ensure that the District is being actively and effectively promoted	Develop and publish a strategy	MT	March 2014
Consider the development of business/manufacturing start up units throughout the District	To encourage business start up	Identify available areas and promote them	SS	March 2014