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Wednesday, 26th June, 2013

Present:-	Councillor David Stringer – in the Chair
Councillors	Miss Baker, Cairns, Clarke, Holland, Jones, Loades, Matthews, Olszewski and Wilkes
Officers	Neale Clifton (Regeneration and Development) Joanne Halliday (Head of Housing and Regeneration Services) Simon Smith (Regeneration and Economic Development Manager) Martin Stevens (Democratic Services Officer)

1. **APOLOGIES**

There were no apologies for absence.

2. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

3. **MINUTES FROM THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

The minutes of the meeting held on 20 March 2013 were confirmed as a correct record.

4. **NEWCASTLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY - YEAR TWO ACTION PLAN AND YEAR ONE REVIEW**

The Regeneration and Economic Development Manager presented a report on the Newcastle Economic Development Strategy. Cabinet had agreed the strategy for the Borough at its meeting last May following consultation with partners and the local business community on an earlier draft. When the preparation of a new Economic Development Strategy had first been discussed, it was initially proposed to provide a mid term report half way through the five year horizon of the strategy but Cabinet had instead requested an annual review. The appendix to the report provided a review of the Year One Action Plan and set out a proposed Year Two Action Plan. The action plan, like the strategy itself, was based around four themes, economy, place and infrastructure, people and image and marketing. He gave a status update on some of the actions contained within the plan.

A Member stated that it was important to communicate the initiatives that the Borough were undertaking. It was also important to communicate them to Members of the Council so they could help keep their ward informed. He added that there were certain initiatives which would benefit from publicity outside of the Borough area, which were important for tourism. The Regeneration and Economic Development Manager in response stated that they were important points which could be conveyed to Cabinet.

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A Member asked about the status of the Economic Development local plan. In response the Executive Director for Regeneration and Development stated that a timetable would be received by Members by the end of the calendar year.

A Member enquired about the status of the Ryecroft development scheme. In response the Executive Director for Regeneration and Development stated that the Council was currently preparing the financial information for the business plan before proceeding to market. It was important to have a clear understanding before proceeding to market in the autumn.

A Member asked if there was a breakdown of the apprenticeships and family initiatives which the Council had played a part in securing. He stated that there was a considerable amount of people aged between 24 and 30 that were finding it hard to obtain jobs and that this age group should be targeted.

A Member enquired whether the Council was doing every thing it could to attract funding from agencies within the region. The Regeneration and Economic Development Manager in response stated the Council was working with Stoke-on-Trent on receiving some new European funding. An event had also been held last Friday to which a number of companies had been invited. The companies invited were encouraged to look at apprenticeship opportunities. As a consequence of this event, he believed a number of apprenticeship opportunities had been offered.

A Member asked what the Borough Council was doing to encourage start up businesses. In response, the Regeneration and Economic Development Manager stated that there were a number of initiatives currently taking place, one of which was the pop up shop trial.

The Regeneration and Economic Development Manager undertook to given a written response to a number of questions from Members, these included what assistance was available for graduate business start up, an age breakdown of FEI customers, some information on what the Council was doing to promote Apedale County Park and the Borough generally for tourism, an update on talent match and the total number of apprenticeships as part of the 100 in 100 event.

The Chair requested an idiot's guide to the main strategies for Members' use with the key points for each strategy incorporated. This would ensure Members were better informed in the future. He also asked that a simplified version of the Action Plan be made available to all Elected Members and that the Year Two Action Plan should have more definitive deadlines for the expected completion of individual Actions.

5. TOWN CENTRE PARTNERSHIP - BUSINESS PLAN

The Town Centre Manager introduced a report on the Town Centre Partnership Business Plan. The plan was an evolving document and the action plan had in fact been updated since the last meeting of the Scrutiny Committee. The Partnership was a private sector led initiative with a vision of becoming the best market town in Staffordshire. He referred to the management structure of the board, which was detailed in the business plan.

The Town Centre Manager stated that the partnership was encouraging businesses to sign up. The Lymelight festival which had been run on a small budget by the business community had been a success and it was hoped that this would become an annual event. He was working on a wider events programme for the Town. One of the aims of the partnership was to make Newcastle a student town. They were

looking to improve the links with Keele University to attract more students to the town. A Freshers event was going to be held in order to encourage students to make better use of the town. He was pleased to see new shops appearing in the town. Prospective businesses now had a single point of contact, which allowed for better facilitation.

A Member asked how footfall was going to be monitored in the town. In response, the Town Centre Manager stated that this was monitored by asking a number of businesses within the town centre for their own figures. Members questioned whether there was merit in the Partnership completing their own footfall survey. In response the Town Centre Manager stated that it was expensive to carry out such a survey and they did not have the available budget at the present time to carry out the research. The data from the businesses was going to be provided to the next board meeting. The Portfolio Holder offered to report back from the board meeting with the data. A Member stated that it was hard to judge the success of the partnership without quality data for analysis. In response to a question from a Member, the Town Centre Manager confirmed that 14% of shops in the town were empty.

A Member praised the approach of having key events within the Town as a way of bringing people into the Town. He thought that as events were held, other community groups would be encouraged to hold their own within the town.

A Member stated that it was important to ensure that markets didn't decline, citing the Charities Market as an example. He thought longer-term market research was a useful approach to finding out what the public wanted to better inform businesses in the future. He suggested that an application for the Town to become a Business Improvement District was important. In response the Town Centre Manager agreed that lessons could be learnt from the markets already in place and there was certainly an argument for more of a collective strategy. He agreed that events were important and it was hoped soon to have a jazz and blues event. He agreed that market research was important and not necessarily just within the town but more widely across the Borough. To become a business improvement district was one of the districts longer-term goals. He was pleased to report that the Partnership's website had received over 2000 hits in the last two weeks. A number of promotional items were being given to the shops to help advertise the new website. The Executive Director for Regeneration and Development stated that the outside market was a Borough led operation ultimately but it was important to have the input of the Town Centre Partnership. A report would be received by Cabinet on the 17 July with a number of proposals for the improvement of the outside market within the Town.

RESOLVED: That a representative from the Town Centre Partnership be invited to the Committee in approximately six months time.

6. **BROADBAND**

The Chairman referred to the Broadband Newsletter which had been circulated with the agenda. He was pleased to have read that the County Council would invest £7.83m, BDUK £7.4m and BT £12.47m over the lifetime of the project. It was hoped that the Broadband Manager of the Superfast Staffordshire Project, Paul Chatwin would be able to attend the next meeting of the Scrutiny Committee.

7. **HOME IMPROVEMENT AGENCY SERVICES**

The Head of Housing and Regeneration Services introduced a report on the Home Improvement Agency Services. The service had been initially setup to help

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vulnerable households to repair their homes and specifically with adaptations through the Disabled Facilities Grant programme.

The Head of Housing and Regeneration Services outlined the options available to the Borough Council. Option A was to provide a service in-house. If this option was taken forward it was likely that funding from the Support People Grant would be lost. There would be large setup costs and there was a significant risk that it would be more expensive than the current service delivered. The customer experience would also not be as smooth. Option B was to retender the service as a Borough only service. This would require the Council to tender for the services outside of any county wide arrangement. Option C was to retender in partnership with Staffordshire County Council. It was believed that this option would be value for money and give a better resourced and co-ordinated service. The contract would be for four years.

The Executive Director for Regeneration and Development stated that a decision was still to be reached on whether Cabinet would make the final decision on the Home Improvement Agency Services or the Portfolio Holder.

Members agreed that it was important to have safeguards in place to ensure that the Borough's residents were not waiting an unreasonable time for the service compared to other authorities. They also felt that it was important for energy efficiency to be automatically considered during every project. There was a discussion about the pros and cons of not for profit organisations and profit making organisations.

RESOLVED: That the Scrutiny Committee recommends Option C – Retender the Home Improvement Agency Services in partnership with Staffordshire County Council.

8. **WORK PLAN**

The Chairman reported that Democratic Services would be working with him to reform and update the work programme which would then be reported to the next meeting of the Committee. A meeting of the HS2 working group was intended to be arranged in the near future, with the intention of following this up with a second meeting inviting stakeholders to obtain their views on the issue which could then be reported to Cabinet.

9. **URGENT BUSINESS**

There was no urgent business within the meaning of section 100 (4) of the Local Government Act 1972.

COUNCILLOR DAVID STRINGER
Chair