

Economic Development and Enterprise Scrutiny Committee – 3 December 2014

Portfolio Holder Question Time

The following information outlines the main activities that the Portfolio Holder has chosen to highlight as having been undertaken over the past year. Members are asked to submit any questions to the Scrutiny Officer (Member Services team) at least **3 days prior to the Scrutiny meeting**.

1. Newcastle Town Centre Public Realm (Street Market) project – this year has seen the completion of the scheme with the successful pedestrianisation of Hassell Street to improve the pedestrian movements to the lower end of the town along with the introduction of a day time taxi rank. In conjunction with this the Council has delivered the key element of the scheme, the new market stalls, in a consolidated section of the High Street which not only provides new structures for market trading but has greatly enhanced the visual appearance of this part of the High Street. A market fun day was held in September to promote the new market and to celebrate the history of the market charters.
2. Ryecroft retail-led redevelopment scheme – the Council continues to work with the County Council to secure a long term use for the Ryecroft site as this is a key site for the future economic well-being of the town centre. Through utilising specialist advice the Council has undertaken a procurement process which is leading to the selection of a preferred developer. To deliver a successful redevelopment will require significant resources and time for the preferred developer to secure planning permission and a construction contract. This matter is the subject of a separate specific agenda item at this meeting.

In the meantime an opportunity has arisen to utilise the vacant site of the former store building (following its demolition) to support the town centre and encourage footfall to local businesses. Temporary permission has therefore been granted to a private company to operate the Winter Wonderland. This is a new initiative for the area and complements the Christmas activities operating in the town centre.

3. Town Centre Partnerships – the Council has continued to actively support both the Newcastle and Kidsgrove Town Centre Partnerships and members will note that there is a separate agenda item providing more detailed information about the performance of the said partnerships. Nevertheless I have summarised some key headlines below:

The Newcastle TCP has delivered a wide range of activities in line with their business plan; this has included the Jazz and Blues Festival, Lymelight Music Festival, Global Groove and a weekend of activities around the Christmas Lights switch on. Working in partnership the Council has allowed free parking for major events and after 3pm for Christmas and a new customer loyalty scheme has been launched with the Lymecard.

Kidsgrove Town Centre Partnership has established a membership scheme and is launching a website. They have developed the “GO Kidsgrove” brand and delivered Christmas, Easter and Halloween events linking to local businesses.

4. The Homecoming new circus event – specific Council support was given to deliver this event. Officer time was supported the Newcastle Town Centre Partnership with a successful Arts Council bid which helped to deliver a totally different visitor experience and cultural offer for local residents. By offering some officer support and minimal financial support (£1,000) this demonstrated that such events (costing nearly £20,000) can be delivered by effective partnership working.
5. Business Boost competition 2014 – another successful competition and awards event was held at the Keele Sustainability Hub. By using Council officer resources the Business Boost awards are able to offer advice and financial support through private sponsorship, to local businesses that show the potential to develop. This year the scheme was expanded to include a town centre customer excellence award. The Business Boost scheme gives a unique opportunity to promote and support Newcastle based businesses.
6. Town Centre subway improvements – through section 106 agreement funding structural repairs and visual improvements have been made to two key subways in Newcastle town centre. Ryecroft subway refurbishment has been completed with modern colourful artwork through design workshops with St John Fisher School and completion of Bridge Street subway has been painted with heritage murals which has generated great local interest.
7. Education Business Partnership – through the Council’s aims to support local business growth and ensure young people can access employment opportunities the Council is seeking to strengthen links between educational establishments and employers. Working with the City Council and the LEP there are plans to establish a North Staffordshire Education Business Partnership. Locality projects will be established with local schools to link them to local businesses, thus increasing the aspirations of the young students to seek a career with a local business and to consider more appropriate and targeted qualifications.
8. Inward Investment – seeking inward investment is a key priority for the Borough and by working with the Stoke and Staffordshire Make It team the Council is able to have inward investment brochures and advice to companies looking to relocate or develop within the area.
9. Business support – working with Staffordshire Chamber of Commerce to signpost businesses to the Business Helpline and access to Advisors on 0300 111 8002. The Chamber can direct businesses to training and support plus any regional or national funding opportunities such as the current Regional Growth Fund which will provide gap funding for existing companies that wish to expand or invest to create sustainable jobs, where this investment would otherwise not happen due to lack of available finance.