

Economic Development, Culture & Leisure Panel - informal meeting
Thursday 26 October 2023 at 1pm, Executive Meeting Room

Present

Councillors Russell Simpson (Chair), John Smith (Vice-Chair), Yinka Adeniran, Peter Candlish, Leo Madden, George Madgwick

James Daly - Culture, Development and Projects Officer

Claire Watkins - Business Development and Projects Manager

Jane Lamer - Head of Economic Growth and Skills

Rebecca Alexander - Places and Markets Manager

Allison Harper - Democratic Services

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were made.

The Chair advised that, following panel discussions and discussions with Jane Lamer in Economic Development the suggestion was to refine the scrutiny topic to a review of the Economic Development & Regeneration Strategy focusing on the High Street element. The strategy contains a key objectives box which was quite vague and was compiled in 2019, pre Covid-19 since when a lot of things have fast forwarded, and a lot of retail habits have changed including on-line shopping. He suggested it would be useful to deep dive further and 'pick apart' this element.

There was a discussion about the contention that it was 'not fit for purpose' with Jane Lamer explaining why she had used this phrase. Working with the strategy unit and Councillor Pitt, the portfolio holder, it was decided to go for a refresh of the strategy in relation to the fundamental changes that have come across since the Pandemic and the now different economic climate. Some of the actions were very specific in the strategy and the plan is now to have more overarching priorities and then have a plan that is something more practical that can be adjusted without having to revisit the whole strategy. It is about making sure the strategy feels current and with longevity.

The Chair stressed that he considered the part concerning high streets was not fit for purpose not the whole strategy and that was the element that the panel could scrutinise. Shopping habits have changed so much since the implementation of the strategy.

Councillor Madden suggested using the terminology 'refresh' or 'renew'.

Councillor Candlish considered that the change in shopping habits is not so different from 2019 as the trends had been there for a long time and it was not really known by how much the Pandemic had really changed habits. High streets had been changing for a long time prior to the Pandemic and they were likely to continue changing.

The unanimous decision was taken to change the Scrutiny title to 'Since the Economic Development and Regeneration Strategy was written pre Covid-19 the Economic Development and Regeneration Strategy concerning High Streets needs

to be reviewed. The Panel suggests a review of the Economic Development & Regeneration Strategy focusing on High Street direction'.

Jane Lamer advised she would be able to bring a draft report to the November meeting providing a summary of the current position and where the service would suggest the focus is around High Streets in the updated strategy.

The Panel then discussed timescales to ensure the review was completed in time by the end of this municipal year. Timescales were tight. A decision was made to schedule an extra meeting in December to help with this.

The Panel then had a thorough discussion on suggested witnesses to be invited to include rental estate agents, market traders, retailers, cultural witnesses, licensing, retail centre managers and the High Street Taskforce. Witnesses could attend in person or provide a written submission. Direction would be given to witnesses on the evidence requested from them to ensure there was focused discussions and that witnesses were clear what the panel meant by 'the high street'.

The meeting ended at 14:15