

Scrutiny Review of Economic Development – February 2012

1. Executive Summary

1.1 Introduction

Members of the Overview Scrutiny Committee agreed to undertake a review of economic development in the borough.

1.2 Terms of Reference

To review the action carried out by the Gravesham Borough Council (GBC) and partners on economic development particularly in respect of the effectiveness in stimulating growth and facilitating new employment in the borough and assisting local people to acquire appropriate training and skills to enable them to gain employment.

The review would include comparison with selected peer authorities in Kent and elsewhere in the country which are recognised as excellent in their economic development role.

Additional evidence would be sought from the local business community and training providers which would help the review to develop its recommendations on how the authority could improve its effectiveness in the economic development of Gravesham.

1.3 Context of the review

The review was carried out in the context of the coalition government's announcement that all Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) including SEEDA (South East England Development Agency) will close by 31 March 2012. Responsibility for economic development and regeneration is being passed on to successor bodies including Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and central Government departments.

1.4 Evidence gathering - Appendices 1-6.

A number of evidence gathering sessions were held with other Authorities including; Kent County Council (KCC), Canterbury City Council, Swale Borough Council and Thurrock Unitary Authority.

A forum on the training and skills element of the review was held at North West Kent College with representatives from the business and education sectors taking part. Evidence was also gathered from the KCC 14-24 Innovation Unit.

A web based questionnaire was sent to all businesses in the Gravesham Borough Council business network. Just fewer than one hundred replies were received.

1.5 Recommendations

Cabinet is asked to consider the following recommendations:

High Priority 1.5.1 to 1.5.2

- 1.5.1 ***A Gravesham led “round table” meeting be arranged at the Civic Centre with KCC (Cabinet Member for Regeneration and Enterprise, KCC and Director of Economic Development, KCC) involving the HCA (Homes & Community Agency), Locate in Kent, Visit Kent (and/or other tourism agencies) so as to explore a common approach to Economic Development in Gravesham. This will avoid a fragmented and time-consuming approach that involves separate meetings.***
- 1.5.2 ***GBC should continue to support and listen to local businesses who wish to arrange themselves into appropriate independent groups to champion their priorities, including the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Sector.***

Medium Priority 1.5.3 to 1.5.8

- 1.5.3 **In the light of the anticipated increase in footfall and tourism in Gravesham during the Olympic period; Gravesham Borough Council (GBC) works with its partners and the business community to launch a specific Tourism campaign themed on key aspects of Gravesham.**
- 1.5.4 **Consider whether, for any aspect of existing and new business enquiries – e.g. Regulatory Services, Environmental health, Planning etc. – a more ‘business friendly’ approach could be achieved through the training of Council staff to understand business needs and how the Council can help business.**
- 1.5.5 **Re-examine how GBC can encourage local procurement of goods and services by collaborating with local businesses and raising awareness in the business community about how the Council can support them. Potential should be considered for setting a percentage for trade between the Council and local businesses.**
- 1.5.6 **Continue to examine whether all opportunities for external funding are being considered and pursued and investigate the potential for unlocking Gravesham’s major land and property sites.**
- 1.5.7 **Engage with KCC and promote the ‘Make Kent Quicker’ campaign which concerns the provision of high speed Broadband to those areas in Gravesham which cannot access such at present- acting as a contact point/facilitator for Parish Councils/Resident Associations. KCC be asked to arrange a survey in Gravesham to establish which areas need ‘quicker’ broadband.**
- 1.5.8 **GBC work with local training & skills providers, including the 14-24 Skills and Abilities Team, to establish a forum to champion local priorities with a key focus to enhance engagement with key groups such as ‘NEETS’ (people who are currently Not in Education, Employment, or Training), parents and businesses.**

Note: Recommendations in bold italics are high priority. Recommendations in bold only are medium priority.