

Report of the Portfolio Holder for economic development, regeneration and the town centre

Aligned to “Keep my place safe and looking good’, ‘Help me run a successful business’ and ‘Provide good things for me to see, do and visit’.

I am pleased to present an update report to the Council about the areas covered by my portfolio. In doing so I would like to both look back over recent events and forward to emerging issues.

Economic priorities

My portfolio was recently extended to cover the wider economic development and regeneration agenda and I am now in a position to ensure that the town centre regeneration work that I have led on makes an effective contribution to the wider prosperity of the district.

My portfolio also now extends to identifying support programmes and initiatives that benefit businesses from across the district, working with Worcestershire County Council to make sure that Bromsgrove continues to be well connected and accessible, ensuring that the needs and priorities of key centres and villages within Bromsgrove district are addressed and working with partner organisations to ensure that local residents have the right skills to meet the needs of local companies that are wishing to grow and expand and that we continue to invest in Apprenticeships.

In July 2015, it was pleasing to see that Cabinet endorsed five new economic priorities for Bromsgrove district which are designed to ensure that ‘business begins in Bromsgrove’. The priorities had been developed in close consultation with the Economic Development Theme Group, which consists of representatives from the local business community as well as key stakeholders such as Heart of Worcestershire College and Department of Work and Pensions.

Just to re-iterate the five priorities are as follows:

1. Harness the local entrepreneurial spirit and support business start-ups and existing business growth;
2. Encourage new inward investment and SME growth through the development of key employment sites;
3. Create a more vibrant Bromsgrove Town Centre by enhancing the current retail and leisure offer;
4. Improve connectivity within Bromsgrove (Digital and Transport);
5. Invest in our local workforce by supporting training and apprenticeships.

My update sets out briefly progress that is being made against each of these five priorities.

Priority 1: Harness the local entrepreneurial spirit and support business start-ups and existing business growth

The Council continues to support local businesses to grow and invest as well as creating a culture for entrepreneurialism to thrive. The Council delivers its economic development and business support activities through the North Worcestershire Economic Development and Regeneration (NWEDR) service (hosted by Wyre Forest District Council) and is working closely with the Growth Hubs established in Worcestershire and Greater Birmingham and Solihull to ensure that local businesses can access the support that they require.

Over the last 12 months, I am pleased to report that 41 existing businesses in Bromsgrove district have accessed support from programmes promoted via the NWEDR service. The support made available includes access to a dedicated business advisor, coaching, mentoring and support in accessing grants. 17 businesses in the district have successfully applied for a grant to help them grow and develop their business, with the total grant value totalling nearly £80,000.

The Council is also committed to supporting new businesses to set up and thrive and over the same time period, the NWEDR service has helped 121 local residents that were seeking help to set up their own business, with 22 new businesses actually starting up and 7 businesses accessing a small grant to help with their set up costs. In many cases, it is access to a dedicated business adviser that is most beneficial to the customer rather than the grant.

I am also pleased to be spearheading the 'Business Begins in Bromsgrove' campaign.

Over the last few years, the Council has focused on the regeneration of Bromsgrove Town centre and the High Street area. The launch of the 'Business Begins in Bromsgrove' initiative, recognises that it is now time to engage more fully with businesses across the district to understand why Bromsgrove is so special as a business location and to help the Council to understand what support it can put in place to help encourage business formation and growth. Over the next few weeks, I intend to meet as many local businesses as possible so that I can understand what their challenges are and to bring to life what it means to be a business in Bromsgrove.

This initiative stems from the success of the formation of the Bromsgrove High Street Town Team which sees traders working together after I met with them to discuss their needs, issues and concerns and how we can support them.

As part of Business Begins in Bromsgrove I have already visited Rubery High Street and made strong links with the Traders' Association there and more recently Stoke Prior where I made myself available to business leaders and traders from the eclectic mix there of canalside craft shops to industries.

This face to face contact allows us to raise the profile of the Council and NWEDR and how we can all work together, it shows we are listening and have an interest in discovering and meeting the varied needs which Bromsgrove businesses, current and new, have. In the New Year Cofton Hackett and Alvechurch are on our lists of places to visit.

Priority 2: Encourage new inward investment and SME growth through the development of key employment sites

The Council via the NWEDR service continues to work with land owners, commercial property agents, developers and Local Enterprise Partnerships to promote Bromsgrove to prospective inward investors. The following lists examples of Bromsgrove based companies which have announced expansion plans during 2015 which have resulted in new jobs being created.

- Access equipment and Machinery Company has taken on additional staff as part of a £1 million funding package;
- Power transformer manufacturer expanded into larger accommodation at Buntsford Hill Business Park as part of a £500,000 investment which has seen staff numbers increase from 24 to 33;
- An International Control Room Console manufacturer has expanded into new premises at Sapphire Court, Bromsgrove Enterprise Park and taken on additional staff;
- 3 companies (two in the IT sector and a commercial landscaper) have expanded by taking on additional staff following funding delivered through NWEDR;
- An accountancy firm took on new offices and created six new jobs;
- The Bromsgrove part of the Redditch Eastern Gateway has been included as part of the Worcestershire LEP Enterprise Zone bid, which if approved could offer full rate relief to prospective occupiers;
- Discussions are taking place with the owners of Bromsgrove Enterprise Park to seek ways to bring forward the development sites for expanding businesses from within and outside the District, with regards to the Enterprise Park's Sapphire Court development, six further units have been occupied during 2015;
- In October, Bromsgrove was promoted as part of the World Class Worcestershire stand at MIPIIM UK - the UK's largest land and property exhibition, conference and market place for investors to meet, discuss projects and opportunities.

Priority 3: Create a more vibrant Bromsgrove Town Centre by enhancing the current retail and leisure offer

Town Centre

The Town Centre Regeneration Project arose from partnership working between the County and District Councils; the Police and Fire and the Health Authority and was aligned to the District Councils Draft Area Action Plan, which identified areas in and around the town centre for development. As a result, Bromsgrove now has a new Health Centre (catering for fifty per cent of the local population); a new 'Blue Light' station (the first of its kind in the country); award winning public toilets and improved Bus Station plus a newly refurbished High Street and outdoor market. Other works completed include the resurfacing of

Worcester Road, the improvements made to the plaza outside Asda and the development of a new website dedicated to the regeneration of the town, www.betterbromsgrove.com

In June of this year I set up a Town Team, consisting of traders and supported by Council Officers. The aim of the team was to put together a submission for the Great British High Street competition 2015 and they organised various events such as a clean up day and a display in an empty shop and submitted an entry by the submission date of 1st Sept. Whilst Bromsgrove was not shortlisted, the team has now reformed and reorganised with a view to putting on more events, improving the town and entering the competition again next year.

We have all seen how quickly shopping habits can change so it is important that we continue to improve our town and encourage people to visit. Whilst Sainsbury reviewed and subsequently withdrew from their proposed Birmingham Road development, the site is currently being marketed and development may yet arrive.

The events area designed into the new High Street has been utilised with a series of markets and events such as the Court Leet and Farmers Market included in the events calendar 2015. Work is underway to fill the 2016 calendar and will include the Carnival and Christmas market. I am especially looking forward to the French market and the Christmas events later this year.

Development sites at either end of the town are progressing. Preferred developers for the Stourbridge Road car park site (Caldwell Properties) are in discussion with Planners and an application is expected in November 2015. The adjoining private land is subject to a planning application for an Aldi store. The former market site off Hanover Street has been to Cabinet and Council and a planning application from Hinton's Property Group for a Little Waitrose and associated retail and restaurants will be submitted as soon as contracts are exchanged.

Other work I hope to see come to fruition includes:

- The implementation of a street café policy (as soon as WCC agree to this on the highway). This will allow specific properties in the High Street to utilise the area outside their premises for serving food and drink and will enhance the ambience of the High Street and give it a more continental feel.
- The refurbishment of the areas linking into the High Street (Church Street, Mill Lane, The Strand and Chapel Walk) as well as the area between the High Street and Worcester Road. WCC are currently preparing an estimate for this work and will be reported to Cabinet in due course.
- The commencement of building works on the Recreation Road site for a new Care Village and the improvements to the recreation ground opposite.
- The move into Parkside, as well as being exciting for us all moving into new premises, will provide a site of the current council offices for redevelopment.
- When other towns are closing their Libraries, I am proud that Bromsgrove will be getting a new Library within the Parkside development.

Furthermore, Cabinet recently endorsed a proposal to introduce a 'Centres management' approach to support the development of Bromsgrove Town Centre and outlying centres including Alvechurch, Barnt Green, Catshill, Hagley, Rubery and Wythall. A new Centres Manager will be recruited and hosted by the NWEDR service and will build on the 'Town Team' approach that has been successfully piloted for Bromsgrove Town Centre.

4. Improve connectivity within Bromsgrove (Digital and Transport)

One of the most important issues facing local businesses is gaining access to superfast broadband infrastructure and connectivity to high speed broadband is critical in today's technology driven economy. The Council is not directly responsible for the rollout of the superfast broadband network across the county but continues to work with Worcestershire County Council to ensure that it reaches our key industrial areas and business parks.

Furthermore, the Council, via the NWEDR service has been pro-active in promoting the availability of government funded 'Broadband Vouchers', to enable businesses in our district to access grants of up to £3,000 so that they connect to the superfast broadband network. I am pleased to report that between May and September this year that 71 businesses in Bromsgrove accessed these vouchers.

The Council continues to work with Worcestershire County Council as highways authority to find a long term solution to the congestion problems faced on the A38 and are examining the financial implications of bringing forward a long term investment package that improves the capacity of this important road corridor.

5. Invest in our local workforce by supporting training and apprenticeships

A well functioning labour market lies at the heart of the economic development and regeneration of Bromsgrove. The more opportunities there are for high value adding employment and residents who are able to access those opportunities, the more prosperous the town will be.

Local residents need the opportunity to find employment that meets their specific needs and aspirations. At the same time, local businesses need a workforce that has the skills, motivation and commitment for them to operate successfully.

Bromsgrove district has performed well in respects of creating new opportunities for local residents and it is pleasing to report that unemployment in Bromsgrove stood at just 1.2% in September 2015, which is lower than the county and regional rate.

Furthermore, the district has also performed well in supporting Apprenticeships, with over 1,500 Apprenticeships created since April 2013.

The Council working with the Bromsgrove Economic Development Theme Group has identified a number of aims, objectives and actions under the priority of 'invest in our local workforce by supporting training and apprenticeships' and over the next 12 to 18 months I intend to deliver:-

- Improved promotion of the apprenticeship offer to local small and medium enterprises (SMEs),
- Better understanding of local business skill requirements.
- More and higher quality work experience and placement opportunities.

Working with our partners in regeneration, achieving this will involve:-

- Increased access of grant support where available to local businesses,
- Holding of promotional events and jobs fairs here in Bromsgrove,
- Production of a local skills plan including an audit of local business needs,
- Meaningful work experience for both school pupils and unemployed residents,

- Wider participation in the county wide 'Connecting Schools to Business initiative'.

I am particularly keen to progress a major event next year working with schools and Heart of Worcestershire College and local employers, focused on promoting careers and apprenticeship opportunities to school age children, as a way of ensuring that we try to retain as much local talent as possible in Bromsgrove.