



Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission

MINUTES of the OPEN section of the Education and Local Economy Scrutiny Commission held on Thursday 26 September 2024 at 7.00 pm at 160 Tooley Street, London SE1 2QH

PRESENT: Councillor Cassandra Brown (Chair)
Councillor Rachel Bentley (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Sunil Chopra
Councillor Renata Hamvas
Councillor Youcef Hassaine
Martin Brecknell (Co-opted member)
Jonathan Clay (Co-opted member)
Marcin Jagodzinski (Co-opted member)

OTHER MEMBERS PRESENT: Councillor John Batteson (Cabinet Member for Climate Emergency, Jobs & Business)

OFFICER SUPPORT: Amit Alva (Scrutiny Officer)
Adam Wood (Scrutiny Officer)

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies received from Councillor Irina Von Wiese.
Apologies for lateness received from Councillor Renata Hamvas and Co-opted Member Marcin Jagodzinski.

2. NOTIFICATION OF ANY ITEMS OF BUSINESS WHICH THE CHAIR DEEMS URGENT

There were no items of business which the Chair deemed urgent.

3. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATIONS.

There were no disclosures of interests and dispensations.

4. MINUTES

Minutes of the meeting held on 4 September 2024 were approved as a correct record.

5. DRAFT TOWN CENTRE ACTION PLAN

The Chair invited Councillor John Batteson (Cabinet Member for Climate Emergency, Jobs & Business) and Officer Danny Edwards (Head of Economy) to give an overview of the Draft Town Centre Action Plans.

Councillor Batteson thanked the Chair and noted:

- declining high streets over the last 15 years mean improving town centres is a national issue
- the Plans' relationships to the Council Delivery Plan and the work to deliver thriving High Streets; investing in delivering major improvements across Southwark town centres
- the Action Plans show work tailored to the needs of the designated town centres (Camberwell, Peckham, Elephant and Castle / Walworth and East Street, Bermondsey, and Canada Water), developed through feedback from residents and businesses, Councillor Batteson's engagement with the businesses and community, and that of the former Cabinet Member
- the Action Plans show the work to be carried out by the council working with a range of partners and stakeholders such as Business Improvement Districts, Camberwell's SE5 Forum, Peckham Business Forum and Elephant and Castle Business Forum
- the Strategic Policy Leads (within the Local Economy Team) would act as single strategic points of contact for stakeholders wishing to build relationships with the council and for building relationships between stakeholders themselves
- the Strategic Policy Leads are responsible for delivering each of the Action Plan's objectives
- the Action Plans include public-facing plans, currently being piloted, which will be updated as the work progresses, making them responsive to residents' feedback
- the Action Plans show committed and funded actions through the Thriving High Streets Fund
- the future funding situation can change as a result of changes in national government policies
- businesses have communicated hopes that national government will aim to

reduce retail theft by considering shoplifting charges for aggregate value below the current £200 threshold

- (through Danny) that the role of the Town Centre Leads is to be visible within their allocated communities and to use their in-depth area knowledge, working across the council to efficiently coordinate activity and engage with the community

The Chair noted that the report was yet to go to Cabinet, providing an opportunity for the commission to feed into the Town Centre Action Plans.

The commission then asked the following questions regarding:

- the Town Centre Leads' roles and how they fit into existing coordinating provision and reporting structures
- measures of the Plans' and grants' success
- the Action Plans' support for older residents and provision of wifi, benches and toilets as supportive infrastructure for building footfall and increasing safety
- the definition of town centres and how smaller shopping streets relate to the Town Centre Action Plans
- responsibility for deciding where funding is allocated and why the funding allocation process differs from, for example, funding for Neighbourhoods or the Cleaner Greener Safer (CGS) programme
- seasonality (and associated potential for seasonal employment) – how this related to the Plans
- opportunities for sharing lessons from areas deemed already to be thriving
- the balance between local, independent shops and bigger High Street brands, and how the Council can encourage brands to stay where these contribute to increased footfall
- plans for engaging with universities

In response, Councillor Batteson and Danny explained that the roles of the new Town Centre Leads will evolve. They would coordinate actions within the Local Economy Team and across the Council with an emphasis on shorter-term, action-led delivery rather than producing high-level strategy or vision documents.

Success measures will be developed with input from communities (given the consultative nature of the Plans) and feedback from this Commission. Specific, funded projects had their own evaluation processes.

Councillor Batteson noted that wifi connectivity was an important aspect and that it would be factored into the wider infrastructural development within the Plans.

The Council Delivery Plan defines the five town centres: Peckham; Camberwell; Elephant and Castle / Walworth and East Street; Bermondsey; and Canada Water. Support for and actions in smaller streets and parades are provided through other mechanisms in the Thriving High Streets Programme.

Councillor Batteson explained that funding through the Town Centre Action Plans was ultimately the responsibility of the Cabinet Member. Danny added that the funding was non-Council (being UK Shared Prosperity Fund-derived) and it required the Council to follow the processes and outputs established by the GLA and central government.

So far, local businesses had indicated that seasonality was not especially important but this could be explored further if there was interest at a later date.

The reason for a single point of contact in Town Centres is to provide detailed, local knowledge so that on-the-ground issues could be identified and brought to the Council's attention.

Lessons from other, already thriving Town Centres had already been shared. These complemented the conversations with businesses specific to the areas of the Action Plans so that best practices both 'wider' and 'deeper' could be combined. In addition, regular meetings between Bid leads have enabled further sharing of learning.

On the balancing and mixing of smaller, local shops with bigger brands, the Commission heard that the latter can generate spillover interest and business by attracting people to an area who then go on to shop in independent businesses. However, the Council has limited powers at influencing larger commercial interests to stay in an area if this is not to their advantage. Its role in contributing to thriving town centres through increasing footfall is more significant.

The focus of the Town Centre Action Plans is businesses and local residents (including students) whereas engagement with universities happens primarily through the Anchor Network.

6. CABINET MEMBER INTERVIEW- CLIMATE EMERGENCY, JOBS & BUSINESS

The commission then heard from Councillor Batteson on his Cabinet role and remit in Climate Emergency, Jobs and Business.

Councillor Batteson made the following points:

Employment Support, Apprenticeships and Internships

Employment support focuses on the priority groups facing the greatest barriers to work and is delivered through Southwark Works, a framework of specialist providers supporting people with disabilities, long-term unemployed, ex-offenders, refugees and people at risk of homelessness. More work is needed to raise the

visibility of the service. If national government devolves skills and employment support then there may be increased opportunities for the service. Nationally, the apprenticeship system is struggling but Southwark is doing well, particularly in terms of entry level apprenticeships. A more diverse range of Apprenticeship industries and sectors would be beneficial as new apprenticeship posts are predominantly in the Construction industries. In terms of paid Internships, the programme offers three themes: for Sixth Form students; for penultimate year undergraduates; for graduates within 12 months of graduating.

The Skills Delivery Plan

This focuses on six sectors where long-term growth is expected. Activities are more advanced in some sectors (the Green sector has a Skills Centre and pathways into Southwark Works whereas the Hospitality sector has a Skills Hub opening in the next few months). Further work is needed to link employment sectors so that skills training and pathways more closely match how people look for jobs.

Business Support

Businesses are keen to access more funding. Southwark Pioneers and the Thriving High Street Programme are the main vehicles for this. Analysis of Southwark Pioneers (supporting start-ups, micro-businesses, social enterprises and businesses in growth phases) shows good distribution of support for businesses across the Borough.

Living Wage Borough

The Borough is making progress towards the target of doubling Living Wage Employers by 2026 (to 496) with a focus on developing conversations in the business community to highlight advantages for employers (recruitment and retention among others).

The Commission then asked questions on:

- the Council's role in linking Apprenticeships with Children in Care in Southwark and with schools
- the background to and funding outcomes of the Southwark Pioneers Fund and how it could be better advertised
- current provision for those leaving prison (given the national situation)
- how businesses are meeting the challenge of the Living Wage given the current economic situation

Danny explained that Care Leavers (Children in Care are supported by Children and Adult Services) are an important priority for the Council and a Priority group for

Southwark Works where they receive bespoke skills support and access to the support network.

Councillor Batteson explained the importance of the Pioneers Fund (currently in Year 2 of 4 and so outcomes yet to be fully evaluated). Councillor Batteson has been working with officers in Communications to increase visibility through existing channels and to focus on beneficiaries of the fund who can share their stories and so help to engage others. More work is needed to illustrate the support available to potential users.

Regarding ex-offenders, Councillor Batteson agreed to find out from Southwark Works and Pecan (relevant support organisation) on the current situation and report back to the Commission.

Councillor Batteson informed the commission that the aim is to reach the target number of Living Wage employers, noting that accreditation warrants a cost for the business and also that the Council has a role in encouraging and supporting the process of accreditation. Additional initiatives, such as encouraging businesses in Council-owned properties to be Living Wage employers, are being explored.

In response to a query about the appearance of a graph on page 10 of the Local Economy Programmes report, Danny noted the ward label formatting error which would be reformatted, and the report recirculated.

The Chair summarised the discussion and noted opportunities for further boosting communications around the Skills Delivery Plan (and employment support more generally) and links from these to the care system, prisons and schools.

7. PROPOSED WORK PROGRAMME 2024-2025

The Commission discussed the need to see Persistent Absences data and the Council's actions to reduce absences including considering possible actions in the near future.

The Commission agreed to invite a representative from a Southwark school that has successfully dealt with Persistent Absences.

The meeting ended at 8.30pm.

CHAIR:

DATED: