

Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee

7 November 2019

Economy and Enterprise OSC Scrutiny Review - Support provided to the retail sector by Durham County Council



Joint report of Lorraine O'Donnell, Director of Transformation and Partnerships and Ian Thompson, Corporate Director of Regeneration and Local Services

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 The report provides members with an update on the progress made in relation to the recommendations contained within the Economy and Enterprise OSC Scrutiny review report of support provided to the retail sector by Durham County Council (DCC).

Executive summary

- 2 At the meeting of the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 2 November 2017 members agreed the terms of reference for the review with the aim of investigating and understanding how DCC works with key partners including the Area Action Partnerships (AAPs) to support the retail sector in County Durham. The review would also identify any gaps in support and examine any actions by DCC and partners to address these gaps. It was agreed that the review would:
 - Examine and understand DCC's responsibilities for regeneration, economic development and planning with a specific focus on the retail sector.
 - Examine the retail sector nationally, regionally and locally identifying challenges for the retail sector in County Durham.
 - Consider the role of DCC and key partners including AAPs in developing, promoting and delivering retail support in the county.
 - Examine with Commercial Letting Agents in the county the current process for marketing retail premises, the information provided by DCC to agents on the retail offer and any issues/challenges with the current process.

- Identify any gaps in current retail support in the county and examine any actions identified by DCC and partners to tackle gaps in provision.
 - Examine and understand the Durham BID.
- 3 Overall the review found that there are many good projects and initiatives taking place to support the retail offer in the county's town centres and identified a number of areas where additional work can be done. Key improvement areas identified included improving IT connectivity, signage, communication of events and general support to retail businesses.
 - 4 The report was considered by Cabinet at the meeting on the 16 January 2019. At that meeting Cabinet were asked to agree the recommendations contained within the review report which included a recommendation for a six-monthly update on the progress against the recommendations. In addition, the report was shared with the County Durham Economic Partnership on the 26 April 2019.
 - 5 A progress update is attached as Appendix 2 for members consideration and arrangements have been made for relevant officers involved in the review to attend the meeting on the 7 November to answer any resulting questions.

Recommendations

- 6 Members of the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to consider and comment upon the progress made in relation to the recommendations contained in the Scrutiny review report.
- 7 That the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee receive a further report detailing progress made against the recommendations contained in the scrutiny review report at a future meeting.

Background

- 8 The review commenced in January 2018 and concluded in September 2018 and consisted of 11 meetings and 4 visits to various town centres in the county, providing an opportunity for members of the review group to meet with retailers and developers to discuss any challenges or issues and identify the support they required.
- 9 The review made the following 10 recommendations:

Recommendation 1

- That DCC continues to further develop the County Durham town centre surveys to include detail of DCC owned buildings, hotel and bed and breakfast provision and tourist attractions in relation to the 13 largest centres, 2 district centres and 3 retail parks in the county.
- That a member's seminar is arranged to discuss and consider the information provided in the County Durham Town Centre Survey 2018.

Recommendation 2

- That the Real Service Grouping continue to monitor robustly the number of vacant retail units in our town centres and consider introducing an appropriate indicator to monitor performance on a quarterly basis.

Recommendation 3

- DCC ensures that as a result of the Utilities, Telecommunications and Other Broadcast Infrastructure Policy within the emerging County Durham Plan, all new build developments or renovations (both residential and commercial) are served by high speed and reliable broadband connection.
- That DCC continues to work with broadband providers to ensure that residents and businesses throughout County Durham have the opportunity to access superfast broadband provision currently available.
- That pending a successful evaluation of the Bishop Auckland and Stanley pilot schemes to provide free public Wi-Fi, the scheme is rolled out where appropriate to other town centres in the county.

Recommendation 4

- That as part of the 'second round' programme of masterplans, a signage audit is undertaken across all 12 large town centres in the county with a view to making improvements to town centre signage.

Recommendation 5

- In order to encourage future events in town centres DCC rolls out the 'Managing Our Town Centres' project across the county and promotes the project with relevant DCC colleagues and partners including the AAPs.
- That DCC's Communications and Marketing Team in conjunction with partners including Town and Parish Councils and AAPs, actively promote community events to be held in town centres ensuring awareness amongst

local businesses and subject to appropriate regulations regarding the promotion of third party events being satisfied.

Recommendation 6

- That a link to DCC's web pages providing detail of DCC's business support service and the Targeted Business Support scheme is sent to all commercial letting agents operating in County Durham.
- That DCC's web pages providing detail of the business support service and the Targeted Business Support scheme are in a clear format and easily accessible when using search engines to access information on potential grant funding currently available.

Recommendation 7

- That DCC continues to develop training opportunities for the retail sector which are informed by local retailers, with a focus on digital marketing, window display/dressing and good customer service and that the training offer is promoted by various key partners in the county to SMEs and micro-businesses.

Recommendation 8

- That the Business Rates Team and the Enforcement Team re-target all businesses eligible for Small Business Rate Relief who have not applied to date, publicise all forms of business rate relief available and the associated eligibility criteria via the DCC website, Business Durham and the Area Action Partnerships

Recommendation 9

- That DCC considers introducing to some DCC town centre car parks alternative payment options such as contactless payments.
- That DCC reconsiders when car parking initiatives such as 'Free after 3' are offered to ensure that any initiative is of optimum benefit to retailers and limits the length of free car parking in town centres to allow availability/turnover of spaces working with local stakeholders including DCC Councillors.
- That car parking provision in the 12 large town centres is an area of focus in the development of the 'second round' programme of masterplans.

Recommendation 10

- That information in respect of AAP town centre projects are shared across the AAP network.
 - That the review group receives detail of progress made in relation to ongoing AAP projects focusing on supporting town centres and business.
- 10 The report including the recommendations were considered by Cabinet in January 2019 and as part of the review process the committee will receive regular progress updates in relation to the recommendations contained in the report.

Conclusions

- 11 Members will be aware of progress made in relation to the recommendations contained in the review report.

Background papers

Scrutiny Review Report - Support provided to the retail sector by DCC - 2018.

Other useful documents

- None

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

Not applicable

Finance

Not applicable

Consultation

Not applicable

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

All scrutiny reviews are subject to an equality impact assessment.

Human Rights

Not applicable

Climate Change

Not applicable

Crime and Disorder

Not applicable

Staffing

Not applicable

Accommodation

Not applicable

Risk

Not applicable

Procurement

Not applicable