

DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

ECONOMY AND ENTERPRISE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

At a Meeting of the **Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee** held in **Committee Room 2, County Hall, Durham** on **Thursday 7 November 2019** at **9.30 am**

Present:

Councillor M Clarke (Chair)

Members of the Committee:

Councillors E Adam, A Batey, R Crute, D Hall, J Higgins, P Howell, S Iveson, L Maddison, R Manchester, E Scott and M Wilson

Co-opted Members:

Mr G Binney and Mrs R Morris

Also Present:

Councillor J Clare

1 Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Atkinson, S Dunn, T Henderson, J Maitland, R Ormerod, P Sexton and T Tucker.

2 Substitute Members

No notification of Substitute Members had been received.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held 24 September 2019 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

4 Declarations of Interest

Councillor P Howell declared an interest in Item 8, Visit County Durham – Development and Marketing Activity, as Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Local Environment at Darlington Borough Council.

5 Items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties

There were no items from Co-opted Members or Interested Parties.

6 Media Relations

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer, Diane Close referred Members to the recent prominent articles and news stories relating to the remit of the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee (for copy see file of minutes).

The articles included a report of a Landlord fined more than £700 for breaching the terms of a licence for a property within a designated selective licensing area at Easington Colliery. It was added that Durham County Council (DCC) brought the case against the landlord after he failed to comply with two of the conditions of the licence. Members were reminded that the Wembley area of Easington Colliery was a designated selective licensing area from July 2014 to July 2019 and the issue linked to the work of the Committee in looking at the proposed Selective Licensing Scheme for County Durham.

A further article noted that more than 70 apprenticeship opportunities had been filled within the Council, varying from Intermediate (Level 2) to Degree level. It was explained that apprentices ranged in age from 16-37 years and worked across most areas of Council work including: business administration; bricklaying; civil engineering; financial management; horticulture; and highways. Members noted the links to the work of the Committee had undertaken in looking at apprenticeship opportunities for young people and DCC as an employer.

The Committee learned that Newcastle Building Society had created a branch in Barnard Castle Market Place which included six full and part-time positions, including a Financial Adviser. It was noted this linked to activity of the Committee in looking at work undertaken to regenerate our town centres and improve the retail offer.

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer explained that the first tenant, Sumitomo Electric Wiring Systems Europe Sumitomo, had signed up at the new Jade Business Park, near Murton. She added that Sumitomo produced and distributed automotive wiring harnesses, fuse boxes, connectors, and cables throughout Europe. Councillors noted that the site was managed by Business Durham with the media item linking to the work of Business Durham which was the following item on the agenda.

Resolved:

That the presentation be noted.

7 Business Durham - Progress Report

The Chair welcomed the Managing Director Business Durham, Brian Archer who was in attendance to provide the Committee with an update presentation in relation to the work of Business Durham (for copy see file of minutes).

The Managing Director Business Durham thanked the Chair and Committee for the opportunity to provide an update on the performance of Business Durham. He asked Members to note the €47million of EU projects that were underway, and the capital grant programme, with a minimal level of £100,000 based upon the number of jobs created. He explained one project was the Durham City Incubator, working jointly with New College Durham, Durham University and Business Durham to provide high growth business start-ups with support. The Managing Director Business Durham noted seven inward investments within the County and noted £8million worth of contracts won. He added that the business occupancy rate for Council owned units was at 87 percent and that the rental income provided a £1million operating surplus which meant Business Durham was in effect self-funding and had the ability to provide some match funding.

The Managing Director Business Durham explained that there were a large number of businesses across the County and with a high number of start-ups. He noted attractive points of the County included low labour costs and the relatively high skill levels across the working age population.

The Managing Director Business Durham explained the aim was to have Business Durham as a single point of contact, to remove the confusion often faced by businesses and to be different, with a culture that gains the trust of the business community and was clear and transparent. He noted, that he felt this difference had helped Business Durham be successful.

He noted the business survival rates in County Durham and the growth of the stock of businesses in the County, both greater than regional values, with growth increasing and failures decreasing.

The Chair thanked the Managing Director Business Durham and asked the Committee for their comments and questions.

Councillor E Adam noted lower labour costs and asked if the 3,866 jobs created all equated to lower paid and lower skill jobs. The Managing Director Business Durham noted that there was a challenge in terms of attracting the jobs to the County which looked for those higher-level skills, with work ongoing with the Further Education and Higher Education organisations to help build up those skills. He added that the only sustainable competitive advantage came from skills and therefore it was important to be able to look to move people up the value curve in this regard.

Councillor E Adam noted mention of 40 multinationals investing in the County over the last three years and asked were they actively sought and were they companies offering low pay. The Managing Director Business Durham noted there was a range and it was important to focus on the positives and advertise County Durham as a great place, not only in terms of skills, but also in terms of transport links, broadband and marketing. He noted some of the larger companies, such as Amazon and other high-tech companies, as well as more traditional companies. He added that working to create a “blended economy” was important, not simply relying upon low-paid, labour intensive jobs. He noted the promotion of high-tech jobs such as those at the companies based at NETPark and noted many of the Physics and Mathematics graduates from Durham University were attracted to stay in the area as well and work was also undertaken to grow our own jobs within the County in addition.

Mrs R Morris noted looking on the Council’s website that the Skills Strategy was for the period 2014-2018 and asked for more information as regards any refresh. The Managing Director Business Durham noted that while the skills strategy was outside the remit of Business Durham, he understood that there was an aim to raise skill levels, namely above Level 4 and also to look to increase the level of management skills.

Mrs R Morris asked as regards the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and the Local Industrial Strategy (LIS) and asked now, a year later, if it was possible for us in the County to be more proactive in looking to tie-in with the LIS to assert the different needs of County Durham in comparison to Newcastle and Sunderland for example. The Managing Director Business Durham agreed there were nuances associated with County Durham and that there was work through the County Durham Partnership (CDEP), in terms of feeding into the LEP and LIS. He added as regards the research and evidence base being developed, with Durham University and New College Durham being involved. He explained a challenge for the LIS was the high-level nature of the national Industrial Strategy (IS) and in linking with the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) by aligning to the IS in order to be able to access those funds. He noted that it was therefore important to try and influence as regards the IS and those involved, such as Professor Brian Tanner, Chair of the CDEP and others such as the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) and the North East Chamber of Commerce (NECC), were looking to influence on behalf of the County.

Mrs R Morris noted reference to the number of inward investments and asked for more information. The Managing Director Business Durham noted the Annual Report contained a summary and that he could circulate the most up-to-date information to Members in due course.

Councillor E Scott thanked the Managing Director Business Durham for a succinct and informative presentation and noted her attendance at the “Durham: Powered by People” launch event and asked why such a high-profile brand was not mentioned with the report and presentation. The Managing Director Business Durham noted that Business Durham promoted the County as a great place to work, live and make jobs and noted the branding was included on materials, posters and videos. Councillor E Scott noted she felt it was something that should be promoted more within the Council itself. The Managing Director Business Durham noted it was promoted internally, so in turn those departments could inform those businesses they dealt with. The Principal Overview and Scrutiny Officer, Stephen Gwilym noted that the Powered by People brand had been promoted internally, with a footer on e-mails including the branding.

Councillor R Crute noted the uncertainty in terms of funding and the need to ensure when EU funding ceased that the SPF would look to be right for County Durham. He noted the Secretary for State had stated a desire for “maximum continuity” and asked if there was any further information and would other funding streams be subsumed by the SPF. The Managing Director Business Durham noted assurances had been sought in terms of the SPF being greater than or equal to EU funding, adding there was the potential for some areas, including County Durham to be hit hardest by the effects of Brexit and changes in funding. He noted currently he was not confident that the SPF would be greater than or equal to EU funding, citing the loss of European Social Fund (ESF) in particular with its link to the skills agenda.

Councillor P Howell noted low-skilled jobs within the County and also the high-skill jobs, such as those described at NETPark. He asked for further information as regards those occupying NETPark and the numbers of people those companies represented. The Managing Director Business Durham noted that NETPark was growing very well, with £7 million of LEP funding to expand. He added occupancy was over 90 percent and would be happy to liaise with Overview and Scrutiny Officers to arrange a tour for Members. The Chair noted that dates in May/June 2020 would be confirmed for a number of site visits for the Committee, including NETPark.

Mrs R Morris asked as regards any links with the Centre for Process Innovation (CPI). The Managing Director Business Durham noted there was links, in relation to the catapults within the County.

Councillor L Maddison noted schools visits to companies at NETPark would be valuable and asked what work was ongoing to identify key individuals in schools to take leadership on this to encourage interest in those higher skilled jobs at an early age. The Managing Director Business Durham noted an additional 17 schools were taking part in the Future Business Magnates (FBM) competition which had schools working with businesses to encourage an enterprise culture and a “can-do” attitude. He added in many cases students would be taken into businesses, including those at NETPark and that this inclusivity was important in terms of economic growth.

Councillor L Maddison added she had recently experienced the fantastic work of students in woodworking classes and asked how those types of skills were encouraged. The Managing Director Business Durham noted that there were “idea workshops” where students would work with mentors to test and validate an idea and noted the recent launch event at the Xcel Centre at Newton Aycliffe, hosted by BBC Radio Newcastle presenter Charlie Charlton.

Mrs R Morris noted the FBM competition having ran for 14 years and asked for any evidence of successes from former participants in terms of business start-ups or other successes. The Managing Director Business Durham noted he would look to records and see if any further information could be brought back to Members.

Councillor J Clare noted that a recent letter from Government in relation to the SPF had noted a “distribution based upon need”, adding this was a point the Council had been very strong upon, campaigning against any distribution based upon competition. He added that the Government definition of need based would have to be confirmed.

The Managing Director Business Durham informed the Committee that he was leaving the Authority and commented on the excellent work and expertise of colleagues in the County Council and in Business Durham.

The Chair noted he would like to thank Managing Director Business Durham on behalf of the Committee for all of the hard work he had undertaken since joining Business Durham and wished him well for the future. The Managing Director Business Durham thanked the Chair and noted he was leaving to join the West Yorkshire Combined Authority and added it had been a privilege to work with the Business Durham Team and County Council Members. He reiterated that the Business Durham Team was extraordinary and when looking at business support offered in other parts of the country it was clear to him the best offer was in County Durham and he felt very proud of the work of the Team and was grateful of the positive support offered by Members.

Resolved:

- (i) That the report and presentation be noted.
- (ii) That the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as part of the refresh of the Committee’s work programme for 2020/21, receives a further progress report on activity undertaken by Business Durham.

8 Visit County Durham (VCD) - Development and Marketing Activity

The Chair welcomed the Managing Director Visit County Durham (VCD), Michelle Gorman who was in attendance to provide the Committee with an update presentation in relation to the development and marketing activity work of VCD (for copy see file of minutes).

The Managing Director VCD thanked the Chair and Committee and reminded Members of the national and local context regarding 2018, a challenging year. She noted a number of issues, including: “the Beast from the East”, the cold weather experienced in February 2018, the Football World Cup in June/July 2018 and a heatwave over the summer period, adding that while one would normally expect good weather to translate to increased visitor numbers, it appeared as if many people had chosen to stay at home. Members noted other local activities including: the opening of Auckland Tower; Discover England Fund projects; incentives to encourage short breaks rather than day trips and joining up of initiatives, Powered by People and Place of Light.

The Committee noted destination performance information for 2018 as regards the County including: an economic value of £914 million, up 1.4 percent on 2017; food and drink, recreation and indirect spend being the main areas of spend; 9,613 directly employed in tourism; 2,385 indirectly employed in the visitor economy; with the total being 11,998, up 2.7 percent on 2017. Members were reminded that the Vale of Durham was the main visitor product. The Managing Director VCD explained that the number of visitors in 2018 remained the same as the previous year, 19.71 million, however, the number of overnight stays had increased as had the average spend of visitors.

Councillors recalled that the Durham Tourism Management Plan (DTMaP) 2016-2020 was the blueprint for the growth of the visitor economy and noted there was consultation in November as regard the 2021-2025 DTMaP. Members were asked to note international recognition of best practice from the Icelandic Tourist Board and World Bank and national recognition from Visit Cambridgeshire, Chichester and the Wester Ross Biosphere.

The Managing Director VCD noted the Tourism Sector Deal announced by Government on 28 June 2019, with the overarching objective for the UK to remain globally competitive as world leader in international tourism. She noted that this was the tenth sector deal and aligned to the five pillars of the Industrial Strategy: ideas; people; infrastructure; business environment; and places. The Managing Director VCD noted as regards looking to establishing a pilot Tourism Action Zone, which would attract Visit England and Visit Britain support for new ways of working to increase productivity. The Managing Director VCD explained she was on the North East Steering Group along with representatives from Local Authorities, the NELEP, Newcastle Airport and NewcastleGateshead.

She added that criteria for those pilot zones had not yet been announced and therefore it was important to get the evidence base for a North East Tourism Action Zone in place.

In terms of partnership and engagement, the Managing Director VCD noted there were 850 core tourism businesses and 500 secondary visitor economy businesses, and a weekly e-newsletter was circulated to around 1,200 contacts. Members were reminded of the VCD projects focussing on history, heritage and outdoors, with new products to come from April 2020. It was added that an important project was The Northern Saints Trails Project, which aimed to position and raise awareness of North East England as the “Christian Crossroads of the British Isles” and to portray the region’s Saints and their stories against a backdrop of: visitor attractions; cultural and heritage experiences; landscapes; places to eat and drink; visitor accommodation; and North East destinations. Members were referred to a map, highlighting six walking routes, many in rural areas, and it was noted that the Bishop of Durham had stated he would be willing to walk all six routes. It was noted there would be an associated hashtag, #Pilgrimage2020, and VCD would be marketing the project, looking at what it means to be a pilgrim today, and what would motivate someone to make a pilgrimage. It was explained there would be several elements looked at including: Christian/religious heritage; regional arts, culture, heritage, history; spirituality, health, wellbeing, peace, tranquillity; the great outdoors, landscape and walking trails; exploration and family days out; sport, food, ancestral, sabbatical, travel, personal significance such as birthdays or a passion such as music or art.

In relation to destination marketing, the Managing Director VCD noted the partnership work that was undertaken and the two major annual campaigns relating to: heritage and history; and outdoor and landscapes. Committee Members were reminded of the main aims of the campaigns: to raise the national profile and appeal of the county; encourage overnight stays; raise shoulder season occupancy; and to raise awareness of a distinctive Durham experience.

The Managing Director VCD noted the Durham Year of Culture 2019, with a revised target for a visitor economy of £1 billion by the end of 2020, with festivals and events contributing to a higher national and international profile for County Durham. She explained that it had also been the intention to provide additional reasons to visit the County, extend the length of a stay and address issues of seasonality. It was added that the cultural and sporting offer linked to the health and wellbeing agenda and that another aim was to increase the consumption of culture, arts and heritage tourism experiences by residents and visitors. The Managing Director VCD noted that the cultural legacy left for the County would be enjoyed by residents and visitors long after 2019.

Members highlighted the success of the Cricket World Cup and noted the upcoming ten-year anniversary of Lumiere, the largest light show in the UK. The Managing Director VCD concluded by noting the interim results from #Durham19 being: over 13,500 unique web visits, viewing over 41,000 pages; over 2,600 events listed on the site; 20-30 community events per month; 42,000 views of the #Durham19 video; and from the survey undertaken in April 2019, 23 percent of respondents had seen #Durham19 activity and were influenced to visit more than one event, and a further 17 percent were influenced to visit one event.

The Chair thanked the Managing Director VCD and asked Members for their comments and questions.

Councillor P Howell asked if the numbers of people staying at home was linked to the hot weather or if the events over the period were not good enough. The Managing Director VCD noted that anecdotal feedback from some of the more popular, quality, larger attractions in the County, such as Beamish, had experienced less crowds than expected given the fine weather. Councillor P Howell asked how this was evaluated. The Managing Director VCD noted that visitor attraction data was gathered monthly and this was assessed against previous years' information.

Councillor P Howell referred to paragraph 23 of the report and the map highlighting the Northern Saints Trails, with neither referring to the south of the County, Darlington apparently being missed off. He noted that the gravity of the issue seemed to be with the north of the region, however, he highlighted St. Cuthbert's Church in Darlington and significant attractions at Barnard Castle in addition and noted the only hotel mentioned was Rockliffe Hall, not in the County but in Darlington. The Managing Director VCD noted that Rockliffe Hall was a partner, working with other Destination Management Organisations, and the website would randomly display partners information on the website. In relation to the map, the Managing Director VCD noted the projector screen cut off part of the display, however those maps circulated with the agenda papers showed as far down as Darlington. She added that feedback had been received in terms of the North East Cultural Partnership as regard more focus on Darlington and the Tees Valley, and it was noted that Hartlepool were also looking as regards a pilgrim route in their area. Councillor P Howell noted that in terms of pilgrimage, it should be noted that 2025 would mark the bicentennial anniversary of the Stockton to Darlington Railway and this would feed into the Shildon, Newton Aycliffe, Darlington and Tees Valley areas.

Councillor E Scott asked as regards overnight stays and the lack of accommodation in the County. The Managing Director VCD noted this had been an issue for a number of years and that VCD and colleagues from Regeneration had worked together to try and understand the situation. It was noted a number of gap analyses/studies had been carried out and workshops had been held with hotels, bed and breakfasts, glamping businesses and pubs with accommodation to help them understand as regards investing and growth.

She added that around 170 businesses attended those workshops and that tourism data was used to help hoteliers look at how to invest for their business, however, the change was not going to happen overnight.

Mrs R Morris noted she felt the pilgrimage theme was a great idea and asked if analysis predicted that there would be a good take up of the offer being proposed.

The Managing Director VCD noted that both Visit England and Visit Britain had a large amount of information in terms of faith tourism and, while it was a niche market, the offer was a marked point of differentiation from other destinations and also pilgrims tended to be high spenders and likely to also appreciate nature, landscape and heritage, all of which were strong offers in Durham. Mr R Morris asked if numbers of pilgrims would be recorded, the Managing Director VCD noted they would.

Councillor E Adam asked as regards visitor numbers not increasing and asked if it was a chicken and egg situation and whether we needed to build accommodation for people to visit first or was it more events and activities. He also noted that transport was another important factor in order for visitors to access a lot of the County's offer, as many attractions were in rural locations. The Managing Director VCD reiterated the regional partners, as part of the Sector Deal, and those from public transport, such as Arriva and Go North East and also Newcastle and Tees Valley Airports meet and hold discussions. She added that sustainability was also an important element, looking at issues such as electric vehicle car-hire and discussions in this regard were ongoing.

Councillor P Howell reiterated he was very supportive of the work being undertaken in terms of #Pilgrimage19, and emphasised he simply wanted the best scheme for County Durham.

Councillor L Maddison asked if pilgrims would be signposted to other attractions in the County while following the six walking routes as previously mentioned. The Managing Director VCD noted that would be the case in the initial stages however once launched activities, attractions and themes would be brought in to enhance the offer.

Resolved:

- (i) That the report and presentation be noted.
- (ii) That the Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee includes in its work programme for 2020/21 a further progress report detailing the future performance of Visit County Durham in marketing the county as a tourism destination, together with examples of marketing being undertaken.

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

The Chair asked the Overview and Scrutiny Officer to introduce the report updating the Committee in relation to the progress with recommendations from the Review of the support provided to the retail sector by Durham County Council (for copy see file of minutes).

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer asked Members to recall the work undertaken by the Scrutiny Review Group and the report that had been considered by Cabinet on 16 January 2019. She noted the progress in respect of the recommendations were set out at Appendix Two to the report and noted that the relevant Officers that had been involved in the review were in attendance to update the Committee and answer Members' questions.

The Chair asked if the Officers in attendance could give brief update in relation to their areas of work.

The Traffic Management Section Manager, Dave Lewin thanked the Chair and noted the primary issue raised by the Group within his remit had been in relation to car parking. He referred to the agenda papers which set out Recommendation Nine which asked for the Council to look at alternative payment methods, such as contactless payments and reconsideration of schemes such as "free after three". He explained that in terms of contactless payments, that there had been an increase in the numbers of these payment machines within Durham City and while it was a large task they were being rolled out, with any machine to be replaced being updated to contactless. He added it was hoped to have contactless payments at Barnard Castle in March 2020. The Traffic Management Section Manager noted that in relation to schemes such as "free after three" he reiterated that it was felt that such schemes were more beneficial in the slower retail periods of the year, however, expectations from AAPs, business and the public were for such schemes to be in place. He explained that he was Chair of the North East Regional Support Team of the British Parking Association and that on its agenda for an upcoming meeting, 19 November, was the issue of whether such schemes were right, and how to raise the issue at a national level.

Councillor E Scott noted the massive squeeze in parking in Durham City, however, she noted some car parks were not at capacity and asked what work could be done in redirecting people to where spaces were available. The Traffic Management Section Manager noted that signage options were being looked at, however, it would not be possible to promote one private operator over another and therefore a technological solution was required that gave information on the numbers of spaces actually available. He noted issues with the current technology, with work ongoing to effect repairs. He noted capacity at Riverwalk and that the operators were looking to offer packages on seven-day parking.

Councillor A Batey noted in Chester-le-Street a transferable ticket had been introduced and asked how successful that ticket had been and whether this was a scheme that could be expanded. The Traffic Management Section Manager noted he was not sure how successful the scheme had been, however anecdotally while it had not appealed to mass numbers there had been some cases where it had worked well. He added that he suspected it would not necessarily work well in other areas and that also it could be in conflict with the health agenda. He also noted the majority of the town centres within the County were relatively compact. Councillor A Batey asked if it was possible to get any data on whether the scheme had led to an increased footfall within the area, the Traffic Management Section Manager commented that he would investigate.

Councillor D Hall asked if prioritisation for the roll out of contactless car parking payment machines could be made for visitor attraction areas, such as Durham City, country parks and so on. The Traffic Management Section Manager noted that colleagues from Sport and Leisure advised in this regard. Councillor D Hall asked whether it was possible, when setting prices, to have off-peak rates to encourage people to come into town and village centres to use facilities in those slower periods. The Traffic Management Section Manager noted that in terms of a Local Authority making a Traffic Regulation Order, it was not possible to have such variable charges, however, the private sector was able to do so. Councillor D Hall gave examples of some areas with broken machines and where improvements could be made, the Traffic Management Section Manager noted colleagues from Regeneration were working with owners to improve the situation.

The Community Economic Development Manager, Wendy Benson thanked the Chair for the opportunity to provide an update and referred to Recommendation Six relating to letting agents' awareness of the schemes, such as the Target Business Support Scheme, and improving access to such information via the internet. She explained that information had been sent to letting agents and there had been improved working relations in this regard. She added there had been changes to the website to give more information on the frontpage, with the Web team overhauling the previous iteration. In respect of Recommendation Seven and training opportunities for local retailers, the Community Economic Development Manager noted that the take up of such training had been very poor. She added that such training had been linked to many of the events noted within the VCD presentation, however feedback from the Federation of Small Businesses was that businesses did not wish to train via the Council. The Community Economic Development Manager noted that this may mean there was a need to commission a training provider, or if the Council were to continue to provide free training, they may wish to introduce a penalty for non-attendance. Councillor E Adam asked if any reasons had been given as to why businesses did not wish to receive training via the Council. The Community Economic Development Manager noted the Council was not seen as a training provider, however, on a positive note 62 new businesses had been engaged with since March 2019.

She added that there were some differences when looking geographically, with events in Seaham having been packed out and events in other areas having no attendees.

The Team Leader Regeneration Projects, Chris Myers noted that in terms of Recommendation Three and the roll out of free public wifi, the equipment was being installed in Bishop Auckland and Stanley with most of the antennae being up, however, the schemes had not yet been launched.

He added that in relation to Recommendation One, the Story Maps developed by colleagues in Spatial Policy had proven to be very useful tools in helping to engage with developers and being able to demonstrate the opportunities in an area. He added that the feedback received from developers had been very good.

Councillor P Howell noted Recommendation Three also referenced superfast broadband provision and its future progress. The Digital Durham Project Co-ordinator, Alli Walker noted the ongoing work under the Digital Durham programme to extend superfast broadband coverage to properties outside of any future commercial plans. The launch of a procurement for a third contract was imminent. Announcements of the successful suppliers was expected to be made in April 2020; and the associated planning and delivery to start thereafter.

The Principal Policy Officer, James Cook noted that new data would be available in relation to the Town Centre Surveys for 2019 and this would also include information relating to DCC ownership being set out within the Story Maps. He added that if there were any requests for specific data to be added he would be more than happy to do so. The Principal Policy Officer noted the Member Briefing on the 2018 Town Centre Surveys and Story Maps that had taken place and explained he would be happy to provide a similar briefing for Members in terms of the 2019 update.

The Principal Business Rates Officer, John Naylor explained that in reference to Recommendation Eight, re-targeting businesses eligible for Small Business Rate Relief, many had been contacted and this had led to 61 awards of rate relief, and the new "retail discount" available in 2019 had been awarded automatically where possible, with approximately £2.2 million awarded in 2019, affecting 941 accounts. It was highlighted the webpage for business rates had been redrafted to be clearer and information was promptly updated reflecting any changes affecting available reliefs.

Councillor E Adam asked as regards whether the information applied to all retail and whether we looked to target all businesses in terms of relief. The Team Leader Assessment and Awards, noted it was all retail, and the Principal Business Rates Officer noted that the statutory function was to apply rate relief and it was not strategy to target, with many processes being hard-set within legislation.

Councillor A Batey noted at the meeting of the Review Group attended by Letting Agents, a lack of knowledge among Agents as regards business rates had been highlighted and asked what work had been undertaken in this regard. The Community Economic Development Manager noted that, as part of the engagement process, she would provide information in relation to targeted business improvements and also business rates and relief.

The Area Action Partnership Co-ordinator, Andrew Walker noted that all 14 AAPs supported regeneration for our towns and there had been 132 projects linked to town centres, with AAP funding totalling £1.36 million, comprising of Area Budget and Members' Neighbourhood Budget.

He added that in relation to the free public access wifi scheme for Barnard Castle, work was ongoing with the AAP, colleagues from Regeneration and Local Elected Members as regards the project.

The Chair thanked all the Officers for their hard work in relation to the progress with the recommendations from the Review and noted all of the good work being carried out.

Resolved:

- (i) That the update in relation to progress made in relation to the recommendations contained in the Scrutiny Review Report be noted.
- (ii) 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.

10 Upcoming Meetings

The Overview and Scrutiny Officer reminded Members of upcoming meetings and Special meetings of the Committee, 25 November 2019 and 6 December 2019 and reminded Members that Purdah Guidance had been circulated via e-mail.