

HAMBLETON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Report To: Cabinet
16 April 2013

From: Scrutiny Committee 1

Subject: POLICY REVIEW – BUSINESS FRIENDLY COUNCIL

All Wards

1.0 SUMMARY:

1.1 Between January and February 2013 the Committee undertook a review of Business Friendly Council. This report sets out the Committee's findings, conclusions and recommendations.

2.0 INTRODUCTION:

2.1 Business Friendly Council was regarded as an appropriate topic for review given the current financial context and the Council's overall role in improving the local economy.

2.2 The Committee as a whole undertook the review and the terms of reference were:-

To examine:

- how successfully the Council is encouraging new businesses into the District
- the Council's role in business retention in the District
- how the Council is encouraging the growth of existing businesses in the District

2.3 The following evidence, arranged through the Enabling Officer, was provided at meetings of the Committee:

8 January 2013

- Agreed Project Plan/Evidence Gathering

12 March 2013

- Concluded review

5 February 2013

- Evidence gathering

3.0 OTHER EVIDENCE

3.1 The following witnesses attended meetings of the committee to give evidence:

- James Farrar, Chief Operating Officer, York, North Yorkshire & East Riding Local Enterprise Partnership;
- Sandra Walbran, Director of Customer Services, Hambleton District Council (HDC);
- Graham Banks, Planning Policy Manager, HDC;
- Nicole Patterson, Business and Community Manager, HDC;
- Mark Haynes, Business and Community Officer;
- Sue Seddon, Improvement Manager, HDC;
- Lindsay Ross, Chairman of the Hambleton Strategic Business Forum;
- David Kerfoot, Board Member of the Local Enterprise Partnership;
- Gareth Dant, Northallerton Retail and Business Forum;
- Jo Burgess, YO61ers.

4.0 FINDINGS

4.1 The term of reference of the review was aimed at answering the following key questions:

- What is the current policy of the Council and why is this so?
- Who is the policy aimed at, who is intended to benefit and how is this measured?
- What is central to the delivery of the policy (resources, stakeholder involvement, etc)?
- Is the current policy working (is it delivering the stated outcomes and do the recipients benefit)?
- Does the policy need to change – is it still valid?
- Can the policy and the service be improved – if so how?
- What impact will the policy have on other partners?

4.2 Based on the written and oral evidence presented, the Committee's findings were as follows:

4.2.1 The Committee considered what Business Friendly meant to the Council and currently saw this as promoting and supporting the attraction, retention and growth of businesses in the Hambleton District. The Committee acknowledged that the Council listened to local businesses and following consultation with them saw an opportunity to clarify the Council's priority as supporting business growth and the creation of sustainable jobs; by creating an environment that supports economic growth; helping businesses to locate, stay and grow in Hambleton and helping people to start up and stay in business. It was also recognised that the approach to businesses and dealing with them and their needs effectively needed to be embedded into all Council services.

4.2.2 The Committee identified the business context and challenges within Hambleton District and examined how the Council attracts and retains businesses and supports business growth. The Committee considered that the overall priority and goals of being business friendly should be contained within the Council Plan and that a succinct Council wide business friendly guide, a 'how to' to deal with businesses should be developed. It was also suggested that training through workshops and seminars involving the business sector should be embedded to enable all services to understand how to deal with businesses effectively.

4.2.3 The Committee established that the last Hambleton Economic Development Study was undertaken in 2005 to inform the Local Development Framework and recognised that at this time there was a completely different economic climate and therefore basing future actions on this data was not advisable. Additionally in this time consumer habits had changed radically with the growth of the internet and online shopping models. It was acknowledged that any future study should include an examination of our market towns and consider the Portas report and recommendations; determine if there were any additional local factors and projects that would help to ensure that our High Streets became destinations rather than just a place to shop; consider how to build on our towns as destinations, making them community hubs by animating the high street and ensuring they offered more than just a shopping experience and making recommendations to ensure towns remain vibrant, including a strong independent retail offer in 10-15 years time. The Committee therefore suggested that a new Hambleton Economic Development Study should be commissioned in consultation with other partners, which would examine the health of the District and its towns and determine key drivers for the future.

4.2.4 The Committee recognised the importance of communicating effectively with local businesses and appreciated that some activity was already in hand to start the process of improving communications, as the Council was currently recruiting a Business Engagement Officer, who would provide a key point of contact for businesses. The Committee established the need to use multiple channels of communication and engagement with business and the Council's website was one such area that required specific focus;

although the current website was deemed fit for purpose the Council needed to consider if it was the correct vehicle to achieve what was required. It was suggested that a separate site, with greater freedom from government defined structure applied to the main website, could far more effectively promote the District as a place to base a business and to sell the place, the people and the quality of life. A separate site would also better sell how the Council supported businesses once they were located in Hambleton and could carry a lot of information on the things the Council and others do to support business, such as accessing finance, grants and business support; providing a property register of business premises available to let; offering a business directory; advertising details of training and events and providing sections for local business networks to promote themselves; all of which would need to be linked to the main Hambleton website where appropriate. The Committee therefore suggested that a stand alone website be developed to promote the local business offer in the District including promoting the District as a top class business destination (quality of life, road and rail connectivity and super fast broadband); high quality business networks and the variety of elements of Council support on offer. It was also suggested that the Council's use of multiple communication channels should be improved, including web and social media such as twitter and LinkedIn, to ensure better engagement with businesses; that within the new website structure a business contact database be established utilising a LinkedIn group, which would provide a channel to communicate easily with businesses on a regular basis; that regular workshops with micro-businesses be undertaken to gain input on issues affecting them and to inform the shape of Council services and that specific micro business support be developed building on the success of the "Lunch and Learn" and "Apprentice Scheme". It was acknowledged that local business networks needed strengthening and developing by utilising local good practice and promoting knowledge exchange and close relationships with strategic businesses in the district should be developed through Key Account Management to raise awareness of their plans and needs.

4.2.4 The Committee determined that procurement legislation prevented the restriction of tenders to only local businesses. However the Council could do a lot more to ensure local businesses were better informed of the opportunities available and how they could compete for them. The Council could develop an online Contracts Register detailing what tenders were due to come up and where to provide clearer information about opportunities. Outlining opportunities over a 6-12 month time frame would enable time to effectively promote the opportunities locally and provide sufficient time for people to submit Expression of Interest/Tenders. The Council could also develop a local register of interest in various contracts/services so that interested local businesses could be advised when the opportunities were available. The Committee therefore suggested that an online Contracts Register and Local Register of Interest be developed to better enable local businesses to compete for Council business, ensuring that the system is easily accessible and makes sense to the end users; ensure better promotion of the opportunities available to do business with the Council and undertake procurement in a manner which allows smaller businesses to be able to better compete for elements of Council business, such as procuring in smaller lots or packages and providing support to businesses new to Council tendering to assist them with the form filling as required.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS:

5.1 What is the current policy/practice/procedure of the Council and why is this so?

The current Council Plan includes priorities which support economic growth. In addition, in 2012 the Council recognised that given the financial crisis, it needed to assess the role that the Council could undertake more broadly in being "Business Friendly" and the impact of this at a local level.

5.2 Who is the policy/practice/procedure aimed at, who is intended to benefit and how is this measured?

The current objectives are aimed at businesses by providing employment land and workspaces and targets are in place to measure achievements. In addition, the Council has established a task and finish group and an action plan for improvement in being more Business Friendly. This is being monitored via the Business & Communities team and the Customer Services Board.

5.3 What is central to the delivery of the policy/practice/procedure (resources, stakeholder involvement, etc)?

Resources, organisational culture and business engagement are central to delivery.

5.4 Is the current policy/practice/procedure working (is it delivering the stated outcomes and do the recipients benefit)?

The Council is performing well in relation to the provision of land for commercial development and the provision of workspace. It has also made a range of improvements regarding the business friendly action plan, specifically in relation to engagement, planning tools for business, apprenticeships and support for micro-businesses. It recognises that this is work in progress and that more needs to be done to enable businesses to recognise a wider range of benefits.

5.5 Does the policy/practice/procedure need to change – is it still valid?

The “Business Friendly” action plan is still valid, although the outcomes of the Scrutiny review will strengthen and extend the work in this area.

5.6 Can the policy/practice/procedure and the service be improved – if so how?

The policy can carry greater weight for the Council strategically going forward. The development of this and the plans for improvement will be further integrated into the role of the Council in supporting growth in the local economy. This will result in an improved service and benefits for business.

5.7 What impact will the policy have on other partners?

The policy will have a positive impact on the overall plans and priorities of the Local Enterprise Partnership.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS:

6.1 To recommend to Cabinet that:-

- (1) the overall priority and goals of being Business Friendly be contained within the Council Plan;
- (2) a succinct Council-wide business friendly guide, a ‘how to’ deal with businesses be developed and training through workshops and seminars involving the business sector be embedded to ensure that all services understand how to deal with businesses effectively;
- (3) a new Hambleton Economic Development Study be undertaken in consultation with other partners, which would examine the health of the District and its towns and determine key drivers for the future;

- (4) a stand alone website to promote the local business offer in the District be developed including promoting, the District as a top class business destination (quality of life, road and rail connectivity, super fast broadband etc.); the high quality local business networks and the variety of elements of Council support on offer;
- (5) the Council's use of multiple communication channels be improved, including web and social media such as Twitter and LinkedIn to ensure better engagement with businesses;
- (6) a business contact database be established within the new website structure, utilising a LinkedIn group which will provide a channel to communicate easily with businesses on a regular basis;
- (7) regular workshops with micro-businesses be undertaken to gain input on issues affecting them and to inform the shape of Council services and develop specific micro business support building on success of the "Lunch and Learn" and "Apprentice Scheme";
- (8) local business networks be strengthened and developed by utilising local good practice and promoting knowledge exchange;
- (9) close relationships with the strategic businesses in the district through Key Account Management be developed to raise awareness of their plans and needs;
- (10) an online Contracts Register & local register of interest be developed to better enable local businesses to compete for Council business; ensuring the system is easily accessible and makes sense to the end user;
- (11) there is better promotion of the opportunities available to do business with the Council and undertake procurement in a manner which allows smaller businesses to be able to better compete for elements of Council business such as procuring in smaller lots or packages.
- (12) support to businesses new to Council tendering be provided to assist them with the form filling etc. as required.

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