

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE EMPLOYMENT LEARNING, SKILLS & COMMUNITY POLICY AND PERFORMANCE BOARD

APRIL 2020 – MARCH 2021

Introduction from Councillor Andrew MacManus Chair of the Employment Learning, Skills & Community Policy & Performance Board

During the past year, as in previous years, we have seen economic uncertainty and reduced funding having a bearing on the work priorities and areas of focus of the Board.

In addition, some of our skills, employment and business support funding are aligned with the *Liverpool City Region* (LCR). However, we continue to ensure that Halton gets its fair share of funding support to ensure that we provide a good standard of service to our residents and businesses.

At the time of writing the future is less certain than at any time in the living memory of many. The country left the European Union on the 31st January 2020 and our trading relationship with the EU was partly decided by the *Trade & Cooperation Agreement* that came into effect on 1st January 2021. How this treaty develops may have a material impact on our residents and businesses.

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced 3 lockdowns covering most of the period of this report. That has severely disrupted employment and businesses. It has put additional demands on Council services.

The future impact of both of these is unknown.

The Board scrutinises the work of the *Economy, Enterprise & Property Division* and the *Community & Environment Division*. Since March 2020 the former has been heavily involved in delivering various government and local schemes to support local businesses and the latter has seen the almost total shut down of its activities with staff being deployed to other Council departments to assist in Covid-19 related work.

This had impacted the work of the Board as staff have not had the normal time to prepare reports. However, this has been circumvented by rolling up areas of interest into catch-all reports.

My thanks to the officers for working with me and the Vice-Chair to develop the agenda items and the quality of the reports and presentations they have produced during the year. Board members also thanked officers at meetings for the work they were doing to cope with the pandemic and maintain services.

This will be my last report as I will be retiring from the council after 11 years of service, 5 of them as chair of the Board. I would like to thank members for their contributions and the support they have shown throughout the years.

I hope that the Board will continue to make a worthwhile contribution to creating an economically prosperous borough in this challenging environment.

THE BOARD'S MEMBERSHIP

During 2020/21, the Board's membership was unchanged and comprised Councillors A. MacManus (Chair) C. Plumpton- Walsh (Vice Chair), J Bradshaw, L. Cassidy, R Leck, G. Logan, June Roberts, C. Rowe, A Telling, P Wallace and L Whitley.

The Board had three virtual meetings during the year. The first meeting was cancelled due to Covid-19 restrictions on the holding of Council meetings.

THE ROLE OF THE BOARD

The Council's constitution sets out the Board's strategic priority is to develop policy and scrutinise performance in relation to the Council's objectives.

Specifically in relation to 4 areas:

- Enterprise and employment
- Adult learning and skills
- Culture and leisure services
- Library Service

In addition to reports on these areas there was separate reporting of Covid-19 related matters affecting the Board's area of scrutiny.

COVID-19 SPECIFIC REPORTING

New Working Arrangements

The Board received a report which set out the range of services that had been provided during the Covid-19 pandemic which were relevant to this Board.

These services were:

Business Improvement Team – Services provided included: raising awareness of support available to 2,500 local businesses, query handling and delivery of financial support. The later was in excess of £2M. They also raised awareness of business opportunities, for example the supply of PPE, and scams exploiting the pandemic.

Employment, Learning and Skills Division – Health and Safety measures required the operations of the division to be quickly reassessed and re-modelled to enable continued support for our learners and customers. Within a few days of the first lockdown ICT Services successfully got all staff online and able to work remotely. The Covid-19 situation has resulted in the following changes within the division:

- Cessation of face-to-face delivery of teaching, learning, assessment and employment support
- Adult learning exams were unable to go ahead in centres
- Learner portfolios were only partially completed
- The majority of the summer term adult learning classes were unable to run
- Customers and learners were unable to attend centres to access IT to job search, and self-study.

Operations were remodeled to mitigate these to ensure continued support for users and learners. Staff maintained contact with residents through phone calls and virtual platforms.

In summary, at a local level our immediate actions are to safely re-open the centres and prioritise access for residents that need support the most, particularly those who do not have a social network and access to personal IT.

Supporting the many newly unemployed residents as well as the existing cohort of unemployed residents is a priority now and in the future.

Library services - The library buildings were closed to the public from March 2020. The majority of staff were redeployed. Library teams worked quickly to shift activity to digital platforms with budgets being reallocated to increase resources and support new demand. An intensive social media campaign was developed to engage audiences and highlight resources to new and existing customers.

Sport and Leisure - Kingsway Leisure Centre, Brookvale Recreation Centre and Runcorn Swimming Pool closed to the public in March 2020. The majority of staff have not worked since then.

The service is generating no income and anticipates a significant increase in cleaning and training costs to re-open. Participation numbers are not expected to return to pre-Covid-19 levels for a significant period. This will have a major impact on income, thus the subsidy required will increase.

At the time of the Board report a phased opening was proposed. Usage will be controlled by an online booking system.

The service provided a range of web based and print media advice on exercise and health.

Brindley Theatre - It has been closed since March 2020. Staff are working on reorganising and negotiating contracts thus maintaining a full programme once reopening takes place. The bookings diary has over 90% occupancy through to early 2022 with enquires being received daily.

The one year *Theatre Seat Concession* trial was due to finish in July 2020. Due to the building being closed this will be extended in order to complete the trial.

Events - The Councils events calendar was cancelled for 2020.

Community Centres – All were closed in March 2020. Since then a number of staff from the service have taken up redeployment opportunities

Recovery of Halton's Economy

The Board received a report on the borough's *Economic Reset Plan*, which had previously been circulated to all councillors. The plan would be used to ensure that the Council could support local businesses in partnership with local organisations and businesses and partners operating in the LCR.

Local authorities were consolidating existing statutory and operational requirements as we emerged from the first phase of Covid-19. They were reallocating and securing resources in

order to redefine their economies and working to improve the economic and social prospects for residents and businesses over the year ahead.

A presentation to the Board provided further analysis and data on the potential impact of Covid-19 on Halton's economy.

Local Authority Discretionary Grant Fund

The impact of Covid-19 on Halton's businesses has been severe with many losing several months of trade and some still not fully operational.

During lockdown the *Business Improvement and Growth Team* collated all current government information for businesses into a single resource for use by Council colleagues and developed dedicated resource packs for specific target groups.

The fund was designed, administered and delivered by the Council and was aimed at businesses that were not able to access previous grant schemes. The criteria for accessing the scheme was discussed in the report together with Halton's focused schemes for eligibility.

A total of 163 grants were made worth £831K.

Liverpool City Region Hospitality & Leisure Grant

At the time of the report LCR was placed in a Tier Lockdown. Businesses most affected by the lockdown were identified in order to offer some level of support.

An allocation of £1,060,792 had been provided to Halton and the Board was provided with an update on the number and the types of businesses eligible for support and the grant allocations awarded.

ENTERPRISE AND EMPLOYMENT

The Board received updates on the following that are administered by the *Business Improvement & Growth Team*.

Business Growth Programme

This is an initiative by the LCR to support small and medium sized businesses.

It is being done in 3 phases, currently we are in phase 2. The Board was updated on key activities being undertaken or overseen by the team during the pandemic.

The *programme* aims to support 95 SMEs to ensure growth and sustainability. As they emerged out of the first lockdown, more support was required in the areas of digital marketing, strategic marketing and strategic business planning indicating that businesses required help to reach a wider market and in some cases alter their business strategy.

Most of the team has been working on supporting local businesses and its activities have been changed to reflect this.

Some generic business support has continued, for example the *Business Growth Programme*. This has been supporting SME's by offering an in-depth diagnostic to gauge the type of support required. It is part of the LCR's *Growth Hub Programme*, which supports

businesses by offering fully funded specialist support through the *European Regional Development Fund* and Council funding.

Growth Platform

During the past year this has concentrated on working with businesses and designing solutions to meet their needs. They have been providing support to ease business progress through the pandemic and help emerging from it.

Officers within the team have been liaising with colleagues in the Combined Authority and the Chamber of Commerce to ensure that activities are complementary and do not duplicate existing provision.

ADULT LEARNING & SKILLS

Employment Learning & Skills Division

Since March 2020 the staff within the division have been operating a remote system for customers and learners as all learning centres were closed. The staff were now in the process of preparing for centres to reopen again and planning how delivery to customers and learners would be rolled out given social distancing measures.

As well as guidance surrounding Covid-19 being core to the delivery the Board was advised that the work would focus on supporting those individuals that had been adversely affected economically and had lost jobs and/or confidence.

The report provided updates in the following areas:

- European Social Fund Ways to Work programme;
- LCR Apprenticeship Hub;
- LCR Apprenticeship Growth Plan;
- Department of Work & Pensions Work and Health Programme;
- Merseylink Employment and Skills performance; and
- Adult Learning and Devolution.

In response to councillors' queries regarding the potential for an increased demand for apprenticeships once the furlough scheme ended officers advised that this was anticipated so a request had been submitted to government for the numbers of these to be increased.

During the year a new programme was launched, the *Job Entry Targeted Support Programme*. Members were advised that this would support 1453 participants between October 2020 and March 2022 and would provide placements of not less than 3 months duration.

Department of Work & Pensions Kick Start Programme

This is a new job creation scheme for people aged 16 – 24 which aims to provide wage subsidies to employers who create 6 month work experience placements. The forecast number of placements to be administered between November 2020 and December 2021 is

100. The Executive Board agreed at its meeting held in October 2020 that the Council should apply to become an intermediary for the delivery of the programme.

The report provided detailed information on the programme, Halton's approach, the resources available and costs associated with becoming an intermediary.

Test and Learn Projects

These are delivered by *Halton Adult Learning Service*, which is funded through LCR's devolved *Adult Education Budget*.

The projects included Web Design, Coding, Digital Marketing & Media and Engage with Reading Volunteer Programme. The delivery of the projects was via the existing tutor team together with a digital creative company who co-delivered the digital elements.

The *Reading Volunteer Programme* was reported in the Times Education Supplement as a good practice of *Test and Learn*. The programme helps people to develop both their reading ability and confidence. Additionally, it works to encourage them to seek out qualifications to improve their employment prospects.

These projects have allowed the service to innovate and develop the provision to meet the employment needs in the digital sector as well as supporting people with lower level reading skills to gain essential skills to improve their employability and begin their education journey into recognised qualifications in English and IT.

The following items represent the community areas of the Board's work

Library Service Update

The report outlined the recovery of the libraries following the easing of restrictions after the first lockdown with all libraries open with safety measures in place. The service had renewed its focus on three key values – connection, creative learning and spaces. The Board was provided with details and examples of current projects taking place using these values.

The Board was also advised of *The Joy Project*, a planned season of visual arts activity in public spaces taking place across the Borough this autumn. This was arranged in response to the need to engage creatively with communities during the pandemic which had taken away the option of using the library buildings as venues.

Community Development Service Annual Report

The service helps support local community groups and organisations with their formation and facilitates the delivery of community led initiatives and activity.

The service also has a role in managing the delivery of projects for nine Area Forums enabling councillors to respond to community concerns and aspirations. Examples of projects that the service had helped to deliver throughout the year within each Area Forum were provided.

Information was also provided on community development grants that had been awarded during the year.

It was noted that this role generated effective community engagement with Council departments and partner organisations and contributed to building resilience in Halton's communities.

The report discussed the work of the service, its purpose, activities and performance for 2019/20 against the previous years. The service worked with 101 groups and 6,987 people benefited.

Community Centres Annual Report

The *service* provides the management and delivery of services from centres in Castlefields, Ditton, Grangeway, Murdishaw and Upton. These centres delivered programmes of community activities with varying models of community cafes and service outlets. The main activities were related to health, young people and arts development. There were 313,227 attendances.

It was noted that these centres provided a community hub for residents to enjoy activities and receive services locally.

The Board was provided with a summary and individual centre's performance which included usage, activities and operating costs over a 3 year period.

Preparations for Halton's Borough of Culture 2021

The award of LCR Borough of Culture (BOC) was inspired by the *UK City of Culture Programme* which followed Liverpool's European Capital of Culture in 2008. The new initiative was launched in 2018 as Liverpool celebrated its 10th Anniversary as the UK's only European Capital of Culture. (It needs to be pointed out that Glasgow was a European Capital of Culture in 1990. Liverpool was England's first Capital of Culture.)

The BOC initiative rotates around the city region with the aim of encouraging each of the 6 borough to develop its local talent and potential. This will reflect the ambitions and aims of the *Regional Culture and Creativity Strategy* which looked to build sustainable capacity across the city region.

The progress made so far was outlined to the Board, which included the emerging programme of activities and the potential risks and challenges that could be faced in light of the pandemic.

Members made a number of comments and suggestions.

Officers advised that the BOC could be used as a toolkit from an inward investment perspective to get businesses involved in celebrating the Borough's history and encouraging them to contribute any artefacts they may have. Although businesses had not been approached yet due to the pandemic this task would be revisited when some improvement in the situation was made.

Sport & Leisure Services Update

The team has undergone a number of changes in 2020 with a number of colleagues moving on. There was a reduction in the support provided during 2020 whilst posts remained vacant and staff were deployed for some of their time to support the Council's Covid-19 response.

In 2019/20 there were 516K attendances.

In addition to the areas the constitution requires the Board to scrutinise the following were reported to the Board:

Scrutiny Topic

The Role of the Board earlier in this report referred to policy development. This is done through an annual exercise focusing on one area in detail and is called the Scrutiny Topic. The September 2019 meeting of the Board agreed that '*Traded Areas in the Borough*' would be the scrutiny topic for 2020. The pandemic meant that the normal process of meetings, interviews and visits was not possible. Additionally, the way these areas would operate post pandemic was an unknown.

The Chair consulted the Chair of the Scrutiny Committee and it was agreed the topic would not be pursued and that there would be no topic group in 2020 and 2021.

Performance Report

At each meeting the Board receive this report that informs them of emerging issues and the performance of the divisions in meeting Key Performance Indicators. The later feed out of the annual business plan which in turn is derived from a longer term Council level plan.

Policy Update Report

Again at each meeting the Board receive a briefing on national and regional policies that might affect the areas covered by the Board. This provides the context within which the divisions operate.
