

## **Cabinet – 14 December 2022**

### **Walsall Economic Strategy**

<b>Portfolio:</b>	Councillor Andrew
<b>Related portfolios:</b>	Councillor Bird
<b>Service:</b>	Regeneration and Economy
<b>Wards:</b>	All Wards
<b>Key decision:</b>	Yes
<b>Forward plan:</b>	Yes

#### **1. Aim**

- 1.1 The Walsall Economic Strategy will provide an evidence-based document stating and analysing the current position in terms of the local economy, working with Council teams and external partners to shape the narrative and create a set of interventions to drive improvement in the economic performance of the borough. This will inform the work of the Council in developing successful place making, creating the conditions for investment, jobs and homes.

#### **2. Summary**

- 2.1 It has been agreed that the Council requires an economic strategy to take an informed view of the borough's economy, to better define the role of the Council and its partners in developing and delivering interventions to improve performance and create opportunities for good sustainable growth. This is an opportunity for the Council to show real leadership in addressing the challenges we face and in creating excellent partnerships to do so. An economic strategy will also support the Council in articulating its offer to local and regional government when capital and revenue funding opportunities are presented, and business case development is required.
- 2.2 In May 2022 the Council contracted with Urban Foresight Ltd to work with offices and partners in order to build an evidence base and then create a strategy which would address the areas where intervention is required, providing a set of recommended actions to match need and a basis for prioritising activity.
- 2.3 Areas of intervention are grouped thematically as follows:
- Walsall Town Centre
  - Jobs and Skills
  - Brownfield sites
  - Net zero
  - Housing and public realm

The strategy explores these areas, given longstanding economic challenges and recent economic shocks, and through analysis of barriers and opportunities also the work that has already been done to feed into this evidence base, indicates areas of intervention.

- 2.4 The Economic Strategy will inform future business planning where interventions can be developed within budget parameters, drive partnership working to identify investment models, and officers will work with the Policy and Strategy team, also the Economic Intelligence Unit, to capture and measure success effectively.

### **3. Recommendations**

- 3.1 That Cabinet approve the Economic Strategy and its recommendations, as set out in Appendix A, as an analysis of the current position and a reference for future funding bids.

### **4. Report detail – know**

- 4.1 Since May 2022 the Council has been working with Urban Foresight to develop this strategy. Work has involved undertaking a thorough review of existing strategies and activity to form a sound evidence base on which to proceed. The evidence base is derived from:

- Office of National Statistics (ONS) and other official sources of data
- Real-time data, including Google Mobility
- A comprehensive suite of current and past strategies and plans
- Academic research on emerging economic sectors

The evidence base and strategy are also the result of extensive stakeholder consultations with public, private, academic and voluntary/community sector partners, which are listed in an appendix to the main strategy.

- 4.2 Key trends were identified as follows:

- Overall - by most conventional metrics, Walsall has significant socio-economic challenges. This masks considerable geographic variation, from East to West.
- Employment and Income - employment has grown rapidly since 2014. The focus should now be on ensuring a full recovery from Covid, and on driving up wages through the development of better jobs.
- Skills - in order to fill these jobs, Walsall needs a skills offer which is tailored to emerging high-value industries in areas of existing specialism. It also needs to drive engagement with this offer.
- Crime - There are both real and perceived challenges. Data points on this seem a little contradictory but measures to increase footfall and activity should drive further improvement.
- Housing - Walsall's housing stock is generally in need of improvement – even in the most prosperous areas housing quality is just in line with UK average.
- Liveability and Health - Walsall has the potential to be much more liveable – with a greater focus on amenities near to where people live. Active travel and better access to parks and the natural environment should also improve health outcomes.

- 4.3 This work has also dovetailed with and analysed the feedback from the We Are Walsall 2040 work to align with the priority areas identified by its feedback; while the two pieces of work have somewhat different perspectives and focus, it has been invaluable to share feedback and understand the views of residents across the borough.
- 4.4 An analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges was also undertaken which supported the articulation of challenges as follows:
- We continue to see great potential in Walsall Town Centre but, in conjunction with the Town Centre Masterplan, further investment needs to be made in both the built environment and in driving the daytime and night-time economy in the heart of our Borough.
  - Job creation has been robust across the Borough over the past 10 years and appears to be bouncing back from Covid. Challenges remain around low paid employment and there is a need for a greater investment in skills to drive the productivity, resilience and health of our business community.
  - The Borough has a compelling asset in its brownfield development sites. In order to bring these into use for both business and housing there is a need to work ever more closely with private developers and public sector partners to address historic issues of land contamination and to ensure new transport and communications infrastructure is provided where and when it is needed.
  - The opportunities from a transition to a lower carbon economy are substantial for Walsall Borough and significant public and private sector investment is out there if we get this right. To unlock this however we will need to work closely with skills providers in key areas such as construction, housing and transport.
  - Walsall stands to benefit from the growing workforce in Birmingham and the wider West Midlands. If we are to capitalise on this then investments will need to be made in better housing, an enhanced culture and leisure offer, amenity and green spaces and improved transport infrastructure. This strategy is part of addressing the public realm investment challenge that this entails.
- 4.5 Consideration of the evidence base, SWOT and challenges, alongside understanding of the context which we operate and the importance of partnership working, led to a set of interventions grouped thematically as follows:
- 4.6 Town Centre - Walsall Town Centre has so much potential, and this strategy seeks to deliver on our ambitions for this key urban asset. The Town Centre Masterplan and the Connected Gateway are key elements of that, but an ambitious broader suite of measures is now envisaged to animate activity in the town centre and to materially grow its leisure and culture offer.
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  - Part of this could see revived outdoor markets, pop-up retail offers and performance spaces within the town centre but also at other key sites including the canal basin.

- Making smart use of Council owned or controlled assets where a strong community leisure or cultural offer and benefit can be evidenced.

4.7 Jobs and Skills - Walsall has been steadily closing the employment gap with the wider West Midlands since 2010, but challenges remain on wages and skills. Our focus therefore must now move to better, rather than more, jobs

- Walsall Learns - a further expansion of vocational and apprenticeship training to build on existing lower skills interventions and to curate and establish higher level skills boot camps and programmes together with a range of private sector industrial and service partners.
- Walsall Builds - establishing a Modern Methods of Construction taskforce to grow this key sector, build on existing business and knowledge assets within the Borough and to deliver in-borough projects from housing to commercial development.
- Walsall Makes – a new investment prospectus targeting manufacturing and higher-value logistics investment opportunities and development sites across the Borough. Walsall has a proud heritage of delivering products and services that national and international markets need. This work will ensure that our excellent businesses have all the advice and support they need to thrive and grow.

4.8 Brownfield sites - Walsall's brownfield sites can be a significant driver of future prosperity. The Borough's strategic location as well as access to the wider West Midlands labour pool is attractive – but unlocking these sites is challenging

- Capital and people resources will be deployed to increase joint ventures and other innovative partnership delivery and funding models between the council and developers to share the risks of site remediation, preparation and redevelopment, be that for housing or employment.
- Resources will be identified to compile and promote an investment portfolio for opportunities across the Borough. Part of this resource will be used to proactively reach out to engage with key national and international investment partners.
- Market leading connectivity will be a priority within this strategy. Working with key partners such as WM5G, Walsall will aim to become a vanguard 5G Borough, offering scale-up opportunities for industry, adopting a 'connectivity as standard' smart city Borough wide approach, promoting gigabit fibre and exploring the use of the canal system for a Neutral Host Operator, providing telecommunications infrastructure for providers.

4.9 Net zero - Net zero will play a significant role in the UK government's policy and funding priorities. Walsall has a 'moment in time' opportunity to capitalise on the growth of the low carbon construction, retrofit and transport sectors.

- We will, through our procurement policies and housing association partners, support net zero growth sectors such as offsite construction and housing retrofit.
- The Council and key public sector anchor partners are all pursuing an increased ambition on electric vehicle adoption. This extends to a wider regional dialogue on the transition to electric public transport.

- We are committing to work closely with our manufacturers and logistics businesses on the greater adoption of new technologies and processes, and the skills required for these, allowing them to meet and exceed carbon targets. We will work with existing firms in the automotive supply chain to help grow their business as the West Midlands establishes market leadership in the sector.

4.10 Housing and Public Realm - Walsall aims to be an even better place to live. Given its position and excellent connectivity to the rest of the West Midlands, there is clear scope for new housing development.

- This strategy proposes further people and investment resource to allow the development of a wider range of strategic partnerships and innovative new models that can deliver even the most complex sites. This convening or partnership resource is particularly key, given the fact that often the Council does not control these development sites.
- This strategy commits to maximizing public realm improvements in other urban centres informed by the learning s within Walsall town centre. This will include the curation of increased event related activity to stimulate demand.
- This strategy looks to build on new railway station development and improvements to Junction 10 of the M6 by improving connectivity within Walsall. This will include more measures for low carbon and active travel as well as a regional dialogue on bus routes in and around the Borough.

### ***Council Plan priorities***

4.11 The Walsall Economic Strategy will address the following Council Plan key areas of focus:

- a) Economic - Enable greater local opportunities for all people, communities and businesses.
- b) People - Encourage our residents to lead more active, fulfilling and independent lives to maintain or improve their health and wellbeing
- c) Communities - Empower our communities so that they feel they are connected and belong in Walsall, creating safe and healthy places whilst building a strong sense of community.

### ***Risk management***

4.12 As this is a strategic document then the risks considered are strategic ones and relating to the overall borough perspective, contained in the evidence base. When individual recommendations are implemented and business cases are created in order to secure approval and investment, full and specific risk analysis and management will take place as part of that business case development.

4.13 A wider risk to the success of the strategy is that of the Council securing sufficient funding and resources to deliver the recommendations. This is subject to ongoing officer and Member analysis and prioritisation in an environment of constrained funding.

### ***Financial implications***

- 4.14 There are no direct, specific financial implications of this report as it concerns a strategic document, however when implementation of recommendations is agreed and developed, the financial cases will be worked up for each element of programme activity and bids will be developed for submission to SIB or any external funding providers. Further reports on specific options will be brought to cabinet as they develop.

### ***Legal implications***

- 4.15 There are no direct legal implications for this report.

### ***Procurement Implications/Social Value***

- 4.16 There contains reference in this report and the strategy to harnessing the procurement of the Council to drive social value and promote net zero interventions. These will be consulted on with Procurement colleagues to shape any intervention ensuring that it is compliant and aligned with the procurement and financial objectives of the Council.

### ***Property implications***

- 4.17 The report and strategy contain reference to use of the Council assets to facilitate wider land assembly in challenging development sites, also to consider asset transfer as a tool in driving town centre regeneration. When these principles can potentially be utilised as part of specific interventions this activity will be developed and delivered in full consultation and joint working with the Corporate Landlord.

### ***Health and wellbeing implications***

- 4.18 The importance of health as a cross cutting theme throughout the objectives for economic regeneration is clear, as is the link between health and wellbeing and economic prosperity. In designing our interventions and measuring their success we will consider the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) and health indicators to re-establish that link and be clear on our monitoring of success.

### ***Staffing implications***

- 4.19 There will be, as mentioned in the body of the report, a challenge in the number of resources which are available to deliver all of the recommendations in the report. The strategy will assist business planning to enable us to plan resources more smartly and will also inform any business cases required to request augmentation of resource.

### ***Reducing Inequalities***

- 4.20 It is essential that all of Walsall's residents, communities and protected groups benefit from the proposed interventions and objectives in the strategy. Each intervention and defined programme will be subject to full EquIA and peer challenge from colleagues in terms of equality and diversity.

## ***Climate Change***

- 4.21 Net zero recommendations and implications are contained in the strategy but as with other areas, specific benefits and impacts of activity will need to be analysed and quantified for each area of intervention when they are developed.

## ***Consultation***

- 4.22 This strategy has seen extensive one to one and round table consultation both within the Council and with external partners. It is anticipated that wherever possible and appropriate that this will go on to inform co-development and strong partnership working. A list of consultees can be found in the appendix to the main strategy.

## **5. Decide**

- 5.1 Cabinet is asked to agree the principles, themes and indicative interventions set out in the strategy.

## **6. Respond**

- 6.1 Delivery of the strategy will commence, with business cases brought forward on specific measures, if required.

## **7. Review**

- 7.1 The strategy will be reviewed periodically as we are still operating in a changing economic environment and need to build in flexibility and responsiveness accordingly.

## **Background papers**

The Draft Walsall Economic Strategy

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