

Report to: Development, Housing and Skills
Scrutiny Committee

Date: 11th April, 2011

Report of: Skills Scrutiny Panel

Report No:

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Report Title: Skills Scrutiny Panel – Final Report and Recommendations

**Confidential /
Non Confidential:**

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(**Non-Confidential**) This report does **not** contain information which warrants its consideration in the absence of the press or members of the public

Purpose:

To present the findings of the Skills Scrutiny Panel

Recommendations:

To approve the recommendations of the Panel

Background Doc(s):

Summary:

Introduction

The Development, Housing and Skills Scrutiny Committee established a Scrutiny Panel to investigate ways of improving the skills base within Bolton to meet the current and future needs of the Bolton economy.

The Panel was subsequently appointed, being politically balanced and comprised:

1. Councillor A. Connell
2. Councillor Cottam
3. Councillor Cox
4. Councillor Critchley
5. Councillor Harkin
6. Councillor Mrs. B. Ronson (Councillor Radlett substituted for Councillor Mrs. Ronson on 3 occasions)

At its first meeting, the Panel appointed Councillor Critchley as Chairman.

The Panel was supported throughout its investigations by the following officers

Keith Davies	-	Director of Development and Regeneration
Andrew Donaldson	-	Assistant Director (Policy, Partnerships and Performance)
Stephanie Crossley	-	Assistant Director (Culture and Community Services)
Andy Walker	-	Head of Service (Enterprise, Employment and Skills)
Anna Hughes	-	Principal Neighbourhood Renewal Officer
Sue Somerville	-	Adult Learning Manager
John Addison	-	Principal Performance and Scrutiny Officer

Terms of Reference

The Panel agreed the following terms of reference:-

“To improve the skills base of Bolton people to enable them to achieve more and to put them in a position to take up the maximum number of the 5,000 jobs to be created in the town by 2020”

Context

In 2007, Bolton published a new Community Strategy which anticipated enormous physical and social transformation for the Borough. Underpinning this aspiration was a ten year vision for economic growth which would see the creation of some 20,000 new jobs in the town. However, the global economic downturn meant that the pace of development and change had to be reviewed although it was still anticipated that around 5,000 new jobs would be created in Bolton by 2020. The Council has revisited its economic strategy in the light of this situation and has made the raising of skills levels within Bolton a major part of its refreshed approach. It is within this context that the Panel commenced its deliberations.

One of the main priority areas of the revised strategy concentrated on improving the skill levels within the working age population. Despite increased attainment of young people within formal education, skill levels within the working age population are failing to show any consistent upward trend.

One third of adults (approximately 40,000 people) lacked a level 2 qualification (equivalent to 5 good GCSE's) which was the basic entry requirement for the majority of low skilled jobs whilst less than half Bolton's Working Age Population had a level 3 qualification (equivalent of an A level).

It was against this backdrop that the Panel began its deliberations.

Process and Evidence

Following its first meeting on 5th November, 2010, when the Panel received various background information in relation to its remit, the Panel met on 5 further occasions with the following key themes and contributors:-

10th December, 2010

Key Theme – Employer Feedback

Contributors – Vertex Data Science, Stateside Foods Ltd and Rochdale MBC.

This was the first meeting of the Panel at which evidence was sought from representatives of the employers sector. In this regard Mr. David Gavin, Stateside Foods and Ms. Sarah Ward, Vertex Data Science Ltd, as representatives of major employers within the town very kindly accepted an invitation to meet and enter into a dialogue with the Panel.

Mr. Gary Kelly, Skills Transformation Manager, Rochdale MBC was also been invited to attend this meeting.

The employers representatives had been invited to begin a dialogue with the Panel about their perception of current labour market conditions and any issues around the skills agenda in Bolton. Mr. Kelly had been invited as Rochdale Council had begun to address problems in the Borough's skills issues some 18 months ago.

The employers representatives were advised of the current context within which the Panel was operating in that despite the economic recession having a major impact on the Council's long term economic strategy, it was anticipated that the local economy would begin to grow from 2012 onwards and that 5,000 new jobs would be created by 2020. The Council had made it a priority that policies and opportunities were in place both to raise the aspirations of the local workforce to have the necessary confidence to maximise this opportunity as well as having the requisite skill sets to secure employment.

14th January, 2011

Key Theme – 14-19 Strategy – Are Young People Skilled to Access Employment

Contributors – Carol Cantwell (14-19 Development Manager), Ian Fitzgerald and Pat Harrison (Bolton College) and Mike Green (HR Director, Leighs Paints).

The purpose of this meeting was to discuss and examine the current scope and direction of education between the ages of 14 to 19 to ensure that young people had the necessary skills to access employment and the roles played by the Council and Bolton College in this regard.

The Panel received brief descriptions of the roles played by the Council and Bolton College in respect of the 14-19 strategy and also engaged in a dialogue with a representative of the commercial sector about what employers were looking for when looking to appoint young people.

The Panel was also advised at this meeting that the Council had asked the Commission for the New Economy to undertake an analysis of skills issues within Bolton. It was explained to the Panel

that the rationale behind this course of action was that improving the skills capacity of Bolton residents remained a key economic and social priority. However, performance data was complex, of variable quality and published well in arrears. Information in relation to labour market information was also difficult to access.

The main components of the work to be undertaken by The Commission for the New Economy were around skills intelligence, target setting and sharing labour market intelligence.

It was anticipated that the skills analysis:-

- would deliver a revised, comprehensive and sustainable basket of indicators;
- would provide a strategy check which would be compatible with the Council's evidence base;
- would facilitate consultation with key partners; and
- advise the Council how it might bring coherence around this issue.

11th February, 2011

Key Theme – Skills for Competitiveness – Work Based Learning and Leadership and Management

Contributors – James Williams, National Apprenticeship Service, Nissa Smyth, Chair, Bolton Work Based Learning Partnership and Sue Somerville Adult Learning Manager.

This meeting of the Panel concentrated on the importance of apprenticeships and an understanding of the wider work based learning offer. The meeting also looked at the mechanisms by which the Council could engage people with a view to overcoming barriers to access employment, in particular, the use of Adult Safeguarded Learning (ASL) monies.

In relation to the apprenticeship agenda, the Panel received 2 presentations. The first from James Williams covered the following points/areas:-

- Apprenticeships were backed at the highest political level;
- The policy context of apprenticeships in that the Government's focus would be on level 3 with an ambition that by 2014 the majority of apprenticeships would be at advanced level (level 4);
- The funding context in that the Government had committed to increase the budget for apprenticeships to £1,400 million in 2011/12 with £605m being invested in adult apprenticeships;
- The rising numbers and most popular apprenticeships; and
- Current success stories.

The second presentation from Nissa Smyth, Chair Bolton WBL Partnership outlined the work of the Work Based Learning Partnership, who was represented on the body and that, at the request of the Council, it had established an Apprentice Working Group which had produced a draft development plan which had three key objectives:-

- To increase the number of apprenticeship frameworks available in Bolton;
- To increase the number of apprentices on programme in Bolton; and
- To increase the number of employers accessing apprenticeship provision in the Borough.

The WBL Partnership had identified three key barriers to achieving its objectives:-

- Lack of resources;
- The attitude and awareness of some key stakeholders; and
- The need to stimulate demand.

Sue Somerville, Adult Learning Manager gave a presentation to the Panel outlining the Council's Adult Social Learning Programme and its relationship with Bolton College in respect of the delivery of courses.

4th March, 2011

Key Theme – 14-19 Strategy

Contributors – Pat Harrison, Director of 14-19 Bolton College and Kelvin Nash, Director of Adult Learning and Higher Education, Bolton College.

This was an additional meeting as the Panel felt that it needed a further opportunity to discuss with Bolton College, a key strategic partner of the Council, its role in the 14-19 agenda and higher education.

Following a presentation to the Panel about the College's role, there was an acceptance that the Council should continue to work with the College to achieve its aspirations around the development of apprenticeship programmes and extending and improving partnerships.

11th March, 2011

Key Theme – Skills for Competitiveness – Leadership and Management

Contributors - Mike Lomas, Director of Business Development and External Partnerships, University of Bolton and Rachel Combie, Director of Strategic Marketing, Marketing Manchester.

Rachel Combie, Director of Strategic Marketing, Marketing Manchester, attended the meeting and updated the Panel on the current position in regard to the Attracting and Retaining Talent Strategy for Greater Manchester.

Mike Lomas, Director of Business Development and External Partnerships, University of Bolton gave a presentation to the Panel outlining the University's support to schools and colleges in developing higher level skills.

The meeting on 11th March, 2011 concluded the Panel's evidence gathering.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Panel received evidence and information from a variety of sources and carried out its work against a backdrop of the Council actively seeking to refresh its economic strategy. The Panel view its final report and the recommendations contained therein as being complementary to this process

The Panel also recognise that, in setting itself a challenging timetable within which to deliver its final report, it has not been possible to gather evidence from all interested parties but is satisfied that the evidence received allows it to make legitimate recommendations..

Accordingly, as part of this wider process, the Panel would wish to make the following recommendations:-

1. To the Executive Member for Development, Regeneration and Skills:-

- That the Council should recognise the need to create the right economic conditions for growth by addressing identified infrastructure problems or by identifying suitable development sites;
 - That the Panel recognise the valuable role played by the Bolton Skills Board but would recommend that, as part of the review of the Council's economic strategy, the opportunity be taken to review its terms of reference and membership to ensure that they are in line with the priorities contained in the refreshed economic strategy; and
 - That following the review of its terms of reference and membership, the Director of Development and Regeneration, in conjunction with the Bolton Skills Board continues to work closely with local employers to deliver economic regeneration in Bolton.
2. The Panel was impressed by the work being done by Rochdale Council in developing its skills agenda by bringing together related Council functions and responsibilities. The Panel was of the view that the Council also needed to have a joined up approach to skills development by creating conditions which allowed joint working between schools, colleges and employers. Accordingly, it would recommend to the Chief Executive that a review be undertaken as to how this work is undertaken across the Authority.
 3. The Panel, during all phases of its evidence gathering, received clear messages from employers and partners that apprenticeships would be a key element of any strategy aimed at economic regeneration and skills development. Accordingly the Panel would recommend that the Council should facilitate, with all key strategic partners, a new strategy for apprenticeships at a local level. Such strategy should:-
 - as a priority, take account of the contents of the Development Plan currently being prepared by the Work Based Learning Partnership;
 - build on the work currently being undertaken by Bolton College to develop apprenticeship programmes; and
 - investigate alternative methods of delivery in the current economic climate.
 4. The Panel recognised that the newly relocated and rebuilt Bolton College campus presented a unique opportunity to build and enhance its reputation as a provider of high quality learning provision. The Panel would wish to see this opportunity developed by way of the following:-
 - that the Council continues to work and support Bolton College to achieve its aims and aspirations;
 - that Bolton College should continue its drive to improve and extend partnerships with employers;
 - that Bolton College should explore joint working with the Council's Business Bolton Team via the sharing of information and resources;
 - that Bolton College should continue to have an open dialogue with partners to broaden and tailor its curriculum to enable as many Bolton residents as possible to access development opportunities to take advantage of economic growth; and
 - that the Adult Safeguarded Learning priorities and spend be reviewed as part of the Council's review of priorities and outcomes.

5. The Panel met with a number of employer representatives from the manufacturing and service sectors. It was evident from discussions that for positions requiring level 1 and 2 qualifications (5 GCSEs Grade A*-C) employers were not having difficulty attracting suitable candidates. However when presenting for interview employers gave the clear and repeated message that candidates lacked “employability” skills. With this in mind, the Panel would wish to give a clear message to the 14-19 Partnership that as well as academic attainment being important, of equal importance was the development of those skills for life which would allow pupils to access employment opportunities and thus raise the aspirations of young people.
6. Finally, the Panel was aware that the Council had commissioned a major piece of work from the Commission for the New Economy to undertake an analysis of skills issues within Bolton and would ask the Executive Member for Development, Regeneration and Skills to consider the recommendations contained in this report within the context of that piece of research. The Executive Member is also recommended to enter into a continuing dialogue with those partners/employers who had given evidence to the Panel to ensure that the momentum generated by the Council’s refreshed policy and the work of the Panel is taken forward.