

# Economic Recovery Panel

## **Wychavon District Council**

9<sup>th</sup> December 2020

## **1. Summary of the Economic Recovery Panel approach with Wychavon**

The Local Government Association is hugely grateful to Wychavon District Council for undertaking the recent Economic Recovery Panel. This tool has been developed to aid councils in their work relating to the COVID-19 crisis.

The panel ran for two hours on the afternoon of Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> December 2020 and considered the way in which Covid-19 has impacted Wychavon economically; the approach to the related response undertaken by the council and its partners; and thinking and delivery around the economic recovery.

The session involved the council's Leader, key Portfolio Holders, the Chief Executive and senior officers and was facilitated by:

- Gareth Edmundson, Chief Executive of Cheltenham Borough Council
- Councillor Duncan McGinty, Leader of Sedgemoor District Council

They were supported by Chris Bowron from the Local Government Association.

Economic Recovery Panels are focused on enabling councils to take stock of, and reflect upon, the period since the current crisis began, the way this has impacted and the challenges that lie ahead as the local authority seeks to lead the recovery. Such panels are tailored to meet individual councils' needs and are designed to complement and add value to a council's own mechanisms for identifying areas of good practice, learning and improvement. The process is not designed to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of the council's plans and activities.

In what is an unprecedented environment, where everybody is learning through experience and precedents are few, peers are using the experience and knowledge they have gained in recent months and drawing on the information presented to them to prompt reflection and discussion amongst the senior political and managerial leadership of the host council.

This letter provides a summary of the peer team's feedback in the light of the discussions during the panel sessions. In providing this to the council, we have done so simply as fellow local government officers and elected members. By its nature, the panel provides a brief and only partial snapshot of a very complex, intense and unique set of happenings in relation to response and emerging plans regarding recovery.

## **2. Feedback**

Based on what we have heard and read, the council can be seen to have delivered a comprehensive and effective response to the Covid-19 crisis both generally and in relation to the economy specifically.

There has been effective communication and engagement with a wide range of stakeholders, at both strategic partner and individual business level, regarding the economic challenges being faced. This has included regular dialogue and information exchange through a forum comprising key partners such as the Chamber of Commerce; National Farmers Union; Federation of Small Businesses; and Worcestershire Business Central (the Business Growth Hub) initially on a twice-weekly, then weekly and now monthly basis. Around four thousand businesses, which represents

more than fifty per cent of the total that exist within the district, are now registered to receive the council's business E-bulletin.

Through a regular survey undertaken by the Chamber of Commerce, a clear picture of the position of Wychavon businesses has been available since early on in the crisis. The current indication is that around half of businesses find themselves in a challenging situation financially and around one-fifth of all companies in the district are contending with a crisis situation. The council has not only worked hard in distributing Government grants to support businesses but has also, in doing so, taken the opportunity to engage in dialogue with them around their situation. As a result, council officers can articulate, very clearly, meaningfully and impressively, an understanding of the way in which key sectors and a range of individual businesses have been impacted so far and the risks (plus also some opportunities) that exist for them going forward. An example of this is the understanding of the differential impacts on supply chain organisations in the food and beverage industry and the way this has been determined simply by whether they have geared themselves traditionally to supplying supermarkets or the conference and entertainment industry. This understanding has, in turn, informed the council's approach to the distribution of Government grant.

The council has taken a practical and pragmatic approach to the recovery which has delivered results. This is most amply demonstrated by the work it has undertaken around high street re-opening, guided by the Town Centres Advisory Panel comprising business representatives, community activists and elected members. This has included on-going engagement between council staff and landlords to understand issues and jointly identify solutions; free car parking in line with key criteria and parameters; measures to aid the flow and movement of people in public places to reduce the risk of transmission; and increased council staff visibility as both a reassurance and a deterrent.

Such work has supplemented the strong leadership the council has shown consistently over an extended period with a variety of investments and interventions to maintain and enhance the vitality and viability of its town centres, as seen with the recent decision to invest £4million in Evesham town centre. Things are currently being taken further still through the work commissioned from the CBRE on Town Prospectuses for some of the main urban centres within the district, which is serving both to strengthen engagement with key stakeholders in those places and to emphasise the council's commitment to urban design. All of this reflects the way in which the council recognises town centres as acting as powerful indicators to residents and business of the strength of the local economy.

The council is conscious of the importance of being clear with people about the way in which the future of urban centres is likely to look different, with increased housing development likely to be key to maintaining their vitality in a context of emerging and potential trends around the likes of retail and office accommodation. The Riverside Centre development in Evesham, referred to above, reflects such an increasing emphasis on housing. Alongside this sits a drive from the council around the growth and promotion of arts and culture both in relation to that particular development and more generally.

As a well-resourced council in terms of the quality of the people working for it, the financial resource available to it and the assets it can call upon, the council is positively positioned to both directly deliver and facilitate investments within both the urban and rural environments. Examples delivered thus far include the Waitrose development in Evesham; the support, in the form of land assembly and the donation of buildings, for the Number 8 Arts Centre in Pershore; a loan for an independent cinema that enabled it to secure additional social investment fund monies; and the creation with partners of the Worcester Six Business Park.

The council's financial strength emanates from the approach it has demonstrated over many years and is reflected in the authority having been recognised in a report (commissioned from Grant

Thornton by The Society of District Council Treasurers) as the most financially resilient district council nationally. The financial position of the authority has been a key aspect in enabling it to demonstrate a confident response to the crisis. In relation to both its finances and the good people that the council has working for it, the council recognises that delivering the response requirements of the Covid-19 crisis demands attention and resource and there is an opportunity cost around this when it comes to the ability to deliver work on the economic recovery.

Overall, in its consideration of the economic future for Wychavon, the council strikes us as demonstrating:

- Real passion for the district and its future
- An important depth of knowledge and understanding about the place, the context and its business community
- Thoughtfulness and reflection – as seen for example in the council being acutely aware that whilst it very much positions itself as ‘business friendly’ there is also a risk of barriers being inadvertently created through, for example, the approach to Planning

The council is looking to establish, in around 12 months’ time and through work with partners, an ambitious long-term economic strategy for Wychavon. Over the coming months the emphasis will be placed by the council on information and intelligence gathering to inform the strategy and now is the time to be thinking about any additional research that could usefully be commissioned to inform thinking further. The intervening period should also see an increased degree of certainty emerge in relation to the context the council and Wychavon are operating in, with key considerations around Covid-19; EU exit and transition and its implications for migrant labour and supply chains; and work at the national and regional level around Strategic Economic Plans, which is being led by Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP). These currently represent extremely fluid situations that it is hoped will crystallise to a degree over the coming months, enabling strategic planning to be undertaken rather more easily than at present. The national grant funding context for localities should become clearer during this time too, for example with the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and a potential Government ‘Levelling Up Fund’ – although the council is clear that it hasn’t and won’t rely on being awarded monies from such sources.

The period of disruption that is currently being experienced globally and nationally represents an opportunity for the council to engage widely both with partners and internally to secure input and thinking on the future for the locality. Within this, it is timely to consider the strength of local partnerships and related governance arrangements and what is needed for the future in order to enable the thinking and planning around the economic recovery for Wychavon to move at pace. Good relationships already exist with key strategic partners, such as the LEP and Worcestershire County Council, but it is felt that the links with the academic and learning and skills sectors could usefully be enhanced. In addition, there is seen to be the potential to re-invigorate or create Business Association-type arrangements in those parts of the district where they are felt to be less strong than in others or not even in existence at all currently. There are different options and avenues for the council and partners to pursue in terms of future arrangements, with one option that could potentially be considered being the creation of a cross-sector economic taskforce for Wychavon – a concept adopted in a number of places including Cheltenham, Gloucester and Shropshire.

Key to the future economic strategy for Wychavon will be:

- Flexibility, being fleet of foot and ensuring diversity within the economy in order to counter-balance uncertainty
- Providing meaning and hope to local people given the levels of economic distress and disillusionment being experienced

- Emphasising the role the council plays as the ‘guardian of place’
- Recognising that, whilst town centres and high streets are important both in their own right and as barometers of the strength of the economy, they represent only part of the economic landscape of Wychavon
- Featuring elements that are already ‘writ large’ in the thinking and seem strong, particularly ‘Intelligently Green’
- Integration with the council’s wider ambitions and stated commitments
- Themes of inclusivity – supplementing the geographically targeted work already underway around social mobility with approaches to deliver benefit for the most vulnerable and those most disadvantaged by the current crisis

Our sense is that the council is contemplating and doing all the right things as it thinks strategically about the future. It will be important to remain alert to, and act upon, the ‘quick wins’ that might emerge over the coming months in advance of the economic strategy being finalised. Alongside this is the need to be thinking through, and acting upon, ways in which Wychavon can be repositioning and promoting itself already for the economic future.

The overall message is one of the potential the council has to be bolder in the setting and outlining of its ambitions through its economic strategy with partners, enabling it to then gear its continued investment and intervention decisions accordingly. The council has been confident in delivering the response to Covid-19 and it should continue to demonstrate this as it frames the recovery.

### **3. Next steps**

We appreciate the senior managerial and political leadership of the council will wish to reflect on this feedback. The council is encouraged to enter the findings into the public domain in due course.

Under the umbrella of LGA sector-led improvement, there is an on-going offer of support to councils and we would be happy to discuss potential areas of additional support, advice and guidance. Helen Murray (Principal Adviser) is the main point of contact between the authority and the Local Government Association (LGA) and her e-mail address is [helen.murray@local.gov.uk](mailto:helen.murray@local.gov.uk)