

BROMLEY ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP

Minutes of the meeting held at 4.00 pm on 12 October 2021

Present:

Councillor Peter Morgan (Chairman)

Carol Arnfield, LBB Head of Service for Early Years, School Standards and Adult Education
Sharon Baldwin, Orpington 1st BID Company
Scott Bartlett, Mytime Active
Councillor Hannah Gray, Executive Assistant for Renewal, Recreation and Housing/Small Business Champion
Mark Haynes, The Glades
Michael Humphries, Handelsbanken
Carmel Jewell-Newby, London South East Colleges
Mike Lewis, Michael Rogers LLP
Lorraine McQuillan, LBB Place Shaping & Local Economy Manager
Lee Thomas, Fairlight Group
Bruce Walker, Lansdown Asset Management

Also Present:

Ose Akpom, LBB Economic Development Manager
Councillor Vanessa Allen
Councillor Yvonne Bear
Paul Harding, Openreach
Ben Johnson, LBB Head of Planning Policy and Strategy
Ian Meacher, Openreach
Johan Oosterling, Mytime Active

12 WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Zoe Carr – Beckenham Together BID Company and Penge SE20 BID Company, Frances Forrest – Your Bromley BID Company, Lesley Holland – Bromley Education Business Partnership, Lydia Lee – LBB Assistant Director, Culture and Regeneration, Helen McIntosh – South East London Chamber of Commerce, Robert Sargent – Acorn Group, Chandra Sharma – Federation of Small Businesses and Caroline Tatchell – Splash Damage.

Apologies for absence were also received from Marg Mayne – Mytime Active and Sam Parrett – London South East Colleges, and Scott Bartlett – Mytime Active and Carmel Jewell-Newby – London South East Colleges attended as their respective substitutes.

13 QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS AND MEMBERS OF THE PUBLIC ATTENDING THE MEETING

No questions had been received.

14 MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 15TH JULY 2021 AND MATTERS OUTSTANDING

The Chairman noted that there were no matters outstanding.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 15th July 2021 be agreed.

15 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

Update from Openreach regarding the installation of fibre optic cable

The Chairman welcomed Paul Harding – Regional Partnership Manager, Openreach (“Regional Partnership Manager”) and Ian Meacher – Senior Project Manager, Openreach (“Senior Project Manager”) to the meeting to provide an update on the installation of fibre optic cable across the borough.

Openreach had worked closely with Bromley to create and ratify a Digital Charter to support a faster rollout of ultrafast Full Fibre broadband for homes and businesses across the borough. Announcements made earlier in the year, regarding the 53 Greater London locations identified as part of their 25 million premise ambition to fibre up the country, incorporated additional builds to towns and rural locations. In addition to the 470,000 homes and businesses already delivered to across the capital, this would add an additional 840,000 to their rollout plans. This represented over £336m of investment into the capital, and Openreach’s commercial build was fundamental to the Government achieving its target of delivering ‘gigabit capable’ broadband to 85% of the UK by 2025. Openreach played an important role across Greater London, with more than 4,700 of their people living and working in the capital. Recent research by the Centre for Economics and Business Research (Cebr) highlighted the clear economic benefits of connecting everyone in London to Full Fibre, estimating that this would create a £13.8billion boost to the local economy.

Across Bromley, Openreach were working across five exchange areas. The biggest to date was in Orpington with over 20,000 premises now enabled to place an order. So far, take up was low, with just over 1,000 premises now consuming an ultrafast service – as such there was a big opportunity to boost take up in this area. The builds across Grove Park and Farnborough were progressing well, with over 10,000 premises now enabled for service, and early stages of work had commenced in Biggin Hill and Chislehurst and Hayes Common.

Councillor Hannah Gray, Executive Assistant for Renewal, Recreation and Housing/Small Business Champion, noted that it would be good to see the areas of the rollout identified more clearly. She was aware of commercial sensitivity but highlighted that it would be useful to be kept up to date and provided with as much information as possible. Members could then pass this information on to the BIDs and networking groups, who could disseminate it further – people could not sign up for ultrafast Full Fibre broadband if they did not know it was available. The Regional Partnership Manager advised that there was an online tool which indicated the availability of ultrafast Full Fibre broadband by postcode and agreed that further thought could be given as to what other information they could provide to Members. Councillor Gray further suggested that flyers could be produced and delivered to the specific areas of rollout along with other communications from the Local Authority.

Visiting Ward Member, Councillor Vanessa Allen asked for further information regarding the plans for the rollout of ultrafast Full Fibre broadband between Beckenham and Crystal Palace. The Regional Partnership Manager said that this area was not in the immediate plan of work to take place before 2026, but he would provide more precise dates following the meeting. Mike Humphries, Handelsbanken highlighted that there was a raft of the borough that would not be able to access ultrafast Full Fibre broadband in the immediate future and emphasised the importance of shortening the timescales as much as possible. In response to a question from the Chairman, the Regional Partnership Manager said that the maps provided indicated the rollout to be completed by Openreach, however it was noted that there would already be some existing fibre optic capacity in the borough, delivered by other network providers.

Lee Thomas, Fairlight Group requested the headlines in terms of speed and capacity across London – including other outer London boroughs; the Bromley borough; central Orpington; and the commercial districts. Visiting Ward Member, Councillor Yvonne Bear asked what percentage of the borough would have access to ultrafast Full Fibre broadband, once the work on the five exchanges was complete. It was highlighted that not all areas of the borough would be covered by exchanges that were actually located in the borough. Areas such as the Cray Valley, which was one of the main industrial sites, was a particular issue and information was requested relating to plans for sites around the edge of the borough. The Regional Partnership Manager and Senior Project Manager agreed they would provide responses to these questions following the meeting.

Sharon Baldwin, Orpington 1st BID Company said that it was good to see that Orpington would be receiving ultrafast Full Fibre broadband – however a number of its businesses worked out of several other locations across the borough, which may suffer from a slower speed connection. She would be happy to promote this opportunity within her BID area but needed to be clear exactly what she was promoting and how it would support businesses. It was suggested that this could be discussed further with the Regional Partnership Manager and Senior Project Manager outside of the meeting. Councillor Gray agreed that it was important to rollout ultrafast Full Fibre broadband across

the whole of the borough, with an aim to be the first borough covered in London, but it was vital that there were no gaps. It was suggested that a project timescale be provided, which set the expectations for each stage.

The Chairman thanked Paul Harding and Ian Meacher for their presentation to the Partnership.

Provision of new office space in Bromley town centre

Ben Johnson, LBB Head of Planning Policy and Strategy informed Members that Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) were being produced for Bromley and Orpington town centres. SPDs provided further guidance regarding Local Plan policies and details on how they should be implemented. There were restrictions on what could be done in town centres, but the directorate were keen to make the most of the policies and ensure that new, high quality, office space was provided. Members were asked for their thoughts regarding the provision of new office space in Bromley town centre.

Mike Lewis, Michael Rogers LLP, highlighted that it had been around forty years since there had been major office development in Bromley town centre, which it was noted had been occupied by large organisations. The existing stock had become fragmented, and the buildings tired – some were almost at the point where they were unlettable unless significant sums of money were thrown at them.

There was a drive for quality, as occupiers did not want 1980's, second-hand spaces. The Threadneedle – T Building (formerly Wren Court) had been ripped back to its shell, and around £150 per sq. ft. had been spent on the refurbishment of the building. This was a quality building that was achieving rents of up to £35 per sq. ft. It was noted that the Bromley Park Group had recently launched a development of just under 100,000 sq. ft. in Elmfield Road, which had received planning permission last year, and would provide further quality lets. The geography of Bromley town centre made it very competitive, particularly due to its good transport connections.

Lee Thomas, Fairlight Group, informed Members that the company had owned a building on Elmfield Road for a number of years, which offered flexible workspace. The 'Bromley Park' development was in the prime office district, and it was considered that A+ grade offices needed to be built in the town centre in order to once again attract big companies. Large companies used to rent a whole floor within an office, but due to a lack of demand for tired, older office buildings, these had now been divided up to offer smaller lets, with smaller companies generally. This in turn set the tone for the average 'Bromley Town' occupier, with an almost complete absence of larger PLC occupiers like the Town/Borough used to enjoy. This had an impact on the whole town centre as there was no longer a "trickle down" effect from the bigger businesses to the smaller ones. Members were advised that nearly all of the recent lettings in central London were for quality, new build spaces –

these were receiving decent interest from large operators, which was something that had not been seen in Bromley for decades.

Mr Lewis highlighted that there was a closing window of opportunity. Without new, large, high quality office space being provided in the town centre, it would become “flat land”, which would not attract big businesses into Bromley. In response to a question from the Chairman, Mr Lewis said that Wells House was currently the largest building on Elmfield Road and had flats surrounding it. He understood residents not wanting to be overlooked by big buildings – however it was considered that an office block would be better as they were largely empty at weekends and therefore the perceived intrusion was not as significant. Mr Thomas said that an overview of Bromley showed lots of different sectors operating together and emphasised the need for office space to be retained as part of the eco-system. Commercial offices were good neighbour – in comparison, retail was at its capacity at weekends.

Bruce Walker, Lansdown Asset Management, noted that in other neighbouring boroughs, lots of people were moving from the outer areas into town centres to be closer to rail connections, where they worked, and the leisure offer. In response to questions from Mr Walker, Mr Lewis advised that for a number of years, Bromley had not been able to provide the spaces needed by large companies, as once buildings were fragmented, they “dropped off the radar”. It was highlighted that discussions were taking place with a prospective occupier for the largest part of the Bromley Park development. This was a large London company, who would be a single occupier, and it was not unusual for deals like this to take up to nine months to complete. Mr Thomas stated that big companies paid good salaries, which their staff would spend in the town centre where their premises were located. This vibrancy was evident in a number of locations, such as Watford and Woking, and was supplemented by the eco-system which included offices. Mr Walker considered that Bromley town centre was small in comparison to the areas listed and asked what could be done to offer more to big businesses. Sharon Baldwin, Orpington 1st BID Company, said it was about balance and repositioning Bromley as a borough. The eco-system needed to be better performing, and big businesses would bring the movement of money into the borough. Mr Lewis agreed that occupiers of office buildings could have an impact on the retail and leisure offer. It was emphasised that a robust strategy for the town centre was needed, to ensure everyone was working together, and it should not be filled with residential units.

The LBB Head of Planning Policy and Strategy acknowledged that there had been lots of issues raised, which would be taken into account by the team. It was noted that Elmfield Road was a priority area for office development, however it was not possible to fully restrict residential development.

The Chairman thanked Members for their input to the discussion.

RESOLVED that the presentation and discussion be noted.

16 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TEAM

Lorraine McQuillan, LBB Place Shaping and Local Economy Manager advised that in addition to herself, the Economic Development Manager, and the Project Support Officer, three new members of staff would shortly be joining the team – a Project Officer, who would support the business community, a Town Centres and BID Development Manager, and a Head of Economic Development.

RESOLVED that the update be noted.

17 ARG GRANT DISTRIBUTION AND APPLICATION PROCESSES

The LBB Place Shaping and Local Economy Manager informed Members that a new round of business grants would be launched at the end of the week. Details would be published on the LBB website, and a copy of the press release would be circulated to Members.

(ACTION: LBB Place Shaping and Local Economy Manager / Clerk)

The four key grant schemes included in the latest round of funding were:

- Business Start-up during COVID Grant – to support existing start-up businesses in Bromley that had been impacted by COVID-19;
- Business Growth Grant;
- Grants for occupying a vacant unit; and
- Cultural Grants – to support cultural activities and events in the borough.

These grant schemes would be advertised across the borough. It was noted that a number of cultural organisations would be contacted to make them aware of the cultural programming grant and encourage applications.

In response to a question from Lee Thomas, Fairlight Group, the LBB Place Shaping and Local Economy Manager said that the grant for occupying a vacant unit would assist existing businesses with the set-up costs associated with occupying a vacant unit. Businesses of all sizes were encouraged to apply, including businesses from the retail, office and industrial sectors.

In response to questions from Councillor Gray, the LBB Place Shaping and Local Economy Manager advised that the deadline to apply for most of the grants was 31st January 2022. It was highlighted that the deadline to apply for the grant for occupying a vacant unit was 31st December 2021, however this grant would be awarded on a first-come, first-served basis and the funds were limited – all types of businesses, from any sector, were eligible to apply.

RESOLVED that the update be noted.

18 PLANNING POLICY UPDATE

The LBB Head of Planning Policy and Strategy provided an update in relation to planning policy.

Members were informed that a 'Call for Sites' consultation exercise was now underway and would remain open until mid-November 2021. This was the first stage of the Local Plan review, which would look at any potential sites for economic development or any other uses. In response to a question from the Chairman, the LBB Head of Planning Policy and Strategy said that the Local Plan review was a time-consuming exercise that had a number of statutory requirements. It was anticipated that a first draft would be consulted on by the end of next year, with the completion date being the end of 2024.

In response to questions from Lee Thomas, Fairlight Group, the LBB Head of Planning Policy and Strategy said that the impact of the introduction of Class E, which allowed retail, offices and restaurants to be converted to residential use through permitted development rights, would reduce the ability for nuance in the planning of town centres. It was considered that the team had enough capacity to undertake the work required for the Local Plan review and the introduction of Class E. It was highlighted that the Article 4 directions put in place would cover the whole of Bromley town centre.

With regards to planning reform, the LBB Head of Planning Policy and Strategy noted that there were no confirmed updates and that the government had appointed a new Secretary of State.

RESOLVED that the Planning Policy update be noted.

19 TOWN CENTRES AND BUSINESS SUPPORT UPDATE

The LBB Place Shaping and Local Economy Manager provided an update on Town Centres and Business Support.

Members were reminded that the Local Authority had been allocated a further £295k from the 'Welcome Back Fund', for use in welcoming customers back to the high streets. Over the summer a programme of business advice was offered; pop-up parklets provided in Orpington, Beckenham and Penge; and artificial grass had been installed in Bromley town centre. Discussions would shortly be taking place with partners regarding winter planting and events in town centres.

The LBB Place Shaping and Local Economy Manager informed Members that the 'Start-Up Bromley' programme had been launched, providing support to start-up businesses and entrepreneurs. As part of this scheme, business lounge facilities were available in Bromley Central Library, Orpington Library and more recently, Biggin Hill Library. These provided dedicated space which could be used for training, networking and showcase events.

It was noted that the Local Authority had been successful in its 'High Streets for All' funding bid, the first stage of which would see £20k used to support the provision of high-quality cultural programming in Bromley town centre. A bid had been submitted for the second stage, for between £100-200k, to increase the number of cultural activities and was linked to the amphitheatre and Churchill Gardens. Members would be advised of the outcome of this bid, which would be announced in December 2021. If successful, the funding would need to be spent by March 2023.

(ACTION: LBB Place Shaping and Local Economy Manager / Clerk)

The Bromley Business Hub website had recently been launched – <https://www.bromleybusinesshub.org/> – which publicised support, advice and training. Members were advised that the website included a recruitment database and calendar of events, which partners could add to by contacting the Business Support Team. Lee Thomas, Fairlight Group, considered that the Hubs could be used to disseminate further information regarding the rollout of ultrafast Full Fibre broadband.

Mark Haynes, The Glades, advised Members that the shopping centre would shortly be celebrating its 30th birthday. It was highlighted that the last couple of years had been tough for retail businesses, and both Debenhams and The Disney Store had recently closed their units in the shopping centre. It was highlighted that the majority of companies that had closed stores had done so because of their stance or current situation, rather than there being an issue specifically in Bromley. There had been several new stores that had opened during the last 18-month, including Crew Clothing Company and Ted Baker. A new burger restaurant, Marlowe's, had also opened and leases would shortly be completed for three further restaurants, which it was hoped would be open before the end of the year. There was also interest from both food and non-food operators for some of the other vacant units, and some existing occupiers were looking to take more space within the shopping centre.

The shopping centre would be looking to use vacant units for a "local showcase". Businesses, who mainly operated online, would be provided with support to open pop-up shops in the units for periods of between six weeks and six months. This would showcase both local business and artists, who would produce window displays. It was considered that this was helping increase footfall as, when compared to 2019, footfall for eleven of the last twelve weeks had been positive. Mr Haynes said that things had been tough, but not as bad as they could have been, and there were positive things on the horizon.

Sharon Baldwin, Orpington 1st BID Company informed Members that footfall in the town centre was up to 80% of the figures being seen pre-pandemic, and the dwell times in the car parks had been increasing over the last few weeks. It was noted that businesses were experiencing real problems with staffing, particularly in the hospitality and leisure sectors.

Vacancy rates in the town centre were decreasing, and following its departure, Peacocks had reopened on Orpington High Street in August. Of

the units that had been vacant long-term, the lease for one would be signed shortly, and five smaller units would be made into one large unit for use by Getir, the grocery delivery company.

Members were advised that a final consultation event on proposals for the regeneration of the Walnuts Shopping Centre would be held on Thursday 21st October 2021, prior to a planning application being submitted. It was emphasised that this development would have a major effect on the rest of the high street. With regards to meanwhile space, work was being undertaken to look at how this could best be utilised. Five units within the Walnuts Shopping Centre were currently being worked on to facilitate community projects and showcase them in a different way.

The annual Flavours of Orpington Food Festival had taken place in September 2021, and restaurants had indicated an increase in bookings of up to 30%. The event had ended on the Sunday with a community BBQ attended up 600 people. Over the summer, Orpington had entered the annual London in Bloom competition. This year the business community had been award a gold medal and first place in the Business Improvement District (BID) category, which highlighted the partnership work undertaken.

RESOLVED that the Town Centres and Business Support update be noted.

20 WORK PROGRAMME 2021-22

Members had been provided with a copy of the Economic Data Report 2021/22 Q2 (July – September 2021) and an update on the Economic Development Strategy – Priority Actions for Quarter 2 2021/22 (July – September 2021).

Ose Akpom, LBB Economic Development Manager, informed Members that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of start-ups in Bromley had fluctuated at around 200 businesses per month. There had been a huge spike in the number, with around a 50% increase in September 2020. This had been immediately followed by a fall in business start-ups, and the numbers had generally continued to fall until July 2021. More recently there had been an increase, and in August 2021 this figure had stood at around 150 per month.

The number of unemployed claimants in Bromley had hugely increased, from 5,000 prior to lockdown, to a peak of approximately 12,000 in September 2020. This number had been gradually decreasing since April 2021, and in August 2021 stood at 9,025, however they would like to see this reduce further. The number of jobs furloughed in Bromley had reduced from 20,360 (31st March 2021), to 16,320 (30th April 2021) – at the end of July 2021 this figure stood at around 8,000 jobs. The proportion of jobs on furlough for industry sectors within Bromley followed a similar pattern to that seen across

London. It was noted that following the impact of the pandemic, employment would be a key area of focus in the borough.

Between 2015 and 2021, apprenticeship starts in Bromley generally maintained an average of 1,488 per annum. This was slightly above the average figure of 1,474 across a number of local boroughs. The latest 2020/21 figures reported so far showed a reduction of 20% in the apprenticeship starts as compared with 2019/20 across all boroughs.

The LBB Economic Development Manager advised that pre-pandemic, footfall had been high, but this had reduced following the subsequent periods of lockdown. The total number of visitors for the first 8 months of the year to August 2021 was up by 0.9% on the previous year but was 33.3% below normal footfall levels in 2019. In comparison, a reduction in footfall of 2% had been experienced across Greater London during the first 8 months of the year, compared to the same period during the previous year. This was 47.6% below normal footfall levels in 2019. Bromley town centre had experienced the largest increase in vacancy rate overall compared to the other town centres within the borough, increasing from 9.4% in April 2020 to 12.2% as at July 2021 (+2.8%). This vacancy rate was also higher than the average rate across Greater London (10.7%). The second largest increase in vacancy rate over the same period was in Orpington, which was primarily experienced over the last quarter. However, it was noted that the vacancy rate in Bromley town centre was lower than some other comparable areas such as Croydon (23.8%), Kingston-upon-Thames (13.3%) and Sutton (16.4%).

With regards to retail spending activity, the benchmark data had been taken from 2019. In comparison, from March 2020, the first period of lockdown, the retail spend in Bromley High Street had dramatically reduced to around 20% of the normal spend. Following the easing of restrictions in June/July 2020 there had been a significant recovery (up to 80% of normal spend), but subsequent lockdown restrictions had generally suppressed retail spending up until April 2021. Since then, retail spending had increased in accordance with the individual steps within the government roadmap and up to 80% of normal trading activity was being seen in August 2021.

The LBB Economic Development Manager informed Members that there were seven key aspirations within the Economic Development Strategy: Education and Skills; Employment Spaces; Helping Businesses Thrive; High Streets for the Future; Connectivity and Mobility; Enhancement of Tourism and Culture Industries; and Working Towards a Green Economy.

Members had been provided with a summary of the projects being undertaken; the achievements in Q2; and priority actions to be completed in Q3.

RESOLVED that the update be noted.

21 ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Scott Bartlett – Mytime Active informed Members that the organisation had set targets for membership and were on track to reach 70% by March 2022, and 100% by September 2022. Swimming lessons had recommenced, with 90-95% uptake across most sites which was extremely positive.

Carmel Jewell-Newby – London South East Colleges advised that the College had experienced a promising start to the academic year, and it was hoped that this would continue going forward.

Carol Arnfield – LBB Head of Service for Early Years, School Standards and Adult Education informed Members that the Bromley Adult Education College (BAEC) had established a confidence building course, 'Terrified of Interviews'. This allowed attendees to practice techniques to reduce anxiety and perform well in remote and physical settings and had received good feedback. Other courses included 'Starting a Business' for people looking to work self-employed. This had been especially successful, running twice in summer and autumn 2021 (online and onsite) for which a number of referrals had been received from DWP claimants.

'Let's Talk Work in Bromley' was an online course to support unemployed people over the age of 50, helping to identifying transferable skills, appropriate search mechanisms and building confidence.

From January 2022, the College would be offering an employability module (6 sessions) to ESOL learners – each course would be tailored for different levels.

RESOLVED that the updates be noted.

22 DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

4.00pm, Tuesday 11th January 2022

4.00pm, Tuesday 29th March 2022

The Meeting ended at 5.35 pm

Chairman