

Case Study

Economic Growth Advisors Programme

Borough Council of Wellingborough

Joint Working with partners to enhance inward investment, business engagement and funding opportunities

Key themes covered by the case study

- ✓ Business engagement and retention
- ✓ Inward investment

Summary

Background

The aims and objectives of the project were to:

- Develop an Inward Investment Plan to guide future Inward Investment activity, including advice on effective systems and processes for business retention and inward investment for the Borough.
- Recommend effective procedures for joint working and knowledge sharing between Council, the Northamptonshire Enterprise Partnership and the Borough's Economic Partnership and local businesses. Suggest performance targets to measure particular activities' return on resources and effectiveness as business retention and inward investment methods.
- Provide advice on which activities should be prioritised in order to make best use of the council's limited resources.

It was agreed that a series of face to face and telephone interviews, with council officers, members, partners and key businesses, should be conducted over a period of three months, to gather intelligence and inform the project.

The results of the interviews would then be combined with the experience of Councillors, officers and the appointed consultants' perspective to develop a series of recommendations to guide economic development activities going forward.

Rationale for project

The Challenge

The Borough Council of Wellingborough has limited resources to undertake Economic Development activities, so the project was designed to assist the Economic Regeneration Officer in prioritising the activities that would maximise those resources.

Wellingborough's economy is traditionally a low wage, low skill economy, this provides us with a challenge that we are determined to address.

A key driver of the council's Economic Development work is the growth that the Borough is required to accommodate. This will see the construction of approximately 7600 new homes and a supporting redevelopment of the town centre; and will necessitate the creation of supporting infrastructure, including the creation of adequate, high quality jobs and attracting new inward investment as well as identifying potential sources of funding. With property prices (both commercial and residential) remaining favourable compared to many other areas, Wellingborough's offer is a strong one and will be key to securing the future prosperity of the area and it's residents and businesses.

We recognised that this may be a tall order for a small Borough Council such as ours, so we took the lead in the development of an Economic Development Strategy for the Borough and have re-established an Economic Partnership with a number of external agencies (including Northamptonshire Enterprise Partnership, Jobcentre Plus, Connexions, and the education establishments in the Borough) in order to realise the key aims and objectives of the Strategy.

The council welcomed the involvement of the LGA adviser to take a holistic look at Wellingborough's strengths and provide an impartial, external perspective, helping to ensure that our ambitions are achievable in reality. The advice and support received will be shared with partners, neighbouring authorities and our Local Enterprise Partnership.

The objectives were therefore to:

- Advise upon effective systems and processes for business retention and inward investment for the Borough.
- Recommend methodologies for joint working and knowledge sharing between the Council, NEP, the Economic Partnership and other partners;
- Suggest performance targets to measure the return on investment for resources used on business retention and inward investment activities.

Key actions

The method

Over 20 interviews were conducted, either face to face or over the telephone, with key Councillors, officers, local businesses and partners.

From the responses gained, it was clear that the Council has some clear strengths – including its Economic Partnership – but that a refocussing of resources and activities was required.

As the project developed it emerged that local employers were keen to have a closer working relationship with the Council and that the main priority should therefore be on business retention – not at the expense of attracting new investors, but recognising the importance of keeping and growing established businesses. Wellingborough has some very influential and important businesses and the focus upon these to inform the way forward became increasingly obvious and is reflected in the intended action plan to move forward.

The Council is now carefully considering the scope of an action plan for implementing recommendations from the project over the next few months, with a clear way forward to re-vitalise the Economic Partnership, enhance the relationship with delivery partners and engaging closely with strategically important businesses.

Key findings and outputs

The results

Recommendations for priority activities were as follows:

- Select and meet with the Top 10-15 employers in the Borough over the next 12 months – gaining intelligence and addressing their needs.
- Agree protocols with Northamptonshire Enterprise Partnership (NEP) and others with an interest in businesses in the Borough (i.e. UKTI) for visiting businesses and working together to support them.
- Measure the jobs created and safeguarded as a result of responding to business needs – report on a quarterly basis.
- Leverage existing resources through an effective Relationship Management Programme.

- Put in place an Open for Business initiative.
- Have a highly focused approach to Inward Investment, with relevant partners (County Council, NEP, UKTI).
- Look for funding opportunities with partners to add resources to Economic Development.

These recommendations reflect the resources and colleagues / partners currently have available to deliver them and will further strengthen Wellingborough's opportunities. Many of them are relatively easy to implement and should lead to visible benefits relatively quickly. Others will take a little longer to bear fruit, but will be a worthwhile investment of time and resources.

Opportunities for shared learning include:

- A presentation to the Borough's Economic Partnership.
- The sharing of recommendations with neighbouring Council's through County / LEP networks.
- Publication of the recommendations on the Council's website.

Key lessons learnt from the project include;

- Tapping into the experiences of other Local Authorities is relatively easy to do, and very helpful.
- An external perspective (from the Growth Adviser) is valuable as it offers an opportunity to take a step back from day to day Economic Development and gain new insights.
- The project would not have happened without the LGA initiative and has highlighted a number of areas that the Council is keen to move forward with.

Economic benefits

The project has identified a number of potential economic benefits for the Borough but these will be fully realised over the next 12 months, and beyond, as the implementation plan for the recommendations is put in place.

These benefits stem from the fact that Wellingborough's local businesses drive the area's economy. It is important to ensure that businesses are supported effectively in order to improve their knowledge of and access to sources of advice, support and funding as appropriate. In turn, more profitable businesses create a more prosperous local economy.

The recommendations arising from this project as detailed on pages 3 and 4 will enable the Council to engage with local businesses more effectively and efficiently and will ultimately result in a better mutual understanding and stronger working relationship. These relationships will enable us to;

- Influence education and training provision locally to meet employer needs.
- Identify and react to growth opportunities within existing businesses.
- Decrease any potential for business issues to lie dormant and create future issues.
- Build a stronger business community by facilitating discussion across businesses and recognising and addressing similar needs collectively.

In turn this will enable the Council to work with businesses on the issues that are of most importance to them and justify expending resources on them through capturing hard outputs from joint working.

Early indications are that it will be easier to measure benefits and safeguard new jobs more rigorously through implementing the recommendations regarding measuring jobs created. This evidence will be used to seek funding opportunities for enhanced services.

We also anticipate additional benefits from closer working with other business support organisations (public and private) enabling us to offer a more comprehensive set of services through better understanding of what is available.

By working in a more integral way with County Council colleagues, and those from the LEP, we can clearly see benefits all round, leveraging the Borough Council's scarce resources better to fill gaps in provision for businesses, and eliminating the duplication and overlap of services. We will be better positioned to identify and secure funding from our LEP through a clearer understating of their priorities and the opportunities for us to contribute to these.

Finally, we firmly believe that our enhanced approach to business engagement will enable us to support key employers with their growth plans and gain experience from them in order to attract other businesses to the area, bringing greater prosperity and job opportunities to Wellingborough.