

What Makes Wigan Work?

Introduction from the leader

On 23 June 2009, representatives from the public, private and community sectors all came together to develop the next steps for tackling the problem of worklessness in Wigan Borough.

Nearly 120 people attended the conference at the JJB Stadium to refresh and steer a new action plan for the What makes Wigan work? worklessness strategy.

The current action plan, which was formulated as a result of last year's conference is almost fully commissioned, so a new plan is required for the coming 12 months.

The focus of the day was upon exploring ways to support new business creation and existing businesses, as well as encouraging and assisting individuals to access training and enter employment.

Bishop Stephen Lowe, the Anglican Bishop for Urban Affairs, returned once again as the key note speaker and delivered a powerful speech

detailing some of the new challenges Wigan Borough will face in its fight against worklessness.

The atmosphere at the conference was very positive and a lot of really good ideas were generated.

This newsletter provides a summary of what was discussed.

I hope you find this newsletter useful and informative.



Pete Smith

Lord Smith of Leigh,
Leader of Wigan
Council



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Bishop Stephen Lowe**

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Taking action in the downturn

Consultants, Experian have been commissioned to conduct an economic study of Wigan Borough. During the conference, they presented their interim report.

The economic climate in which the 'What makes Wigan work?' strategy was written has changed dramatically from a period of economic stability to that of recession.

The North West as a whole has been forecast a challenging 12 months with the recession predicted to have a greater impact on the region than the UK as a whole. Regional unemployment levels are currently the 4th highest in the UK.

Like the rest of the country, Wigan Borough has been hit by a decline in employment, especially in the manufacturing and construction sectors.



Experian has predicted that this decline will continue throughout 2009. The extent of Wigan's manufacturing and construction base means that it will probably experience more decline than Salford and Manchester.

However, in the medium term it looks like Wigan will enter a period of tentative economic stabilisation, which should give way to modest growth. Unfortunately, the impact of the employment decline is still likely to be felt until 2014.

Despite a steady decrease in the number of Incapacity Benefit claimants, worklessness levels in the most deprived areas of Wigan have continued to rise.

Increased unemployment has been a key contributor to rising levels of worklessness with deprived areas the hardest hit.

Young people have been far harder hit by unemployment than any other age group, with 1,865 out of 4,300 new claimants between July 2008 and May 2009 under the age of 29.

Barriers to employment remain for Wigan residents. The borough is characterised by lower levels of self-employment (6.3%) compared to rest of UK (9.3%).

Access to training remains an issue. Training budgets have been cut in the private sector as a result of the downturn.

Note: As of July 2009, Wigan Borough was the only local authority in the Association of Greater Manchester Authority (AGMA) area to experience a decline in JSA claimants. What is more is that this has been the case for two consecutive months.



Workshop Feedback

There were two workshop sessions held at the conference. Workshop one focused on increasing entrepreneurial activity and supporting the sustainable growth of business. Workshop two focused upon removing barriers to training and employment.

The workshops gave the participants an opportunity to contribute to and direct the refreshed action plan for the 'What makes Wigan work?' strategy. The following is a summary of what was suggested and discussed:

Workshop One

Preparation for Business Start Up

Wigan Borough historically has low levels of self employment. Yet in the current economic climate, which has seen vacancies decline and competition for jobs increase, self employment should be viewed as a possible alternative.

It was widely felt that this needed to be instilled at a young age, by targeting children at school via Young Enterprise style events and activities. However, this encouragement isn't just needed in schools, but also in the home as well. Work needs to be done with parents to encourage them to support their children to do well at school and to raise aspirations to achieve.

The knowledge and ability to start and run a new business needs to be nurtured and developed.

This can be done via apprenticeships or work experience in either a voluntary or supported environment. This will give the individual an opportunity to learn a trade and gain inspiration and knowledge in how to run a successful business.

Training will be required to ensure that they have the appropriate knowledge and skills, but support prior to this may be required to build confidence and assertiveness.

Starting a new business can be a daunting task. The process needs to be simplified and a full programme of support is required, not just during the start up process, but on an ongoing basis.

Jobs fairs are seen as key to promoting self-employment as an option. This could be done via a franchise fair, for example.

Research needs to be conducted to identify gaps in the market to highlight where new businesses / services are required.

Success stories need to be promoted and local heroes should be held up as positive role models to demonstrate what can be achieved.



The 'Wigan Offer'

The 'Wigan Offer' needs to be established and communicated to encourage people to start a business in the borough; to encourage businesses to relocate to the borough; and persuade businesses to stay. The 'offer' needs to consist of more managed workspaces and enterprise zones to support new and smaller businesses.

High quality office and industrial premises need to be available and marketed effectively. Financial assistance should be offered to businesses such as discounted business rates, start up grants and other financial incentives. The skills base also needs to be publicised more, so the businesses are aware that Wigan Borough has a workforce available to meet its needs.

It is also important that work is done around changing the perceived image of Wigan Borough. There are still negative stereotypes about the area and people are often surprised when they actually

visit the borough to find that their perceptions are wrong. It is important to find out why existing large businesses chose Wigan and choose to remain here, as well as finding out why businesses didn't choose Wigan. It is also important to establish why businesses leave Wigan and find out what would have made them stay. This will help to tailor a package to encourage more inward investment and encourage more businesses to stay. It was felt that in order to make Wigan Borough more competitive as a business location, major improvements are needed to the transport networks and infrastructures. There also needs to be an increased training offer to residents to prepare them for potential employment. This should be extended to employees within businesses, ensuring that their skills evolve to support the businesses and strengthen their own employment position. Future growth sectors need to be identified and a strategy put in place to attract these businesses to

the borough. We need to find out what these would require from a location and an employee point of view.

Business Support & Sustainability

Ongoing support, which can be accessed at any time is required for all businesses, not just for those who are starting up. Tailored packages should be available to support a business at any time during its life and should be available for as long as is required.

Financial support for start ups and existing businesses is required. Work needs to be undertaken with financial institutions to encourage them to support businesses and be more flexible in their requirements and procedures. Rent and training subsidies should also be available.

Businesses should be supported to become more sustainable by ensuring that their business and the skills of their employees are not time limited. This could be done via training subsidies and assistance in diversifying the business if required,

Buy Local is seen as a positive campaign to support businesses, but this needs to be promoted more widely and more people need to get involved. 'Meet the buyer' events would be a good platform for encouraging businesses to support the local economy.



Worshop Two

Training

The lack of training opportunities was seen as an issue. Flexible training packages should be aimed at both workless individuals and employees. The packages should include short courses, outreach and bite sized opportunities. The training should lead to qualifications and should be available and affordable at every level including basic skills and higher education.

Research

It has been identified that extensive research is required to ensure that provision to tackle worklessness is targeted effectively. What skills businesses require needs to be identified, as well as finding out what skills residents already have. This will be key in matching people to jobs.

Employment and volunteering opportunities need to be identified and mapped. There should be a central point where all vacancies and opportunities can be accessed. Regular jobs fairs could be organised to showcase opportunities.

Catching them young

It has been acknowledged that young people need to be 'caught' before they become workless. This means targeting children before they become NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training). This could be done effectively via both in and out of school activities.



Careers advice for young people needs enhancing and non-academic engagement with young people needs to be more effective and widespread.

Support services

Individuals may require support before, during and sometimes after their journey out of worklessness. This support can take several different forms including childcare provision, mentoring and help towards transport. This support needs to be very much community based and readily available throughout the journey, rather than just at the start.

The voluntary and community sector will play a large role in this and they themselves need to be supported to develop to take on the work and successfully deliver the services required.

The Skills Shops have been acknowledged as a vital resource in helping people to identify and access the support they need.

However, it is felt that three shops are not enough and remote services should be considered to reach a wider audience.

The question of sustainability of the projects post 2011 was raised. If the issue of worklessness is to be tackled effectively, on going support will be required. Consideration needs to be given to ensuring sustainability for projects once the Working

Neighbourhoods Fund has ended.

Projects need to work in partnership rather than on their own. They should not be precious on targets and focus more upon providing a quality service to the user and ensuring that their needs are met, even if it means passing them over to another project.

Work experience

Work experience opportunities need to be available to help ease people back into work and also to provide 'on the job training' for people to help them secure paid employment and qualifications. This work experience could take the form of volunteering.

Apprenticeships were seen as key in training people of all ages for careers and enabling them to learn a trade to help them develop their career in the future. Vocational training opportunities go hand in hand with this and should be publicised as an alternative option to academic courses.

Key Note Speaker - Bishop Lowe

Bishop Stephen Lowe once again joined the conference as the key note speaker. As the Anglican Bishop for Urban Affairs, he is a leading authority on worklessness.

Bishop Stephen reflected on the changes that had taken place since the last conference in May 2008. He identified that the rise in unemployment has produced a negative reaction in a community affected by economic recession. A good example of this is over 7,000 people in Wigan Borough voting for the BNP in the recent European elections. He highlighted that we still have communities where people have never worked and the opportunities to work for some young people leaving school or even further education are now even more unlikely.

The recession has undoubtedly had an effect on the war against worklessness. The Bishop highlighted several issues within our communities, which need to be considered.



1. The provision of adequate housing remains an issue for the communities in the future. Whether the new housing is built in socially and economically mixed communities is of serious importance to producing viable working communities.
2. Mental health remains a major issue within the borough. The figure of 40% of Wigan's population on disability benefit who are suffering from mental illness remains a serious problem for the borough which must be addressed.
3. The capacity of the third sector has to be developed if we are to respond to the demands likely to be made upon it as a result of the public sector cuts. This sector has to develop its professionalism, its ability to understand the contracting / commissioning culture and at the same time sustain its values and ideals.
4. The issues of immigration, diversity and community identity are all now there as challenges to be met within the borough of Wigan. Clear efforts have to be made to build bridges between the communities and to produce functioning diverse communities.
5. The variety of problems provided by long term unemployment in many ways means that there is no incentive for commercial organisations under flexible new deal to work with the most vulnerable. The Future Job Funds and the Working Neighbourhoods Fund have to be used in ways to encourage those who are hard to get back to work to re-engage in the world of work. The partnership with the voluntary, community sector and the churches is particularly important in this sphere.
6. It is likely there would be at least 10% cuts in many areas of the council and public expenditure. Indications for services would be substantial whichever political party was in power.
7. A change of government would certainly see an end to regional development agencies and a rethinking of Surestart and many other programmes which we have come to assume as part of our national welfare community provision.
8. Political change will affect issues of inequality and government expenditure on community provision and no doubt on welfare and pensions.
9. Whoever comes to power, the issues of climate change and the environment could no longer be ignored as part of our strategy in terms of making Wigan work. Environmentally friendly projects and industries will undoubtedly have a priority if we have the future of the planet very much in our minds. These are the sort of demands that young people are making of us.