The Regeneration Working Group has met on four occasions and discussed the following main issues:

Meeting of 5 September 2013

1. NORTH EAST INDEPENDENT ECONOMIC REVIEW

Members have received a presentation on the North East Independent Review, the Growth Agenda and key issues for Northumberland to help stimulate debate on potential issues for the Working Group’s Forward Plan.

2. STUDY OF THE EFFECTS OF WINDFARM DEVELOPMENT ON TOURISM

Following the notice of motion considered by Council on 3 July 2013, and its referral to the Working Group, members have considered how best a study into the effect of windfarm development on tourism could be conducted. To carry out the review desk research must be carried out to gather evidence already available on the issue, visitor views sought and opinions sought from tourism businesses.

In order for the review to be objective and robust, members have agreed that a study be commissioned on the effects of wind farms on tourism. This study will be procured through the Council’s partnership with the Institute for Local Governance which facilitated the development of research using the expertise within the North East Region’s Universities. The Working Group will be involved in drafting the specification of the study and will receive regular updates on progress made.

Meeting of 7 November 2013

1. OVERVIEW OF REGENERATION

The Working Group has received a presentation detailing the overview of Northumberland’s Economy and the variations between different settlements and why these issues matter. Following on from the presentation, Members discussed the approaches to growth and regeneration needed to address the conditions detailed in the overview and to inform the direction of the Working Group’s programme going forward.

Members made a number of observations and comments, including:

- Connectivity as a big aspect of regeneration not only in terms of transport but also for internet and mobile availability in the County.
- The importance of the Ashington, Blyth, Tyne and Morpeth to Felton rail lines.
- The need to maintain and improve connections to the Tyne and Wear economy.
- The need for stronger links with the airport and rail both north and south of the County.
- The need to bring back thriving market towns and regenerate town centres.
• Essential dualling of the A1.
• The need for the Council to maintain and further build upon its good relationships with businesses.
• The requirement to further boost tourism in the county and maybe lengthen the tourism season.
• The need to explore examples of where town centres were working well and examine why they had been successful.
• Acknowledgement that there was already a number of initiatives in place, such as the re-launch of Market Towns and the Portas campaign, trying to regenerate areas of the county.
• The need for an area focused approach to regeneration as one approach would not fit all.
• The need to improve the County’s college links and retain skills in Northumberland.

2. STUDY TO EVALUATE THE EFFECT OF WIND FARMS ON THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

The Working Group has been informed that the final tender has now been drafted incorporating comments received from both Members and officers. The final tender has been sent out through the research framework to universities. It was envisaged that details of who had been awarded the tender and timescales of the study would be known and would be made available to Members at their January 2014 meeting.

Members requested that a copy of the final tender be circulated to the Working Group for information.

Meetings of 14 January 2014 and 12 February 2014

1. SUPPORTING VIBRANT TOWN CENTRES

Members have discussed the proposed approach for the Group to take to investigate town centres and market towns in early 2014 with the aim of identifying and providing a progress update about key issues to Policy Board in May 2014, and final recommendations to Policy Board by Summer 2014.

The growth and resilience of town centres is a multifaceted issue with a series of factors which influence the success of different places. The Local Authority’s role in ‘place shaping’ is also complex and the Council plays a variety of roles in different places depending on the characteristics of the relevant town.

Action Market Town (AMT) has been invited to undertake a town benchmarking exercise in conjunction with the relevant Town or Parish Council. Mike King, Senior Consultant from AMT attended the meeting to give an overview of Northumberland’s town centres performance based on the data collected on behalf of the Council. Key performance indicators measured included footfall, opinions, variety/range of shops and car parking and local partners assisted in the exercise. The in-depth data will offer towns a tangible insight into how their town centre is performing, what is working well and what can be improved.
The AMT final research will be available in March 2014 including national benchmarking. Along with the data being available to the Council, the reports will also be shared with the Town and Parish Councils.

The Working Group has been informed of on-going work on neighbourhood development plans by parish and town councils. These plans will create planning policies at a local level to complement the core strategy and other planning documents by the Council.

The Working Group has been mindful not to duplicate any work already being carried out on this subject as well as the need to talk to other stakeholders such as the Chamber of Trade and Northumberland Tourism.

Members agreed to an extra meeting in February to make progress on this activity and to include consideration of the on-going neighbourhood planning work taking place, and other key issues relating to town centre development. The Working Group will then meet again in March to receive the substantive town centre report and the detailed baseline data from the AMT research. A progress update will then be prepared for Policy Board.

At the 12 February meeting a report was received on the role and progress of Neighbourhood Planning in Northumberland together with a further presentation on Developing Vibrant Town Centres using Morpeth as a case example.

Neighbourhood planning is gaining increasing local support across Northumberland with 8 plans now under preparation and strong interest from another 13 communities. It provides a formal mechanism through which communities can express and develop their vision and aspirations for the development and growth of their towns and local areas. Neighbourhood plans are statutory planning documents which can allocate land for development, set specific planning policies for the local area and identify regeneration or enhancement proposals. They provide the opportunity for local communities to take ownership of the future development needs of their areas and give them a much bigger say over the type, location, size and design of development coming forward. They also provide a mechanism for influencing delivery and implementation.

The Working Group felt that neighbourhood planning was the appropriate mechanism through which to progress the work on developing vibrant town centres. This would enable a Place-based approach to be developed for towns which would have local ownership and would set the spatial context for economic development initiatives. The Working Group requested a report be prepared with recommendations for Policy Board on the role of neighbourhood planning in developing vibrant town centres for discussion at the next Working Group meeting in March.

2. SECTION 106 AGREEMENTS: POLICY AND PRACTICE IN NORTHUMBERLAND

The Working Group has been provided with a brief outline of s106 agreements and their aims and purposes in order to inform discussions and recommendations from the Working Group on future policy and practice.

Planning obligations are created under Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 and are also known as “s106 agreements” and “developer contributions”. They are legally binding obligations between local authorities and developers linked to a planning permission and attached to a piece of land.
There is opportunity for members to get involved in negotiations on s106 contributions both at pre-application stage and through the formal planning process. The larger developers are often keen to meet with local councillors prior to the submission of a formal planning application to discuss local needs and the issue of wider community benefits. It is quite appropriate for local members to get involved in such discussions even when they sit on a planning committee, provided they do not pre-judge a development proposal.

The Working Group has agreed to investigate ways in which Member involvement in negotiations on s106 contributions and the access to the information held on the agreements can be further improved. This will be discussed further at a future meeting in order to formulate some findings into a report for presentation to Policy Board.

3. THE EFFECT OF WIND FARMS ON THE TOURISM INDUSTRY - UPDATE

The Working Group has been advised that following an interview process, Northumbria University had been appointed to undertake the desk and business research. Two market research companies had submitted bids for the visitor research and interviews would commence very shortly. It was anticipated that an interim report on the desk and business research would be produced by the end of March, which would be shared with the Regeneration Working Group. Members acknowledged that timescales for the visitor research would need to be agreed with the successful market research company, but it is envisaged that subject to this, a draft final report (which would take account of both aspects of the research) will be available by the end of April/early May.

4. HEXHAM BUS STATION

The Working Group has been advised on the issues surrounding the Council entering into an agreement for the sale of the Council’s interest in Hexham Bus Station and the relocation of the existing bus station facility, in advance of a report being presented to Policy Board in February 2014 to seek its formal approval.

The Working Group has noted the report.

COUNCILLOR T. JOHNSTONE
CHAIR