



Coventry Partnership Business Group Meeting

**Minutes of the meeting held on Wed 03rd Sept 2008 at Peugeot Board Room,
Pinley House, Coventry**

Present:

Pete Walters, CV One
John Guildford, Business in the Community
Roger Lewis, Peugeot Citroen
Ric Richards, Federation of Small Businesses
Faye Williams, Common Purpose
Karen O'Donaghue, Coventry First
Nigel Wain, Coventry Partnership
Dianne Williams, Chamber of Commerce
Andy Walmsley, Coventry City Council
Jo Sandford, Consultant
Linsey Hunter, Federation of Small Businesses
Dhiran Vagdia, FORCE
Sue Bent, Coventry Law Centre
Elayne Hill, Coventry Law Centre

Apologies:

Les Ratcliffe, Jaguar Cars
Louise Bennett, Chamber of Commerce
Sherod Williams Institute of Directors
Jayne Magee, Business in the Community
Dawn Ford, Coventry Partnership

Meeting Highlights

The meeting reviewed the decline in current business environment in Coventry , highlighting the need to ensure that the Partnership Board was made aware how this may impact on delivery of key targets in the Local Area Agreement and how important it is to promote Coventry positively wherever possible.

The meeting also agreed to follow up The Law Centres offer of free focused training on the Do's and Don'ts to avoid falling foul of anti discrimination legislation.

The plans for the Consultation on the Master planning for the City Centre were presented and the group asked the Council to consider special consultation where Business could be consulted with.

1. Welcome and Apologies

Roger Lewis, acting as chair in the absence of Les, welcomed everyone to the fifth meeting of the Coventry Partnership Business Group.

Introductions were given and apologies as above were recorded.

2. Minutes of the Last Meeting and Matters Arising

The minutes of the meeting held on 17th June were agreed.

Matters arising:-

Healthy Lifestyle Promotion

Nigel reported that there was no single existing leaflet covering Healthy Lifestyles suitable for distribution to the group .Following the feedback at the last meeting about the need for a single leaflet covering all health issues, the Council are designing a new leaflet . This will be circulated to the group for comment when available.

Council Chief Exec

Nigel reported that the recruitment process was underway and Dianne commented that the Chamber had been involved in the Stakeholder panel interviews that had taken place. The recruitment process should complete by mid Sept.

Employer Offer

Nigel reported that he had circulated a draft employer offer to the group and had received useful comments which had been fed back. A revised draft was being produced which would be circulated when available.

Sustainable Community Strategy Update

Nigel reported that the Sustainable Community Strategy was now available and distributed copies to the meeting.

There was an intention to produce a summary of the strategy which would make easier reading.

Review of the Business Group

Roger reported that he had met with Dianne and Les (The business reps for the Partnership Board) to review the agenda for future Business group meetings. They had reconfirmed the main purpose of the Business Group was act as a 2 way conduit from the Business Community to the Partnership Board.

Items proposed for the Business group agenda should be :-

- a) Issues from the Business Community which needed to be considered prior to raising with the Partnership Board. Dianne's agenda item on the current Business Environment fits this category.
- b) Issues which the Partnership would like to consult with Businesses on. Sue Bent's agenda item on the No Discrimination Charter and Julie talking about the consultation process for the City Centre master planning are such examples.
- c) Issues covered at the next Partnership Board meeting so the Board Members on the Business Group can counsel input which they can then represent at the subsequent Board meeting.

3. Current Business Environment - Dianne Williams

Dianne presented the findings from the latest Business surveys carried out by the Chamber. See attached slides for full details..

The Chamber carries out Quarterly surveys of Business which are aggregated to give a national picture.

The previous quarter's results had shown nationally Business was heading for a downturn. Coventry and Warwick however did not follow this negative picture as the area was now less dependent on volume manufacture.

Some specialty / Niche businesses were increasing exports due to the lower exchange rates.

The most recent survey carried out in August showed things had now worsened and 77% of businesses now reported sales declining compared to 12 months ago. The performance of the local economy is particularly important to the Coventry Partnership as many of the targets especially related to employment and growth rely on a thriving local economy.

84% of Business reported their sector as being particularly affected by the current economic conditions- particularly in Housing related business. Marketing firms were also hit as companies seek to save money by reducing advertising. Rising fuel costs affected all business.

Companies are now making staff cuts, reducing waste and cutting costs but International Trade is still strong and there is a growing interest in new Business starts.

The Business group agreed that the economic picture described by Dianne matched their individual experiences.

The FSB had experienced high level of calls about redundancy and debt.

Dianne reported that there is help available for large scale redundancies and LEGI can also provide advice to employees and some local businesses under threat.

Karen highlighted an on- line course on Business Continuity and agreed to forward the link to the Business Group.

The availability of finance from Banks was a key issue, Dianne reminded the group of the Small Firms Loan Guarantee which covers loans up to £250K

Pete shared his experience in the City Centre where Voids were at their highest and footfall was 6/7% down. Businesses now want lower rents. The Business Improvement District is working to improve the Business environment in the City Centre.

The office space in the city centre is sometimes difficult to let but major investments such as Severn Trent and Friar gate will address this in the future.

Dhiran commented that SMEs make a large contribution to the City Centre. Dianne reported that LEGI were meeting with CVOne to see how they could help business in the city and that all Partners should promote the use of local Businesses. LEGI could also provide loans as the lender of last resort. The meeting agreed on the need to keep positive and avoid talking things down. It was suggested that the Partnership should explore stronger links with the Telegraph to promote Good news stories about Coventry. Nigel commented that the Partnership was developing a new awareness campaign which could possibly address this.

In summary it was agreed that the key messages that need to be taken to the Partnership Board was the need to continue to promote the city positively and talk the city up. In addition the profile of Business in the city needed to be raised to ensure the Board fully understands the importance of Business in delivering the LAA and that it recognises the difficulties facing Business in the current climate.

Roger thanked Dianne for her presentation and the debate that followed..

4. No Discrimination Charter

Sue Bent introduced herself in her Partnership role as the Chair of the Equalities & Communities Theme group and also as the Director Of the Coventry Law

Centre. The Centre provides free legal advice to citizens in Coventry and represents employees in disputes with Employers.

The Law Centre has bid and won some money from the Equalities and Equal Rights Commission to provide training to smaller business on the rights of people not to be discriminated against. The training would run from Sept 08 to March 09. Sue explained she was seeking the views of the Business group on how best this training could be delivered and also wanted to explore a charter for Businesses to sign recognising their commitment not to discriminate.

Elayne , also from the Law Centre explained that she works with employees in disputes with employers and saw first hand how the problems could be avoided if employers followed the correct steps. The average award in discrimination cases is £3-5K and can take up a lot of employer's time. In the current economic climate employers are considering lay offs so they needed to be aware of the Do's and Don'ts of Anti Discrimination legislation. Experience shows that employers are more likely to pursue cases when it is more difficult to move into another job when the economy is suffering as now..

The training would cover Recruitment Policies, Selection Criteria, Job Application forms and the responsibility of employers to ensure staff do not discriminate Elayne explained that the training could be provided in flexible packages to suit employers (Breakfast meetings, evening or during the day). The training needed to be delivered to groups of 6-8 people.

Sue confirmed the training would cover employers in Coventry and Warwickshire.

Roger reiterated the importance of understanding the legislation in this increasingly complex area and commented that the larger companies have dedicated HR teams to handle employment issues. The free training offered would help smaller business avoid making mistakes.

Dianne and Linsey commented that the Chamber and FSB are now receiving more enquiries around employment law.

Dhiran explained that his businesses were looking to adopt best practice to gain a competitive edge and they need to show evidence of adopting antidiscrimination policies in winning new contracts.

Linsey, Dianne and Dhiran agreed to follow up the training with Sue and Elayne outside the meeting

Sue explained that signing the charter would be a way of recording that business is taking anti discrimination on board.

The meeting was against the need for the charter as previous experience had shown them not to work well. Dianne suggested a survey might be a better means of recording progress.

Dianne and Linsey suggested Sue contact them to discuss inclusion in the Chamber and FSB surveys.

Roger thanked Sue and Elayne for their input and suggested that the training was very relevant for the Business Community today.

5. Consultation Process For City Centre - Julie Fairbrother

Julie reminded the group about the City Centre Master planning to improve the City Centre offer in Coventry and improve its performance relative to neighbouring towns and peer cities.

Jerde, based in Los Angeles were appointed to lead on the Master planning. Public consultations were held in Jan, with over 2000 responses. Since Feb they have been working on the brief and will launch their initial design on 26th Sept for 6 weeks of consultation. The final designs plan will be published on Jan 1st - 12 months after the launch of the initial consultations.

During the consultation a shop will be rented in the Precinct to show the design and seek views from residents. Every body who commented on the original plan will be written to outlining how the feedback has been incorporated and invited to comment further. 17 Ward Forums will be attended.

Dianne reminded Julie that there was a successful and well attended consultation organised with Chamber at the Belgrade. The City Centre design not only impacts businesses in city centre but also those considering moving to the City Centre or even those considering if they should remain in Coventry. The message will need to be tailored for Business. Dhiran also thought there needed to be some coverage across the sub region.

Julie agreed to consider holding a dedicated Business consultation event such as was held at the Belgrade earlier.

It was also agreed that the Business Group would be added to the Master Planning distribution list so they would be kept up to date with the all the communications.

6. Review Of Next Partnership Board Agenda Items

Nigel outlined the items which would be covered on the Partnership Board meeting on 11th Sept.

LEGI was being presented by Dianne and would give the Business Group Board members an opportunity to support LEGI and comment on the need to not talk things down.

A report on the learning from the NRF (Neighbourhood Renewal Funding) was also being presented .NRF (approx £11m) was given to Coventry over 2 years ending Mar 08 to improve services.

The Board will also be updated on the plans for Holocaust memorial Day which is being hosted in Coventry on the 27th Jan 2009. Nigel agreed to circulate information to the group when it was available.

7. Future Issues

The meeting identified the following as items to be considered for future meetings:-

Bike to Work – a scheme to enable employees to save money on buying Bikes to travel to work.

Pete Walters identified a business proposition he wanted to bring to the group, but it might not be ready for the Nov meeting.

Feedback on the city centre consultation

Other possible consultations may be in progress

8. AOB

The next meeting is planned for 5th November, venue TBA, 10-12 am

.Nigel Wain