



Coventry Partnership Business Group Meeting

Minutes of the meeting held on 21 February 2008

Present:

Les Ratcliffe, Jaguar Cars (Chair)
Dianne Williams, Chamber of Commerce
Ric Richards, Federation of Small Businesses
Linsey Hunter, Federation of Small Businesses
Roger Lewis, Peugeot Citroen
Dhiran Vagdia, FORCE
Pete Walters, CV One
Jane Magee, Business in the Community
Jo Sandford, Consultant
Faye Williams, Common Purpose
Karen O'Donaghue, Coventry First
Ros Roke, Coventry Partnership
Nigel Wain, Coventry Partnership
Jane Beaver, Job Centre Plus
Peter Shearing, Learning and Skills Council
Sarah Cole, Job Centre Plus

Apologies:

Louise Teboul, Common Purpose
Andy Walmsley, Coventry City Council

1. Welcome and Apologies

Les Ratcliffe welcomed everyone to the second meeting of the Business Group and invited all those present to introduce themselves.

2. Minutes of the Last Meeting and Matters Arising

The minutes were agreed as a true and accurate record.

Ros Roke, Coventry Partnership, updated the group on recent developments to the city's Sustainable Community Strategy 'Coventry: the next 20 years'. Ros summarised some of the feedback which had been received through the recent public consultation and the resulting changes to the final draft strategy including the addition of a priority around graduate retention and a community safety priority to encourage the reporting of all crimes (including business crime). It was reported that the strategy would be signed

off by the Coventry Partnership Board that evening and would be approved by the Council on 18 March. The strategy would then be formally adopted.

Ros thanked those individuals and organisations which had been involved in the consultation. She asked members of the group how the Partnership could engage the business community more effectively in similar consultations in the future.

Pete Walters, CV One, supported the focus on the reporting of business crime and advised that security and anti-crime measures would be a major focus for the Business Improvement District (BID).

Linsey Hunter, Federation of Small Businesses, advised that more notification and longer timescales would obviously be beneficial. Dianne Williams, Chamber of Commerce, asked how organisational responses were weighted against those of individuals and whether it the wide representation of a body such as the Chamber i.e. a collective response for local businesses, was taken in to account. Ros advised that organisational/collective responses had been given more weight but it was agreed that this could be made clear within future consultations.

Members of the group commented on the sheer volume of material and advised that future correspondence to the business community needed to be clear and succinct. It was recommended that short executive summaries be produced to communicate key issues to the business community and that a strong media campaign would also support such communications.

Dianne Williams advised that the policy team at the Chamber of Commerce could help with producing suitable communications. Ros thanked members of the group for their feedback and thanked Dianne for the offer of support.

Action:

- **Ros to work with the policy team at the Chamber of Commerce to produce an executive summary of the final Sustainable Community Strategy**

3. Local Employer Partnerships and the Skills Pledge

Les introduced Jane Beaver, Job Centre Plus, and Peter Shearing, Learning and Skills Council. Les explained that Jane and Peter were involved in the Partnership's Learning, Skills and Employment theme group and had been invited to talk to the Business Group about the 'employer offer'.

Jane Beaver summarised some of the current challenges/barriers facing local businesses including, recruiting a skilled workforce, up-skilling current staff and retaining employees. Jane explained that there was support available for employers through Local Employer Partnerships and the Train to Gain initiative. She highlighted that there was significant government interest in both initiatives and that Job Centre

Plus and the Learning and Skills Council would like to get more local businesses involved.

Jane summarised a range of current statistics and explained that claimants of Job Seekers Allowance and Incapacity Benefit would form the much of the potential workforce in the future. Local figures demonstrated that there were a high number of local job vacancies but that the match between employment opportunities and potential recruits was poor, with a definite skills-gap.

Peter Shearing went on to highlight some of the key changes to employment within the West Midlands predicted in the next 10 years, including the loss of low/non-skilled jobs and the growth in jobs which required high skills. Peter summarised a range of local statistics and advised the group that there was a high proportion of people in Coventry with no skills. The group were informed that the numbers of skilled employees in Coventry compared poorly with other regions and that the skills gap could affect the future competitiveness of the city.

Peter introduced the Train the Gain initiative which provided a service to support employers of all sizes and in all sectors. He advised that the initiative formed a joint investment between the government (through the Learning and Skills Council) and the employer. It was reported that the initiative offered free skills brokerage to employers (including a needs analysis for organisations) to help identify where they could benefit from up-skilling their workforce, where different types of training were on offer locally and the sources of funding available. In addition, the initiative would provide free training for a level 2 qualification and free numeracy and literacy training. Part funding was available for level 3 qualifications, for management and development training for SMEs and there was also funding to support apprenticeships. Peter presented a worked example from a small manufacturing firm to illustrate the funding available for different levels and types of training.

Jane continued to explain the support available to employers through Job Centre Plus, such as free recruitment and the support of trained advisors to find people for work placements. It was reported that Job Centre Plus could provide pre-employment training which could be tailored for large employers or consortiums of smaller employers and employers. Employers could also benefit from a service which reviewed their recruitment practices and working patterns.

Jane and Peter explained that all of the services and support which they had detailed were currently available to local employers but that the government and, in particular, the Prime Minister, were keen for employers to sign up to local employer partnerships and the skills pledge. They highlighted that there would be national recognition and good publicity for local employers which signed up. The request to the Business Group was to help provide leads to interested local businesses, particularly SMEs.

Les thanked Peter and Jane for their presentation and invited members of the group to ask questions.

Dianne Williams advised that there was concern from employers about the related issues of absenteeism in Coventry and that this was affecting the perceptions of companies considering locating in Coventry. The group discussed this issue and concluded that the perceptions could harm local economic development. Jane advised that Job Centre Plus could provide practical advice and tools to support employers in taking the risk of employing individuals who may have been out of work for a considerable amount of time. Some national employers were seeing these initiatives as useful in tackling absenteeism.

Sarah Cole, Job Centre Plus, informed the group that the main focus of marketing activity to date had been on large national employers but that there was now a strategy to target SMEs and that an event was planned to attract local SMEs. Pete Walters, CV One, recommended that the city-wide BID company should be invited to sit on the Business Group as many of the businesses involved would be very similar to the example of the small manufacturing firm.

Les asked the group to suggest ways to encourage local businesses to sign up to the pledge.

Members of the group advised that the worked examples were helpful and that face to face contact with individual employers would be beneficial. It was recommended that a Coventry specific executive summary be developed and that the Partnership establish a regular email newsletter for local businesses and business networks. This could include details of the two initiatives and provide direct web links and contact telephone numbers, as well as local case studies which could then be disseminated through the organisations represented on the Business Group.

The group discussed the difficulty in attracting business people to an event specifically about Local Employer Partnerships and Train to Gain. Jo Sandford, Consultant, suggested that members of the Business Group could commit to promoting the initiatives to their own members by including an agenda item at forthcoming meetings. Linsey Hunter, recommended that information about the initiatives be included within larger scale events for business members e.g. the Federation of Small Businesses had recently promoted the Train to Gain information at an event with a well-known speaker from sport.

Pete Walters, CV One, confirmed that he would like to take information to the Business and Retail Forum. He also asked about any links with schools. Jane Beaver advised that Job Centre Plus did provide some training within schools to help students develop interview skills and to be more aware of the job market. Peter Shearing highlighted a forthcoming Connexions event to be held at the rugby ground. It was recommended that details of the event should be communicated to the Business Group.

Action:

- **Peter and Jane to develop an executive summary tailored to local employers in Coventry, to include relevant case studies and useful contact details.**
- **Sarah Cole to liaise with Pete Walters to arrange for information to be discussed at a forthcoming meeting of the Business and Retail forum.**
- **Ros to circulate details of the Connexions event to members of the Business Group.**

4. Forthcoming Issues

Ros reported that the Partnership's Health and Wellbeing theme group would like to promote health at work and specifically wanted to request the Business Group's support in promoting smoking cessation support to employees. She asked for feedback on whether members of the group would see this as a relevant issue for local businesses.

The group agreed that the health of employees was an important issue for businesses.

Ros also suggested that information about changes within the Youth Labour market in Coventry could be brought to a future meeting by a representative from Connexions. There was an opportunity for local business people to become involved as important influencers and champions. Peter Shearing suggested this could be linked with the Partnership's work around NEETS (those young people not in education, employment or training).

Actions:

- Les and Ros to work with the Health and Wellbeing Theme Group to develop a proposal for the business group regarding reducing the numbers of employees who smoke.
- Les and Ros to work with the Children and Young People's Partnership to develop a proposal for the business group.

5. Any Other Business

No other business was raised.

The date of the next meeting was confirmed as Tuesday 22 April from 10.00 am – 12.00 pm (venue tbc).