

Minutes of a Meeting of the Economic Development Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 18 October 2005

Present: Councillor Mick Jones (Chair)
" Anne Forwood (Vice Chair)
" George Atkinson
" Peter Barnes
" Michael Doody
" Eithne Goode
" Pat Henry
" Frank McCarney
" Philip Morris-Jones
" Ian Smith

Officers: Bill Basra, Corporate Review Team
Charlotte Cox, Assistant Land Agent, Property Services
Katherine Grasby, Senior Solicitor, Chief Executive's Dept.
Jean Hardwick, Principal Committee Administrator, Chief Executive's Dept.
Kevin McGovern, Transport Operations, PTES.
John Lyons, Community Development, PTES.
Maureen Oakes, PTES
John Ridgley, Regeneration Projects Manager, PTES.
Paul Seamer, Performance Management Unit, PTES
John Scouler, Head of Social and Economic Regeneration, PTES.
Roy Shearing, Economic Development, PTES
Mandy Walker, Regeneration Zone Manager, PTES.
David S Williams, Economic Development Officer, PTES.

1. General

(1) Apologies.

An apology for absence was received from Councillor John Ross.

(2) Members' Disclosure of Personal and Prejudicial Interests.

Councillor Peter Barnes declared a personal, non-prejudicial, interest in all matters relating to farming.

(3) (a) Minutes of the meeting of the Economic Development Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 26 July 2005

Resolved that the accuracy of the minutes of the meeting held on 26 July 2005 be agreed as a correct record and be signed by the Chair.

(b) Matters Arising

Members commended the “Future of the Automotive Industry” presentations and debate, which they considered had been excellent and commented, as follows—

- that the Government should be lobbied about the precarious state of mass motor manufacturing in this country and that it would be more beneficial to invest in manufacturing in this country rather than abroad;
- that only one of the forty-one industrialists invited to the meeting had attended and asked that all invitees be kept informed of follow-up action;
- that, whilst the content of the meeting had been good, no conclusions had been drawn.

In response the Chair agreed that it had been a very good and informative meeting and regretted that only one industrialist had been able to be present. With regard to follow-up action, it was more appropriate for this issue to be addressed by the Coventry, Warwickshire and Solihull Partnership, as it was an issue of regional importance. However, he would be happy to revisit this issue again in the future and would welcome advice from Members on specific issues that they might wish to bring forward.

David S Williams informed Members that the County Council and Coventry City Council were jointly launching a promotional event in November for the Automotive Industry at either MIRA or Pro-Drive.

(b) John Ridgley – Retirement and Thanks

The Chair reported that this was the last meeting of the Committee that John Ridgley would attend before his retirement at the end of the month. He wished him well in his retirement and thanked him for all his past work for the Committee.

2. Public Question Time

None.

3. Review of the approach of the Council to policy and the delivery of services in rural areas.

John Scouller presented the report of the Director of Planning Transport and Economic Strategy which had been produced in response to a request made by

the Committee, at its meeting on 23rd June 2005, where farm diversification, business support, public transport and access to health and other services had been identified as key rural service delivery issues to be addressed.

A panel of officers led the Committee in a discussion of these issues as follows –

(Copies of the presentation material used during the course of the meeting will be circulated to Members)

Rural Facts and Figures

Paul Seamer gave a brief overview of statistical data relating to rural areas which included –

- DEFRA's new classification of urban and rural areas following the launch of DEFRA's Rural Strategy 2005 and population breakdown and statistical data of each area following the 2001 Census;
- Details of the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2004 which consisted of seven distinct measures (which included road distances to services);
- Overall satisfaction with local bus services;
- Factors that prevented or made access to health services difficult.

Members could obtain further information by accessing the Research Unit's Website – www.warwickshire.gov.uk/research or e-mail research@warwickshire.gov.uk

Property Services, Rural Estates

Charlotte Cox outlined the work undertaken by the Rural Estates Section in providing help and giving advice to the farming community. She explained “farm diversification” and highlighted opportunities and grant schemes, which would help to achieve the County Council's corporate objectives of “improving the environment” and “developing and maintaining a vibrant local economy which provided prosperity for all”.

In conclusion, she outlined what County Council officers could do to promote these schemes to give farmers and rural businesses the best opportunities. She suggested that, by allowing diversification in Warwickshire, it would roll out additional benefits to the County, by boosting the rural economy and increasing employment opportunities by having more rural based businesses.

Rural Business Support

Roy Shearing explained the work of the Business Support Team and outlined three aspects of business support to rural enterprises. These included the wide range of market sectors and types of businesses, the range of services available from the County Economic Development Group and the way in which the County

Council worked in partnership with other agencies to meet the needs of clients in the rural areas.

Rural Public Transport in Warwickshire

Kevin McGovern outlined –

- The County Council's commitment to provide rural public transport in Warwickshire (around 75% of the total public transport budget being spent to provide access to health, leisure, training, educational and shopping facilities for people in rurally isolated areas);
- The additional transport services operating in rural areas in addition to conventional bus services, which included Flexibus, Back and 4th, Busterwerkenbak and Racing To Get There.

Access to Services – Social Inclusion Strategy

John Lyons reminded Members of the Council's Social Inclusion Strategy which sought to address the needs of individuals or areas that were unable to benefit from the quality of life being experienced by others and, in particular, recognising the needs of people living in rural areas.

Discussion

The Chair thanked the speakers for their presentations, which he considered had been extremely useful and informative. He identified three areas that the Committee might wish to considered further –

- The work of the Business Support Team;
- Public Transport provision – is it meeting the needs of rural areas taking account of the Census 2001 statistics;
- The need to raise with Cabinet the need for a Rural Services Strategy

The Chair then opened the meeting for discussion.

Members commented on the presentations and asked questions as follows –

Questions

- Was assistance being given to the rural economy at the expense of the urban economy?;
- Were new rural enterprises being created which were intrusive and upset people living in rural areas?;
- Was business rate council tax being applied to rural business?

- Was there a rural economy, if only 7% of people in Warwickshire were working in agriculture?

In response Members were informed that –

- Applications for change of use of rural properties for non-agricultural purposes e.g. use for bed and breakfast, would pay business rate council tax;
- Applications for Rural Enterprise Scheme grants for diversification would require planning approval.
- BMW had been built on a brown-field site and employed many people who lived in the rural areas.
- 80% of the land in Warwickshire was rural and there was a huge opportunity for growth and development in tourism and farming entrepreneurs should be encouraged.

Comments

- It was acknowledged that the rural economy could not continue to exist by traditional farming methods. It was considered that it would be short-sighted not to support the farming industry to enable diversification and to assist farmers to continue and to act as custodians of the countryside;
- The information presented by the speakers was very informative. It was questioned, however, whether departments were fully aware of each other's activities in support of the rural community
- Rural (affordable) housing was an issue of concern and not been addressed during discussion.

The Chair closed the meeting, having heard the presentations and discussions, and asked the officers to prepare an action plan for the three areas identified for further investigation.

4. 2004/05 - Full Year Performance Plan: Planning Transport and Economic Strategy

John Scouller presented the report of the Director of Planning Transport and Economic Strategy, which outlined the PTES full year performance outturn with respect to Economic Development objectives. In addition, it contained details of consultation activity which had taken place and analysis of complaints received during 2004/05.

In reply to questions the officers said that –

- the number of jobs created by Warwickshire Investment Partnership (WIP) as a result of Wolseley moving from Harrogate to Warwickshire was 600;

- WIP was involved in the relocation of 28 new businesses to Warwickshire;
- The revenue deficit relating to the EPIC should be offset by rents/surpluses in subsequent years and occurred in the main because of the three-month delay in taking over occupancy of the premises.
- Assurances were given that budget allocation had been made for regeneration of Leamington north of the river to take place.
- The SRB funding Programme had been very successful and had halted the decline of rural village shops;

Following further discussion the Committee acknowledged positive progress made on the Department of Planning, Transport and Economic Strategy's performance at the full year stage.

5. Provisional Items for Future Meetings and Forward Plan Items Relevant to the Work of this Committee

(a) Provisional Items for Future Meetings

Members noted the provisional items for future meetings.

(b) Forward Plan

Members noted that the reports to Cabinet on 20 October 2005 on The Local Authority Business Growth and Social and Economic Regeneration – Maximising Funding for External Funding would be deferred.

Additional there would be a report on Funding of the Olympic Bid.

Members noted the following report to Cabinet relevant to the work of this Committee.

Cabinet - 8 December 2006

Voluntary Sector Consortium Proposals, Nuneaton and Bedworth (PTES)

6. Any Other Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

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Chair of the Committee

The Committee rose at 12:30 p.m.