

Notes to West Kent Partnership

Notes to meeting – 22 January, 2009 - Kings Hill Conference Centre

Present:

Cllr Roy Bullock – Tunbridge Wells Borough Council (Chair)
Tony Bartlett - Business Link Kent
Di Woolloff – GOSE
Cllr Nicolas Heslop – Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council
Jon Rosser, Town & Country Housing Group
Sheila Wheeler, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council
Charles Willsher – Kent Association of Local Councils
Cllr Peter Fleming – Sevenoaks District Council
Simon Richardson - SEEDA
Robin Hales - Sevenoaks District Council
Roger House – Federation of Small Businesses
Rob Cottrill – Tunbridge Wells Borough Council
Mark Raymond – Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council
Mark Salisbury – West Kent Police
Rosie Serpis – AXA PPP
Ahmad Eslami – Learning and Skills Council (LSC)
Cllr Mark Worrall – Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council
John Cunningham – West Kent Civic Trust
David Candlin – Tunbridge Wells Borough Council
Merle Bigden, Sevenoaks District Council
Wendy Wood – WKP Co-ordinator

Welcome to:

Mike Bodkin, of KCC Environment and Regeneration Directorate who joins the Partnership as the new Lead on West Kent at KCC

Attending for item 3

Mandy Bearne – Head of Marketing and Research - Locate in Kent
Melodie MacNamara, Partnership Manager – Jobcentre Plus
Andrew Aves – Regional Organiser, Kent and Medway - Federation of Small Businesses
Kevin Pollard, County Network Manager – Business Link Kent

Apologies:

David Hughes; Tom Phillips; Bill Fearon; Keith Austin; Cllr Nick Chard; Penny Chatfield; Michael Cooke; Andy Corcoran; Brendan O'Connor; Linda Prickett; Caroline Shaw; Mandy Wynne; Jan van der Velde

1. Chairmanship

Chairmanship was handed over to Roy Bullock, Leader of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council. The new Chairman thanked Peter Fleming for his contribution to the Partnership as Chairman over the last year.

2. Minutes/Matters Arising

Item 2 – West Kent Investment Strategy

Tony Bartlett advised that consultants had been asked to provide quotations through a transparent procurement process. Three quotes had been appraised by a panel and scored. All are suitable, some more so than others but all have come in at over the available budget. SEEDA have been approached to match fund this piece of work and until the funding issue is resolved it will not be possible to commission the work. If consultants can be in place in early February then the timescale will be to bring 3 scenarios for West Kent to the April meeting – these being - doing nothing, maintaining the status quo and growing the economy. An action plan would then be developed from the preferred option for consultation and presentation to the July WKP meeting.

Action

SEEDA to consider the possibility of match funding to support preparation of the WKIS.

3. Dealing with the Economic Challenge – Panel session

The Chairman introduced the panel session, highlighting that an important part of the work of this partnership is to react quickly to issues for our area and identify action. The Dealing with the Economic Challenge session aimed to identify:

- What is currently in place to support the West Kent Economy and businesses
- How various initiatives available can signpost and link to each other
- Any gaps in support and who might fill that gap
- Any issues the WKP could lobby on and where
- Any practical/technical support WKP or WKP members could provide in support of WK businesses

Tony Bartlett chaired the session and introduced the panellists:

- Ahmad Eslami - LSC
- Simon Richardson - SEEDA
- Mandy Bearne - Locate in Kent
- Mike Bodkin - KCC
- Melodie MacNamara - Jobcentre Plus
- Andrew Aves - FSB
- Kevin Pollard - Business Link Kent

3.1 Learning and Skills Council (LSC)

Ahmad Eslami outlined the services and products available through LSC directed at addressing the current economic conditions. He explained that the national office has directed a response to redundancies or threatened redundancy. ESF projects are being specified to ensure this and now 90% of all economic development jobs within LSC are focussed on responding to redundancies. These staff already work closely with partners and employers

and are therefore well placed to deliver on this objective. Intelligence from the market is fed back to LSC national office to help to identify which sectors are growing and therefore which skills areas need to be addressed to meet need in those sectors.

Integrated services are available, all with an emphasis on employment. Schemes are generally delivered through partners, for example, Train2Gain and Skills for Life. Specific work is also being undertaken with graduates to ensure they receive adequate advice. As much of the work of the LSC is delivered through partners a single pack is being produced which pulls together all the products and services available through all partners to simplify the offer for employers.

A question was asked about the LSC policy of only offering formal training resulting in a qualification to those in employment. Ahmad explained that pre-employment training was also now available and there is a move towards more flexibility in how the LSC operates in the current climate.

In answer to a query about the length of time an individual has to be out of employment to qualify for LSC training, it was confirmed that this period is 6 months. However, as soon as someone is under threat of redundancy or becomes unemployed Jobcentre Plus are their first port of call and they will be signposted as appropriate. Some specialised groups including ex-offenders and those with a disability can now access courses straight away.

In response to a question about long-term prospects for those facing unemployment it was recognised that there are some groups who will remain out of work for the duration of the downturn. However, for others there will be an opportunity to retrain in new skills in sectors that are growing either through their employer or if unemployed through channels open to individuals. It is also a recognised fact that less people leave university and enter the job market during a recession choosing instead to remain in research and development or undertake a second degree.

There was some discussion around the LSC halt on capital bid applications which could have implications for the developments at West Kent College and Hadlow College. However, reassurances were given that this is a temporary situation and it is understood that support has not been withdrawn from both schemes.

Concern was expressed that whilst support was available to those made redundant from larger companies under the SEEDA led recovery plan where companies shedding 20 or more jobs have to report those redundancies, those losing their jobs in smaller numbers fell under any radar and the provision of support to those firms and the individuals involved may be difficult to identify. It was made clear to the meeting that individuals need to be aware that Jobcentre Plus is the route into establishing what else is available.

3.2 SEEDA

SEEDA gave an overview of the SE economic conditions and those particularly in West Kent. Information was provided on initiatives launched both at national and regional level and the Partnership was invited to consider what in particular needed to be addressed in West Kent, particularly in regard to identifying new opportunities for the future and potential growth sectors.

Possible growth sectors in West Kent could be around cultural and media sectors and environmental opportunities. It also needs to be recognised that employment demographics are changing as residents lose jobs in London and there are opportunities to capture their skills for the West Kent economy. The skills mix in West Kent needs to meet the challenges of the future as well as what is required today. The presentation is attached to these notes

Handouts on SEEDA data and initiatives were also available at the meeting and are attached to these notes.

3.3 Locate in Kent

The presentation is attached to these notes. Additionally, the meeting was advised on up to date data on employment levels which showed a slight increase across West Kent in December. However, levels are still at around only 1.4% or 1.5% compared with over 4% in Thanet.

Locate in Kent continues to work to attract new companies to Kent, increasingly from overseas and to work with local companies who are expanding or who need to downsize into smaller premises.

Business grants for business investment has now been rolled out across Kent and 2 grant advisers are employed.

The issues for West Kent are that there are a lack of sites and premises coupled with an expectation that no speculative building will take place in the near future. Also an issue are the high speed rail links elsewhere in Kent, which potentially disadvantage West Kent. Locate in Kent is lobbying on the empty rates tax burden now falling on Kent businesses

3.4 KCC

Paul Carter launched Kent County Council's *Backing Kent Business* campaign on 10 December. This is viewed by the County Council as a badge around which stakeholders can coalesce. The campaign is largely around procurement of goods and services. The County spends around £860M pa of which 40% is spent directly in the Kent economy. There is an aspiration to increase this percentage. Measures in this area include:

- KCC payment of all invoices on 30 days
- Easier access to procurement process – workshops being run with FSB
- Focus on Kent suppliers on invitations to tender, keeping within legislative boundaries
- Requesting suppliers to use Kent supply chain themselves
- Bringing forward capital expenditure projects to revive construction in the county

Consultation on the Kent Regeneration Strategy *Unlocking Kent's Potential* was launched on 20 January. The strategy runs from 2009-2020. It is a long-term vision but very much recognises the current economic climate. The strategy aims to build a new relationship with business. Part of this activity will be a number of liaison meetings with a business and stakeholder group and an Agreement to Action was signed earlier this week.

Immediate KCC initiatives taking place include:

- Business event in March to raise awareness of Olympic opportunities
- Procurement workshops with FSB
- Sponsorship of Kent Excellence in Business Awards (KEIBA)
- Launching a regeneration framework (*Unlocking Kent's Potential*) that will
 - Establish a skills commission
 - Build a housing strategy with districts
 - Build an integrated transport strategy which can deliver growth without gridlock

Longer term initiatives include:

- Develop a vocational training programme including increasing the number of apprenticeships offered by KCC itself
- Market Kent more aggressively in partnership with organisations such as Locate in Kent, Produced in Kent etc.
- Continue to invest in infrastructure and signpost to Building Schools for the Future.

Details of KCC initiatives to support business can be found at www.Kent.gov.uk/business

3.5 Business Link Kent (BLK)

Presentation dealing with the support offered by Business Link is attached. For any business requiring help Business Link should be the first port of call.

97% of West Kent Businesses have less than 20 employees and 95% have less than 10. There are also a very high number of single person businesses. Micro businesses are defined as those with less than 10 employees. Business Link are exploring potential of gaining government support for a voluntary code of conduct for all employers to notify the authorities of any redundancies.

Business clinics for micro businesses and 1:1 meetings on site with Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) are available through BLK at no cost. These not only help employers to look at business priorities but to address staffing issues and how to release the full potential of employees.

BLK are acting as brokers between businesses and training providers to ensure that the appropriate training is delivered to the appropriate people at the appropriate time. A potential barrier is the LSC requirement that all training lead to a recognised qualification in order to qualify for funding. However, LSC is indicating that some flexibility may be considered.

3.6 Federation of Small Businesses (FSB)

Presentation attached. The FSB has produced a five point plan of government action which could provide real support to small and micro-businesses in the current downturn.

There is the potential for many of those who become unemployed to set up their own businesses with the appropriate support.

3.7 Jobcentre Plus

Melodie MacNamara outlined the service offered by Jobcentre Plus. New claimants are rising in West Kent with the total number of claimants rising from 1200 in January 08 to 1800 in December 08. The organisation is recruiting more staff so that they can provide a comprehensive service to applicants including signposting to opportunities which may include re-training and self-employment as well as employment.

There is a five point plan for the newly unemployed and from April there will be extra advisers, recruitment subsidies and help to people wishing to start a business. Voluntary work as a route to employment is also to be promoted.

Jobcentre Plus is responsible for LAA NI 152 – Working age people out of work and claiming benefit with a target to reduce by over 1.5%. During the period May 07 to May 08 all WK districts showed a drop in claimants but it is anticipated that these figures will go back up in the current period.

Jobcentre Plus is working closely with the LSC and BLK as well as districts on various initiatives to get people back into work. Local employer partnerships (LEPs) are being actively promoted with an initial target to gain support from the public sector. This initiative will link to Train 2 Gain and needs to be 'sold' by partners.

The integrated joint brokerage pilot with LSC and BLK in Ashford is underway. This is a central hub where all information that could be required on support available from various agencies is all available at a one stop shop.

It was noted that there is no Jobcentre Plus in Sevenoaks and no plans to reinstate one in the current circumstances.

Actions from Panel Session

- **Clarity required for businesses and the unemployed on where advice is available. WKP and partner organisations to signpost unemployed/potentially redundant to Jobcentre Plus. Businesses in difficulty and those considering starting up their own business should be directed to BLK who will signpost as appropriate under the business simplification programme**
- **Future session to be organised to look at strengths and opportunities for West Kent economy in preparation for the upturn and actions identified to provide training to meet sector skills needs of the future**
- **FSB 5 point plan to be endorsed by WKP as SMEs and microbusinesses account for 70% of the West Kent economy. Letter to be sent from Chairman to Lord Mandelson, copied to all WK MPs and Jonathan Shaw, Minister for the SE**

- **Ask for urgent action from Government to commence infrastructure projects in West Kent, notably transport schemes including A21 improvements. April meeting to be themed around this with involvement from the relevant agencies.**

4. West Kent Partnership Vision and Terms of Reference

The Partnership approved the revised wording in view of the change of role to an economic partnership subject to a minor revision to reflect the emphasis of partnership activity on transport and housing as well economic development. Revised Vision and Terms of reference attached.

5. West Kent Leader Report

The Partnership noted that the programme is now underway with a contract in place for the first project. West Kent is leading the field and is only the second Local Action Group (LAG) to fund a project. The programme was very late getting underway across the region through circumstances outside of the LAGs' control resulting in serious delays in SEEDA issuing programme contracts. Although our programme is hopeful of agreeing further project contracts before the year end, the Partnership endorsed the recommendation that a written request should be sent to SEEDA requesting the facility to roll project funding forward at year end. Post meeting – SEEDA have acknowledged the difficulty for all LAGs in spending the budget for 08/09 and agreed that roll forward of unspent project funding will be possible.

6. Co-ordinator Report

The Partnership noted the budget revisions which reflect the commitment to ongoing support of the Leader programme.

7. Hot Topics

- **Kent Regeneration Strategy – Unlocking Kent's Potential**

Concern was registered at the woefully inadequate length of the consultation period running from 20 January-27 February. This is particularly highlighted as the WKP has taken a keen interest in the development of this strategy and raised a concern previously that adequate provision should be made for consultation.

Action

Chairman to write to Cllr Paul Carter and Cllr Kevin Lynes requesting an extended period of consultation until after the next WKP meeting in late April. This would allow the WKP an opportunity to put together a comprehensive response drawing on the expertise of at least 3 of its sub groups and for all partners to input to and agree the response.

- **Route Utilisation Strategy**

This is being prepared by Network Rail. Consultation this spring will lead to publication of investment priorities for the next 30 years.

Action

Transport sub group to ensure WKP is a consultee to the strategy and draft a response

Network Rail and Office of Rail Regulation to be invited to participate in next WKP meeting which will have a focus on infrastructure.

8. Dates of Next Meetings – all 10am, Kings Hill Conference Centre

- Thursday 23 April 2009 – Infrastructure Investment in WK
- Thursday 16 July 2009
- Thursday 15 October 2009

Amended 3 February 2009

West Kent Partnership

Vision Statement

Through promotion, representation and action, we aim to support the development of a stronger economy. Through co-ordinated working we endeavour to add value to the local delivery of public, voluntary and community services and provide a voice for the people of West Kent at local, regional and national level.

Terms of Reference

The West Kent Partnership will undertake to:

1. Promote West Kent, explore bids for external funding, and maintain a working relationship with Central Government, the Government Office for the South East, and other regional bodies including SEEDA and the Homes and Communities Agency.
2. Provide an effective working relationship with the Kent Partnership and to influence its deliberations and future reviews of Vision for Kent, Kent Agreement and economic strategies to the benefit of West Kent.
3. Represent the interests of the West Kent sub region and provide a strong and influential voice on matters of particular concern to its local communities, especially around economic development, housing, transport and essential infrastructure.
4. Promote effective, joint co-operative working both within the partnership and between the Partnership and other local agencies and bodies.
5. Identify the key issues facing the West Kent area, address the need for investment and develop joint actions.
6. Consider and influence the plans, strategies and agendas of other key agencies to ensure that West Kent interests are properly represented.
7. Aim to ensure that the plans and strategies prepared by public agencies align with emerging joint priorities
8. Add value on economic development and infrastructure issues to the community strategies for each District and Borough in West Kent, promoting good practice and better joint working