

**Skills and Economic Regeneration Partnership (SERP)
Minutes - Wednesday, 20th May 2009, 9:30 am**

Present

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| Bill Fryer | Black Country Consortium |
| Cllr Shackleton | Sandwell MBC |
| Steve Smith | Sandwell MBC |
| Andy Bywater | Sandwell MBC |
| Tony Lear | Black Country Chamber |
| Mel Chillingworth | Sandwell MBC |
| Jim Wells | Sandwell MBC |
| John Sandland | RegenCo |
| Shirley Woolner | LSC |
| Kim Mocroft | Sandwell MBC |
| John Sutton | Sandwell MBC |
| Alan Wood | Business Link |
| Kay Greenbank | Business Link |
| John Tew | Black Country Chamber / Ault Insurance |
| Surinder Bains | Sandwell Partnership |
| Sanita Johnson | Sandwell Partnership |
| All Allerson | Greets Green Partnership |
| Keith Stanley | Black Country Chamber |
| Eileen Kibbler | Sandwell PCT |
| Paula Grizzard | |
| Joe Ling | Advantage West Midlands |

Apologies

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| Gary Eggington | JobCentre Plus |
| Lyndon Bracewell | Sandwell MBC |
| Frank Mills | BT |
| Ian Cotterill | Sandwell Partnership |
| Stephen Gabriel | Sandwell MBC |
| Glenda Joseph-James | GOWM |

2. Minutes / Matters Arising

- Concern was raised regarding target setting for benefits and employment figures. These are still yet to be determined. Have been mentioned to the Programme and Performance Group.
- JT is hoping to have approval on the college project. Consultants are currently working with LSC on next stage and hoping to hear outcome next week. Earliest really expected is 3rd June. Lot of projects have been submitted - not enough funds available to support all of them but decision is expected to favour those that are ready to roll.
- KS asked if the dire need for this been registered? JS has stressed repeatedly the urgent need in Sandwell for improved college provision to everyone possible. Criteria has been met and everyone possible has been lobbied. Just waiting for decision now and is ready as possible to start. Have met all deadlines that have been set.
- BF asked for clarification that total pot of £300m is available for scheme. JT said yes but estimate that 179 colleges have applied for funding hence the need for outside consultants being appointed to assess them and look at those with the greatest need.

College has already committed £7m and educational impact severe if this does not go ahead. Current buildings are not fit for purpose and real impact is that these may not exist in the future.

- Tesco has now submitted its planning application for West Bromwich. Approval is pending in August with building likely to commence in 2010.
- AWM has reviewed its budget and is facing a cut of £48m and a further cut of £21m in its land budget. There may be an impact on the regeneration of West Bromwich - confirmation is expected at the end of June on this. Will only fund projects that it is legally committed to.
- BF asked what is under review. SUD, enterprise, skills, employment therefore most areas covered by SERP remit. Not management aspect of SUD by will review projects. Stressed that the college needs funding from AWM.
- Confirmed that both the College and All Saints had legally binding contracts from AWM and as such were both safe. BF pointed out that we need to ensure that any such agreements for other projects must be in writing to safeguard projects. We must work up solutions that are not dependent on AWM or other single funding sources for any projects and identify alternative match funding streams so projects are not at risk of this happening to them.
- AA asked if there was a need for a workshop to look at how to take budgets forward in a different way to how we are working at present? BF felt that this is how we should have been working from the start of the process and stressed that there is a need for a better alignment of funding. SW stressed that all partners are currently being faced with budget cuts.
- EK reported that PCT held a workshop on 8th April looking at how community benefit clauses can be incorporated into the start of programmes. SERP will look into working from the start of this.
- AA said that it was a positive step that the PCT has offered to work in partnership with SERP from the start and that we need to pick this approach up in future.
- BF stated that we can't continue to make budget cuts in the future, and that we need to make our existing resources work better. We have good ideas but these need to filter up system to make them happen.
- JT said that funding for the college from LSC will allow them to draw down funding from other sources including support from banks. Greater squeeze on public funding is anticipated for some time and more private funding is needed.
- J Sandland suggested that rep from HCA should be on SERP. BF said that they look at funding in isolation and without considering impact.
- AA suggested recommending to next Partnership Executive in June about looking at new way of thinking. Possible extension of Sandwell's approach to recession.
- Action Log: all to continue feeding back to J Sutton.

4. Forward Plan

- Forward Plan: all to continue feeding back to J Sutton. Add in special meetings regarding use of public funds.

Partnership Working Review

- SS reported that Sandwell has undertaken a peer review by other Local Authorities as part of the Comprehensive Area Assessment. Run by IDEA, was a full corporate review headed up by Chief Executive of Bolton Council with officers from Barnsley and Wandsworth Councils.
- Formed by a self assessment and submission of various documents, visits and interviews and identified key strengths and areas for improvement. Had a focus on the council but with a partnership element to it. Felt that the LSP was strong.
- Was felt that a long-term vision for Sandwell was needed - Sandwell needs to explain its role in the area.
- A strong regeneration strategy is needed and there is concern around health inequalities.
- Positive aspects are its children's services, and role and contribution to the Black Country and City Region.
- Full report is due soon and will bring this to SERP as soon as it is received. Emphasis now is on what Sandwell is like as a place to live.
- AB said we should look at what Sandwell will be like in 15 years time for the business community to encourage the business sector to grow. We need to identify what business advisors are telling clients about Sandwell in light of this.
- J Sandland said that Sandwell's traditional sectoral strengths are still seen as a weakness when they should be championed.
- JT felt that we need to look at what works elsewhere but asked who could coordinate this. Need a lead agency or could SERP do this? EK felt that we need to promote Sandwell's strengths more.
- TL pointed out that companies locate in Sandwell specifically because of the local skills base.
- J Sutton stressed that we need to get the economic situation in Sandwell right or all of Sandwell will suffer. **Action: J Sutton to organise special SERP meeting to discuss this.**

5. Performance Improvement

- Noted that there are delays with performance figures because they related to the academic year, or targets still have not been set.
- Many have performed well or have exceeded targets therefore reward monies have been received.

- NI152 **was** improving until May 2008.
- Unemployment rate has shown the rate of increase slowing down from March to April 2009.
- AW reported on business startups that had been recorded through Business Link. Very strong at the moment although figures presented were not necessarily those who were VAT registered. BF pointed out that there was possibly a correlation with the higher unemployment rate at present.
- Question was asked about the current rate of business closure rate for Sandwell. AW stated that Black Country Observatory will have that data. Suggested that this information, and economic data in their Economic Barometers be circulated to SERP for information. AB felt that it may be better to provide summaries of these instead.
- AW felt that the numbers are useful but the sectors and sustainability levels are the key data. AB asked how many businesses grow to become VAT registered? Felt that business development is an area that needs work.
- AA pointed out that there is significant grant funded support for business startups in the Greets Green area and this could impact on startup figures in high performing wards when this funding ceases.
- KG stressed that data was only those recorded by Business Link. AW confirmed that Business Link do monitor for survival rates. Target is 75% and currently have data for 2007/08.
- EK requested a breakdown of business startups by age profile. **Action: AW to get these along with 2007/08 survival rates for next meeting.**
- AA asked how the LAA reward funds will be used? Asked if the agencies who delivered positive results would see this money.

6. Future Working of SERP and the Sub-Groups

- Business Plan sets out SERP sub-groups and having them take ownership of the plan, delivery of targets and tracking delivery of objectives. Lead responsibility of this should be the chairs of each sub-group.
- Agreed that there is a need for greater collaboration between all of the three sub-groups.
- ALSG expressed concern about the skills gap NI and whether this should be the responsibility of the Business Group. Meeting needed between the sub-groups to discuss joint working and crossover of work areas.
- TL said that he is happy to provide regular monitoring information to the Business Group on business startups.

7. Business Link West Midlands: Presentation by Kay Greenback

- Deferred until next meeting.

8. Key Issues Arising From Worklessness Inspection

- Still waiting for a written report on this which is expected in June or July. Will circulate this to SERP once it is available.

9. Recession Action Plan

- Short-term action plan was circulated to SERP as part of the papers. Still working on medium-term to long-term action plans.

10. Economic Plan

- AB said that as part of the refresh of the Economic Plan we need to look at the visioning process in a new way.
- AA felt that there is a need to look at opportunities as well as challenges that face Sandwell.
- BF asked the question whether businesses in Sandwell that are performing well really care about strategies we are producing? Resources are needed to deliver and ways to operate. Businesses locate based on their needs - affordable land, skills, distance staff travel to work and these are the factors that they consider. College provision for training is vital. Funding needed to make this happen is vital - we need a "Plan B" to ensure that these projects don't fail.
- J Sandland asked if we need the new plan before February. AB said that it could be ready within 3 months but would it be fit for purpose. J Sutton said he would review the timescale but there would be a period of uncertainty.
- AB said there is an issue over land use retention - business relocation is a concern as we do not have sites to offer if needed. Need to look at CPO possibilities. AA asked if protocols are in place for this? AB said that they are not working or he is not aware of them if they are available.
- KS felt that we are currently producing too many documents. A simple statement and then taking action based on that is all that is needed. J Sutton replied that we have been instructed that we need to have a forward plan for SERP.
- PG attended SERP credit crunch and thematic plan events. Questions were asked where investment and resources should be targeted. What does Sandwell want to be as an area?
- SERP is responsible for shaping the economy and should then feed into the council's role for shaping Sandwell as a place.
- Need to hold an event - propose for June - not just talk but work on evidence based to look at action planning. Look at economy including transport and land issues.
- AB said that Economic Assessment being undertaken by April 2010 is a legally required document.
- PG reported that the final version of the government response to Tackling Worklessness - Houghton Report - was published last week.

- EK said that it was key to the Economic Plan that we identify where we want to be and how we get there.
- JT re-emphasised that the business sector is **not** interested in plans, they want to see action. Partnership is too dependent on paperwork. Short-term actions are critical and Sandwell must be more business-friendly. Any event must show this. BF said that people involved at the moment are shaping Sandwell for businesses but businesses themselves are not directly involved.
- PG noted that not enough work is being done to involve the private sector - a closer relationship is needed. EK asked if a different audience is needed for this event? PG felt that we continue to have meetings but little seems to be resolved.
- BF said that Find It In Sandwell held an event on 21st May attended by 500 businesses at Bethel convention centre who met Olympic organisers. Shows that something is happening for businesses. Lichfield District Council have managed to have new Tesco store development happen more rapidly than Sandwell - site clearance of old store and new Extra store built and opened in 10 months so why is Sandwell taking so long.
- J Sutton said that the aim is to refresh the existing Economic Plan which will drive action of the groups forward and ensure that something is happening. Short-term business plan is needed to drive work forward in the meantime. Medium to long-term plan is also needed to assist with upskilling residents, supporting business needs and to identify what type of economy we want to have in Sandwell in 5-10 years time.
- AA said that the Black Country Development Framework made the decision to focus on housing. AB and J Sutton met with planners to challenge this decision. TL said that local businesses are continuing to lose trade - this is a key issue for them and this planning to address this is needed now. If businesses are not supported then we will not be able to retain them.
- We are recognised as being the best local authority in the West Midlands for engaging with the private sector and this is a fantastic opportunity to be capitalised upon. We need to keep and grow what we have in terms of businesses. We have ample brownfield land for manufacturing and should capitalise on this.
- BF said that we should link with Find It In Sandwell and improve business involvement. J Sutton suggested developing a survey to get views from the business community to drive forward the actions of the Business Group.
- AB said that the key priority of Sandwell is to grow the existing business sector. AA asked if we know what businesses need - new premises etc? do we have a land use plan and how do we focus our plans for business.
- SS said that we are trying to do everything at once - there is a need to separate all of the work strands, but with business as a priority. Still the question over where the leadership is on this.
- J Sutton agreed that there is a need for an event for June to plan for long-term but short-term issues must be addressed. AB and PG to take a lead on organising this and all to submit further comments on this to AB.
- BF asked if we have identified what the local communities think of the economic planning process. They may have a different view to the public sector.

11. Employment and Skills MAA

- KM reported that work on this is still progressing. Was not successful in achieving pilot status.
- Sign off beginning of July. Next meeting is on 22nd May but MAA is still under constant revision especially regarding reducing claimants and improving L2 / L3 achievements.

12. Black Country Employment and Skills Board: Presentation by Shirley Woolner

- Deferred until next meeting.

13. Minutes of Sub-Groups

- Minutes from all three sub-groups circulated with papers and noted.

14. LAA Reward Guidance

- Report noted. Agreed that we must ensure that the grant is shared responsibly.
- There is a need to talk to SMBC's Strategic Investment Unit regarding the allocation of these funds. **Action: J Sutton to investigate where grant will be used.**

15. Future Jobs Fund

- New £1bn fund created by government to tackle worklessness amongst long-term unemployed who have been out of work for 18-24 months offering intensive support for 6 months. SMBC will be bidding into this pot of funds.
- BF stated that JCP has wanted to take a Black Country wide approach to this fund. J Sutton is collating information on economic impact on Sandwell for a possible Black Country or City Region bid. Will talk to the group to look at this. Bids need to be submitted by the end of June with projects starting in October.
- BF pointed out that £100m of this fund has been set aside specifically to support social enterprise.
- Neil Bunch to act as point of contact for Sandwell. 12 month programme and will be able to act as a source of top-up funding for existing programmes.
- KM discussed this at the last MAA meeting on Friday. J Sutton has suggested a Black Country wide bid and other authorities as willing to do this.
- BF mentioned that existing ideas for projects still need funding - could this be another source for these? JL said that there is a "production line" of available projects so there is already a source of ideas and ready-made partnerships to make the most of available opportunities.
- Need to look at the maximum impact and greatest level of potential collaboration between partners.

16. Any Other Business

- EK reported that PCT is working on a Fit For Work pilot project. Consists of larger commissioned projects. Had hoped to join Birmingham and Solihull who had got through first bidding stage, but will now join them later in programme.
- Routeways To Health - 50 people have now been placed into NHS careers. Programme will now be rolled out across the West Midlands.