

SELECT COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC REGENERATION

Wednesday, 12th January, 2005, at 6.00 p.m.
in Committee Room 2 at the Council House, Dudley

PRESENT:-

Councillor K Turner (Chairman)
Councillors Body, Mrs Cowell, Islam, Jackson, Rev Johnston, Knowles,
Mrs Patrick, Rogers and C Wilson.

Officers

Assistant Director of Housing (Strategy and Private Sector) (as Lead Officer to the Committee), Senior Assistant Director of Finance, Assistant Director of Law and Property, Assistant Director of the Urban Environment (Economic Regeneration), Head of ICT Services, Business Support Manager, Senior Planning Officer, (Directorate of the Urban Environment) Management Officer (Chief Executive's Department) and Mrs Johal (Directorate of Law & Property).

Also in Attendance:-

Ms Sarah Middleton – Chief Executive (Black Country Consortium)

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TSUNAMI DISASTER

The Committee stood in silence as a mark of respect to the people who lost their lives in the Tsunami disaster.

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MINUTES

RESOLVED

That the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 3rd November, 2004 be approved as a correct record and signed subject to an amendment to those members present by the substitution of Councillor Mrs Patrick by Councillors Ms Harris and vice-versa.

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DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Declarations of Personal Interest, in accordance with the Members' Code of Conduct, were made by the following Members for the reasons indicated:

Councillor Islam declared a personal interest in respect of Agenda Item No 10 (Proposed Corporate Equality and Diversity Priorities for 2005/06) in view of him being a Member of the Dudley Racial Equality Council.

Councillor K Turner declared a personal interest in respect of Agenda Item No 6 (Proposed Revenue Budget 2005/06) in view of his granddaughter being a pupil that was in receipt of the Home to Schools Fund.

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APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence from the meeting was submitted on behalf of Councillor Ms Harris.

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PRESENTATION ON VISITS MADE BY THE MAYOR

The Mayor (Councillor Knowles) made a presentation in relation to the visits he had made to date, and commenced by thanking Mr Tompkins (Business Support Manager) for organising the visits and for his continued attendance and commitment throughout.

The purpose of the Mayoral visits was to build relationships between the Council and local businesses so as to determine real issues for businesses and to discuss positive steps to make improvements. Sixteen companies/organisations across the Borough had been visited so far and a further fourteen visits were still on the agenda.

Visits that had been made to businesses had included Stourbridge News, Express and Star, Copthorne Hotel, Black Country Living Museum, International Festival of Glass, Zeus, Black Country Chamber and Business Link, Sandvik, Beatties and Lye Business Centre. The Mayor mentioned that there were a number of innovative companies in the Borough but that businesses that transferred abroad did so because it was cheaper to make components abroad. However there was a need to retain research in this country. In relation to Beatties, the Mayor reported that the store recruited twelve trainees a year and had accordingly won a training award. Of the twelve recruited, an average of four or five were offered employment and it was further highlighted that current Managers at Beatties had started as trainees. In relation to the Lye Business Centre it was reported that there were currently thirty-one companies, which was the maximum take-up, and pointed out that the success rate was higher than the national figures.

The Mayor commented that whilst undertaking the visits he had been surprised at how well businesses had been coping under the current pressures and difficult situation. He also pointed out that the businesses were very enthusiastic when visits were made to their establishments and he highlighted the need for them to continue after his term. He also suggested that the Committee should consider visiting some businesses as part of their work programme in the future.

The Mayor advised that feedback from businesses had been received, which would be compiled into a report and submitted to the Committee in the future. He also suggested that the Cabinet Member for Economic Regeneration be invited to that meeting with a view to addressing any issues or concerns.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the presentation be received and noted.
- (2) That a further update report be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee and that the Cabinet Member for Economic Regeneration be invited to that meeting with a view to addressing any issues or concerns.

PROGRESS ON THE BLACK COUNTRY STUDY

Ms S Middleton, Chief Executive (Black Country Consortium) made a presentation to Members on the progress of the Black Country Study.

Ms Middleton reported that the vision for the Black Country had commenced two years ago when the public and private sector had combined to jointly produce the Black Country Study, which was a thirty-year vision for the Black Country. The vision highlighted three aspects for urban renaissance, namely the need to reverse the population decline, the need for growth in incomes and the need for an appropriate socio economic mix. In relation to demographic changes various scenarios were given and if no action was taken it was expected that 85,000 people would be lost by 2031. Retention would stop net outward migration with 90,000 more people and 60,000+ households by 2031 and growth would lead to 125,000 more people and 71,000+ households by 2031. It was reported that a Project Plan setting out the objectives of the study, key issues to be addressed, a timetable and a statement of public participation would be submitted to the Regional Assembly later in the month and a Launch Conference was scheduled for 22nd February, 2005.

It was further reported that the Project Plan's key issues for the Black Country included delivering urban renaissance, the need to plan for and manage growth, restructure land use and redefine redundant employment land for other uses (create new locations), how to grow out the town centres in terms of retail leisure and office and how to afford Merry Hill/Brierley Hill a status of "Strategic Centre".

During the discussion that followed a Member queried in relation to the projected population loss of 80,000+ and asked whether a breakdown by Borough was available. It was further queried whether consideration had been given to the relocation of Civil Servant jobs from London to the West Midlands and it was also mentioned that at a recent Working Group it had been determined that Dudley was struggling with the take-up of industrial land.

In responding Ms Middleton advised that the decline in population figures were available as a breakdown by Borough and she agreed to supply these if required, however it was indicated that Dudley suffered the least drift. In relation to securing the Civil Service jobs, Ms Middleton confirmed that securing and positioning the jobs in the Black Country was part of the agenda. In relation to the take-up of employment land, Ms Middleton reported that the problem was being addressed and avenues were being explored.

In response to a query from a Member in relation to the imbalance in Universities around the West Midlands, Ms Middleton confirmed that the vision statement highlighted the imbalance in University presence, however working with a substantial network of Universities and to ensure support processes were in place was the vital factor.

The Lead Officer to the Committee agreed to contact Ms Middleton with a view to agreeing a timetable for submission of regular update reports and presentations to the Committee in the future.

RESOLVED

That the presentation be received and noted and that further update reports and presentations be submitted to future meetings of the Committee.

A joint report of the Director of the Urban Environment and the Director of Finance was submitted on the proposed Revenue Budget and Council Tax for 2005/06.

During the discussion that followed the presentation of the report a Member commented that the proposals should be looked at thoroughly and particular reference was made to issues and concerns based around transport and it was suggested that greater resources be allocated to address transport issues.

In response the Assistant Director of the Urban Environment (Economic Regeneration) reported that one of the implications of the Traffic Management Act was the immediate appointment of a Traffic Manager. The appointment would provide for a greater emphasis and closer monitoring on the management of traffic with a view to addressing the concerns. He further advised that the Local Transport Plan for the West Midlands was the mechanism to address transport issues and the resources that were allocated via the Council's budget were intended for that purpose, however it was pointed out that allocating extra resources would alleviate the traffic situation further.

A Member commented that the whole issue of transport was a problem in Dudley and that the traffic flow was unpredictable and concurred that transport should be given greater prominence.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the Government's proposals for Revenue Support Grant in 2005/06 be noted.
- (2) That the Cabinet's Budget proposals for 2005/06 be noted.
- (3) That the concerns expressed by Members in relation to transport being given a higher priority be referred to the Cabinet.

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CHANGE IN ORDER OF BUSINESS

Pursuant to Council Procedure Rule 13(c), it was

RESOLVED

That Agenda Item No 7 (e-Government – Progress Report) be considered after Agenda Item No 12 (Recommendations of the Economic Regeneration (Economic Regeneration) Working Group) to allow the Director of Education and Lifelong Learning to be in attendance.

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SCRUTINY PROTOCOL FOR SELECT COMMITTEES

A report of the Director of Law and Property was submitted seeking consideration on a Draft Scrutiny Protocol for Select Committees.

During discussion on the item, a Member made particular reference to a previous scrutiny matter, which had involved delay in obtaining the necessary information from officers and it was felt that it was not easy to challenge the decisions made by the Cabinet. It was further commented in relation to the same matter that detailed consideration could not be given to the scrutiny of a decision as Members had been informed that the review was restricted to a single meeting. The Assistant Director of Law and Property agreed to take these comments back to the Director of Law and Property.

A Member referred to paragraph 38 of the protocol that stated call-in could be exercised by the Chairman or by 5 members of the Committee from 2 or more political groups and it was pointed out that this meant that it was not easy to challenge a decision when only one party wished to call-in a decision.

In responding the Chairman said that he appreciated the concerns expressed by Members and stated that it was not the intention of Select Committees to be political and he reminded Members of the Select Committee that he could be approached at anytime if there were any concerns in relation to decisions that had been made.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the information contained in the report submitted be noted and that subject to the comments and concerns expressed by Members, the draft Scrutiny Protocol for Select Committees be approved.
- (2) That the Assistant Director of Law and Property be requested to refer the comments and concerns expressed by Members to the Monitoring Officer.

PROTOCOL FOR RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MEMBERS AND OFFICERS OF DUDLEY MBC

A report of the Monitoring Officer was submitted seeking consideration on a draft Protocol for Relationships between Members and Officers of the Council.

During discussion on the item, Members expressed concern in relation to paragraph 100 of the protocol that required Members to inform the Chief Executive or Director when arranging a public meeting. Members regularly held small local meetings to discuss certain issues such as traffic problems and it was felt to be a little extreme and unnecessary to have to inform the Chief Executive on each occasion.

A Member further commented in relation to paragraph 103 which stated “Officers must never be asked to attend ward or constituency political party meetings” and it was felt that the general public and Members should be entitled to receive independent unbiased expert advice from Officers in relation to particular issues.

With reference to paragraph 123, a Member reported that e-mails were frequently forwarded to other Members to keep them informed of certain issues and also correspondence from Officers had been made available to the public. It was felt that this paragraph could benefit from some rewording to add clarity.

In responding the Assistant Director of Law and Property advised that it was difficult to cover all scenarios in the protocol and in relation to holding public meetings and having to inform the Chief Executive or Director, he advised that the paragraph was sufficiently wide to afford Members some discretion. In relation to attendance of Officers at political meetings, the Assistant Director of Law and Property confirmed that Officers routinely attended public meetings, however they were not allowed to attend specific political meetings. In relation to correspondence issues, he reported that Members were entitled to pass on correspondence from Officers to individual members of the public. However, restrictions specifically applied to confidential material.

The Assistant Director of Law and Property undertook to refer all the comments made back to the Monitoring Officer with a view to consideration being given to the rewording of certain paragraphs to make them clearer.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the information contained in the report submitted be noted.
- (2) That the comments made by Members be referred to the Monitoring Officer with a view to rewording certain paragraphs to make them clearer.

A report of the Director of Law and Property was submitted seeking consideration of the proposed corporate equality and diversity priorities for the Council in 2005/06.

The Chairman of the Select Committee on Economic Regeneration (Equality and Diversity) Working Group commented that the report now submitted reflected issues that the Working Group had discussed. There was a need to ensure that records of employees on ethnic origin and disability were as complete as possible and also that appointment levels in relation to black and minority ethnic groups more closely matched those of applicant numbers. The Working Group were hoping to analyse the recruitment figures and recruitment events that were held with a view to identifying solutions.

RESOLVED

That the information contained in the report submitted be noted.

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THE REVISED DEPOSIT UNITARY DEVELOPMENT PLAN –
PROGRESS TO DATE

A report of the Director of the Urban Environment was submitted informing Members on the progress of the review of the Unitary Development Plan (UDP) for the Borough.

In response to a query the Senior Planning Officer confirmed that adoption of the UDP was anticipated in May, 2005 and once adopted it would be in force for a period of three years.

In response to a query in relation to the Committee undertaking scrutiny of the UDP, the Assistant Director of the Urban Environment (Economic Regeneration) advised that a clear understanding of the process and the new regime would be more beneficial at this stage. It was further suggested that a presentation on the adopted plan be submitted to a future meeting.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the information contained in the report submitted be noted.
 - (2) That the new regime in respect of the Unitary Development Plan be included as an agenda item to the next meeting and that a presentation on the adopted plan be made to a future meeting.
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RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE ECONOMIC REGENERATION
(ECONOMIC REGENERATION) WORKING GROUP

A report of the Lead Officer to the Committee was submitted seeking consideration of the recommendations made by the Economic Regeneration (Economic Regeneration) Working Group.

In relation to the decline in usage of free bus passes, the Chairman requested that the West Midlands Passenger Transport Authority (WMPTA) be approached with a view to providing a report that identified the areas where reductions had occurred, the reasons for the reductions, seasonal variations and an analysis on whether journeys made were long or short.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the report submitted be referred to the Select Committee on the Environment with a view to incorporating the comments made into the report on Local Transport Plan 2.
- (2) That the West Midlands Passenger Transport Authority (WMPTA) be requested to provide a report to a future meeting on information in relation to the decline in usage of free bus passes with identification of the areas where reductions had occurred, the reasons for the reductions, seasonal variations and an analysis on whether journeys made were long or short.

E-GOVERNMENT PROGRESS REPORT

A joint report of the Director of Education and Lifelong Learning, as Corporate E-Champion and the Director of Finance updating members with the latest information on the Council's performance against BVPI 157, which requires 100% e-enablement of all services by 1st January 2006, was submitted.

The Chairman commented that figures in relation to the Chief Executive's Department indicated that little change had appeared to have been made and requested that a report be submitted to the next meeting to enable the Committee to monitor and ensure compliance targets would be met.

RESOLVED

- (1) That the information contained in the report be noted.
 - (2) That the Chief Executive's Department be requested to submit a report to the next meeting.
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VISIT TO TECHNOLOGY CENTRES – 28TH JANUARY, 2005

The Chairman reported that, as part of the Economic Regeneration Working Group programme, a visit to technology centres (to include Coventry University and Warwick Science Park) was due to take place on 28th January, 2005. He extended the invitation to all Members of the Select Committee and advised that an itinerary would be sent out to all those that were interested.

The meeting ended at 9.15 pm.

CHAIRMAN