

Federation of Small Businesses - West Midlands Policy Unit

Minutes of the West Midlands Policy Unit held on Monday, 7th July 2008, 11:15am at the Eaton Hotel, Birmingham

Present: David Caro – Chairman
John Bates (arrived 11:23 am)
Roger Culcheth
David Dunn
Jeff Hunt
Alan Moore
Bob Osbourne (arrived 12:16 am)
Peter Silver
Bruce Undy
Carol Undy

Observer: Denise Craig – Policy Manager, West Midlands (APM)

11:15am meeting commenced. The APM took the notes.

The Chairman welcomed Carol Undy (CU) to the meeting and explained that he had asked Carol to become a co-opted member of the WMPU taking on the Skills Portfolio.

1. Apologies

No apologies had been received.

11:23 – JB arrived

2. Minutes of the May Meeting

There were no amendments.

Proposed by DD; Seconded by BU; All in favour.

It was agreed that the Minutes would be circulated to Regional & Branch committees and posted on the 'members-only' section of the WMPU WebPages.

APM

3. Matters arising

Page 1 - Minutes of the April meeting

The APM had confirmed in her report that the minutes had been circulated to Regional and Branch committees and had been posted on the WMPU WebPages.

Page 1 – Matters arising – Red Routes – contact with London APU and WMBTG

The APM reported that there had been little FSB member concern regarding Red Routes therefore it had not been the subject of any policy activity in that area. Due to other commitments she had not attended the previous West Midlands Business Transport Group meeting and had therefore not been able to raise the issue. She agreed to raise it at the next WMBTG meeting she attends.

Page 2 – Matters arising - Regional Voice article

It was agreed this matter is now out of date.

Page 2 – Matters arising - Sub-National Review (SNR) – Invitation to Rose Poulter.

DC and JB confirmed that details of the SNR had been received from Mike Cherry.

Page 3 – Matters arising - Members' Reports – Transport – information for Network Rail meetings

BU reported that nothing had been received to date.

Page 4 – Election of Vice-Chairman(men) – dates of forthcoming National Policy meetings

DC confirmed that he had received the information.

4. and 5. Future West Midlands' Policy Activity and APM's objectives

It was agreed that these two agenda items would be discussed together.

12:16 – BO arrived during the discussions.

Following a wide ranging and detailed discussion, it was agreed that the list of 9 priorities would be reduced to 5. The new list would include:

- Crime
- Skills
- Transport
- SNR/Spatial Strategy/Planning
- Manufacturing

There was widespread concern about the lack of feedback between Regions and the WMPU and JB suggested that each Regional Chairman should ask their respective Regional Committee to forward minutes of their meetings to the WMPU, in the same way the WMPU minutes are forwarded to Regional and Branch Secretaries. Concern was expressed by BU about the loss of information about branch activity. RC suggested that there should be a regional report to the WMPU from the WMPU delegates, plus the minutes of each region. This was agreed.

All

It was also agreed that DC and the APM would arrange meetings with relevant FSB Regional personnel to discuss ways of harmonising activities by the different FSB committees across the West Midlands. DC also informed the WMPU of a forthcoming meeting that was being arranged with the East Midlands Policy Unit and their PM to explore areas where the two midlands' regions could work collaboratively.

DC/APM

The APM outlined the work objectives she had been given at her recent appraisal. These include:

- Policy Dinner – organise the 3rd annual WMPU Policy Dinner with a theme of Crime against Business.
- Make a positive contribution to the England Policy Team. Suggested specific activity – managing Policy reporting activities at National Conference 2009.
- Analyse responses for the Business Link Survey and produce a report, with appropriate approval/sign-off before publication.
- Continue to produce articles for the Birmingham Post column, ensuring a minimum of at least 20 are published (over 12 month period) with little or no editorial changes.
- Produce a West Midlands lobbying plan for the forthcoming EU elections, in conjunction with nationally agreed plans, priorities and manifesto.
- Work closely with a colleague in the London Office on a piece of legislation to develop a deeper understanding of the policy process in Westminster and Whitehall. (Carried forward from previous appraisal period).

The WMPU asked for an additional objective to be included to cover the work required on the Biennial Survey results (Lifting the Barriers to Growth) and the APM agreed to submit this to Sue Bridel.

APM

It was agreed that future WMPU activity would include:

- Policy Dinner
- Business Link Survey report
- Possible involvement in the forthcoming Conservative Party Conference 2008 – subject to direction from London Office and further discussions with Andrew Cave

DC

- Biennial Survey – subject to direction from London Office
- European and General election preparation – subject to direction from London Office

It was acknowledged that this list is subject to change as national FSB campaigns emerge and national, regional or local issues develop.

13:05 – Lunch

14:00 – Meeting resumed

6. Business Link Survey – update

The APM confirmed that over 500 responses had been received and they had all been logged on a spreadsheet ready for analysis. Initial soundings suggested that very few FSB members had used the services and it looked possible that the final analysis may conclude that Business Link is not reaching its target market. However, the APM explained that there was considerable interest in the survey report outside the West Midlands, adding a higher degree of strategic importance than originally envisaged. It was agreed, for this reason that the initial information on the responses would be kept within the WMPU until the final report has been signed off by all relevant FSB parties.

7. Sub-National Review (SNR) – update

RC gave an update of the situation regarding the SNR consultation.

BU passed a paper to the APM on the West Midlands Regional Partnership Review on consultancy support. BU suggested that the FSB should write to the West Midlands Regional Assembly (WMRA) asking why the West Midlands Business Council (WMBC) has not been included as the business representative on the Project Management Team. (The representative is Louise Bennett of the West Midlands Confederation of Chambers).

It was agreed that a copy would be made for DC and that he would speak to James Watkins at WMBC.

BU/DC

The APM confirmed that the FSB West Midlands' submission had been made in plenty of time before the deadline. She also confirmed that she had sent a copy to relevant FSB members and staff. RC requested that it should not be circulated more widely until the Government response was published. The APM explained that she had already agreed to several members' requests for permission to circulate it externally and it may be too late to prevent this. However, she agreed to send an email to the Regional Organiser's explaining the position.

APM

The APM also reported on some briefing notes that had been prepared for use by DC, which were awaiting additions from MC. She was asked to circulate the finalised version to the WMPU, Sue Bridel and Priyen Patel.

APM

8. Regional Strategies – update

RC reported that Phase 2 of the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) had been returned by Government because of requests for further changes to the housing numbers. It would be delayed until autumn 2008. This will also delay the Examination in Public and Phase 3 has been put back to January 2009. Further information is likely to be available at the forthcoming WMRA AGM.

9. Lifting the Barriers to Growth 2008 - update

As had been reported at earlier meetings, this year's survey had been affected by delays and a very poor response. It was being suggested that there should be a change of name. There were several reports of complaints and the committee was asked to

forward details to DC by the end of the week to collate remarks and forward to John Walker, prior to the next National Policy meeting.

WMPU/DC

RC commented that this situation had been made worse because of the lack of a Policy Manager, time and resource and he also felt the survey should have gone to a university with experience of surveys. He said the current situation reflected badly on the FSB.

The APM said the decision on how to release the information should be held in abeyance until further guidance is received from London.

10. Chairman's Report

The Chairman's report was tabled. Many aspects of the report had been discussed earlier in the meeting.

He reported verbally on a request from Advantage West Midlands for a meeting with himself and the APM and also the forthcoming round table dinner meeting with Liam Byrne organised by Government Office West Midlands (GOWM) on 10th July at the Hyatt Hotel in Birmingham.

11. Treasurer's Report

The accounts to May had been circulated previously.

PS queried the distribution of the accounts through the APM, citing a previously minuted decision that this should be done by the WMPU Treasurer only. A discussion followed. It was agreed that electronic copies of the accounts could be circulated by the APM, as long it did not involve a significant amount of work to do so.

The accounts for May 08 were adopted.
Proposed by BO; seconded by RC; all in favour.

A copy of the WMPU budget was tabled for information purposes. There were questions about advertising, Young Enterprise and provision of a laptop for David Caro (depreciation figures). DD commented that he had used the information provided by Blackpool for the depreciation item.

DC confirmed that attendance fees would only be payable where the meeting was on the WMPU calendar and on receipt of a written report.

DD re-iterated the FSB rule on the 3 month time limit for submitting expense claims.

12. APM's Report

The APM's report had been circulated previously. Many aspects of the report had been discussed earlier in the meeting. However, the APM drew the WMPUs attention to item on the new skills service and it was agreed that Chris Handy would be invited to the next WMPU meeting.

APM

She also highlighted the item on the Bank of England Regional Panel. It was agreed that the WMPU would email suggestions for which sectors should be represented. It was understood that holiday commitments may have some impact on who could attend.

13. Members' Reports:

WMBC – covered earlier in the meeting.

Crime – It was reported that the Local Authority overview and scrutiny minutes were available.

Environment and Energy – It was agreed that the Energy survey could be sent out by mass email as soon as appropriate.

APM

Europe – covered in earlier reports.

Manufacturing – covered in earlier reports.

Planning – nothing to report.

Procurement – nothing to report.

Rural – Reports from PS on the WMBC Rural Policy Group meeting on 29th May and from BU on the Rural Affairs Forum (WMRAF) meeting on 12th June had been circulated previously and BU tabled a paper from the WMRAF meeting. A report from RC on the Rural Regeneration Zone Annual Conference on 27th June was also tabled.

It was agreed that the proposed amalgamation of the WMBC Rural Policy Group and the Rural Business Advisory Group should be supported by the FSB.

BU reported on information about overflow flooding areas and the use of canals as sinks.

Skills – The APM agreed to forward all relevant information on this issue to CU and to arrange a briefing meeting. DC asked to be included in the meeting.

APM/CU/DC

Transport – The issue of Red Routes and cost of fuel were discussed. BU commented that the FSB were lobbying parliament about the concept of 'levelling out', as operated in other countries. There was also lobbying of Government in respect of the 40p tax-free mileage claim allowance.

It was reported that Manchester have agreed to the congestion charge – the consultation is now underway and FSB in other areas are also lobbying against the introduction of these charges. The APM reported on a request for support from the North West APU and agreed to circulate the email to WMPU members.

APM

Others:

No other areas were discussed.

14. AOB

Conservative Party Conference – BU suggested holding a small lunch to discuss specific topics and with key people invited, similar to the John Hutton event at the Labour Party Spring conference. The APM expressed reservations about resource, time and venue availability to organise properly. DC agreed to pursue AC about national FSB activity.

DC

Warwickshire & Coventry Regional Debt Event – BU reminded the committee about this event arranged for 16th July at Coventry University. He asked the other Regional Chairmen to circulate details to their regions.

RC/BO

Small firms waste license – BU reported on an item in the Daily Mail suggesting that this was to be introduced and targeted at home-based businesses. He agreed to send details to the APM to forward to Nyree Connell in the London Office.

BU/APM

15. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Monday 1st September 2008, 11:30am at the Eaton Hotel, 279 Hagley Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham.

The meeting closed at 16:10pm