

Federation of Small Businesses - West Midlands Policy Unit

**Minutes of the West Midlands Policy Unit held on
Monday, 13th October 2008, 11:30am at the Eaton Hotel, Birmingham**

Present: David Caro – Chairman
John Bates
Roger Culcheth
David Dunn
Jeff Hunt
Bob Osbourne (arrived 12:10)
Peter Silver
Bruce Undy
Carol Undy

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

11:30 am meeting commenced. The PM took the notes.

The Chairman explained that the proposed guest speaker, Chris Handy had not wished to attend today's meeting but had asked for dates of further meetings. DC said that under the circumstances regarding Mr Handy's previous intended attendance, he felt that the WMPU would not wish to give up a guest speaker session to Mr Handy and therefore the PM had asked for details of the service electronically that could be circulated to the WMPU for a decision on whether to agree to circulate further. A discussion followed and it was agreed that relevant contact details would be exchanged with a view to arranging a meeting between Chris Handy and Carol Undy (as WMPU Skills portfolio holder)

PM/CU

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Alan Moore and Anthea McIntyre. Bob Osbourne had left a message to say he would be late arriving.

2. Minutes of the September Meeting

There were no amendments. Proposed by DD; Seconded by RC; 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.

PM

3. Matters arising

Page 1 – Start of meeting – Condolences for Karen Norris

The PM informed the APU that Karen's mother had passed away a few days after the meeting and confirmed that she has sent a sympathy card to Karen from the WMPU committee members.

Page 2 – WMBC Presentation – Follow-up actions

The PM confirmed that these had all been done or were being progressed.

Page 1 – Matters arising - Minutes of the July meeting

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

Page 3 – Matters arising - Future W Mids Policy Activity and PM's objectives - Regional Minutes and Reports to WMPU

RC reported that the Shropshire, Herefordshire & Worcestershire (SHW) region had now held a quorate meeting and this request had been rejected. There was a further discussion about this matter and DC commented that he understood the Regional Minutes and Reports could not be circulated under the current FSB Manual of Standard Procedures (MSP) rules. However, he asked that the process to call for amendments to the MSP be started.

Page 3 – Matters arising – Meetings with Regions, Policy Unit Chairman and Policy Manager

It was agreed that as there could be changes within the Regional Committees due to the forthcoming AGMs, that these meetings should be deferred until the New Year.

DC

Page 3 – Matters arising – Invitation for Chris Handy to speak at October mtg

See explanation on page 1 of these minutes.

Page 5 – Item 12 – PM's report – Birmingham Post Meeting

It was agreed that this meeting would be arranged once the proposed changes and move to their new offices had settled down. PS asked for notice of the meeting to feed information through prior to the meeting.

PM/PS

Page 5 – Item 12 – PM's report – Birmingham Post Meeting

The PM confirmed that she had supplied the West Midlands statistics as requested. She also confirmed that no comments had been received from the APU on the draft document. A discussion on usage followed, with the PM confirming that full briefings on this will be made available to the ROs and details of the campaign programme will be reported to the APU when available. BU commented on the disparity between Shires and the conurbation; JB emphasised the issues of Local Authority (LA) Procurement; JH suggested a league table should be set up to highlight those LA's that are proactive in their dealings with SMEs. The PM agreed to take these suggestions to the next meeting of the English Policy Unit.

PM

DC said that there had been discussion at the recent Business Link Scrutiny Panel regarding automatic rate-relief for SMEs; PS commented that District Councils will be disappearing soon and RC reported that analysis of rate relief and LA returns for take-up levels was planned. He also referred to the announcement by Brentwood Council for the reduction of payment times to small businesses. The PM circulated a copy of the John Walker letter on this matter and JB commented that this set a precedent which should be used to encourage other LA's to follow suit.

Page 6 – Item 14 – Policy Priority Reports – Skills – CRB checks

JH reported that he had received no comments from the APU on this matter. JB outlined details of his business experience in this matter and also his voluntary work with the Cricket Association.

Page 6 – Item 14 – Policy Priority Reports – Skills – FSB Business Lecture (11th February 2009)

The PM confirmed that she had circulated outline details of the event, with more to follow when available.

12:10 BO arrived

Page 6 – Item 14 – Policy Priority Reports – Transport – M1, Jct 19 consultation

This matter will be covered in the Transport agenda item.

DC apologised and realised that he had not asked if members wished to put forward any matters under AOB. CU commented that she wished to raise an item about Independent Garages and Vehicle Services and DD asked to raise the issue of the PM's workload. The APU agreed to consider these under AOB.

4. WMPU 2009 meetings

It was agreed that the meetings in 2009 would continue to be held at the Eaton Hotel, at similar intervals to 2008 and the majority wished for the meetings to continue to be held on Mondays, starting at 11am. The PM was asked to discuss the dates with DC, check the availability and costs and subject to these being acceptable, circulate the proposed dates to the WMPU. If members agree, she was then asked to confirm the booking with the Eaton Hotel.

PM

5. Current West Midlands' Economic Situation

A discussion followed that covered the following points:

- Rugby High Street – retailers being offered grants to move in
- Need for case studies highlighted by PM – required urgently by London Policy office

APU/PM

- Problems obtaining finance from Banks
- Issue of £50k protection for business savings – DC agreed to raise this matter with National Policy

DC

- Reckless lending and high levels of debt for individuals
- Employment reduction impacts on general population and subsequent impact on business and Local Authority revenues
- Small businesses right to finance if operating properly
- Need for Government representatives on Boards of the Banks
- FSB should take an aggressive policy stance on the issue
- 10 year leases restrict small business developments
- Empty property rates
- Heavy handed conglomerate landlords – no leeway or flexibility applied
- Bildenburg Group should be approached re world economies
- Greater flexibility and a relaxing of rules would support small businesses
- Commercial lending rates are Government controlled in France and lending is only allowed up to 70% of property
- Disparities between regulations for public and private landlords
- Targeted rates reductions, i.e. for shop premises; also rates holiday; it was noted there is a question over payment to government by Local Authorities
- Care regarding rates holidays – examples where this caused problems are Merry Hill retail park and an industrial site in Coventry, which was acquired by a French company which then took production back to France
- Impact of environmental policies on West Midlands' economy, especially with our automotive manufacturers. Not just a problem within West Midlands, includes Toyota and Nissan
- Leasing companies, increasing costs and length of contracts

13:05 – Lunch

14:10 – Meeting resumed

6. Surveys – update

a) West Midlands Business Support Survey – update

The PM gave a verbal report. RC reminded the APU about Ann Johnson's position with BLWM and asked if she had been sent a copy. The PM agreed to do so. BU commented on the numbers sent and responses received and also on the correlation with the Rural BL.

PM

b) Lifting the Barriers to Growth – update

The PM gave a verbal update and a discussion followed about methods of presentation. It was agreed that individual tailored presentations may be the most appropriate method, but a view would be taken once the reports had been published.

7. WMPU Policy Dinner – update

The PM referred members to the section on this in the PM's Report, which had been previously circulated. DD tabled a paper on the costs. DC raised the issue of whether next year's event should follow the same format at the same time of year, given that European Elections were planned for next June. It was agreed there would be a focus on EU matters and the Parliamentary Diary would be consulted for optimum dates. Mid-week in the evening would be preferable. The PM agreed look at dates, venues and costs. She agreed to co-ordinate with Regions and Branches.

PM**8. Empty Property Rates Issue**

PS reported that his burned office building has now been taken into housing stock and out of commercial usage. BO asked if there were any plans to apply empty property rates to domestic property. DC & RC responded that they had not heard this mentioned. A discussion followed on the development of FSB policy on this matter. RC confirmed that they were asking the Minister to immediately implement a reduction of 50% on Empty Property Rates and automatic application of Rates Relief – which was within the authority of the Minister to do, without recourse to Parliament. He commented that they were asking for Rate Relief to be also extended to empty properties, as the original legislation was very badly worded. Ideally the FSB is looking for the Scottish scheme to be used, as it is simpler.

9. National Policy

DC reported that there had been no meeting of the National Policy Unit since the last WMPU meeting, but will take back members' comments to the meeting tomorrow.

10. Chairman's Report

The Chairman's report was tabled. He gave a verbal update that he had been asked to attend a ministerial meeting on 9th October. Questions on his reports included:

- Smart metering. DC agreed to raise this matter with John Holbrow
- Conservative Party Conference – BU commented that fringe meetings can be done outside the security cordon and should be considered for future party conferences. DC agreed to speak to Andrew Cave about this and also the issue of an FSB stand.

DC**DC****11. Treasurer's Report**

Period 11 accounts had been circulated previously. Proposed by JB; seconded by BO; all in favour. Period 11 accounts were adopted.

On the issue of consultancy fee rates, DD confirmed that £50 per day is currently the figure used. DC suggested raising this amount for APU attendance to £75. Proposed by BO; seconded by JB. All in favour.

BO mentioned concerns if choosing to query national rates at the National AGM conference. RC said there was an issue over low rate of attendance allowance claims and BU asked if this would get through the Treasury Committee especially when including the 2-course lunch we have at the Eaton Hotel.

12. PM's Report

The PM's report had been circulated previously. The PM drew attention to the item about the Manchester Congestion Charging campaign. DC said he had spoken to the relevant people and 2,000 leaflets would be required for distribution to the parts of the West Midlands that bordered the North West. She asked if the WMPU would confirm agreement to pay the costs of these leaflets (£800 approximately). This was proposed by DD; seconded by PS. All in favour.

13. Policy Priority Reports:

Crime – Nothing to report.

Manufacturing – Nothing to report.

Skills – The PM reported on a meeting with 'thefutureworks' earlier that day. She agreed to circulate details of the launch event on the 21st October to CU.

PM

SNR – RC had tabled 2 reports. Key points included:

- Future housing will be market driven, which could result in problems for house building in the Black Country and North Staffs.
- No time was allowed for debate at the Regional Spatial Strategy Study Seminar
- The report from Nathaniel Lichfield consultants does not mention employment land or sustainability.

CU asked if RC's paper could be sent back up to the RSS Study Group. RC agreed to do this and thanked CU for the suggestion.

RC

Transport – BU reported that the Regional Transport Partnership meeting was cancelled. At the West Midlands Planning and Transport Group meetings it had been reported that 90 suggestions put forward in the Quick Wins campaign had been taken up. The one for Landor Street had been implemented immediately. However, there are issues over how others will be delivered and BU agreed to continue to press for this to happen.

Others:

Bham Post Article on the WMBC view of AWM– BU commented that the article had effectively said that WMBC think the RDA is fantastic and asked about how the FSB makes contact with AWM. He agreed to email the article to DC.

BU/DC

Local Authority Strategies – RC asked if the APU representatives could ask their Regions and Regional Organisers if they are aware of LAs drawing up any strategic plans.

APU/RC

14. Regional Reports

a) Staffs & W Mids:

The region has 3 concerns:

- Voting of increasing allowances at National level
- Recruitment linkages
- FSB costs in light of current climate

b) Shrops, Herefordshire & Worcestershire:

- Report tabled

c) Warwickshire & Coventry

- Report on Radio 5 Lives' Big Debate

- Minutes – Representatives will take relevant items to APU. Urgent items will go straight to the PM.

15. AOB

CU passed a copy of an article on the proposals which could restrict independent Garages from carrying out Vehicle servicing. DC agreed to take this matter up at the National Policy Meeting.

DC

DD raised concern at the level of the PM's workload. It was agreed that she would try to find some Secretarial Support to take the WMPU minutes, although the comments were made that they would prefer the PM to continue to do undertake this duty, as the standard of her minutes were excellent. It was agreed that once an appropriate person had been found, they would be engaged on a trial basis.

PM

Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Monday 24th November 2008, at the Eaton Hotel, 279 Hagley Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham.

The meeting closed at 16:00pm