

Federation of Small Businesses - West Midlands Policy Unit

**Minutes of the West Midlands Policy Unit (WMPU) held on
Monday, 18th May 2009, 11:00am at the Eaton Hotel, Birmingham**

- Present:** David Caro – Chairman (DC)
John Bates (JB)
Roger Culcheth (RC)
David Dunn (DD)
Jeff Hunt (JH)
Bob Osbourne (BO)
Peter Silver (PS)
- Guests:** John Hardwick, Chairman - East Midlands Policy Unit
- Observer:** Denise Craig – Policy Manager, West Midlands (PM)

11:31am meeting commenced. The PM took the notes.

DC welcomed John Hardwick to the meeting.

1. Apologies

Apologies had been received from Ken Wigfield (KW), Bruce Undy (BU) and Carol Undy (CU).

2. Minutes of the April 09 Meeting

There were no amendments and the Minutes were proposed by DD; Seconded by JH; all in favour.

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

PM

3. Matters arising

Page 1 – Item 2 - Minutes of the February 09 Meeting circulation

The PM confirmed this had been completed on 28th April 09.

Page 1 – Matters arising – Policy Reports – Others – RDA briefing note

The PM confirmed that a briefing note had been circulated to the committee on 15th May 09.

Page 2 – Matters arising – Information on good BIDs

RC explained that the issue of the FSB Policy on BIDs was being considered, but it had been missed at the last National Policy meeting and so had not been discussed by the Policy Unit. It would be on the agenda at the next meeting on 9th June 2009. RC gave a brief background and outline on current activity regarding the FSB position. A discussion followed which covered:

- Obtaining copies of contracts for comparison purposes
- Circulation of papers to businesses in the Coventry-wide BID
- Use of FSB Legal Advice line
- Input free of charge from a solicitor with the Coventry-wide BID
- FSB membership of British BIDs

Page 2 – Matters arising - Taxi License Issue

PS reported that both James Gollins and BU had been given each other's telephone numbers but he was not able to report whether a conversation had taken place. It was agreed to carry this forward for BU to update the committee.

PS

Page 2 – Matters arising - Morgan Cars letter

KWi was not in attendance and it was agreed to carry this matter forward.

KWi

Page 2 –Matters arising - Short-time working assistance information

The PM confirmed that she had forwarded the request to Lynsey Brook. However, the costing had not been received as yet and she agreed to follow this up.

PM

Page 2 – Matters arising - Roller Banners

The PM confirmed that 2 roller banners had been ordered on 29th April. The customised one had been received very promptly (1st May), but the generic 'free' one had still not been received. The PM agreed to follow this up.

PM

Page 2 – Matters arising - Young Enterprise and West Midlands (WMBC) Invoices

DD reported that both invoices had been received and paid.

Page 2 – Matters arising – Reports from West Midlands Fraud Forum

JB asked about this matter and the representation of the FSB on the Fraud Forum. DC replied that he had spoken to Mike Cherry who was happy to come and give reports at any meeting of the WMPU that the committee requested. A discussion on this matter followed, concluding with agreement that DC will invite Mike Cherry to the next WMPU mtg.

DC

Page 2/3 – Matters arising - Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) – Coventry-wide BID

The PM referred the committee to the section on this matter in her report.

Page 3 – Item 4 – Current West Midlands' Economic Situation – Comment from Advantage West Midlands (AWM) on West Midlands Economic Strategy (WMES)

The PM confirmed that a reply had been received to their request for information about what steps were being taken to protect the WMES and the details were included in her report.

Page 3 – Item 4 – Current West Midlands' Economic Situation – Information of issues

DC and the PM confirmed that no suggestions had been received from WMPU members. A discussion followed on the eligibility of independents to stand as MEPs. DC commented that they cannot do so they must field at least as many candidates as there are MEP places available in each Government Region.

The matter of communication between Police Forces was also discussed with JB commenting on the initiative in Coventry called 'Crime Out, Business In' from some years ago.

DC asked if the results of the West Midlands Policy Survey had yet been received and the PM confirmed she had not received anything to date. It was agreed that she would chase this matter and forward response to KWi for his work on the Crime portfolio.

PM/KWi

Page 3 – Item 5 – Chairman's Report – Taste of Birmingham event

DC confirmed that the outline information had been sent out to all the Regional Secretaries and Regional Organisers and that a 2nd invitation would be coming through for emailing round again.

Page 3 – Item 5 – Chairman’s Report – Young Enterprise – consistency of approach

DC apologised that he had not raised this matter with National Policy and agreed to do so at the next meeting.

DC

DC also confirmed that the brochures had been received and that as he was unable to attend the Regional Finals it had been agreed that the Policy Manager would take his place on the Judging Panel. The PM confirmed that she had been asked to Chair the panel and she had accepted.

Page 4 – Item 9 – Policy Priority Reports – Manufacturing – EEF/WMBC paper

DC and the PM confirmed that the paper had been discussed.

Page 5 – Item 9 – Policy Priority Reports – Skills – Pat Jackson Meeting

The PM said that this had not been arranged as yet and it was agreed it would be carried forward.

PM/CU

Page 5 – Item 9 – Policy Priority Reports – Transport – Red Routes Information

DD confirmed that no information was yet available on the Burnt Tree Island and Great Bridge Red Routes. It was agreed that this situation would be monitored.

Page 6 – Item 10 – Regional Reports – Shrops, H & W Region – Accord Template letter

The PM confirmed that she had emailed the Accord Template letter to KWi on 6th April 09.

Page 6 – Item 11 – AOB – Regional Development Agencies

The PM confirmed she had produced and circulated a discussion paper to the WMPU and this item had been put on the Agenda.

Page 6 – Item 11 – AOB – Business Waste Recycling

The PM confirmed that she had sent a briefing note to JB on 1st May 09 and DC confirmed he had taken the matter forward to National Policy. A discussion followed.

4. Regional Development Agencies (RDAs)

A discussion paper had been circulated on 15th May 09. DC referred to the item in his Chairman’s Report. RC commented on the section in the paper regarding the main political parties and stated that the Lib-Dems wished to get rid of RDAs and that this would be considered by them at their autumn conference. It was agreed that this would be put on the agenda at the July meeting. RC pointed out that even if there is a change of government at the next General Election it is unlikely there be any changes for at least 2 years.

PM

5. European Elections and Prospective MEPs Dinner

It was agreed that it worked well giving the presentation during the meal as this meant the candidates could not just make their prepared speeches and had to respond to the manifesto. DC commented that Neena Gill had stayed for the whole evening despite being very tired and intending to leave early. PM thanked the photographer, Andrew Priest and confirmed that very good pictures had been received the next day from him. A Press Release had been produced and circulated with relevant pictures and reported that Richard Hyslop had requested a summary and pictures to post on the FSB’s Euro Blog. JB commented that the service during the meal was somewhat lacking. BO commented that it was an excellent venue. DD said a full breakdown would be available in due course but reported that the costs of the meal totalled £1,244.76. The PM confirmed that she would be producing Notes that would be circulated to all attendees

and that follow up action would include arranging meetings or dinners with the successful candidates. BO reported that at a Burton, Lichfield & Tamworth Branch event arranged for the 20th May 09 it was likely that MEPs would be attending. It was agreed that the PM would discuss suggestions with DC for follow up events which would be circulated to the WMPU committee by email.

PM/DC/AII

6. Chairman's Report

The Chairman's report had been circulated on 17th May 09 but as it had been circulated at short notice copies were also tabled. DC highlighted:

- Credit Crunch Breakfast and the suggestion of consumption vouchers as an alternative to rebates. BO commented on the likelihood of counterfeiting.
- Save our Garages Issue – DC commented on the Intel and Microsoft precedents

13:02 Lunch

14:03 Meeting resumed

7. Treasurer's Report

The Accounts for Periods 6 had been circulated on 1st May 09 and Period 7 had been circulated on 15th May 09. However several members reported that they had not received the Period 7 accounts and additional copies were tabled.

Period 6 Accounts – Proposed by BO; Seconded by PS – All in favour

Period 7 Accounts – Proposed by BO; Seconded by JB – All in favour

A discussion followed covering:

- Young Enterprise Invoicing
- Possible future activities of the PM
- Joint East and West Midlands activities. There was general agreement from the WMPU members that this should be seriously considered. John Hardwick agreed to discuss this with Lyndsey Bunn and put the request to the East Midlands Policy Unit.

John Hardwick/DC

- MEPs follow up meetings after the European Elections. It was agreed that suggestions should be submitted to the PM by 29th May 09 for use in discussions between DC, DD and the PM.

AII/PM/DC/DD

- Meet the Banks Event – it was agreed this is something that should be done at FSB Regional level.
- BIDs research
- Use of WMPU funds by FSB Regions. DC commented that this should be agreed by whole committee and should be fair to all 3 Regions.

8. Policy Manager's Report

The Policy Manager's report had been circulated on 1st May 09. RC commented that the matter on Small Business Rate Relief (SBRR) payments had been raised with the Dept of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) in respect of franchises where rates are included in the rent.

John Hardwick gave an overview of the progress of the Accord in the East Midlands.

9. Election of Officers

DC reported that nominations had been received for:

Chairman – David Caro

Vice-Chairmen – John Bates and Bruce Undy

Treasurer – David Dunn

As the positions were not contested there was no requirement for a vote. Therefore the nominations were proposed by JH and seconded by BO. All were in favour.

BO asked as a point of order if it was mandatory for annual elections to be held for national positions. JH replied that it was and referred him to the FSB's Memorandum and Articles.

DC thanked the committee on behalf of all the nominees and passed the nomination papers to the PM.

10. Policy Priority Reports

a. Crime – Two reports from KWi had been circulated on 1st May 09. In KWi's absence the PM drew the committee's attention to the Crowded Places Consultation. RC asked about the Hazel Blears comment in the KWi report and said that he would like clarification of what terrorist convictions are included, for example whether it included anti-hunt lobby activities. The PM agreed to ask Rosina Robson.

PM

b. Manufacturing – DC reported that the WMBC Manufacturer's group had not met in the last period. DC commented that the VAT deferment policy had been helpful to date, but PS reported on changes in the approach of HMRC in that a request to defer could prompt a VAT inspection/audit. It was agreed that the PM would report this back to the London Office.

PM

DC reported that in his own business he was being asked for more quotes than ever for models coming out in 2011/12.

RC commented on the issue of deferment of the increased Business Rates and the transitional rate system. He said that nothing had been laid before parliament until just before the summer recess. The FSB has asked to meet with DCLG to discuss whether the proposals are workable. Apparently, the Treasury did not tell either BERR or DCLG and no one knows how it will work. Most big businesses are unlikely take the deferment option, but whether small businesses will, remains to be seen.

JB reported on one of his local councils using Citroën vehicles. A discussion followed.

c. Skills – No report had been received. The PM highlighted a request that had come through the One Voice group about a survey on the requirement of graduates by small business and a discussion followed which included:

- PS reported on the erosion of NMW exemptions for students where they are over 21 and still in training.
- Government flagship policies and approach to small businesses
- School leaving age

It was agreed that the PM would send a mass email to West Midlands' members with the survey link.

PM/CU

d. Sub-National Review/Spatial Strategy/Planning – The RSS Phase 2 is currently undergoing Examination in Public. The FSB has not been called to give evidence, however the WMBC have done so.

DC and the PM gave evidence at the Regional Select Committee.

JH reported on Housing Associations refusing to take on private sector dwellings because of poor workmanship. A discussion followed which informed the committee that Housing Associations work to higher standards than private developers, for example insulation is twice as thick and dimensions of dwellings have larger minimum requirements. It was agreed that RC would ask National Policy and the WMBC to consider whether standards should be standardised.

e. Transport – The PM highlighted the section in her report on the new Transport Stakeholder Group she had attended on behalf of James Watkins at the WMBC.

f. Others:

Save our Garages Campaign – The PM updated the committee on the situation since her report was written, in respect of the Motor Vehicle Block Exemption Regulations (MV-BER). DC commented that the EU cannot ignore the Intel and Microsoft situation.

11. Regional Reports:

a. Staffs & W Mids Report – BO gave a verbal report covering the recent budget discussion by the Regional Committee and the strong feelings about honoraria in light of the current economic situation. It was felt that payment levels should be frozen to acknowledge falling business for many members. The EBLO, Colin Stratton had attended the last meeting and there was concern about the recruitment structure. A Regional Golf Day has been arranged on 1st July 09 at Oxley GC in Wolverhampton. DC reported that a lively mix of branch activities is planned and the budget will remain the same as last year.

b. Shropshire, Herefordshire & Worcestershire – A report from RC had been circulated on 15th May 09. RC highlighted the section covering the 3 Counties Show, Young Enterprise and the Nick Clegg meeting.

c. Warwickshire & Coventry – JB gave a verbal report. He reported that the Accord was going well and that 2 councils had signed, with 2 about to. They will be using the Accord to discuss purchasing activities under the Keep Trade Local campaign. Planning is taking place for the Regional Dinner in November, a Golf Day is planned for September and budgets are also the same as last year.

John Hardwick asked if the Regions have separate Policy group in the West Midlands and was informed that they do not. He reported on the situation in the East Midlands where Leicestershire & Northants hold 6 Regional meetings and 6 Regional 'Policy' meetings per year, called FSB Activism meetings. They work well and the other regions are considering adopting the concept. Lincolnshire Region currently hold a Policy meeting every 6 weeks and a Regional meeting every month. BO commented that there is too much ring-fencing of activity in the FSB – everyone should be talking about Policy all the time although he acknowledged that DC had tried to make the Staffs & W Mids Region more policy focused.

RC commented that Shrops, Herefordshire & Worcs covers a large geographical area and only has 3 branches – one for each County, because it is a sparsely populated rural area. A lot of the work is devolved to the Branches because Regional events do not work. The Regional Committee work on an overall plan and within that framework the Branches carry on. However he did report that Policy and general activism has stepped up.

12. AOB

Local Government Election Manifesto – DC reported that the manifesto was now available. Also a new Keep Trade Local leaflet on the Post Bank issues had been published.

The meeting closed at 15:55pm