

**MINUTES OF SHROPSHIRE BUSINESS BOARD MEETING HELD ON
2 NOVEMBER 2009 (4.30 – 6.30 PM)**

Present

Businesses

Mr Roger Belham (Vice-Chairman)	CS Contract Furniture, Whitchurch,
Mr Trevor Benyon	Muller Dairy (UK) Ltd, Market Drayton
Mr Tony Bywater MBE	Salop Leisure Limited, Shrewsbury
Mr Andrew Corbett	PerfectArc Ltd, Ludlow
Dr Geoffrey Davies OBE (Chairman)	McConnel Limited, Ludlow
Mr Arthur Hill	CH Hill & Son, Much Wenlock
	Chair Shropshire Environmental Technologies
Ms Mandy Stoker	

Representatives

Ms Fay Easton	Shropshire Enterprise Partnership Chair Shropshire & Telford Destination Management Partnership (DMP)
Ms Katie Foster	

Mr Greg Molan	Shropshire Learning Network Lead Member for the Local Environment and Economy, Shropshire Council
Cllr David Roberts	

Observer

Ms Kairen Francis	Jobcentre Plus
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Officers

Mr Jake Berriman, Ms Jacqui Casey, Mr Mark Pembleton, Mr Nick Taylor and Mr David Wise	Shropshire Council
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1. Apologies and Welcome

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Ms Amanda Cunningham, Mrs Karen Davies MBE, Mrs Ann Johnson, Mr William Jones, Mr Stuart Kelly, Mr David Ledbury, Mr Robin Morris and Mr Richard Sheehan.

The Chairman reported that all the invitations made to join the Board, following revisions to the membership agreed at the last meeting, had been accepted and he welcomed Katie Foster, Greg Molan and Mandy Stoker to their first meeting.

2. Declarations of Interest

No declarations of interest were made.

3. Minutes

RESOLVED : That the minutes of the last meeting held on 24 September 2009 be agreed as a correct record.

4. Matters arising

4.1 Skills Needs and Provision of Training and Higher Education in Shropshire (Item 3.1)

The Chairman reported that proposals for the expansion of Higher Education (HE) provision in Shropshire had not been selected by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) for taking forward to the full business planning stage. Only six out of the twenty three statements of intent put forward under the New University Challenge initiative had been accepted and none were from the West Midlands.

Greg Molan reported that the Partnership would be meeting with HEFCE on 30 November to discuss why the Shropshire bid was unsuccessful. At this stage it was thought that among the reasons would be difficulties with employer engagement and the fact that, in terms of educational figures, Shropshire was not an identified area of 'special need' in the West Midlands. Shropshire had been outsiders in the bidding process as HEFCE had tended to favour bids on the basis of high disadvantage and population density. However, the HE Partnership developed on the back of the bid was a strong one and other expressions of interest had been received from Higher Education Institutions interested in making investment to improve HE delivery in the county. It was hoped to pursue these by means other than the University Challenge Initiative.

4.2 Business Board Terms of Reference and Membership (Item 8)

Revised terms of reference, including declarations of interest were received.

4.3 Appointment of Vice-Chairman and Business Board representative on the Local Strategic Partnership Leadership Board (Item 9)

The Board noted that Roger Belham had agreed to be Vice-Chairman.

5. Business Board Business Plan – Task and Finish Group reports

5.1 Procurement Group

Jacqui Casey reported on the progress of the Procurement Group which, in receiving information from various sources, had to date:

- Investigated current Shropshire Council procurement systems, where they had agreed a set of monitoring actions to provide more detailed information on local business engagement in tendering opportunities.
- Examined the Council's Procurement Strategy and policy used by officers
- Received feedback on the relevance of available training with a view to providing more and plugging gaps.
- Reviewed best practice from other organisations across the West Midlands.

The Group considered there was a need for additional business input from Board Members and attendance at meetings, particularly to support the local supply chain work.

Any specific actions identified by the Group would be brought back to the Business Board for approval.

With regard to public-sector contracts attention was also drawn to the importance of local firms gaining access to military procurement contracts in Shropshire. It was noted that this issue had been raised previously by Cllr John Hurst-Knight at a meeting with the Minister for the West Midlands, John Healey. Nick Taylor agreed that it should be raised again by the Council.

Officers were advised to contact the NFU's policy adviser and Taxassist Accountants who had a large number of SME contacts for feedback. The importance of reviewing Council paperwork to ensure tender applications were as user-friendly as possible was raised.

5.2 Raising the Profile of Shropshire Group

The Chairman reported that there had been a huge amount of interest from Board members wishing to be involved in this area of work and they would be contacted shortly to attend the first meeting of this Task and Finish Group. Fay Easton requested her name be added to the Group.

The Board received a paper from Mark Pembleton on the unique selling points (USP) of Shropshire and a suggested remit of the Group.

Members pointed out that that websites were not the only method of bringing the USPs of Shropshire to the public's attention. The Muller television advert portraying the Shropshire countryside, the BBC series on The Victorian Farm, Acton Scott and newspaper articles celebrating Darwin's bicentenary had all had considerable impact.

Mention was made of the value of Welcome Host Programmes to both the tourism industry and wider organisations in welcoming visitors.

6. Issues report: Rural Affordable Housing

Jake Berriman, Head of Strategy and Policy, gave a presentation on affordable housing provision in Shropshire and the policy context. He explained that the lack of affordable housing was worst in rural areas where there was the least housing stock and high numbers of people on low incomes. There had been tensions between housing and planning authorities and the new Council were trying to find a uniform approach for delivering affordable housing. Final policies would be incorporated into the Core Strategy of the Local Development Framework. The Interim Planning Guidance sought to maximize opportunities e.g. single plot schemes which allowed people to build their own affordable homes on land that would not normally obtain planning permission, innovative private sector schemes, and small housing sites outside and adjacent to existing villages could also be released for the provision of affordable housing. In negotiating the proportion of social housing with developers the Council also wanted to ensure local builders stayed in business, rather than lose key skills.

In answering questions from Board members he explained that the definition of affordable housing was set out in the Government's Planning Policy Statement 3 which gave a range based on local incomes of people unable to access housing on the open market. With regard to nimbyism attitudes in villages with ageing populations, unwilling to accept additional housing, he explained that one of the roles of his team was to engage with Parish and Town Councils and explain how affordable housing for local needs helped sustain rural communities and that such sites needed to be acceptable against a range of planning criteria. Landowners and sellers needed to be incentivised and one possibility was to give them nomination rights over housing stock, but they should not be able to exercise excessive rights of veto.

Attention was drawn to the fact that Shropshire firms found it difficult to recruit/retain graduates and a member suggested that the possibility of a scheme to address such a sectorial need e.g. through providing a hall of residence, should be investigated.

7. Local Economic Assessment

7.1 Local Economic Assessment Issues paper

Mark Pembleton presented an issues paper on the new statutory duty which would be placed on all top tier local authorities from 1 April 2010 to produce an economic assessment of their areas to reflect the issues that were genuinely affecting businesses and promote economic development. Guidance would be issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government.

With regard to the demographics information a member pointed out that a large number of people in their fifties were starting up new businesses and creating wealth and the statistics should not therefore always be seen in a pessimistic light.

With regard to the section on higher education/skills it was pointed out that at Ironbridge, the University of Birmingham offered post graduate vocational courses.

One member felt that Shropshire had a skilled workforce compared to other areas of the country, noting that there were significantly more people with NVQ Level 4 qualifications than in the West Midlands.

Members agreed that action needed to be taken over infrastructure provision to improve poor quality broadband services in the county. They also felt that the unreliability of the mobile phone network was an issue which needed to be addressed.

Mark undertook to consult the Business Board and other stakeholders in the New Year on the full Draft Economic Assessment for Shropshire.

7.2 Sector Analysis: Agriculture and Supply chain

The Board received a report on agriculture in Shropshire.

In discussing the report Arthur Hill pointed out that the study findings in 2002 would have been affected by the severe consequences for Shropshire farmers of the Foot and Mouth outbreak in the preceding year. He pointed out the importance of farm diversification projects and felt that a food ombudsman was required to benefit consumers and farmers. In relation to challenges, the transmission of bovine tuberculosis from infected badgers to cattle needed to be tackled more effectively and the decline in the dairy industry had been well documented. Concern was also expressed over the Environment Agency's suggested flood alleviation scheme upstream of Shrewsbury which would flood extensive areas of fertile land, and he hoped that it could be discussed in more detail at a future Board meeting. In relation to opportunities the main issues were carbon emissions, the willingness to replace fossil fuels and the development of GM crops. He stressed the vital importance of farming to the local economy, the local environment and landscape.

Nick Taylor responded that the Severn Valley Flood Risk Management Scheme was not now directly linked to the building of the Shrewsbury North West Relief Road. The Environment Agency were considering the viability of the project, which was intended to not only alleviate flooding in Shrewsbury but other downstream towns in Shropshire and beyond into Worcestershire.

It was also noted that farming had a role in encouraging tourism.

8. Shropshire Council Business Grant Scheme

Nick Taylor reported that Shropshire Council had approved the establishment of a Shropshire Business Enterprise Fund which would operate for two years. It was

hoped it would continue if successful and it met the needs of Shropshire businesses. Details of the scheme were set out in the draft leaflet circulated at the meeting.

9. Any other business.

The Chairman reported that Fay Easton had suggested a number of items to be considered at future meetings:

- Broadband provision in the county. The Council's Economic Development Team had recently undertaken research with businesses to better understand and evidence the impact that poor broadband coverage had on the business community of Shropshire. It was agreed that a representative from BT should be invited to attend to discuss the findings.
- Business support to the SME sector in the county, including home-based businesses. A report would be made to the next meeting following Council research in this area to establish the needs of home-based businesses and the support available to small businesses.
- The future of Shropshire's market towns.
- Fay would also provide an update on the result of the Enterprising Britain award at the next meeting.

Andrew Corbett had also suggested that Katie Foster be asked to give the background, priorities, plans and key issues of the Shropshire and Telford Destination Management Partnership. She informed the Board of the Shropshire "Tourism Summit" on the 7 December at the Albrighton Hall Hotel and extended an invitation to all Board members. She also drew attention to the fact that the DMP was providing limited financial support to the Shrewsbury Christmas television advertising campaign and there was a new lottery funding programme for heritage and craft apprenticeships. Details of all would be forwarded to Board Members.

10. Dates of future meeting

The following dates were noted:

25 January 2010
26 April 2010
12 July 2010
18 October 2010.

All meetings would take place at the Shirehall, Shrewsbury, 4.30 p.m. – 6 p.m.