

West Kent Partnership Meeting

The Clocktower Pavilion, Alexandra Suite, Swanley, Thursday 26 January 2012

MINUTES

Present

Cllr Mark Worrall,(Chairman), Cllr Robert Atwood, Williams Benson, Paul Bentley, David Candlin, John Grafik, Peter Fleming, Philip Griffin, Roger House, Paul Lulham, Mark Raymond, Jan van der Velde, Mandy Wynne, Ross Gill, Lee Colyer, Joe Middleton, Julie Beilby, Alan Hewett, Matthew Balfour, Wendy Wood

Apologies

Tony Bartlett, Matthew Nix, Robin Hales, Lesley Bowles, Bill Fearon (John Grafik attends) Owen Baldock (Matthew Balfour attends), David Hughes (Julie Beilby attends), Caroline Shaw, John Cunningham, Brett Maclean, East Sussex Economic Advisory Board

Welcome to New Members

Paul Bentley, Director of Strategy and workforce, Maidstone & Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust Philip Griffin. Skills Funding Agency.

The Chairman suggested that Jon Regan, of Hugh Lowe Farms in Mereworth who is the lead on one of the 4 LEP strategic objectives – strengthen our rural economy - should be invited to attend future meetings. This was agreed.

John Spence who chairs the LEP also to be invited to attend a future meeting.

1. Minutes/Matters arising from 20 October

The Minutes were agreed as an accurate record.
The meeting noted the update on rural broadband at Paper A in the agenda
All other matters arising are covered in Agenda

2. Government Funding Initiatives/Rural Growth Networks – Ross Gill, KCC

Powerpoint attached. Ross attended January meeting last year and updated the meeting on the various funding initiatives resulting from the Autumn Statement and others in the last year and progress on LEP activity.

Rural Growth Network bid – Partners identified that there will be opportunities for West Kent if the bid is successful as Hadlow and East Malling are to be key partners. However, care should be taken to ensure that any bid and subsequent programme assists in the continuation of successful Leader programmes within the South East LEP and does not cut across them.

Both Skills Funding Agency and K College identified opportunities to engage more fully following a successful RGN bid which is effectively seed funding. It was agreed that Paul Hannan of Hadlow College to be invited to next meeting

Kent Employment Programme

This £2M initiative from KCC to help young people into graduate positions and apprenticeships with SMEs was welcomed. However, it was suggested that a more dynamic delivery might be achieved by organisations other than local authorities. It was also commented that as many businesses are having to reduce staff numbers there will have to be a quick and beneficial return on engaging in any programme requiring employers to take on additional staff.

It was suggested that there may be scope to work with VAWK and the Springboard to Success graduate volunteering programme being delivered in Sevenoaks District. Recruits receive experience and training in public, private and voluntary sectors and very good relationships have been forged with all sorts of local employers.

It was suggested that opportunities to link to initiatives such as STEMNET which creates opportunities to inspire young people in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) could be explored as could the role of Education Business Partnerships.

South East LEP

Partners felt that it is clear that with the funding that government is potentially devolving to LEPs comes a complicated and onerous bidding procedure (example RGN bids) often to tight timescales and that the freedom and flexibilities envisaged are not materialising. Furthermore, business are not truly engaged with the LEP with only a few large companies directly involved. Business support organisations such as Chambers and FSBs are expected to represent all SMEs but there are no SMEs directly represented on the LEP. The 50/50 public/private split on LEPs is not being achieved. The rhetoric of the LEP is not being matched in reality and ways must be found to make the work of the LEP relevant to private enterprise.

Action 1: WKP to send letter to Greg Clark in his capacity as Minister of State, Communities and Local Government, Minister for Decentralisation and Tunbridge Wells MP, copied to John Spence, Chair of SELEP, expressing commitment to ideals of LEP and desire to see the initiative work but drawing attention to the reality on the ground of the high level of bureaucracy. Also an issue is the work involved in bringing bids forward quickly often to a very high level of detail, particularly for transport initiatives which involve bidders in high levels of outlay with no guarantee of funding.

Action 2: Ross to provide a compendium listing a range of funding streams with a very brief description of each which WKP and others can circulate and with a particular intention to make this information available to local businesses. Ross will also establish what European funding is currently accessible for West Kent to bid for and in particular whether there is scope to develop a European bid around rural transport.

3. Fair Funding for the South East – Lee Colyer, Chair Kent Finance Officers Group

The Kent finance Officers Group have been involved in work with Local Government Futures on how the South East compares with other areas on funding. Lee presented the findings which demonstrate that the South East is severely discriminated against using the government funding criteria. As a new system is to be introduced Partners agreed it was vital that appropriate representations are made to ensure a more equitable approach for the south east and that within those representations the issue of business rates was also tackled. Also to highlight that the South East has changed dramatically in recent years and this needs to be recognised in the new system.

Action 3: Lee to

- provide concise lobbying information for partners highlighting what is wrong with current system and what needs to be addressed in new system.
- return to April meeting to provide information on the new system
- liaise with all public sector organisations within Kent, particularly Health Service to provide a consolidated view on what is required under the new system and access the economic futures model to suggest an appropriate public sector package
- Draft a letter for WKP to send to West Kent MPs with an overall position statement

4. LEP sub group issues – Mark Raymond (Paper A)

The meeting was asked to consider the draft prospectus commissioned by the LEP sub group. This document is to be used to highlight the areas of common concern across East Sussex and West Kent. It is intentionally short and concise focusing on 4 key areas.

Comments already received since drafting are as follows:

- Transport and A21 in particular should be lead topic and enlarged to include Colts Hill by pass and reinstatement of city service on Maidstone East line
- Broadband should be second topic
- Rural Grant Programme item should focus more on need and less on process, ie the significant need in the rural areas, - perhaps a flavour of some of the improvements in the past.
- Bigger focus on and business support and growth and linkages to RGN

Action 4:

- All partners to consider revised draft (attached) and their perspective on key issues and supply any amendments to Wendy by 20 February - to be kept short.
- William to call a further meeting of East Sussex colleagues once the draft is ready to enable them to have an opportunity to comment further.
- Final draft to be sent to Greg Clark by LEP sub group before adoption

5. Pathways to Enterprise Interreg Bid (Paper B) – Wendy Wood

Partners noted that the bid could link to Kent Employment Programme.

Action 5: Partners endorsed SDC as accountable body for the project and agreed that the Chairman should provide a letter of support for the bid.

6. Microcentre for Business – Roger House

The presentation is attached to these Minutes. The target is to support at least 120 companies on a one:one basis and up to a further 300 through workshop activity. Success will be measured by increased turnover and jobs/apprenticeship places created. Partners welcomed the programme and the support it will deliver to micro-businesses.

Roger requested funding from the 3 councils to deliver the programme in support of rural businesses and will supply the relevant information for their consideration. It was noted however, that the councils would need to consider the support they were already giving to all such business support initiatives to avoid any duplication.

7. Transport Group update - Paul Lulham

Highways

A21 – Negotiations continue. KCC and E Sussex CC have committed to underwrite any increase in spend above £70M and offered to fund the necessary public inquiries. The DfT has said it will look at the whole of the A21 corridor before making any final decision on the Bexhill-Hastings link. This is expected in March.

Lower Thames crossing – this was announced in the Autumn Statement and KCC have a seat on the stakeholder group who will be exploring the various options over the next 12 months followed by a 6 month consultation period. Should the link be East of Dartford this will have a significant impact on the capacity of A227 and A228 at Colts Hill and this issue will be raised.

Buses

Arriva have committed that from summer 2012 all buses on Pembury hospital route will have low floor access. KCC are involved in wider discussion around transport to Pembury involving volunteer drivers and any potential role for Kent Karrier services.

The DfT guidance on the Better Bus Area Fund states that bids from 'conurbations and large urban areas' will be preferred, of which there are none in Kent or Medway under the definition provided. Given the quantity of data required and the limited time to submit bids, KCC is currently discussing internally whether or not this would be a worthwhile exercise.

Rural bus services are failing to provide a satisfactory level of rural access and some services currently operated on a non-commercial (ie, subsidised) basis may have potential to be developed as commercial services.

The Local Transport Act gave local transport authorities the power to establish Statutory Quality Partnership Schemes (SQPS). Under an SQPS, authorities may set minimum bus service quality standards on certain corridors, in return for complementary investment in supporting infrastructure (eg, bus priority measures, improved waiting environment etc). KCC intends to introduce a SQPS on the A20 between Leybourne and Allington to promote modal shift and improved air quality on this key strategic corridor into Maidstone. If successful, this model may be rolled out to other parts of West Kent.

Trains

Although the annual fare increase was slightly lower than feared, with RPI +1% imposed rather than the anticipated +3%, fare rises in West Kent have still been disproportionately high. More commuter coach services are now in service so possibly a tipping point is being reached.

Services into London Bridge are already experiencing delays and this is a very serious issue for the West Kent economy. Poor services over the next 5 years while remodelling takes place could lead to the loss of commuters to live in other areas. The remodelling however will improve capacity and journey time reliability for commuters to Charing Cross and Cannon Street and facilitate the introduction of Thameslink services to Tunbridge Wells and Maidstone East.

Draft specification for new South East franchise will be published later this year.

High Speed 2 has been announced linking London to Birmingham. There is potential for High Speed 1 to connect with High Speed 2 so that a direct link could run from Ebbsfleet to Birmingham on domestic services.

Gatwick – a full consultation will run from March on future airport capacity in the South East. Gatwick Airport are currently consulting on their master plan to grow to 40M passengers from current level of 32M with just one runway. This has implications for residents in the Edenbridge/Cowden area.

Action 6: Paul to

- draft a further letter of support from WKP on A21 at a time he deems appropriate.
- draft letter at an appropriate time on rail fares and services for West Kent commuters
- update the next meeting on where city coach services users are parking their vehicles

8. Pembury Hospital transport forum (Paper C) Paul Bentley

The Chairman mentioned for the record that he is a non-executive director of the acute Trust.

Integrating voluntary driver transport as part of the transport provision to Pembury hospital was an initiative of this Partnership who were in a unique position to be able to facilitate discussion between all providers and the NHS Trust at a meeting held on 18 January.

The hospital at Pembury has handled 80,000 patients in the 4 months it has been open and ensuring that all non-emergency patients arrive relaxed and comfortable for their appointments is a priority of the Trust. The meeting identified a real way forward by melding public and voluntary transport provision in a way which would allow Pembury Hospital to meet its planning obligations and at the same time ensure that the best possible service is being provided to patients and other users.

Further scoping is now underway and a meeting is envisaged towards the end of February.

Serving community transport needs in the most cost-effective and quality assured way is the objective. Partners commented that there has been huge progress in scoping the provision since discussions on this issue were first initiated and to see recognition that with a small amount of additional funding the voluntary sector can deliver much improved service provision. Tribute was paid to the Chairman for his leadership in steering negotiations so capably.

The Joint Transport Board in Tunbridge Wells are likely to have a special meeting on Monday 27 February to which a range of parties will be invited around Pembury Hospital but details of the debate is as yet not known

9. Any Other Business

It was agreed that a standing invitation should be issued to all the Chairs of the new GP Consortia operating within West Kent to attend WKP meetings.

10. Dates of next meetings – 10am-noon, followed by sandwich lunch

- Thursday 26 April 2012 – Chiddingstone Castle
- Thursday 19 July 2012 – Chartwell
- Thursday 18 October 2012