

West Kent Partnership Conference – Stimulating Economic Growth, 18 January 2013, East Malling Conference Centre

Keynote Speaker

Rt Hon Michael Fallon, Minister of State for Business and Enterprise and MP for Sevenoaks
Chairman – Peter Fleming, Chairman, West Kent Partnership

Panel 1 – South East Local Economic Partnership (SELEP)

- Susan Priest, Director, South East Local Enterprise Partnership
- Jon Regan, Hugh Lowe Farms, Lead for LEP Rural Working Group
- Simon Parker, New Local Government Network (NLGN)

Panel 2 – West Kent and East Sussex Leaders

- Paul Carter, Leader, Kent County Council
- Matthew Lock, East Sussex County Council
- Carl Maynard, Leader, Rother District Council
- Bob Standley, Leader, Wealden District Council
- Nicolas Heslop, Leader, Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council
- David Jukes, Leader, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

There was falling snow in East Sussex and a risk of significant snowfall forecast for Kent on the morning of the event. A number of delegates deemed it unwise to travel. 132 delegates were confirmed although attendance on the day was 84. Only a small number of completed feedback forms were received but these were overwhelmingly positive as were verbal comments from delegates at and after the event.

Main Outcomes

- **Bid now under development for a Regional Growth Fund bid for a programme to provide access to low cost finance for West Kent and East Sussex SMEs**
- **Closer working with East Sussex on shared issues**
- **Engagement with Regional (LEP) and National (Michael Fallon) Government on local issues**
- **Articulation of issues impacting on business in West Kent and East Sussex**
- **Greater business awareness of role of Local Enterprise Partnerships and County and District councils in supporting business**
- **Promotion of work of West Kent Partnership in Courier Newspapers – lead editorial in Business Supplement, January 24.**

West Kent Partnership – Identified Action

- **Bid to Regional Growth Fund** for a programme to provide access to finance for SMEs.
- **Business support offer** - Co-ordination of Business Support offer in the area
- **LEP Business Liaison** South East Local Enterprise Partnership to review how to communicate effectively with business and remain business focused
- **Revitalisation of town centres** to focus on and accommodate their changing role with less emphasis on traditional shopping and greater tourism/leisure provision to alter the High Street experience.
- **Business Rates** - need to ensure businesses are not put at risk by unfair local taxation. Business rates are a significant cost to SMEs and continue to lobby for scope for rates to be set locally.
- **Parking charges** need to be carefully handled to ensure town centre trade is supported on one hand but also to ensure proper management of car parking to enable shoppers to park easily.
- **Planning issues** can effect business development but early discussions between planners and developers can be effective in resolving problems. The adoption of clear planning policies was also a factor in avoiding protracted planning conflicts=
- **Rural Economy** – continue work on bringing super fast broadband to rural areas and attracting young people to landbased careers
- **Support Young People** into work – Support initiatives for NEETs (not in employment, education or training) to access employment or training
- **Transport** – West Kent Partnership Transport sub group to work with partners on student/apprenticeship travel options

Keynote Speaker – Michael Fallon

- Government funding for LEPs to build capacity and develop strategic plan
- EU structural funds aligned to LEPs growth strategies
- UK gap of 10,000 engineers pa
- Investment in broadband - £45Bn across country, £100M for rural
- Small business tax relief in UK one of the world's most competitive

SELEP Panel

- LEP to operate where can add value, avoid bureaucracy
- EU investment fund submission being prepared - £200M
- Local authorities can broker creative commerciality – a role as place shapers, not just service delivery
- Listen to business issues through Chambers, IOD, FSB, WKP, LEP working groups etc
- Communication between LEP and business important
- How to make countryside more attractive to young people?

- Local approach to broadband provision required

Leader Panel – Support for business

- Avoid extra burdens on business - ie regulation
- Appropriately skilled labour pool
- Support town centres – keep empty properties, presentable, work with Landlords to reduce rent on unoccupied premises
- Local procurement and prompt payment policies
- More flexibility required for local government on business rates
- Government management of large infrastructure projects too lengthy and unwieldy
- Planning appeal process too lengthy
- Continuing pressure to deliver A21 improvements to unlock local development
- Policies to ensure redundant industrial land retained for business use
- Support Young People into work through initiatives such as Kent Jobs for Kent young people – employer subsidy

Issues identified by delegates as impacting on Businesses

Business Support

- Provision of start up finance for small and micro businesses
- How can we better create a “joined up” supportive environment for new and existing businesses to help them grow to include finance investment, incentives, etc?
- Are local authorities doing everything they can to fill empty shops?
- An environment nurturing micro/small business from start to growth – business support, affordable workplace, broadband, private/public Finance
- Signposting and information for business support programmes
- Marketing
- Small business support
- Need to support home-based businesses
- Why is there very little outsourced from the City to Kent?
- Can you promise to deliver two or three practical actions that will help businesses in West Kent in the next 12 months?
- What can we do to retain existing businesses in West Kent?
- What should central government do more to help the West Kent economy and what should it do less?
- High tax stifling economic growth
- Could there be a communication channel – business to business – Media charge for advertising
- Are virtual currencies and trading websites such as www.wetradeit.com helpful for small businesses to trade without risk to cash flow?
- ‘Teach a man to fish you feed him for a life time.’ Why are government initiatives to promote small business growth focused on short-term interventions rather than long-term sustainability?
- What assistance is available to start up businesses?
- How can more SMEs become aware of the £200 million Growth Accelerator scheme?

- Are local authorities doing everything they can to liaise with rental agencies to fill empty shops with e.g pop up shops to improve the look of High Streets?
- BSK works with ambitious companies who want to grow. What is the panel's view as to how we raise ambition and encourage more owners/managers in WK to go for growth?

Skills

- Youth unemployment – what opportunities are being created for young people 16-24?
- What are the WKP doing about developing academia/industry collaboration?
- More support for disabled people
- How will we support the 458 NEET young people in West Kent?

Planning

- How can planning and infrastructure investment help deliver economic growth?
- What is being done to help businesses with planning applications affected by the Ashdown Forest Special Area of Conservation
- Affordable housing and rental monitoring "30 years old and still at home"

Transport

- Cost of travel for young people is too expensive
- Student and apprentice transport from rural areas
- How can we improve public transport in rural areas?
- Connectivity between bus and rail
- Will funding be available to community transport organisations attempting to fill the gap created by reduced council funding of commercial operations?

Broadband

- The region's priority is for a reliable and stable broadband service. Why dilute that with other infrastructure projects?
- How much pressure can really be brought to bear on the telecoms companies to spend the billions needed to upgrade the hardware in order to achieve the speeds of broadband we all so urgently need?
- When will broadband be fast enough?
- Effective broadband in Crowborough – when?
- Lack of broadband speed in rural areas
- How can broadband providers work together to provide free public broadband?
- When can we expect everyone in towns and rural areas to have at least a reasonable and consistent broadband coverage

Rural

- What is the LEP's strategic approach to helping rural businesses in this area?
- What are the LEPs plans for engaging with rural stakeholders – from across private public and civil society sectors – so as to help shape the proposed EU financed growth programme in Essex, Kent and E Sussex for period 2014-20?