

Herefordshire Partnership Board

“Extra” meeting to discuss the economic downturn and its impact on Herefordshire

Thursday 8th January 2009

2 pm Hereford Room, Plough Lane, Hereford

Present:

Roger Phillips (Chair)	Herefordshire Council
Chris Bull	Herefordshire Council and PCT
Brian Atherton	Chamber of Commerce
Gary Woodman	Chamber of Commerce
Richard Gething	Herefordshire Association of Local Councils
Richard Betterton	Third Sector
Mark Turner	West Mercia Constabulary
Angela Smith	Economic Development and Enterprise Partnership
Mark July	Environment Partnership
Geoff Hughes	Community Safety and Drugs Partnership
Akeem Ali	Health and Wellbeing Partnership

Also present:

Chris Bucknell	Herefordshire Partnership Team
Jane Jones	Herefordshire Partnership Team
Gill Swaithes	Herefordshire Council Research Team
Phil Weaver	Jobcentre Plus
Natalia Silver	Herefordshire Council
Phil Edwards	West Mercia Constabulary

Apologies received from:

Bill Bloxsome	Environment Partnership
Mike Ashton	Chamber of Commerce
Helen Braithwaite	Government Office West Midlands
Sharon Menghini	Children’s Trust
Jo Newton	NHS Herefordshire

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Welcome, Introductions; Purpose of the meeting

The Leader welcomed everyone and invited introductions around the table. He then outlined the purpose of the meeting, and explained the role of the LSP in sharing information about the challenges being experienced in Partner organisations as a result of the economic downturn, and ways in which Partner organisations might be able to assist in practical terms.

There will be enormous financial constraints, resources will need to be targeted even more closely to their best effect, and a sense of realism will be required.

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Setting the context

The Leader introduced the three speakers:

Gill Swaithes (Research Team Herefordshire Council)

Phil Weaver (Job Centre Plus)

Brian Atherton (Ross and District Chamber of Commerce)

Each speaker gave a presentation, which included statistical and anecdotal evidence illustrating how the current recession is impacting on Herefordshire, particularly on the local economy.

(NB Information for each of the three presentations was distributed to those present)

Agenda Item 4 Information Sharing (All)

A discussion followed during which those present were invited to raise their particular areas of concern, questions and suggestions. These included:

- ◆ Impact of reduced revenue to Herefordshire Council due to fewer planning applications, building controls and car parking. As a result of the slowdown in house building, fewer Affordable Homes may be built as these are usually on the back of private housing development.
- ◆ Health issues – notably the increase of those suffering mental ill health due to job loss, debt issues, homelessness.
- ◆ The types of information being requested from the Economic Development Team is broader and changing e.g. access to capital funding to enable diversity where they may have financed schemes themselves.
- ◆ Third Sector organisations are experiencing increased demand, especially in the areas of mediation and advice. There are concerns over reducing returns from trust funds, however, there are also increasing number of volunteers who may be retired or unemployed, with good skill levels. There is particular concern over rising overhead costs.
- ◆ Support is required to assist the self-employed – previous recessions have shown an increase in this sector following a down-turn – possibly as people utilise their redundancy payments.
- ◆ Public order issues and shifts in crime patterns may occur during a time of joblessness and recession. This can manifest itself through increased vandalism, and a breakdown in community cohesion. There are practical difficulties associated with homelessness, e.g. reported overnight break-ins to empty buildings for shelter.
- ◆ The Small Business sector raised the issue of the use of bailiffs by local authorities and requested that those businesses with a good paying track record should be allowed some flexibility. All not doom and gloom – some businesses were reporting buoyant trading. An offer for Mike Cherry (National Vice Chairman of the Federation of Small Businesses and a member of the Rover Task Force) to address the Economic Development Group was made and accepted.
- ◆ The quality of life in Herefordshire is still good (low crime rate, good schools etc) and these should be promoted.
- ◆ Enhanced local procurement opportunities to be explored and pursued.
- ◆ Alternative methods of transport, especially for those seeking employment for whom a car is not viable, to be promoted.

Chris Bull outlined some finance information. Public finance will reduce in 2010 -11. Whatever the current impact is, this will continue for the longer term, not least because the returns on investment income by Local Authorities is so low. The impact of the reduction in personal income for older people (and the County has a high proportion of older people) should be noted, particularly in respect of people's ability to afford social care. The culture of having things now, as opposed to waiting has resulted from higher customer expectation and this will be a significant challenge for the LA and NHS. Although there is sympathy for businesses with cash-flow problems and some flexibility in payment of Business Rates may be possible, it must be clear that payment of this tax is not optional.

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How can Herefordshire Partnership respond to the issues to minimize the impact to the economy and the community?

The Board concluded that there was a need to look at specific areas:

- ◆ Enhanced local procurement opportunities
- ◆ Tourism (potential to the County, especially with the low £ and the possibility of tourists taking UK breaks)
- ◆ Business Support – specifically small businesses and new business growth
- ◆ Ensuring there are 'safety net' advice services readily available for the community and for small businesses
- ◆ Effective signposting for businesses and the community
- ◆ The need to identify what is working well and celebrate these areas
- ◆ Retail – to avoid town centre blight and support independent retailers
- ◆ Support training to prepare for the up-turn in the economy

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The Next Steps

It was proposed that the Economic Development Group should develop an action plan, to be presented at the next Herefordshire Partnership Board meeting on 11th February 2009.

It was proposed that Phil Weaver, Job Centre Plus, should become a co-opted member of Herefordshire Partnership Board

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Date of the next meeting

Wednesday 11th February 2009, Kindle Centre