

MINUTES of the meeting of Social & Economic Development Scrutiny Committee held at Maylord Orchards Meeting Room, Hereford on Wednesday, 14th January, 2004 at 6.00 p.m.

Present: Councillor A.C.R. Chappell (Chairman)
Councillor J. Stone (Vice Chairman)

Co-opted Members Councillors: Mrs. P.A. Andrews, H. Bramer, Mrs. S.P.A. Daniels, J.G.S. Guthrie, B. Hunt, G. Lucas and A.L. Williams
D. Stevens (Chamber of Commerce).

Councillor G.V. Hyde, Cabinet Member (Economic Development, Markets and Property), Councillor J.C. Mayson, Cabinet Member (Rural Regeneration and Smallholdings) and Councillor R.M. Wilson, Cabinet Member (Environment Highways & Transportation) were in attendance.

44. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Cllr. M .R. Cunningham, Mrs E. Newman (HALC), Mr P. Thomas (NFU), Cllr P.G. Turpin, Cllr R.V. Stockton (Cabinet Member – Community & Social Development).

45. NAMED SUBSTITUTES (IF ANY)

Councillor Mrs P. A. Andrews substituted for Councillor M. R. Cunningham and Councillor G. Lucas substituted for Councillor P.G. Turpin.

46. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

47. CONSIDERATION OF THE ECONOMIC POSITION OF HEREFORD

The Committee considered the economic impact of recent events in Hereford City and invited comments on possible ways forward.

The Chairman explained the remit of the Scrutiny Committee and outlined the format of the meeting.

The Chairman invited **Mr A. Tector, Head of Environmental Health and Trading Standards**, to report upon the first notification of the outbreak of Legionnaires disease and subsequent events.

Mr Tector reported that the outbreak had been notified on 6th November with 4 confirmed cases. He briefly described the method of contracting the disease and likely sources. He stated that Legionnaires disease was not a 'notifiable disease' to the local authority. However, having been informed of the outbreak the Authority, which had some level of expertise in this field, had worked jointly with the Primary Care Trust (PCT), the Health Protection Agency and the Health and Safety Executive.

He informed the Committee that a large inspection and sampling programme had commenced on 7th November which had included cooling towers at Bulmers. Results from the samples had only taken up to one week to get back from the laboratories. During this time the Local Authority had brought in a leading microbiologist and Bulmers had also employed a leading expert. Bulmers had been extremely co-operative throughout.

A cooling tower at Bulmers was identified as a suspected source and was closed down on 12th November. However, the tower could not be confirmed as the source until the results of a second sample were known. The outbreak was controlled through the Local Authority Emergency Planning Team and a press contact centre was established at a very early stage. Except for one or two press releases specific to the Local Authority, all press releases were co-ordinated and issued as joint statements with the other agencies.

When questioned about the attitude and level of the press involvement, Mr Tector reported that from the outset the various agencies were conscious that the facts should be made public. Generally the press reporting had been good and supportive. However, a number of regional articles and radio broadcasts were less helpful.

He thought the other agencies had worked well, particularly as this had been the first major outbreak for the newly formed Health Protection Agency to deal with. He did, however, express serious concerns that the Legionnaires disease was not a 'notifiable disease, and that new legislation may move the control and co-ordination of such an outbreak to a regional body. He commented that the IT expertise in the Council, particularly the use of the Geographical Information System (GIS) system, had considerably reduced the time searching for the source. The Cabinet Member (Rural Regeneration and Smallholdings) commented that this contrasted with the national action in relation to Foot and Mouth demonstrating the benefits of local management.

Recognising that the first few hours of such an outbreak were crucial the Committee questioned how soon the emergency policy had been implemented. Mr Tector replied that the Local Authority had reacted within hours in getting inspections and testing underway and set up the press centre.

The Chairman thanked Mr Tector for his detailed report.

The Chairman then invited **Juliette Coard, Manager of The Maylord Orchards Shopping Centre and Chair of the City Centre Retail Group**, to give an overview of the impact on the retail sector following the outbreak of Legionnaires disease and subsequent economic events affecting the City.

Ms Coard reported that within days of the outbreak, City centre traders were reporting a 30 to 40 % drop in trade, which was particularly significant for the small trader. She acknowledged that there had been a national reduction in trade figures. However, locally the drop in shopper numbers had been confirmed by the reduced car parking and footfall figures. The City Centre Retail Group had decided to support publicity events to attract trade back. She commented that once trade was lost to other centres i.e. Gloucester or Worcester, it was very difficult to get back.

When asked about the number of Welsh shoppers and visitors to the market she commented that, while no statistics were available, retailers across the retail sector had reported significantly reduced numbers of customers.

When asked for her suggestions on the way forward she suggested that the various sectors e.g. retail and tourism, should co-ordinate their publicity to market Hereford as a whole package.

Acknowledging that a parking concessions had been made on Merton Meadow car park, the increase in car parking charges, coupled with the doubts over significant regeneration projects, did not encourage a positive economic outlook.

The Chairman thanked Ms Coard for her views.

The Chairman invited **Mr G. Anstee, trading as Ambience, Church Street, Hereford** to give his views on the economic impact of recent events.

Mr Anstee was one of 300 plus small independent retailers in the City. Mr Anstee commented that, based on a straw poll of the Church Street area, traders were reporting a drop of between 20 and 50% in trade. This had a dramatic effect, particularly on the small trader. Profits during the run up to Christmas helped to sustain a business during quieter times.

When asked whether this drop in trade would affect his Business Plan he commented that it would be affected as his profits for the year were probably down by 10%.

The Chairman, referring to comments received prior to the meeting, invited Mr Anstee to comment on the Christmas entertainment in High Town. Mr Anstee's personal view was that, while it may bring a degree of income, he was not in favour of the fairground type of entertainment particularly at this time of year. He also thought there was no collective input to the use of High Town or the promotion of Hereford. He wished to see the further promotion of Farmers Markets.

The meeting acknowledged the efforts of the City Centre Retail Group and in particular the work of Juliette Coard as Chair of the Group.

The Chairman thanked Mr Anstee for his views.

The Chairman invited **Mr W. Lyons, The Chamber Area Manager for Hereford**, to comment on the discussion so far and the Chamber of Commerce perspective.

Mr Lyons thought that following the disease, Hereford was left with the psychological problem of persuading the public that it was safe to come to the City. This was on top of the already fragile state of the local economy. He referred to an article printed in August 2003 in which he painted an optimistic picture for Hereford, referring to the many projects or schemes such as the City of Living Crafts, Rotherwas Access Road, Flood Defence that were promised. However since Advantage West Midlands (AWM) had cut back its funding, the economy of the City was now hanging by its fingernails. Herefordshire had some good businesses but part of the economy was based on declining industry. Projects such as the Rotherwas Access Road provided an impetus with out which the business economy would contract.

He wanted to see the whole community unified behind the economic business case for Herefordshire. A balance needed to be struck between the rural nature of the County and the need to improve the infrastructure, attract 21st Century businesses and generate economic prosperity. Herefordshire had a strong partnership philosophy, which should be built on and used to ensure Herefordshire's future prosperity, particularly through agencies like AWM.

He agreed that transport improvements were crucial for the development of business and tourism.

The lack of success with the City of Living Crafts project would force a rethink on the management of the City Centre.

The Director of Policy and Community commented upon the AWM funding position and acknowledged that some of the projects hadn't fully met the AWM criteria and had therefore missed out on funding. She also commented that constructive discussions were continuing with AWM in moving other projects forwards.

The Chairman thanked Mr Lyons for his remarks.

The Chairman invited **comments from the floor of the meeting**. The following are the principal comments made:

- In response to questions regarding improvements to the infrastructure and pedestrian areas of High Town/Eign Gate, the Cabinet Member (Highways and Transportation) reported that part of the funding for the City of Living Crafts would have enabled improvements to be made to the City Centre. The Authority were still looking to make the improvements, however, funding would be at the expense of other projects.
- The Cabinet Member (Highways and Transportation) reported that a Major Scheme funding bid for Rotherwas Access Road had been made in July 2003 but failed to obtain a commitment from government. Government had raised a number of questions and therefore a revised bid would be submitted in July 2004. If the revised bid were successful it would provide funds from April 2005, ensuring work could continue to the original programme.
- That Arctic Circle had invested in its business at Rotherwas in the expectation that a bypass would be built. The business now wished to create a further 25 jobs at the Rotherwas site but had decided, on business grounds, to locate the jobs in South Wales.
- In response to questions regarding the funding of the City Centre Partnership, and the employment of a City Centre Manager, Mr G. Hughes, Head of Community and Economic Development, reported that the Authority were working with the partnership and contributed to its funding. Mr Lyons reported that the Partnership had intended to employ a Manager as part of the City of Living Crafts. The Partnership were now looking to generate income from other sources.
- While the economy of the retail centre of the City was important this could only be improved if the public could gain better access to it otherwise shoppers would go elsewhere. A new bridge or bypass was essential.
- Businesses, the general public and the Authority needed to lobby the government on the issues which had been raised.

The Chairman introduced Mr N. Hudson from Advantage West Midlands (AWM) Western Region and invited him to comment on behalf of AWM.

Mr Hudson reported that significant funding had come to this part of the region and that AWM were funding a lot of good local projects. However, from AWM's perspective these projects portrayed a mixed message. There did not seem to be a clear vision of the direction for Herefordshire over the next 10 to 15 years.

Regarding the Rotherwas Access Road he commented that a case had to be made that it would provide 'value added' benefits.

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The Chairman spoke of the difficulty of reviving a depressed local economy and commented that it wasn't only the inner-City areas that had deprived areas. He repeated the call for the County to work together to lobby AWM and the government for further economic assistance.

In closing the Chairman thanked everyone for their contribution to the meeting and stated that the issue would be discussed at the next Scrutiny meeting and that a report would be presented to Cabinet.

The meeting ended at 8.05 p.m.

CHAIRMAN

