

# EXECUTIVE

Minutes of the special meeting held on Monday 22 December 2008 at the Town Hall, Royal Leamington Spa at 7.20pm.

**PRESENT:** Councillor Michael Doody (Chairman); Councillors Mrs Bunker, Caborn, Mrs Grainger, Hammon, Kinson, Kirton, Shilton and White.

**ALSO PRESENT:** Councillor Crowther (Labour Group Observer); Councillor De-Lara-Bond (Liberal Democrat Group Observer); Councillor Gifford (Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Committee); and Councillor Dean (Chair of Audit and Resources Scrutiny Committee).

(Councillor Dean substituted for Councillor Mrs Knight as Chair of Audit and Resources Scrutiny Committee).

## 704. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

## 705. RESPONDING TO THE CREDIT CRUNCH

The Executive considered a report from Economic Development and Regeneration and Revenues and Customer Services detailing how the Council could undertake a leadership role to support local communities and businesses during the uncertainty created by the economic downturn and the financial 'credit crunch'.

The economic downturn had been sudden and although Warwick District was better placed than others to withstand its impact, many residents and businesses were already feeling the affects. The post-Christmas period was likely to be difficult for many citizens and it was felt that the Council should act quickly to assume a leadership role within the communities it serves, by maximising the information and support available to residents and businesses through its direct service provision and by co-ordinating the work of other partner agencies.

The impact of the global financial downturn was continuing to have a significant impact on the national and local economy. On a local basis it appeared that intelligence gathering on the status of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) was weak, which meant that there was a risk that SMEs were struggling to continue trading or were to cease trading without an awareness of the support and help that may be open to them. It was also apparent that individuals were not aware of the help that may be available.

An easy reference guide to services would go some way to resolving the current issues, especially if it was effectively directed to business and householders throughout the District. This could be achieved by using the business rates register and the householder information held on the Council tax

## **EXECUTIVE MINUTES (Continued)**

database. The effectiveness of the guide could be maximised by ensuring that key partners, with direct contact with local residents and businesses, had access to the guide.

A 'credit crunch' section on the Council's website was to be established and maintained with up-to-the-minute information and advice. Website advice would be easy to access and could have a significant impact in getting the message across. The Council's website currently received around 50,000 unique visits per month. One Stop Shops and road shows offered additional ways of getting the information across to the local community, building on the Council's commitment to make its services easily accessible and convenient.

The actions proposed in response to the current financial downturn should be considered as part of the wider commitment of Warwick District Council to economic development. The Enterprise Hub was scheduled to start operating from the early part of 2009 and would offer direct support and opportunities for the creation of new enterprises and jobs. To support those facilities, the Council had set up an Enterprise Team, which would work with West Midlands Business Link, the Regional Agency providing support to SME businesses.

It was important that the Council took a leadership role and ensured that residents and local business had access to appropriate support and advice. The Council would continue to work closely with partners and ensure that there was an effective stream of information that was targeted locally so that they would be able to access help and support (such as, the Chamber of Commerce seminars, etc).

The Joint Audit and Resources & Overview and Scrutiny Committees asked the Executive to consider the following comments:

1. The Executive be asked to consider whether it is the best way to spend the money on distributing the leaflet District wide. The Council should be targeting where our resources are going and in the initial stages, should be directing them at businesses;
2. The Executive consider making an offer to the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) of £30,000 to aid their services during the economic downturn; and
3. The Executive be asked to consider further ways of saving money so that future funding may be released to aid those affected by the credit crunch.

The Executive took into consideration the above comment under 1 above but felt that this could possibly miss out some businesses and individuals and therefore did not agree with this view.

The Executive considered the comment within 2, but felt they could not support it because the CAB had not approached the Council for additional funding, however, it was agreed that a letter would be sent to the Government and local Members of Parliament in support of CAB and their increased financial burden at this time during the 'credit crunch'.

## **EXECUTIVE MINUTES (Continued)**

The Executive were in total agreement with the observation above within 3, and agreed to add it to their resolutions.

The Executive wished to congratulate the Chief Executive for his positive reaction in these troublesome times and also thanked the officers for the report.

### **RESOLVED** that

- (1) the use of £10,000 of unallocated 2008/2009 economic development revenue budget and £20,000 from the contingency budget, be approved, in order to:
  - a) prepare and distribute a 'credit crunch' guide to services which would be mailed directly to all business and householders within the District;
  - b) establish a 'credit crunch' zone on the Council website setting out appropriate support and advice which would be available;
  - c) make the 'credit crunch' guide available at Riverside House and in the One Stop Shops to ensure that customers can access advice and support quickly from one source;
  - d) support a 'credit crunch partnership' which brings all organisations together to ensure that there is an effective and co-ordinated response; and
  - e) increase funding to enhance advice to businesses in general and in particular the small/medium sized, independent and rural businesses;
- (2) further ways of saving money be considered by the Executive, so that future funding may be released to aid those affected by the 'credit crunch';
- (3) the Citizens Advice Bureau's (CAB) situation, be monitored by the Executive and a letter be sent to the Government and local Members of Parliament in support of CAB and their increased burden during the 'credit crunch';
- (4) the expenditure for the production and distribution of separate 'credit crunch' leaflets for businesses and householders across the whole district, be approved;
- (5) the staff at Warwickshire Direct and One Stop Shops to be given full training to enable them to advise clients appropriately;

## **EXECUTIVE MINUTES (Continued)**

- (6) the potential for the next issue of the Corporate Focus magazine to be used to promote the message and for it to produced and distributed earlier than originally planned be investigated;
- (7) the Chief Executive be asked to investigate the possibility of collecting Business Rates over 12 months rather than 10 months as at present, to aid those businesses struggling to meet payments;
- (8) co-funding the printing and distribution of the leaflets across the whole District, be investigated; and
- (9) the Council should continue to make a positive reaction and lead the approach in response to the economic downturn affecting Warwick District.

(The meeting ended at 8.20pm)