

SCOTTISH BORDERS COUNCIL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

MINUTE of Meeting of the EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE held in the Council Chamber, Council Headquarters, Newtown St Boswells, TD6 0SA on Tuesday, 3 November, 2015 at 10.00 am

Present:- Councillors S Aitchison (Chairman – Education Business), S Bell (Chairman – Economic Development Business), D Parker, (Chairman – Other Business), C Bhatia, M J Cook (from para.2.1), G Edgar, J Mitchell, D Moffat, D Paterson, F Renton, R Smith.

Also Present:- Councillors I Gillespie, G Logan, A Nicol, W McAteer, S Marshall, S Mountford.

Apologies:- Councillors J Brown, V Davidson.

In Attendance:- Depute Chief Executive (People), Chief Officer Economic Development, Corporate Transformation and Services Director, Service Director Children & Young People, Service Director Regulatory Services, Business Gateway Manager, Funding & Project Officer, Clerk to the Council, Democratic Services Officer (J Turnbull).

EDUCATION BUSINESS

Present:- Mrs J Aitchison, Mr J Walsh
Apologies:- Mr G Donald, Ms A Ferhai.

1. **CHAIRMAN**

Councillor Aitchison chaired the meeting for consideration of the Education Business. He welcomed Mrs Aitchison and Mr Walsh to this section of the Executive meeting and passed on apologies on behalf of Mr Graeme Donald and Alison Ferhai.

MEMBER

Cllr Cook joined the meeting during consideration of the following item.

2. **HOBKIRK PRIMARY SCHOOL 2.1** There had been circulated copies of a report by the Service Director Children and Young People proposing changes to the status of Hobkirk Primary School in that it be mothballed for a temporary period and that the decision to do so be reviewed within 12 months. The report outlined the background to the falling pupil roll at Hobkirk Primary School, which had resulted in placing requests from parents of the last seven pupils attending the school being granted, leaving no pupils at the school. Arrangements for accommodating the pupils within Denholm Primary School were described in the report and included transport, staffing and the educational and social benefits to be achieved through the process. The Statutory Guidance issued pursuant to the Schools Consultation (Scotland) Act 2010 recognised that on occasions a Local Authority might consider it appropriate to mothball a school. This decision did not need to be subject to the formal requirements of that Act. However, the guidance emphasised that mothballing was temporary and any decision to do so must be kept under review. The Service Director Children and Young People, Ms Donna Manson, advised that parents had identified a number of concerns relating to the size of Hobkirk School and the effect on their children's education. Their children had been attending extra curriculum activities at Denholm Primary School and enjoyed the socialisation of these group events. As a result of discussions all parents made placing requests, all of which had been

granted. Arrangements were then made for the children to attend Denholm Primary School. Engagement with parents of pre-school children had also taken place in Hobkirk and their preference was for their children to attend Denholm Primary School. Ms Manson continued that the new Curriculum for Excellence had an impact on the parents' choice. In answer to Members' questions, Ms Manson clarified that transport for the seven children to Denholm Primary School had been agreed as a management exception as an interim measure and officers would re-engage with those parents of pupils who had already transferred previously. However, transport would not be provided to schools outwith the catchment area. During the interim period the Headteacher would be undertaking a large amount of management tasks, therefore the dual headship role would continue for the time being. In respect of pupils attending Secondary schools there was approximately a 50% split between Jedburgh and Hawick High Schools, with placing requests being used by parents to send their children to the school of their choice.

- 2.2 Mrs Aitchison, Parent Representative, made a comparison between Hobkirk Primary School and Ednam Primary School which were not dissimilar. Mrs Aitchison highlighted the significant impact on communities when the village school no longer existed and expressed concern that in providing free choice for some parents the choice for other parents was denied. When a school was identified as being at risk then engagement with the community should take place at the earliest opportunity to identify ways of sustaining the school. Members discussed the report and referred to Hobkirk Primary School's roll which had reduced from 39 pupils in 2010 to seven pupils in 2015. It was suggested that the small schools policy may need to be reviewed to allow for earlier intervention to support some village schools. Ms Manson further advised that in a mothball situation the legislation stated that the decision should be reviewed at a maximum of three years but good practice suggested a review within one year. The Executive Committee in January 2015 had considered details of the development of a School Estate Strategy and this included a review of the school estate, with further details due to be considered by the Executive Committee in the new year. The Deputy Chief Executive (People) clarified that all parents would be consulted as part of the review of the school estate. The Chairman advised that all the Committee's comments would be included in the review as it went forward. Members agreed, with reluctance, to approve the recommendations.

**DECISION
AGREED:-**

- * a) **to recommend to Council that Hobkirk Primary School be mothballed with immediate effect for a temporary period;**
- (b) **to review the status of the school within the next 12 months; and**
- (c) **in the interim that transport be provided to Denholm Primary School for any new pupils moving into the area.**

MEMBER

Mrs Aitchison and Mr Walsh left the meeting prior to consideration of the following item.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT BUSINESS

Present: Mr J Clark.
Apologies: Mr G Henderson

3. **CHAIRMAN**

Councillor Bell chaired the meeting for consideration of the Economic Development business. He welcomed Mr Clark to this section of the Executive meeting and passed on the apologies of Mr Henderson.

4. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT UPDATE

- 4.1 With reference to paragraph 1 of the Minute of 1 September 2015, there had been circulated copies of a briefing note providing an update on recent Economic Development activities. The Chief Officer Economic Development, Mr Bryan McGrath, summarised the paper and highlighted the main points covering Business, Regeneration, Tourism & Events, Funding, and Low Carbon Economic Strategy. Officers had been working with Business Gateway on the new Borders Railway Tourism Business Opportunities Guide, a copy of which was circulated at the meeting. The document would be available to all businesses as a download and in print and had been very well received at its launch event. Members discussed the update and in particular issues surrounding the numbers travelling by train, and Mr McGrath advised that the addition of extra train carriages was for Scotrail to consider, although it was early days for the new line and he expected numbers to stabilise over the coming months. The 93% business occupancy rate for industrial units was very good, as this was normally 90%, although it also depended on the demand across the region, and reflected that there was more positive business activity underway. Councillor Paterson raised an issue on the SBC Visitor Information Map, which focused on walking and cycling routes for the Central Borders, and Mr McGrath undertook to investigate this further and respond to Councillor Paterson out-with the meeting. Members highlighted that having successfully delivered the Borders Railway, reassessment was now required in terms of the wider economic priorities for the whole of the Scottish Borders. It was also important that every opportunity was taken to use TV and other coverage of major events involving the Council e.g. Tour of Britain, as a promotional tool for the wider Borders area.

DECISION

NOTED the update.

5. VISITSCOTLAND INFORMATION PROVISION – A NEW APPROACH

- 5.1 There had been circulated copies of a report by the Corporate Transformation and Services Director outlining how VisitScotland was responding to the way visitors were now accessing information and making holiday decisions and how this was impacting on the performance of the manned visitor information service throughout Scotland. The report explained that VisitScotland currently operated and managed five VisitScotland Information Centres (VICs) in the Scottish Borders, providing face to face information services, including an accommodation and ticketing service. The VisitScotland Information Centres were partially funded via an annual Minute of Agreement (MOA) between Scottish Borders Council and VisitScotland. The report provided information on the performance of the VICs in the Scottish Borders. Visitors were accessing information from a wide range of sources when they were in Scotland. Trends indicated that online usage for visitor information and booking would continue to rise. In line with this trend, Scottish Borders VisitScotland Information Centres had experienced an overall decline in footfall in recent years – apart from slight increases in Hawick and Kelso - while there had been a significant rise in website visits and digital referrals to Scottish Borders businesses. Recognising the change in consumer behaviour and demand, VisitScotland was undertaking a national review of information provision and the overall customer experience, looking at the best way to ensure that information was delivered to more people in more places using the channels that visitors used the most. The Chief Officer Economic Development, Mr McGrath, advised that VisitScotland was currently carrying out a national review on how it provided information through all its channels. It was proposed to hold a briefing session for all Members late in 2015 or early 2016 – depending on the availability of Visit Scotland senior managers - to provide an outline of the new strategy and options for future visitor information provision being considered. A further report on tourist information would also be presented to Executive Committee once the VisitScotland review had been completed. Members discussed the report and

highlighted that co-hosting VICs was perhaps the way forward to deliver visitor information, for example the VIC partnership with the Heart of Hawick had increased footfall. It was acknowledged that there was a significant change in the way in which consumers accessed information and made bookings. It was hoped that the VisitScotland briefing would include detailed analysis of declining footfall and what plans would be put in place to optimise resources to maximise benefit and visitors to the Scottish Borders. The Chairman advised that the Council provided funding to VisitScotland partly to cover marketing and visitor information provision. It was important that there was good attendance and engagement at the briefing session.

DECISION

AGREED:-

- (a) to invite senior managers from VisitScotland to provide a special briefing for all Elected Members on the new VisitScotland Customer Experience Strategy and its developing approach to information provision in the Scottish Borders and the rest of Scotland; and**
- (b) that a further report on tourism information be brought to the Committee in 2016 once VisitScotland had finalised its review.**

MEMBER

Councillor Parker left the meeting prior to consideration of the following item.

- 6. **BUSINESS GATEWAY PROGRESS REPORT: 1 APRIL 2015 – 30 SEPTEMBER 2015**
- 6.1 With reference to paragraphs 5 and 6 of the Minute of 12 May 2015, there had been circulated copies of a report by the Corporate Transformation and Services Director presenting an update on the performance of the Business Gateway in the Scottish Borders, covering the period 1 April 2015 to 30 September 2015. Service delivery was aligned to the National 2012-2017 Business Gateway Service specification, with additional local services funded through EU Projects that added value to the “core” Business Gateway service. This funding ran out on 30 September 2015 and a new round of ERDF funding was expected to start before the end of 2015. The Business Gateway Business Plan 2015/16 was approved in May 2015, and incorporated a Performance Improvement Plan to further enhance the service. By the end of September a total of 331 businesses had accessed advisory services through Business Gateway with a further 635 businesses attending a workshop or event. Performance was good in relation to business starts with 108 recorded showing 109% of year to date (YTD) target. Focus had been put on Potential (PHVSU) and High Growth (HVSU) starts with the appointment of a part time adviser specialising in these areas, this had meant the best ever achievement in these were with 17 PHVSU and 8 HVSU clients representing 189% and 114% of YTD targets respectively. This provided an excellent pipeline of growth clients for future years. LGAS clients were also ahead of target at 18 which was 117% of YTD target. There had been a slower than expected start for higher growth clients and these were below target for the year. Whilst not satisfactory, plans were in place to counter this and annual targets were not a concern at this point. Progress against key performance targets was detailed in Table 1 in section 3.2 of the report, and an update on the Performance Improvement Plan was detailed in Appendix 1 to the report. Mr McCreadie, Business Gateway Manager, advised that following on from the successful Business Week in 2014, a Scottish Borders Business Month had been held in October; there had been 24 events across the Scottish Borders with 200 attendees, with over 600 attendees at events over the six month period. These events would help feed new clients into the segmentation model. In answer to Members’ questions Mr McCreadie further advised that there were three advisors employed by Business Gateway, one full time funded through ERDF. The majority of funding was spent on staffing and this was working well. Mr McGrath added that it was proposed to hold an event on 1 December 2015 following the Executive Committee for Members to engage with Business Gateway customers. The Chairman thanked Mr McCreadie for the informative report.

DECISION

- (a) **NOTED the improving performance of the Business Gateway Service to date and the actions planned for the future.**

- (b) **AGREED**
 - (i) **to continue to receive regular progress reports to monitor performance; and**

 - (ii) **that the Business Gateway provide an update to Committee in February 2016.**

7. SOUTH OF SCOTLAND RURAL REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- 7.1 PROGRAMME - PROGRESS REPORT** With reference to paragraph 13 of the Minute of 10 June 2014, there had been circulated copies of a report by the Corporate Transformation and Services Director on progress in implementing the South of Scotland Rural Regional Economic Development Programme, in partnership with Scottish Enterprise and Dumfries and Galloway Council. The South of Scotland Alliance presented a programme of strategic projects to Scottish Government and Scottish Enterprise in the summer of 2014. The programme aimed to build on the opportunities which were available in the South of Scotland. Four strategic projects were identified at the heart of the programme, Borders Railway/Central Borders Business Park; Mountain Biking – refreshing a world-class product; M74 Corridor Strategic Development Masterplan; and Stranraer Waterfront. The programme was presented to Mr Swinney MSP, Depute First Minister, in June 2014. Since then, the partners had been taking forward the four strands of work and progress against each of these was set out in the report. Progress on the actions would be reported to the Depute First Minister when the South of Scotland Alliance met him in December 2015. Members discussed the report and highlighted that Mountain Biking in the Tweed Valley required wider publicity in terms of signage and links to VisitScotland. Mr McGrath advised that while the Tweed Valley was a world class mountain bike destination which had a high profile in mountain biking circles, one of the aims was to raise the profile and broaden the attraction. The Forestry Commission would have a key role in promoting and linking the product to local businesses. Additional tractions and trailers were required to sustain interest, attract new people and family based activities were also being explored. There was a discussion on the cross border Seven Stanes venue at Newcastleton and it was requested that the venue be developed further, with improved signage and digital connectivity as well as local access to fuel. Moving the trail head into Newcastleton and the installation of the new bridge had helped. There was further discussion on cycling across the Borders and issues with signage for cycle routes.

MEMBER

Councillor Parker returned to the Meeting.

DECISION

- (a) **NOTED the progress made in implementing the four strategic projects that make up the South of Scotland Rural Regional Economic Development Programme.**

- (b) **AGREED to request that the South of Scotland Alliance would seek ongoing support from the Scottish Government for this strategic programme at its meeting with the Depute First Minister in December 2015.**

OTHER BUSINESS

8. CHAIRMAN

Councillor Parker took the Chair for the remaining business.

9. **MINUTE**

The Minute of meeting of the Executive Committee of 20 October 2015 had been circulated.

DECISION

APPROVED for signature by the Chairman.

10. **UK LANDFILL COMMUNITIES FUND** 10.1 With reference to paragraph 6(a)(iii) of the Minute of Meeting of 10 March 2015, there had been circulated copies of a report by the Chief Executive recommending the reallocation of unused UK Landfill Communities Fund to BCCF Environmental - Duns Rugby Football Club. The report explained that on 10 March 2015 the Executive approved a grant of £27,451 to BCCF Environmental – Earlston Community Development Trust. This project, the Adventure Playpark Project, was no longer going ahead and the grant award had been terminated. As a consequence, £27,451 of unallocated funds was held by BCCF Environmental of which £25,536 was available funds and £1,915 was fees. An application from BCCF Environmental – Duns Rugby Football Club – Clubhouse and Community Facility was currently held by SBC awaiting UKLCF funds. It was recommended that the funds awarded to the Earlston Community Development Trust project be reallocated to Duns Rugby Football Club. This would enable the Club to complete its funding package and its project. Members noted that the Duns Rugby Football Club project started in July despite full funding not being in place. While it was unusual to award funds after the project start date, this was allowable under the UKLCF.

DECISION

AGREED to approve a grant of £25,536 to BCCF Environmental – Duns Rugby Football Club.

The meeting concluded at 11.40 am