

East of England Regional Economic Forum

24 March 2009, 9.00am-10.50am

Location – Stockwood Park Discovery Centre,
London Road, Luton

Minutes

Attendees

Name	Position
Barbara Follett MP	Regional Minister (co-chair)
David Burch	Federation of Small Businesses
Deborah Cadman	East of England Development Agency, Chief Executive
Roy Davis	Luton Borough Council
Megan Dobney	Regional TUC
Robert Gordon	Chair of EoE Strategic Authority Leaders'
Angela Harrowing	Government Office for the East of England
Terence Illott	Government Office for the East of England
Michael Large	Chairman, East of England Business Group
Karen Livingstone	NHS East Of England
Jamie Merrick	East of England Development Agency
Chris Mole	Parliamentary Assistant to Regional Minister
Julia Nix	Jobcentre Plus
Caroline Neville	Learning and Skills Council, Regional Director
Paul Pugh	Government Office, Regional Director
Cheryl Smart	Regional Chambers of Commerce & Industry Representative
Brian Stewart	East of England Regional Assembly, Chief Executive
Caroline Tapster	Chair of EoE LA Chief Execs'
Mike Wherrett	Highways Agency
James Beal	Renewables East
Ian Jenkins	GO-East Secretariat

Apologies

Richard Ellis	East of England Development Agency, Chair (co-chair)
Stephen Castle	Chair, Nations and Regions East, London 2012
Gwyn Drake*	Highways Agency, Regional Director
Mark Eriera -Guyer	COVER
Terry Fuller	Homes and Communities Agency, Regional Director
Jerry Golland	Chairman, Institute of Directors, East of England Region
Richard Howitt	MEP, East of England
Neil McKay*	NHS East of England Chief Executive
Ian McPherson	Norfolk Constabulary, Chief Constable
Lynda Russell*	Jobcentre Plus Regional Director
Brian Stewart	EERA Chief Executive
Richard Tunnicliffe	East of England CBI
Caroline Williams*	Regional Chambers of Commerce & Industry Representative

* deputy attending

Action Points from this meeting

	Action	By whom
1.	Chase local authority returns on the impact the recession is having on local communities	Caroline Tapster & Brian Stewart
2.	Consider providing Barbara Follett with specific case examples of housing repossession or mortgage valuation practices.	Michael Large and other REF members
3.	Invite the Citizens Advice Bureau to a future meeting.	Secretariat
4	Lead a discussion at a future meeting on identifying future actions coming out of the Houghton Review on tackling worklessness.	Caroline Neville
5	Barbara Follett to check that apprenticeships were available to local people in the context of an Olympics infrastructure project in the region.	Go-East to relay to DCMS
6	Barbara Follett to write to Local Authorities to see if they might encourage the use of empty retail properties by not-for-profit organisations and other good causes.	Go-East and partners
7	Consider whether the region is developing the right skills base to take advantage of a transition to a low carbon economy.	Caroline Neville and partners
8	GO-East to consider with partners how demand for low carbon products and services can be encouraged, including through collective public procurement.	Go-East and partners
9.	Barbara Follett to seek a discussion of the low carbon economy at a meeting of the Council of Regional Ministers or the Regional Economic Council.	Secretariat
10.	REF members to respond to questions posed in the Government's vision for a low carbon industrial strategy, by end-April. (Comments can be sent to Graham.Nunn@goeast.gsi.gov.uk at GO-East).	REF members
11	Next meeting to be two hours duration	All to note

Welcome and Introductions

1. Barbara Follett thanked Stockwood Park Discovery Centre in Luton for hosting the meeting and welcomed those present to the fifth meeting of the Regional Economic Forum.

Item 1- Economic Update

- **Discussion of Monthly Economic Outlook paper**

2. Jamie Merrick highlighted some of the key messages in the paper. He said that while there was still some growth in the overall employment figure, the unemployment claimant count continued to rise. According to confidence surveys, businesses in the region were less pessimistic than elsewhere, with suggestions that 50% had been relatively unaffected by recession. There were real issues with the housing market, with declining prices, rising repossessions and only a slight increase in new buyer enquiries. Information was available from Insight East <http://www.insighteast.org.uk> the name of the new economic intelligence centre for the region.

- **Local Overview – (Cllr Roy Davis, Regeneration, Major Projects, Strategic Planning and Transport portfolio holder)**

3. Roy Davis gave an overview of the Recession's impacts on Luton including short-time working in some businesses and jobs at risk. He also emphasised the private sector's positive perceptions of Luton as an attractive location for investment. However, he stressed that public sector investment had to lead the way and cited the new road to the airport, the University of Bedfordshire, a planned extension to the shopping centre and funding for apprenticeships as important partnership investments by local regional and national Government in the area. . There are on-going challenges around Learning and Skills Council capital funding for a further education college, rail infrastructure and congestion at a key M1 junction.

Item 2 - Matters arising from previous meetings

- **Verbal updates on Impacts on Communities workstream**

4. Terence Ilott highlighted reports from two Local Authorities on the impact the recession was having on communities –in Peterborough and Hertfordshire as well as a regional view from the 3rd sector. Paul Pugh stressed that information from all local authorities was essential to inform a substantive paper for a future meeting, to ensure the group were aware of key issues. Caroline Tapster and Brian Stewart undertook to contact local authority colleagues to achieve this.

Action – Caroline Tapster and Brian Stewart to chase local authority returns on the impact the recession is having on local communities.

- **Verbal update on Investment and Infrastructure Task & Finish Group**

5. The initial meeting of the above Task & Finish Group will take place at GO-East on the 9 April.

- **Discussion of issues and action points arising from previous meetings**

6. The meeting noted that details of the Automotive Assistance Programme had been published and Luton continued to have concerns over the sustainability of the van plant and how decisions on its future would be reached. Barbara Follett was aware that the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform were looking at policy options that might benefit the automotive industry, as well as meeting policy objectives such as carbon reduction and boosting the wider economy.

7. Following on from the January discussion on house repossessions, Barbara Follett said that she would welcome from Michael Large, or other REF members, any specific case examples of housing repossession or mortgage valuation practices.

8. It was agreed that the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) should be invited to attend a future meeting to brief the Forum as they had closer to 'real time' intelligence on the impacts of the recession. Barbara Follett commented that it was important that local authorities did what they could to support CAB and other 3rd sector bodies.

9. Deborah Cadman would reflect the issue of access to credit and supplier insurance through the national RDA network.

10. The Highways Agency reported that it was seeking to access additional funding from the fiscal stimulus for road maintenance projects.

Action – Michael Large and other REF Members to consider providing Barbara Follett with specific case examples of housing repossession or mortgage valuation practices.

Action – Secretariat to invite the Citizens Advice Bureau to attend a future meeting.

Item 3 – Support to help Businesses and people

- **Implementation of Joint Regional Redundancies Plan**

11. Julia Nix, Caroline Neville and Deborah Cadman reported on how Jobcentre Plus, Learning and Skills Council and EEDA were working together to deliver the regional response to redundancies in the East of England <http://www.eeda.org.uk/3678.asp>. This region was well-placed to respond, given the collaborative arrangements already in place and hence the Joint

Response to Redundancy Plan built upon this strong base. The Plan comprised the key elements the Chief Secretary to the Treasury had asked for: a web-site for employers to easily notify forthcoming job losses that was critical to ensuring public sector partners could respond before employees became unemployed; rapid response teams, where the region was already well served by established local networks; a Careers Advice Service that was working well; skills funding for re-training, where Jobcentre Plus had considerably increased its budget; funding from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, as was the case in Great Yarmouth; Employer Networks, where the region was served by Local Employment Partnerships; all public sector vacancies to be notified to Jobcentre Plus - happening; local partnerships with all public sector infrastructure projects – in hand.

12. In addition 'Train to Gain' had reached 40,000 learners through providing businesses with funding to back skills support and businesses with less than fifty employees could access funded leadership and managerial training. The three organisations were sharing relevant data and co-ordinating their activities through a task group.

13 Caroline Neville said that at a future meeting she would want to discuss a partnership approach to identifying future actions coming out of the Houghton Review on tackling worklessness

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/tacklingworklessnessinterim>. The meeting also noted the National Apprenticeship Service would come into being in April <http://www.apprenticeships.org.uk/> and Barbara Follett said that she would check that apprenticeships were available to local people in the context of an Olympics infrastructure project in the region.

Action – Caroline Neville to lead a discussion at a future meeting on identifying future actions coming out of the Houghton Review on tackling worklessness.

Action – Barbara Follett to check that apprenticeships were available to local people in the context of an Olympics infrastructure project in the region.

- **Regional support for businesses**

14. Deborah Cadman said that Business Link were experiencing a high level of demand for business healthchecks and EEDA had been re-prioritising resources in the light of developments. The meeting welcomed the work EEDA was doing, with the latest additional round of 'proof of concept' funding being particularly welcomed as very valuable in bolstering innovation.

15. In discussion, there was a desire for a greater focus on upskilling the workforce, as well as more time in the school curriculum for science. Concerns continued to be expressed about the availability of bank lending and about whether the Government's response overall was sufficiently focussed on small businesses. However there was a sense that this region was fairing better than others.

16. There was a discussion on whether empty retail properties could be used by not-for-profit organisations and other good causes on a short-term basis. Barbara Follett said that she would write to Local Authorities to see if they might consider encouraging such an approach, as empty shops could undermine the vibrancy of struggling town centres. Barbara Follett also mentioned the importance of libraries for jobseekers and their on-line resources for businesses.

Action – Barbara Follett to write to Local Authorities to see if they might encourage the use of empty retail properties by not-for-profit organisations and other good causes.

Item 4 – Economy of the Future

- **Low Carbon economy**

17. Terence Illott introduced a paper based on the Government's vision, launched on 6 March, that the transition to a low carbon world will transform our whole economy

<http://www.berr.gov.uk/whatwedo/sectors/lowcarbon/lowcarbonstrategy/page50105.htm>

18. James Beal set out the job and wealth creating potential for the future. These included the development of energy efficient infrastructure, particularly offshore wind, wave and biofuels and their technologies; anaerobic digestion from food waste for transport fuels or electricity; thermo-conversion technologies and the scaling up of solar power on regeneration land.

19. There was discussion over whether the region is developing the right skills base and Caroline Neville said she was keen to work with Renewables East and others to take forward work in this area and bring it back for a future discussion. The meeting also considered how to promote demand for low carbon products and services, including how public funding streams in the region can support this. For example, the NHS were already working in this area. The scope for collective procurement needed to be explored further with local authorities and other public bodies in the region, and with the Office of Government Commerce. Barbara Follett said she would seek a discussion of the low carbon economy at a future meeting of the Council of Regional Ministers, or the Regional Economic Council.

Action - Caroline Neville, James Beal and other partners to consider whether the region was developing the right skills base to take advantage of a transition to a low carbon economy.

Action – GO-East to consider with partners how demand for low carbon products and services can be encouraged, including through collective public procurement.

Action – Barbara Follett to seek a discussion of the low carbon economy at a meeting of the Council of Regional Ministers or the Regional Economic Council.

Action - REF members invited to respond to questions posed in the Government's vision for a low carbon industrial strategy, by end-April. (Comments can be sent to Graham.Nunn@goeast.gsi.gov.uk at GO-East)

Item 5 – REF and national policy

- **Future REF meetings**

20. It was agreed that the next meeting on 21 April would be of two hours duration and would be taking place at the Holiday Inn, Norwich North which coincided with the Norfolk Skills Conference at the same venue.

Action – Members to note that the next meeting is two hours duration.

Secretariat, 14 April 2009