

BALLYMONEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

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BALLYMONEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

Minutes of Development Committee Meeting No 218, held in the Council Chamber, Riada House, Ballymoney on Thursday 5th August 2010 at 11.00am.

IN THE CHAIR Councillor J Finlay

PRESENT

Aldermen
F Campbell
H Connolly
C Cousley, MBE, Deputy Mayor
J Simpson

Councillors
A Cavlan
R Halliday
B Kennedy, Mayor
M McCamphill
D McKay, MLA
E Robinson
I Stevenson
M Storey, MLA

APOLOGIES:

Councillors
P McGuigan
A Patterson

IN ATTENDANCE

Minister Arlene Foster, Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment
Ms Glenis Aiken, Private Secretary
Mr Andrew Crawford, Special Advisor
Mr Gren Armstrong, Invest NI, NE Office
Chief Executive
Head of Corporate & Development Services
Development Officer
Committee Clerk

218.1 VISIT BY MINISTER OF ENTERPRISE, TRADE & INVESTMENT, MRS ARLENE FOSTER

The Mayor welcomed Mrs Arlene Foster, Minister of Enterprise, Trade & Investment and thanked her for taking time to attend the meeting.

* **Councillor Storey, MLA joined the meeting at 1.04pm.**

The Mayor summarized the number of bitter blows Ballymoney had suffered on the employment front, with substantial job losses and plant closures, in food, healthcare and textile manufacturing, as well as the construction and transport sectors. This, he explained, with the reduced spending power for local shops and service businesses is a major setback for the business community in the town and surrounding area. He said Council welcomed the opportunity to discuss the economic impact of the substantial job losses in the borough and explore what the department may be able to do to help council in its efforts to secure jobs.

The Committee Chair gave an overview of the various issues of concern. He explained that over the past five years all large companies within the Borough had gone, resulting in over 800 job losses, dire in terms of job losses in a small borough. He highlighted a range of issues including:

- Substantial job losses in food, manufacturing and healthcare industries;
- reductions in small and medium sized industries and the public sector;
- downturn in manufacturing and construction sector,
- absence of growth in service and IT sectors
- average earnings below NI average;
- lack of opportunities for employment for qualified young people;
- failure to attract high skilled jobs to the area and increasing number of people travelling to work.

Concluding, the Chair said Council looked to the Assembly to take whatever measures they can to secure new jobs and address Council's concerns for the economic life of the borough. He invited the Minister to outline what plans her department has to attract new industry to the North East of NI and to Ballymoney in particular.

Responding to the Chair's initial remarks the Minister said she was delighted to have the opportunity to visit Ballymoney, was aware of the difficulties facing Ballymoney, not just as a result of current recession, but pre-recession and its location between two larger towns, and in recognizing the difficulties she also recognized the need to find solutions. Commenting on the business profile of the borough, the Barnett Review, the assistance put in place through Invest NI (INI) to help businesses in the current economic climate she advised on plans for establishment of a small business unit in INI and continuing commitment to working closely with the local enterprise agency (Acorn The Business Centre) and Council as well as DEL and local colleges. She gave some examples of good practice with regard to attracting new inward investment; development of companies and entrepreneurs.

The Mayor and representatives from all party groupings present then put specific questions/comments to the Minister on a range of other issues including:

- re-use of vacant industrial buildings and warehousing, some of which are being developed by the private sector;
- stimulation and attraction of start up businesses in the new technology or knowledge sectors which are not dependent on large populations;
- specific assistance to encourage firms in the engineering sector, which was strong in the area, to grow;
- support for SMEs in the light of reduced government funding;
- encouraging set up of smaller businesses to replace, in employment terms, the large businesses lost;
- co-ordination of support for SMEs;

- help for farm diversification businesses to grow and export;
- ensuring the planning framework in NI is sufficiently flexible to allow tourism development in rural areas such as Ballymoney, which positively favour rural based tourism;
- key infrastructural issues of importance to borough - future of Northern Regional College and upgrading of A26;
- renewal of lignite prospecting licences;
- benefits accruing to borough from Causeway signature project;
- loss of public sector jobs
- signage to Dark Hedges
- categorization of Ballymoney as growth town;
- lack of support for tourism accommodation (self catering) projects in rural areas and opportunities to create rural tourism

Responding to the various economic and tourism issues raised the Minister spoke about Invest NI activities; work with local enterprise agencies; liaison with DARD to ensure co-ordination of investment in farm diversification in tourism projects; the range of departments with interest in tourism; proposals to bring forward planning reform; contact with banks; strategic energy framework; the benefits to be derived throughout the Causeway Coast & Glens Region from the investment in signature project, the potential gains forthcoming in 2012/13 through the Olympics, the Titanic project and the opening of the new Causeway Centre, which through working with the Causeway Coast and Glens Tourism Partnership the wider region will be able to take advantage of and secure benefits; the announcement later in the year of the new tourism policy; potential for additional work on telecoms; public sector jobs/Bain report;

Arising from discussion Committee **AGREED:**

1. To extend an invitation to Geographic Survey NI to present to committee on the subject of lignite.
2. To write to NITB with information regarding request for signage to Dark Hedges.

The Chair closed the meeting at 11.38 p.m.