

Crewkerne Chamber of Commerce

Meeting Tuesday 22 May 2007 6pm

Bilby's, Market Street, Crewkerne

Minutes by Alan Pyle

1) Apologies for absence from Shirley Marsland (Secretary)

2) Eileen Mills (Chair) gave a short report.

£100 was raised at the Chamber Ball held in February; a cheque for this amount was presented to the Friends of Crewkerne Hospital.

3) Eileen said that this would be her final meeting as chairman; she would be handing over to Marcus Barrett to take the work of the Chamber forward.

Eileen looked back on several years in the chair, including representations to Wessex Water while new drainage works were being carried out; to Somerfield when their store was extended (including the shoppers' voucher scheme). Other activities included encouraging flower basket planting and the publication of a business directory.

Eileen formally presented Marcus with the Chairman's chain of office; Marcus thanked Eileen for her work and looked forward to representing the interests of Crewkerne businesses and enterprise. Eileen was presented with flowers on behalf of the Chamber. Cllr Hilary Leamon thanked Eileen on behalf of the Town Council.

4) Eileen referred to a current issue, viz:- the proposal for the re-development of the Bonsoir factory site and encouraged members to become involved. It was felt that commercial opportunities should be encouraged for the building. The item will be discussed at a future meeting.

5) Eileen continued by introducing the speakers for the topic of the evening:- The Somerset County Council bid for unitary status. Speakers Neil Pack and Liz Payne-Ahmadi of Somerset County Council have been charged with communicating the details of the unitary bid to the community. In October 2006 a White Paper, "Strong and Prosperous Communities" called for bids from local government councils to form unitary authorities. These unitary authorities would replace two tier working (counties and districts) Alternatively, bids were invited to improve the working of the two tiers. Bids would be judged under 5 criteria including more efficient delivery of services. It was pointed out that there was no status quo option since authorities which ignored the change would experience reduced funding year by year as though they had made savings.

SCC drew up a bid for a unitary authority for Somerset to replace both the County Council and the 5 District Councils. There was no bid for 'enhanced 2 tier working' but there was a proposal for different sizes of unitary authority to replace the old county-wide structure. Whitehall examined 22 bids from English authorities. 16 were

short-listed from grades given under each of the 5 criteria. Graded as High; Reasonable; Low. The SCC bid scored HHHHR.

The proposal is to dissolve all local government units into one authority. There will be 5 areas for all services. It is anticipated that the most significant savings would occur in procurement. Job losses are stated at 60 staff via natural wastage and redundancy. The bid claims significant advantages in the determination and delivery of services in a more seamless fashion. The business case can be viewed on www.somerset.gov.uk along with a number of supporting papers.

Representation: There are currently 58 County Councillors and it is proposed that in a unitary authority this will double to 116. (Currently there are 299 county and district councillors.) Emphasis on area working through Panels and strengthened engagement with Town and Parish councils. The County is pressing forward with Area Panel working whether or not the bid is successful. However it looks likely that the SCC bid will go forward and we will know the outcome in July. If successful, there will be elections for the new authority in April 2008 which will shadow the existing county and districts till May 2009 when it will become the local government of Somerset.

There followed a lively question and answer session with concerns raised about why further efficiencies would not lead to lower rates, why Area Panels seemed to risk duplicating existing local bureaucracy, why more power could not be given to Town Councils.

Liz Payne-Ahmadi promised to write to the Chamber giving written details of the commitments made to efficiencies. The cost of the change is expected to be met by savings in less than 2 financial years.

Members are strongly advised to see the papers available on the County website.

5) Thanks to Bilby's for generously hosting the venue of this meeting.

6) The next meeting will be announced in the local Press and on the Chamber web page: www.CrewkerneTown.co.uk/commerce