

Statement to the B&NES Cabinet, 7th November 2007.
 Alex Schlesinger. FSB Branch Secretary, Bath

No one would find fault with the proposal to establish a City Centre Manager, similarly we are all in favour of promoting the economy of the city, whilst maintaining its attractiveness.

There is also something to be said in favour of oversight of tourism, festivals and destination management.....However, I would ask this cabinet to seriously consider whether the proposal as outlined today, is in the wider interests of Bath.

The Federation of Small Business has over a 1000 members in the Bath area, it is membership led and represents a fair cross section of business in the city. As such, we are very concerned that the present proposal appears to be gathering momentum without even a hint of consultation with the business community. Indeed, whilst the commercial interests of the local authority should be aligned with those of the business community, we see no evidence that this is the case in reality.

We fully accept that the council would like to make financial savings particularly in its underwriting of Tourism Plus. We note that the employment of a City Centre Manager would be popular with the business community, but it will be popular only if the manager has real powers and access to committees. Naturally, we are aware that the council would like to avoid the additional costs of totally funding a City Centre Manager, but we are puzzled as to how and when the business community will be putting money into this scheme.

We note that there is a proposal for capital funding of £50000 from B&NES and we note that business is to provide the other £50000. Although exactly how, is not mentioned. We also note that there is no provision for revenue funding after the first year.

This leads us to consider the possibility that B&NES will apply to be regarded as a Business Improvement District; giving it powers to raise additional business rates. If this is the agenda, then really the business community should be consulted sooner rather than later.

The FSB also has concerns about the path that is being followed. We know that Tourism Plus will be subsumed under the New B&NES Initiative (B&NES Plus); once again without prior consultation with its subscribing members. We also know that the Bath Plus will be set up as a limited company, and that the membership of its board has already been decided in detail.

We are therefore somewhat shocked that so many decisions have been made without any of the process being made public or being opened to public scrutiny.

We are particularly concerned that B&NES councillors will sit on the board of a limited company perhaps as paid board members; when that same board will be making recommendations of a fiscal nature to the council on which they also sit. We would urge the cabinet to consider whether this will be regarded as normal and acceptable practice within the public sector.

The FSB also has concerns that the new B&NES Plus Ltd., will only link with Business West when it comes to matters of consultation. We would like to remind the cabinet that

although the Bath Chamber of Commerce merged with the Bristol Chamber some years ago, both have now been subsumed into Business West, to the point where the Bath Chamber has no separate membership and perhaps just a bank account. We are therefore very concerned that future consultations will only be with a Bristol based service provider with only unrepresentative membership in the Bath area..