

**West of England Local Enterprise Partnership
Board meeting – Tuesday 9 March 2021**

Sub Groups Summary

Purpose of the report

1. To provide the LEP Board with a summary on the progress of organisational sub groups.

Business Insights Panel [Date of late meeting 18th February 2021]

Overview

The Business Insights Panel was established last April following the introduction of the first national C-19 lockdown. It brings together leaders from key business support, network and finance organisations to gather intelligence, align efforts and ensure the region's firms get the support they need.

Chair: Tim Bowles

Feedback from latest meeting

- Generally, the picture remains mixed across the regional economy but there are some positive signs starting to emerge. Key dates for businesses being 22nd Feb PM roadmap announcement and Budget on 3rd March.
- ICAEW shared its Business Confidence Monitor (covering 5,000 members nationwide) which showed a marked improvement in business sentiment and anticipation of a relatively quick recovery. However, South West businesses were reporting 0.7% reduction in headcount and some persistent skills gaps.
- Looking forward, sales and exports are expected to rise over the next quarter. Capital investment and R&D growth being reported too. Tentative signs of recovery.
- The Panel reflected that much of the Covid-19 financial support, like Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Schemes (CBILs) is now a year old, and banking sector reaching out to customers to better understand impact of lockdown '3.0' and what is needed going forward.
- Panel members seeing continued increase in entrepreneurship and start-up activity.
- A number of panel members referenced the Budget and issue of reversal of VAT charge for construction sector, particularly affecting supply chain and liquidity. One to watch.
- Tourism and Hospitality still facing significant pressures. Consumer confidence has dropped in the latest sentiment tracker delivered at the end of January. Very much waiting on PM announcement.

Taskforce – Regional Recovery Programme [Date of last meeting: 24.02.21]

Overview

The West of England Recovery Taskforce was set up to drive the West of England's economic recovery following the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Led by Regional Mayor, Tim Bowles, this is a partnership between the West of England Combined Authority, the LEP, business, universities and the region's councils.

Chair: Tim Bowles

Feedback from latest meeting

This was the final meeting of the West of England Regional Recovery Taskforce, which has been meeting since May 2020 to feedback on the impact of restrictions and the take up of national and regional support to help inform and shape our response to the pandemic.

The Taskforce has put together a Regional Recovery Plan which outlines how we will harness our region's creativity and diversity to protect and secure jobs, while building back greener and creating opportunities for all residents to share in the recovery. The plan was agreed in October 2020 and activities from the plan have now been incorporated into the WECA Business Plan for 2021.

Alongside the recovery plan, WECA committed £9.4m to support implementing the plan through specific interventions identified with the Taskforce. The following progress was highlighted:

Green Business Grants Programme is now open - providing energy efficiency improvements to buildings or business operations to small & medium enterprises.

Talent Retention Scheme will go live in April, providing a web-based platform to advertise employment opportunities to those businesses facing the prospect of making their staff redundant.

Small Business Grants will be launched shortly:

- Grants of between £1,500 and £6,000 will be available to support businesses from all sectors to adapt to challenges due to Covid-19.
- The grants can be used for activities that create jobs, new products and services or increases productivity.

Arrangements are being finalised for our Community Recovery Fund, Digital Skills Investment Programme and Culture & Creative Support together with our High Streets Renewal Catalyst Fund.

Tim Bowles extended his sincere thanks to the Taskforce Members for their work to support the regional recovery response and welcomed the continued involvement of Taskforce Members to share insights and expertise as we move forwards.

Skills Advisory Panel [Date of last meeting: 12th February 2021]

Overview

Government established Skills Advisory Panels (SAPs) to support Mayoral Combined Authorities and Local Enterprise Partnerships to fulfil their local leadership role in the skills system, by helping them understand their current and future skills needs, and labour market challenges. The West of England SAP convened by WECA has been meeting since February 2020 and has been a key mechanism to feed in understanding on the changing nature of skills needs and employment, particularly through the Covid-19 pandemic.

Chaired: Chris Grier

Deputy Chair: Joanne Rumley

Membership Review

To ensure compliance with government guidelines, some recent changes have been made to the membership: Nigel Costley (SWTUC) and Poku Osei (Babbasa) have been invited to join the Panel; and HE and FE attendance will now attend on a rotational basis to allow each of the institutions to attend a SAP meeting to represent their sector respectively.

Feedback from latest meeting

The SAP meeting in January was structured around updates from each sector on the labour market and skills impacts of Covid-19 and lockdown. The following was reported:

- Business West shared its latest quarterly economic survey
<https://www.businesswest.co.uk/resources/business-west-q4-quarterly-economic-survey-report>
- The **HE sector** has moved to blended learning which has had positive outcomes and led to some innovation in delivery. However, the pandemic is likely to leave a lasting negative impact on the sector with some concerns about student's wellbeing, especially for 1st years. There remains a risk to 2021-22 intake, particularly regarding levels of international students which has already deeply affected parts of the sector.
- The West of England **FE colleges** provided a joint statement. Positively, innovation in delivery to adapt to C-19 has worked well for many students, though the younger age group (16-17) are missing the social interaction. Underlying demand for education and training is stronger than ever, for adults as well as young people. However, there is difficulty in delivering where digital poverty exists and low-income families are struggling with connectivity and space to work. The impact on vocational HE learners not in a classroom has been significant. Loss of teaching time is approx. a third of the whole teaching year. For apprenticeships, breaks in learning may need to be considered and employers may not retain them. This will impact the longer-term skills pipeline.
- **Private training providers** also reported high levels of adaptation and innovation, but the learning that requires practical elements has been difficult or not assessed, which

has had an impact on provider payments. Independents can feel as though their learners are less well supported, e.g. Lateral flow tests, IT kit has not been offered to learners with independent training providers as they have been to FE/schools etc.

- For **Community learning**, providers have been quick to respond, providing individual support to many learners who are vulnerable. Difficult to access the most distanced learners as this needs face to face or community contact so there has been some shift in the learner profile. There have been some difficulties in digital poverty, but this should be much alleviated through the Digital Growth Fund. Families are struggling to engage where they need to support children during the day, so need to adapt hours around this and take a whole family approach.
- No exams will have a big impact on **schools** – government has committed to maintaining the 2020 grade levels for this year, which is good news for young people, but gaps in learning will persist. Public information and encouraging employers to understand what the gaps are will be essential. ‘Ed Tech’ is a potential game changer – more progress made in last few months than over years previously. Many learners more comfortable with remote learning.
- Much of **Voluntary & community** is heavily engaged in health and social care. Some growth through temporary funds and work, leasing property to house homeless...etc but noting a short-term response. Growing concern about funding for the future. Some small community groups may not survive, but these have vital role. Structural inequality is the issue, not just mental health alone. The former leads to the latter. Digital poverty is an issue in the community.
- **Health & care** – the latest surge of Covid-19 has had huge impact and there are a number of shortages across the wider sector, not only in frontline but in support roles which impact people returning home. There have been much higher levels of staff sickness and depletion of skills levels to then cover the amount of care needed. There has been a call to arms to try to meet the need. Increase in applications for roles and training, but issue is retention. International recruitment is a focus, but this comes with language training demand. Apprenticeships and traineeships, digital upskilling and new ways of working are all a core focus. Staff have had to widen their skills base quickly, in order to mobilise across the system.

Cultural Strategy Engagement Group [Date of last meeting: 15.02.21]

Overview

The purpose of the West of England Cultural Strategy Engagement Group is to act as an advisory group to support development of the West of England Cultural Strategy which will provide a regional framework for culture with a joint vision, objectives, measures and criteria for funding that will support economic growth. It includes representatives from WECA, the region's universities and local authorities.

In addition, with support from Arts Council England, the group has acted as a shadow body to progress the development of a West of England Cultural Compact. This will build on the existing strong partnership working across the region to create a new strategic partnership for the cultural sector which will set ambition for the impact of culture in the region and strategically connect the sector to the broader aspirations and priorities of our Local Industrial Strategy and Regional Recovery Plans.

The intention is to establish an interim Cultural Compact in April 2021, to build momentum and prove value, before a final launch of the Cultural Strategy in September.

Chair: Dick Penny

Feedback from latest meeting

- Group agreed process for starting with an interim Cultural Compact in April 2021, building to September launch of Cultural Strategy. WECA is in process of securing a new role to co-ordinate activity for the next six months.
- Group agreed a series of draft documents which had been developed to guide the work of the Compact e.g. Terms of Reference, task and roles, and framework for a number of policy sprints.
- Group received a presentation on the proposed £1m Cultural and Creative Business Support Programme, part of WECA's £9.4m regional recovery fund. The programme is aimed at SMEs working in the creative industries, including creative freelancers (sole traders and directors of limited companies), who require support as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This was warmly welcomed.