

**West of England Local Enterprise Partnership
Board meeting – Wednesday 19 January 2022**

Sub Groups Summary

Purpose of the report

1. To provide the LEP Board with a summary on the progress of organisational subgroups – the Business Insights Panel, Skills Advisory Panel and Cultural Compact.

Business Insights Panel [Date of late meeting 22nd December 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.

Feedback from latest meeting

- Panel members came together to reflect on progress made on regional recovery measures to date and consider the latest impacts resulting from Covid-19 and emergence of the Omicron variant.
- The consensus across the Panel was that the regional economy entered December as a picture of relative strength, with activity beginning to recover to pre-pandemic levels.

Headlines included:

- Sectors hardest hit hardest by Covid-19 were food & drink and accommodation
- The number of businesses liquidating hasn't seen a particular spike
- The labour market has recovered and now, regionally, looking quite strong albeit with some parts recovering more slowly
- Number of job vacancies has risen sharply in the region as nationally, with an imbalance between supply and demand in some sectors
- Types of jobs available – software developers highly sought after in the region, office-based roles and increases in logistics etc
- End of the furlough scheme did not increase unemployment in the region with 88% of people on furlough being taken back into their jobs
- For those losing their jobs, many people have become economically inactive rather than becoming unemployed – an area to keep an eye on
- The impact of Omicron is already being seen, with issues facing tourism and hospitality sectors in particular – the lead up to Christmas, a normally buoyant period for trade.
- Members reported seeing wage pressure on some businesses, particularly with logistics and delivery companies with strong demand in employment in other sectors tempting workers away.
- Positively, a big shift in businesses looking at sustainability.
- Members reported seeing an increase in merger and acquisition activity.

- Evidence that start-up 'equity' is missing and may be slowing down levels of entrepreneurship and business formation.
- Visitor economy – November was strong, but huge 'drop off' in December with cancellations resulting from new restrictions. City centres and high streets a particular concern and underperforming. View that new financial support announced by the Chancellor will not be enough for many businesses.
- Skills shortages now not the big issue - rather staffing shortages at all levels from top management to entry level. Many people are hesitant to leave current employer and using job offers as leverage for pay increases with current employer.
- A lot of businesses are keeping offices open as many young people are living in houses of multiple occupancy and working and sleeping in one room. Need to be aware of the mental health implications of this.

Skills Advisory Panel [Date of last meeting: 14th December 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

Feedback from latest meeting

- The Panel discussed the new regional business to business jobs and skills brokerage platform established through regional recovery funding. This is currently being piloted through a Visitor Economy Recovery Programme, led by the Combined Authority and Visit West. This pilot has highlighted the issues of the sector's attractiveness to prospective employees - there is a need to talk up the sector as a positive career pathway with progression opportunities.
- The Panel discussed the framework for the Metro Mayor's new West of England Good Employment Charter. The aim is for this scheme to be launched fully in April 2022.
- The Panel received an update on all regional employment and skills activity, including the latest on Future Bright, the Careers Hub and Workforce for the Future.
- Business West gave an overview of the Local Skills Improvement Plan trailblazer (stemming from governments Plan for Jobs White Paper). Priority areas within this include Aerospace and Advanced engineering as well as Health and Social Care. A survey has been issued to businesses in the region. The plan will be completed by March 2022.

Cultural Compact [Date of last meeting: 8th November 2021]

Overview

A working group of the LEP, the Cultural Compact is chaired by Professor Sue Rigby with a core membership from the West of England Combined Authority (WECA), Bath and North East Somerset Council, Bristol City Council, South Gloucestershire Council, North Somerset Council, the One City Culture Board, Culture Weston and Visit West.

Chair: Sue Rigby

Feedback from latest meeting

- For this meeting, the group considered the latest draft of the Cultural Plan (see separate LEP Board paper)
- Membership of the Compact will be expanded to coincide with the launch of the Plan, early in 2022.