

## **GESSC Report from 12.2.26**

Cllr Angus Jenkinson

We do not yet have the minutes, so this interim report is based on the limited original information and notes made.

### **Security issue**

Shire Hall had implemented a security system which locked several members out (including this one) pending the arrival of the Democratic officer who was of course busy organising the meeting and then taking minutes. The committee room is right next to the door we could not pass through and the presence of our badges was not sufficient. A request for a review of the security arrangements to provide for visiting members has been made, and it seems material to make this point since in fact it is a scrutiny matter. It's inappropriate for members to be bad from meetings they have arrived at on time because of ineffectual organisation. One consequence is that the early items on the agenda including minutes and matters arising and actions from the previous meeting were missed as well as the beginning of the first major agenda item which took up most of the time.

### **Sidekick**

This was a very interesting topic: the City Region Board approved a £300,000 "investment loan" to a start-up company, Sidekick (brochure attached, the Information in it has been released). On enquiry, the loan carries interest and is refundable but is at risk. Sidekick responds to the perceived problem situation by providing a "Studio". Their premise is that the county has been ineffective and developing really successful start-up businesses despite its cyber strengths and that the best way to change this is through the provision of a special and innovative kind of start-up support system and company. The founders, two principal individuals (and at present there is not much more of a company) have seen your experience in this area and have begun the company with their own resources. They requested funding which firstly would provide a matched funding facility and secondly provide credentials to the market as well as putting it in an operating place with strategic role for the county/unitary.

The problem situation is: Despite a £1bn cyber park in the pipeline, recognition as the UK's strongest cyber cluster, a 10-year-established, 7,000-strong ecosystem, and an accelerator that helped launch 70+ national startups, create 1,700 jobs, and collectively raise £532m - Gloucestershire still has no track record in producing breakout, home-grown cyber scaleups. A decade on, the region continues to lack a unified, structured approach to venture creation.

They see Cheltenham and the developing “Golden Valley” development as a productive environment for the ecosystem strategy based on the declared focus on Resilience in the County. They believe that the intersection of cybersecurity, defence, and national security presents both a critical need and a generational opportunity. They believe the next decade will demand agile, quantum, dual-use and AI-native solutions that can be rapidly prototyped and deployed through mission-driven startups.

Compared with other startup support models, they say that venture studio-founded companies are claimed to be 30% more likely to succeed. (So, on enquiry, maybe 13 per 100 will be very successful instead of 10, while others will survive but be unremarkable.)

They are looking for founders who have already achieved some traction and are beginning the process of seeking these. The goal is to reduce risk but helps suitable founders to leverage their initial success. “Anchored in Gloucestershire’s unique position as a cyber and deeptech hub, the studio brings together physical infrastructure, funding networks, and institutional support to add significant value to an already thriving startup ecosystem.

“SIDEKICK is a purpose-built venture creation engine that transforms bold ideas into scalable businesses through structured validation, hands-on support, and access to capital. Gloucestershire has the perfect opportunity for startups due to significant infrastructure investment leading towards 2030 and beyond.” They claim high level of interest: “Strong support has poured in from academia, public sector leaders, and politicians alike, alongside CyNam, which runs a thriving 7,000-strong cyber ecosystem. Strong support has poured in from academia, public sector leaders, and politicians alike, alongside CyNam, which runs a thriving 7,000-strong cyber ecosystem.”

In this Studio model, Sidekick will effectively build a variety of consultancy support into participants who will share a hub. Networking is part of ideas incubation.

Many questions were asked about the model, background of the founders, details on plans, and general points made. Ecosystems are a known foundation for industry development, Silicon Valley a prime exemplar but there are centuries of demonstration. Since this is a startup, an important feature of the agreed support is the demonstrated experience and qualities of the founders. Cllr Gareth Edmunds gave a useful summary of efforts to try to develop a countywide ecosystem in support of resilience. Cheltenham and initiated it but it is County-relevant. Other members commented.

Sidekick stated that success in developing this startup and the strategy for the county dependent on complimentary activities being done by the authorities and partnership with other bodies. Gareth A recommendation was put (by this member) that was immediately seconded to the effect that we as a committee support the decision and recommend encouraging, coordinating and supporting such necessary environment for success. The chair (John Patient) and in initially the vice chair (Mark Harris) took a view that as a Scrutiny committee for the City Region Board we could not make

recommendations. This caused a commotion and was challenged. Councillor Julian Tooke who is the chair of the City Region Board supported the idea and the chair proposed to take the recommendation off-line for approval at the next meeting. Agreed.

At this point a number of officers disappeared including Democratic Services as well as some other members. This was discussed. It was noted that 5 of the 13 members were missing last time without substitutes. Your representative and others stated that this was not what they were used to. This was agreed along with a call for the chair to lead on gaining commitment.

### **City Region Board Updates**

#### **1. Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) – funding and governance**

The Planning and Infrastructure Act received Royal Assent on 18 December 2025 and introduced a requirement for a Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) to provide strategic, countywide policy context for local plans.

Gloucestershire County Council, as the current upper-tier authority, will become the Strategic Planning Authority with a statutory duty to produce the SDS by May 2029, and that responsibility is expected to transfer in due course as Local Government Reorganisation progresses (to new unitary authority/authorities and then to a combined authority).

The City Region Board agreed to allocate £345,000 from the ringfenced “Strategic Plan for Growth” allocation within the Strategic Economic Development Funding (SEDF) pot to support SDS activities, including addressing identified evidence gaps.

#### **2. Housing Commission for Gloucestershire – funding decision**

The report noted acute housing pressures across the county, including social housing waiting lists outstripping supply and house prices affecting affordability for residents and young people.

The Housing Commission proposed establishing a Gloucestershire Housing Commission, drawing on a model used in Devon, to develop an evidence-led understanding of housing challenges and produce actionable recommendations for local and national stakeholders.

The City Region Board agreed to allocate £100,000 from the ringfenced “City Region Board” funding pot to support the commission; the report stated the estimated cost is £150,000, with £50,000 committed by GCC Public Health and the remaining £100,000 to be shared across other Gloucestershire councils.

#### **3. Business Rates Pool / Strategic Economic Development Fund (SEDF)**

The Gloucestershire Business Rates Pool and the resulting SEDF is allocated through a bidding process to support economic growth activity.

The indicative pool gain for 2025/26 of £1.519m may fluctuate, and decided that it was not advised to allocate the full amount at that stage, with the end-of-year outturn position expected in June 2026.

#### 4. Growth Hubs Gloucestershire – interim and conditional funding

The UK Shared Prosperity Fund support for the Growth Hub network ends in March 2026 and that alternative funding is required to maintain the county's main business-support network. A two-year request totalled £534,600 (year 1: £252,000; year 2: £282,600, including a stated uplift and redundancy costs), intended to cover one Business Navigator per hub (6 FTE) over two years.

The City Region Board agreed £252,000 for 2026/27 from the ringfenced City Region Board pot and agreed £282,600 for 2027/28 subject to confirmation of the anticipated SEDF allocation for 2027/28 (stated as £1.525m).

#### 5. Securing inward investment at Gloucestershire Airport – exempt discussion

CRB discussed a commercially sensitive proposal to secure inward investment at Gloucestershire Airport.

Involves a prospective inward investment project involving a shortlisted site at the airport, potentially 330,000 square feet of commercial space, and an additional 200 high value jobs, with discretionary business rate relief offered by Tewkesbury Borough Council valued at £500,000 per annum.

The SEDF request was £500,000 to fund 100% of the business rate relief for the first year (2027/28). I am not clear on outcome.

### **Cllr Julian Tooke, Chair of the City Region Board — Report**

Cllr Tooke reported that he has looked further into the concerns of the Forest of Dean (FOD) discussed in the previous meeting (the most deprived district in the county with highest proportion of residents working outside the district). There is a consistent pattern of deprivation in the FOD. A group has now been formed to investigate and develop outcomes.

Committee noted that there are ecosystem assets that are not represented in GDP or at County level. There is a need to recognise varieties of asset measured in different ways. This could be used as a general assessment model. There are for example 3,000,000

visits to the FOD forest reflecting its importance but not translating fully into economic benefit.

Discussion about housing noted that the performance and strategy of Devon has been used as a helpful model. The government has responded to it. What is needed is a more joined up and intelligent approach to housing development.