

GESSC Interim Report (Meeting of 21.5.26)

Cllr Angus Jenkinson 27.5.26

This is a relatively informal interim report. I won't be present in the Scrutiny meeting and so cannot answer your questions on Monday.

Headline

The whole session, barring minimal formalities, was focused exclusively on the Forest of Dean and its economic situation in relation to societal. As the room was packed with officers from authorities, we met in the council chamber. The meeting turned at the point when it shifted to a more strategic analysis of the issues, and this led to some potentially radical views on how the area could thrive in the future. Instead of seeing the district as deprived, it might be more useful to see the area as asset rich in potential.

Initial process

A very extensive report had been prepared using a variety of statistical and analytical sources in and beyond the county, and with the help of AI research. I can provide you that report or an AI summary of it, or the AI analytical summary that I specified and commissioned, as a background to my own reading of the data and conclusions.

The meeting began with the chair proposing to take questions on five thematic topics, one by one. And so questions on various items of detail from the first theme were offered. Your councillor indicated that his analysis meant that the questions that he wished to ask were strategic and overarching and that until that was possible he would not be able to ask any. Concluding during the second theme that he would never ask a question, he revised his approach and designed a question asking if strategic analysis was needed to approach the issue.

This led to a wide variety of active and interesting responses from councillors, who described it as the 'elephant in the room', and officers agreed, including the most senior, Colin Chick, who has overall County responsibility for spatial development, planning and economic development.

Views and analysis.

In effect, the provided report rightly frames the Forest of Dean as a test case for whether Gloucestershire's Local Growth Plan can respond to a rural, polycentric and environmentally constrained area. The district has multiple structural constraints, yet it also has structural assets especially natural. While the district has been focused on achieving jobs within its own boundary, this may be less important than ensuring that there are a variety of good accessible jobs for people enjoying the values of the area. After all, the authority has a limited life and 'district' boundaries will not exist.

The district has distrusted tourism and prevented the development of hotels. Yet this has had the effect of leaving only an extractive day trip economy, rather than a richer

ecotourism supported by a network of quality hotels and facilities that could support the area's nature assets and towns. The potential for non-extractive economic and job development was also discussed. Ecosystems of the area are immensely valuable outside a financial frame but can also contribute to financial well-being, provided this works with not against the ecosystem. In general, economic studies suggest that rich nature-friendly areas with relatively easy access to good work opportunities is a driver of healthy economic development.

This would lead to a different kind of focus on strategic development within the county. A particular area of discussion was the importance of better public and road transport. The possibility of a bridge across the Severn took up time and led to the topic in the addendum.

Addendum.

Colin Chick made a significant late contribution related to spatial development and planning. This is also the subject of a question that I have put to the scrutiny committee. A large-scale strategic development within a spatial development framework is taking place within the county, giving development of tens of thousands of houses at pace and with large strategic infrastructure. This differs from the view that we have had that such development will be slow. There is clearly more detail to this and subtle aspects. He raised some interesting questions about CDC's initial and later response to similar applications within our district. In effect it raises questions about the model of development that we will follow. And we need to be aware that government legislation in July will be requiring development in line with spatial development. Our present area plan uses the legacy model. Stroud has chosen to go for the spatial development model, which requires more houses but offers a path to build them and might do so less disruptively than tacking houses onto existing 'strategic locations'. Obviously this is not a matter for the district any longer, but it will be relevant to the unitary.