

GLOUCESTERSHIRE ECONOMIC GROWTH SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a meeting of the Gloucestershire Economic Growth Scrutiny Committee held on Wednesday 9 June 2021 virtually.

PRESENT:

Cllr Rebecca Halifax	Cllr John Murphy
Cllr Dominic Morris	Cllr Gina Blomefield
Cllr Roger Whyborn	Cllr Sajid Patel
Cllr Matt Babbage (Chair)	Cllr Chloe Turner
Cllr Nicky Packer	Cllr Paul Baker
Cllr Paul McCloskey	

Officers in attendance: Mike Dawson, David Owen, Pete Carr, Gillian Parkinson, Simon Excell, Colin Chick and Angela Presdee

1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

The Chair opened the meeting by welcoming members to the new council term and doing introductions around the virtual room.

Apologies were received from Cllr Robert Vines and Officer Steve Mawson.

2. ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIR

Members were advised that as the legislation allowing local authorities to hold meetings virtually came to an end in May, any meetings now held remotely would not be formal.

This meeting was an introductory session to the Committee and therefore any formal business could not be carried out. Members were advised to give thought to their nominations for vice-chair ready for the next formal meeting of the Committee.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were received.

4. TERMS OF REFERENCE

Members noted the attached report on the terms of reference for both the Gloucestershire Economic Growth Joint and Scrutiny Committees, and their relationship to each other.

5. THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF ECONOMIC GROWTH AND RECOVERY IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Presentation 1 – GFirst LEP

- 5.1 The first introduction was received from David Owen, Chief Executive of the GFirst Local Enterprise Partnership and the Committee noted the following:
- The attached report provided links to the core documents for members to review and give an overall flavour of the work involved with an LEP.
 - The overarching mission for Gloucestershire was to sustainably grow the economy.
 - GFirst had been ranked as a high performing LEP by the Government via its yearly Ofsted inspection.
 - It had been challenged a few years ago on the quality of scrutiny it was undergoing by this Committee, fortunately this had been turned around and managed through close working with officers and members.
 - GFirst were really keen therefore to continue in that vein and maintain their high performance at a national level.
 - The LEP was now into its fifth year of growth deal funding and details of the projects supported by this could be found on the website.
 - There were national guidelines on partnership structures which GFirst broadly followed. There were up to 15 members of the Board at any onetime, which comprised of representatives from education, voluntary and community sector, political from GCC and districts and the private sector.
 - Supporting the main Board was also an Investment Panel which undertook detailed investigation of any funding allocations.
 - There were also ten sector groups that represented the main business sector groups in Gloucestershire who provided a genuine, strong sector voice into the LEP's work.
 - Any money spent by the LEP Board was not held by GFirst but instead by the accountable body which was GCC. Both organisations had an excellent, open and sensible working relationship, one which had been recognised as such by Government.
 - The long-term guiding strategy for the LEP's work was now the Local Industrial Strategy (LIS) (which was previously the Strategic Economic Plan).
 - In developing the LIS, the Board surveyed 6000 young people about what they wanted from a future in Gloucestershire.
 - The Strategy had four main focus':
 - Net zero – both how the county could play a lead role in addressing climate change but also the opportunities change offered for economic growth;

- Flexibility – this was a pre-Covid desire, recognising that in order to retain and attract young people, the county had to have a flexible approach to employment and employability;
- Innovation – there was a long history of innovation in Gloucestershire and the LEP wanted to continue that. The County currently had a higher than national average of businesses involved in innovation.
- Sector strengths: Cyber Technology – industry growth for the whole county, not just the development at GCHQ but digital skills centres etc. and Agritech development and growth locally and internationally.
- The LEP had a four stage approach to its Covid response:
 - Setting up a remote response services as quickly as possible.
 - Gathering intelligence from businesses in Gloucestershire on the impacts of Covid and lockdown, which was then fed into Govt. to make sure support was coming down the line nationally or being provided locally.
 - Informing businesses of what support was available by working closely with district partners who were responsible for handing out financial schemes from Govt. plus highlighting information on what was available centrally.
 - The final stage was now implementing the LEPs recovery plan and looking forward to how to build resilience into Gloucestershire's economy.
- The LEP was currently going through a review commissioned by Govt. at national level. The purpose of which was to explore how to strengthen the business voice in local decision making and using the LEPs to do this.
- There were also a number of Board member changes ongoing at the moment.

- 5.2 It was questioned what the outcomes of the youth survey were and how these were reflected in the LIS. The full report was available online (<https://www.gfirstlep.com/downloads/2019/gfirst-lep-youth-survey-2019v2.pdf>) but the main concerns from young people were the climate emergency, flexibility in employment, public transport availability plus their enthusiasm for the natural environment and how much they valued having a mix of urban and rural.
- 5.3 Following on from this, it was questioned whether the LEP considered the large investment brought to Gloucestershire to date addressed those primary concerns. It was advised that now the LEP focus had moved to the priorities within the LIS, it had considered some previous investments made inline with the SEP aspirations probably would not be made now, primarily due to the increased focus on environmental issues.

- 5.4 In relation to Covid, it was queried how the LEP saw the shift from office to home working playing out in the longer term and whether it could have an affect on future investments.
- 5.5 Members heard that a recent news story suggested with two years, working patterns would return to five days a week in the office. This was not something the LEP recognised at this stage. A lot of research nationally and internationally was showing an increasing number of employees wanted a more flexible approach and a mix of working patterns. In addition the data was also showing that businesses welcomed that approach, and hadn't seen productivity suffer through working from home.
- 5.6 In terms of what this shift meant for future development, it was explained that projects such as Golden Valley were providing a supply of good quality office space which the county has been lacking for decades before Covid. On transport, there was likely to be a shift but it wasn't entirely clear how yet. GCC would continue its focus to improve the public transport offer in Gloucestershire.
- 5.7 What we did know however was that there were some tough decisions ahead on transport and how the county achieved the modal shift needed to meet its climate change aspirations. There was a need to discourage people from returning to their pre-Covid travel habits and pursue a much more environmentally friendly/physically active way of travelling.
- 5.8 It was added that the county was currently trialling a new rural demand response rural transport scheme in the Cotswolds and Forest of Dean. It was noted that 26% of residents in FOD and 46% in the Cotswolds did not live within walking distance of a bus stop, as well as many large employers being out of reach from public transport. This type of 'Uber' style bus service could be vital going towards solving rural transport issues.
- 5.9 It was questioned how the LEP were encouraging businesses to be part of a greener economy. It was advised that the Growth Hubs were a key tool here. They were working with existing employers, offering free impartial advice on becoming net zero, but also helping businesses identify the opportunities the green agenda could bring.
- 5.10 In addition the skills agenda was supporting education providers to understand what green jobs were and how to translate those into useful training for young people.
- 5.11 A member recognised the valuable training resource the LEP had provided to young people on STEM career roles. It was advised that currently this was an unfunded area of activity for the LEP, it was unknown at the moment where future funding would come from to continue the programme after Covid but the LEP were very aware of the positive feedback from young people of how valuable it had been. The LEP would continue to look into where they could access funding to continue.

- 5.12 It was added that a lot of the above discussions revolved around the contents of the Local Transport Plan which would be shared with members after the meeting for their review and consider whether a future presentation would be useful.

ACTION: DSU

Presentation 2 – Gloucestershire County Council

- 5.13 The second introduction was received from Colin Chick, Executive Director of Economy Environment and Infrastructure at GCC, and the Committee noted the following:
- The GEGJC had recently considered a report on what the county's role and approach was to economic recovery during and after the Pandemic (report included in this meeting's papers).
 - The report identified three main themes that GCC were directly responsible for, these were summarised in section 2.2.
 - It had then been used to produce an economic dashboard for members of both GEGJC and GEGSC to be able to identify economic weaknesses coming out of the pandemic.
 - Katherine Martin, Data & Analysis Manager, was introduced to give an overview of the attached dashboard.
 - It included the headline figures impacted by Covid and then drilled down on each in more detail. It did not include all indicators for the economy but those that were timely and gave the best understanding of Covid impacts.
 - It was hoped receiving this data as a standing item at each Committee meeting would give members the ability to make informed decisions going forward. Members were encouraged to suggest anything else that could be included.
- 5.14 In reference to the dashboard, there were a few requests for additional measures to be added on green business growth and high streets. These would be taken away for the team to explore but it was advised these were both difficult to measure and the Council did not have unlimited resource to do so.
- 5.15 On the Fastershire project, it was questioned whether the Council was purely supporting business broadband upgrade or whether it was also looking into blackspot residential areas as well.
- 5.16 It was advised that the team were looking at both. In summary, if there was not an existing commercial proposition available, the Council could intervene

and contact broadband providers to see if they would be willing to provide one, if not, that was the stage the Council could step in to provide support.

- 5.17 There was a Fastershire website where anyone could check against a postcode to see what was available in that area and any planned upgrades. It was highlighted however that the council could only intervene on infrastructure; it could not help residents or businesses with poor quality services, which could only be addressed by the providers.

Presentation 3 – Gloucestershire Economic Growth Joint Committee (GEGJC) (to include the role of the six district councils)

- 5.18 The third introduction was received from Mike Dawson, Chair of the GEGJC Senior Officer Group (SOG), and the Committee noted the following:
- Some issues had already been covered through the other presentations so this section would include comments on the local planning authorities, economic development generally plus Covid recovery, the Joint Committee how it worked and where it came from and finally the officer support for this area provided via SOG.
 - The six district councils in Gloucestershire, despite some level of competition at times, acknowledged they were much stronger when they work together, and as part of an effective partnership on most issues.
 - In addition to the LIS and LTP as important documents for the Committee to be aware of, the third were the districts local plans. District councils were the authorities that planned for growth in the county, which was a massive responsibility and incredibly costly. Cotswold, Stroud and the FOD had their own plans, whilst Tewkesbury, Gloucester and Cheltenham worked together on a Joint Core Strategy.
 - It was noted the existing adopted plans which ran from 2011-2031 planned to deliver 61,500 homes across the county plus 340 hectares of employment land (which equated to 52,000 jobs in that period).
 - All authorities were currently working on the next iteration of these plans to work through to 2041, in their draft stage these plans were looking to deliver another 30,000 new homes and 140 hectares (equating to another 18,000 jobs) of employment land.
 - These figures showed the sheer importance of local planning and the responsibility carried by the districts.
 - In light of these figures, comments were echoed on the real need for integrated, long term transport plans to support a more effective planning process.
 - Districts had been somewhat hampered by central Govt. who had always been very keen on planning periods. Many large scale deliveries such as

the Golden Valley project and Tewkesbury Garden Town were long-term projects that spanned outside of these.

- All seven authorities in Gloucestershire were therefore currently working towards a longer-term broad agreement on the future for development in the county beyond 2050, with an aim to better integrate all future development with transport networks etc. A Statement of Common Ground was currently being discussed.
- They all saw economic growth as a priority, but each of their approaches were different. This was because the communities across the county varied a lot, so the focus changed depending on that districts need/aspiration. In addition there was variation of economic growth function within different council structures and staffing.
- Covid recovery has been a huge piece of work for all and the partnership working had been amazing.
- District councils had been responsible for paying out Govt. grant aid to businesses which estimated to date at around £200m to 40,000 businesses, the logistics of which had been terrific.
- There was an update to GEGJC this morning formal partners on Covid recovery efforts, a summary document of this discussion would be circulated to members shortly.

ACTION: Mike Dawson

- Moving on to the GEGJC, it had been created in 2015 when Govt. requested authorities to set up a partnership body which was capable of making binding decisions around the economy and growth.
- This Committee was set up at the same time to provide the joint scrutiny arrangements.
- The functions of GEGJC were a round the exchange of information, partnership and coordination and decisions on funding (specifically around the Strategic Economic Development Fund which derived from the business rates pool).
- Quite often when there were competing bids for Govt. funding, the GEGJC was helpfully used as a forum to discuss.
- Both Committees were supported by the SOG, which was made up of representatives from the GFirst LEP, GCC and district councils at a senior level. These tended to be officers involved in economic growth and/or planning.
- The work of SOG was to support the agendas and work of both Committees.

6. THE SKILLS AGENDA FOR GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Pete Carr, Director of Employment and Skills at the GFirst LEP, gave a brief overview of the skills agenda and members noted the following points:

- The paper provided worked through how Gloucestershire operated in the skills space, the specific challenges that the skills landscape had and proposals that were currently being taken forward (by all partners) to try and reduce some of those complexities and offer a more streamlined landscape locally.
- This agenda had been taken forward by a group called the Gloucestershire Skills Advisory Panel which aimed at bringing together all key partners in this area from education, providers, councils etc.
- Provisions very much operated depending on the need. Some of the work for example was focused on strategic planning, whereas others might be delivering in person training around school career strategies.
- There were also sub-groups of the Panel that were constantly working on a number of direct aspects such as Covid economic recovery.
- The diagram at page 42 of the agenda pack represented the very complicated landscape that was the skills agenda.
- One of the main local challenges was that 89% of all businesses in the county were classed as micro-businesses meaning they only had up to 9 employees. Many were therefore extremely stretched in terms of time and resources to be able to support this agenda.
- The Panel had recently created the Skills Portal (www.skillsportalglos.com) which aimed at starting to simplify the landscape by bringing together all the support an individual might need to one place.
- In addition to this, an Employment and Skills Hub was in the process of being created which would again aim to provide a 'one front door approach' for people who were looking for that support.

7. WORK PLAN

Members noted the future items in the attached work plan and suggested the following to be added:

- Local Transport Plan, with a focus on carbon neutral and the affordability of public transport options
- Youth unemployment
- Green jobs and sustainable growth
- What might be the future impacts of Covid on the economy, particularly with a move towards more home working
- Statement of Common Ground

Minutes subject to their acceptance as a correct record at the next meeting

It was confirmed the Chair would share a draft work plan proposal with members to consider following the meeting.

CHAIR

Meeting concluded at 16:00.