

# Report on Gloucestershire Economic Strategy Scrutiny Committee

Cllr Angus Jenkinson

*A general comment: I aim to report accurately while providing an interpretive view for the members of the committee about a new situation. I would prefer to present simple facts but it is part of the process of scrutiny to analyse and therefore in this case I've taken the liberty of trying to indicate where I have concerns that members might wish to note. I hope the distinction is clear and at least on some matters it should be noted that afterwards and indeed during the meeting there was considerable agreement on a number of points of concern.*

GEGSC is no more. GESSC is the new body.

The first meeting took place on Friday 20 September 2024. That means that there has been no economic scrutiny function since the end of last year. During that time a new strategy was agreed by GCC Council. I challenged this on our behalf.

The agenda of this meeting and notes for CDC O&S (1-3 were housekeeping) follow:

## **4 — GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS —**

- a) These were discussed and I and others pointed out how opaque and unclear they are. In particular, GEGSC had an overview of all GCC strategy. The verbal commentary stated this committee's remit is only the City Region Board (CRB) And any economic strategy that filtered through this body. This body of District representatives [Cllr Dale from CDC] deals or dealt only with funds obtained from various sources. When I researched it, this amounted to some 5% of the GCC budget. There is however change still being worked through — see below.  
<https://glostext.gloucestershire.gov.uk/mgCommitteeDetails.aspx?ID=874> or <https://tinyurl.com/CRBGlos>). However, the governance terms do mention "Gloucestershire strategy") It was also remarked that other councils cannot scrutinise county policy. And see remarks from the City Region Board (CRB) meeting below.

### Revised Terms of Reference Updated 4 April 2024

1. To review the decisions, plans and policies of the Gloucestershire City Region Board and
2. To scrutinise the impact and delivery outcomes of successful Strategic Economic Development Fund (SEDF) bids;

3. To identify future areas of economic growth for inclusion in the Gloucestershire Economic Strategy\*;
4. To provide a scrutiny function for *any potential devolution deal* in so far as it relates to the Gloucestershire City Region Board or the Gloucestershire Economic Strategy\*.

The Economic Strategy Scrutiny Committee may not exercise any function other than those outlined above.

Notes:

- i. Two constituencies may call in a decision.
- ii. The CRB also responsible for discharging the Strategic Economic Development Fund (SEDF).
- iii. I still cannot confirm to you how CRB economic development relates to GCC economic development and both to CESSC. A chart was requested to explain how the City Region Board and GESSC related to each other and other committees.
- iv. The City Region Board had not yet agreed to endorse the Gloucestershire Economic Strategy. GESSC/GEGSC had had no input.
- v. The reference to the Economic Strategy “was generic and could refer to whatever strategy was being implemented, so the wording did not need to be amended”...
- vi. The view is that it is within GCC’s own rights to determine what committees should exist and what their terms of reference should be. However, the Localism Act 2011 defines the requirement for O&S committees and this body has history. But this could be a GCC O&S and not need district input.
- vii. I noted from CRB minutes: The Chair suggested that the City Region Board should endorse the Economic Strategy. Several District Members confirmed that due to their recent elections, they needed more time to review the Economic Strategy. *They asked that the decision to endorse the Economic Strategy be postponed until September’s City Region Board meeting.*

**5 — UPDATE FROM THE CITY REGION BOARD CHAIR —**

- a) I challenged the fact that much of the county cannot be called a city and this name seemed to imply that most of the county would be ignored. The response was that the name has been adopted to satisfy government discourse. It is a government concept. The minutes report:

*5.4: Answering a Member’s question, the City Region Board Chair emphasised that the term ‘city region’ was used in central government to identify areas larger than individual cities or towns. Whilst there had been no specific legislation for the use of the term, there had been a stream of funding announcements over the last decade where identified city regions benefitted*

*over and above other parts of the country. Gloucestershire's largest urban areas were in the geographic centre of the county with important market towns in the outer area of the county, therefore 'city region' fitted well with the landscape of Gloucestershire.*

- b) The chair -- Cllr David Gray, GCC Cabinet Member for Economy, Environment and Planning -- advised that they are an executive body who will make decisions following processes and then we will subsequently review those decisions and give the benefit of our "wisdom". This has been referred back to the officers on the basis of my challenge that Overview and Scrutiny happens before decisions are made rather than afterwards.
- c) As of the 1st of April 2024, the LEP's functions were transferred to GCC. He emphasised that all activities were running as usual except for the LEP Board which ended on the 31st of March 2024. It was explained that the new Economic Growth Board would replace the previous LEP Board and was currently recruiting for the Business Board Member position.
- d) The chair is from Tewkesbury. He indicated the Tewkesbury wants to be on the front foot by engaging in the ideas of a garden town or garden village. This would be to avoid developments without infrastructure. I would encourage the overview and scrutiny committee to invite appropriate input on this subject including a possible visit to the Tewkesbury development or Oxfordshire development in order to get ahead as we move towards the next stages of the area plan and the possible necessity to increase house building over the current schedule, if this is part of our remit.
- e) The chair wishes CRB to lobby government for the needs of Gloucestershire.
- f) So far they have not decided anything because they have only been involved in "forming and storming".
- g) Given item 6.6 from the CRB minutes above and 5d here, it is perhaps unsurprising that the chair advised that it would be May at least before they will be ready to say anything in regard to strategy and it could be longer. There was some debate about how often we would meet.

## **6 — GLOUCESTERSHIRE ECONOMIC EVIDENCE BASE —**

- a) There was much praise for this report. I am unsure why. To be fair, what was brought to the meeting was a summary and there is a considerable body of data behind it that was not discussed. However, all of the data comes from the government and is recognised as not very granular -- the research base is not large enough -- and it comes through late. The officer advise that all counties asked the government to expand and improve research.
- b) The analytics showed chosen statistical information from this database. Given the high level of granularity across Gloucestershire and even within a town, not a great deal of insight was obtained by your reporter. Nevertheless, this database

(full report 400 pages) may be very useful to researchers in CDC and more widely. It may be unfair to judge a report that has limited time and a disparate group of councillor skills.

- c) I noted various terms such as “economically inactive” and “hard to fill”, which are seen as significant problem areas. No definitions were provided but my initial research suggests that each is a somewhat loose term and covers a range of different reasons that might have granular significance. For example, is the job hard to fill because the pay is so low or because there are a lack of highly skilled individuals? Is someone economically inactive because they are retired and perhaps wealthy but below the threshold age, or perhaps a carer or perhaps chronically ill or something else?
- d) One example that does not give confidence was the evidence on climate. Climate data is reported two years after the year of research, which in turn does not begin until some two years after the end of year. So what we know is that in 2021, climate emissions increased compared with 2019 but we do not know what the position was in 2023 nor what it is expect to be in 2024. The estimate that appeared in informal conversation amongst members was that we were well off target for achieving an 80% reduction in GHGs by 20-30. There may be estimates but this would be in a different body.
- e) Similarly, this research does not inform on the necessity or otherwise for new primary schools, given the considerable demographic shift. is not included in this research — primary schools are not important to the economy?)
- f) This suggests that the information base makes it difficult to achieve what another councillor called the ambition of “being in harmony as a unique achievement of Gloucestershire”.
- g) There is no overall body or other arrangements in Gloucestershire County Council for coordinating timely regulatory feedback.

## **7 — GLOUCESTERSHIRE ECONOMIC STRATEGY OVERVIEW —**

- a) The discussion of the county economic strategy was very limited, with only high-level information being presented along with a link to the full report. It was not intended that we do more than acknowledge that there is one.
- b) On a positive note, the recommendations I made to the project team (following an invitation to do so last autumn after the initial presentation) were in the main accepted. These changes relate to my special councillor responsibility where I was qualified to make recommendations. The key change is the addition of “technique” — ie a focus on both agri-tech and agri-technique and not just the former — with some of its consequences.

## **8 — UPDATE ON DEVOLUTION —**

A response has been given: “No mayor please.” A report was given verbally on why the county borders do not lend themselves to a unitary body such as others.

Gloucestershire remains the proper “unit of economic management”. The CRB may be a defensive move therefore.

9 — WORK PLAN—

(very little planned)