

West of England Economic Recovery Taskforce – 18 August 2020

Summary / action notes

Present:

Name	Organisation
Mayor Tim Bowles	WECA
Professor Steven West	Local Enterprise Partnership
Andy Forbes	City of Bristol College
Anwen Jones	BEIS
Claire Smith	Buro Happold
CLlr Dine Romero	Bath & North East Somerset - apologies
CLlr Donald Davies	North Somerset Council
CLlr Toby Savage	South Gloucestershire Council
Dave Perry	South Gloucestershire Council - apologies
Dick Penny	WofE Cultural Strategy Engagement Group
Professor Ian White	University of Bath
Jo Walker	North Somerset
Joanne Rumley	Foot Anstey & WofE Skills Advisory Panel
Joe	MHCLG
Jon Reynolds	GDS Digital
Katherine Davies	Visit Bath / Destination Bristol
Margot Day	Buro Happold
Mayor Marvin Rees	Bristol City Council
Mike Jackson	Bristol City Council
Natasha Swinscoe	WEAHSN
Neil Douglas	Viper Innovations
Nigel Costley	SWTUC

Oliver Rooke	BEIS – apologies
Paul Craig	Rolls Royce
Phil Smith	Business West
Poku Osei	Babassa - apologies
Richard Bonner	Arcadis
Cllr Richard Samuel representing Dine Romero	Bath & North East Somerset
Rick Sturge	Business in the Community [BITC]
Samantha Payne	Open Bionics - apologies
Simon Earles representing Dave Lees	Bristol Airport
Will Godfrey	Bath & North East Somerset

1. Welcome and apologies / setting the scene for the meeting

The Chair welcomed attendees to the meeting.

Apologies were received from Patricia Greer, David Coombs, Katherine Finn, Dave Lees, Cllr Craig Cheney, Cllr Dine Romero, Samantha Payne, Oliver Rooke, Dave Perry, Tim Ball, Peter Alvis and Poku Osei.

Introductory comments from the Chair:

* Thanked all for attending today's meeting and for all their efforts and ongoing work; the focus now is very much on moving forward on the key identified themes and actions and developing the 'ask' and 'offer' to government to support the regional economic recovery.

* Referred to meetings held with major employers across the region, across a range of sectors including creative industries – has gained invaluable insights from these employer perspectives.

* Referred to the ongoing lobbying of politicians and government that is taking place in the context of aiding the region's recovery – both individual lobbying and collectively with other Metro Mayors, including specific meetings with the Chancellor; and with the Department for Transport around public transport funding and subsidies, particularly mindful of the public transport implications of the forthcoming new school / higher / further education terms starting in September and the need to ensure connectivity across the region. He had also lobbied the Prime Minister around government investment in terms of the region's major infrastructure needs.

* Referred in particular to the following encouraging developments:

- In spite of the Covid situation, in terms of inward investment, new inquiries are being received, including inquiries from national and international companies who are keen to invest in the region.

- Good progress is being made through scale-up in the cultural / creative industry sector.

- The 'Trading better on line' scheme is underway, providing assistance to SMEs of between 5 and 250 employees.

- Important research/intelligence is ongoing through the Business Insights Panel – which includes representatives from major employer groups across the region, and the high street banking sector. Notwithstanding the impact of Covid-19, positive economic / job opportunities are still being created. There is also recognition around the potential for employee skill sets being transferable between sectors. There are many challenges ahead but research led by Phil Smith at Business West suggests that through collective efforts, the region is well placed and should be confident about encouraging and developing a positive economic response.

- A West of England business innovation fund is to be launched shortly, aiming to support business from a wide range of sectors to develop innovative projects and products.

The Chair concluded his introductory comments by setting the scene for the next part of this meeting, where, working in break-out groups, detailed discussion could take place around the pre-circulated 'Storyboard' document which brought together the issues and actions highlighted in each of the 9 policy papers under the three themes of WECA's Operating Plan: • Skills (and Employment) • Business • Infrastructure (and Place). Moving forwards, it will be essential to maintain and maximise an effective approach in highlighting the challenges to be faced and taking forward all identified opportunities to boost the region's recovery, building on the region's pre-Covid strengths, particularly around innovation and collaboration.

2. Breakout room discussions

The below themes were raised by members during the breakout room discussions. Each group discussed either 'Business', 'Infrastructure and Place' or 'Skills and Employment' for 15 minutes, before rotating to the next session. Each breakout room was hosted by a WECA representative.

- Concern over continued and increased job losses as we approach the end of the furlough scheme, requiring a rapid regional response
- Consensus that WECA need 3 headline actions to take forward as part of the Recovery Plan
- To increase and support public confidence (return to work, transport, retail, leisure)
- Reimagine our highstreets and city centres. Attracting footfall for health, business collaboration, education and leisure as well as retail
- Digital innovation, connectivity, inclusion and training will be critical to recovery and growth

With two major cross cutting themes

- Diversity and inclusion, including the impact upon already deprived communities
- Green recovery with move to low carbon and green skills/jobs creation

3. Immediate Reflections following break-out room discussions:

Summary comments / reflections from Steve West:

- * There is a widespread immediate concern about how to deal with the expected rising tide of redundancies that are expected shortly. In terms of very immediate actions, it will be particularly important to build, with pace, on those regional interventions that are already seen to be working.
- * As part of the recovery planning, there is an issue around identifying 2-3 really key/distinctive longer-term priorities to take forward. One such priority could be around taking a positive approach to re-imagining how high street buildings are used and encouraging proposals for mixed use of buildings - e.g. within one or adjacent city centre buildings, there could be opportunities for Further / Higher Education use, access to careers advice, more generic work 'touch down' space, access to health/social care, community uses and housing, all within close proximity. With a fall in the use of retail space, there is a need to give people a good reason to go the city/town centre; the importance of student expenditure in particular in supporting the high street economy should not be underestimated. Taking forward distinctive priorities will require pooling of resources and it will be important to also define clearly how 'success' will be measured.
- * A lot of very productive work has taken place across sectors in developing proposed actions. It is important to recognise though that there is effectively a national competition for government resources. The region must deliver a clear and compelling case to encourage government investment and demonstrate the return that the region can deliver from that investment. It will also be critical to convey to government the importance of 'levelling-up' within this region.

Summary comments from the Chair:

- * A collaborative approach must be maintained, building on the region's pre-Covid strengths. Recognising the breadth of the work and actions being taken, it will be critical to continue to share information and experiences and demonstrate 'peer to peer' support; flexibility will be important also, i.e. recognising that the approach is not a 'one size fits all' approach; communities across the region must see benefits from interventions.
- * From the discussion around 'Infrastructure and Place', it will be important for all key partners to show leadership in driving the recovery and help instil confidence, for example around the return of city centre working and leisure activity; need to articulate a strong public message around this to support business activity.
- * It will be critical to highlight and take advantage of all available opportunities for creating jobs and careers and encourage investment in new technologies in connection with this.
- * It will be important to identify 'landmark' interventions to take forward, e.g. how best to support the hospitality and retail sector in the lead-up to Christmas.

4. Overall wrap up / summary

The Chair thanked all attendees for their positive contributions at this meeting. Details of the discussions that had taken place during the break-out sessions had been captured and would be shared (see section 2 above).

In terms of the next meeting of the Taskforce on 15 September, the intention will be to use that meeting to focus on the recovery plan and formulating the detail of the collective 'ask' and 'offer' to government to boost the regional recovery.