

West of England Economic Recovery Taskforce – 3 November 2020

Extraordinary meeting

Minutes / action notes

Taskforce membership:

Mayor Tim Bowles	WECA
Steve West	Local Enterprise Partnership
Andy Forbes	City of Bristol College
Simon Earles (for David Lees)	Bristol Airport
David Brown	The Bristol Port Company
David Coombes	Skills for Logistics & The Skills Group Ltd
Dick Penny	WofE Cultural Strategy Engagement Group
Cllr Dine Romero	Bath & North East Somerset
Cllr Donald Davies	North Somerset Council
Cllr Toby Savage	South Gloucestershire Council
Hope Summers	City of Bristol College
Ben Woods (for Ian White)	Bath University
Joanne Rumley	Foot Anstey & WofE Skills Advisory Panel
Jon Reynolds	GDS Digital
Katharine Finn	PWC
Kathryn Davis	Visit Bath / Destination Bristol
Margot Day	Buro Happold
Mayor Marvin Rees	City of Bristol
Nigel Costley	SWTUC
Neil Douglas	Viper Innovations
Paul Craig	Rolls Royce
Peter Alvis	Lye Cross Farm
Phil Smith	Business West

Poku Osei	Babassa
Richard Bonner	Arcadis
Rick Sturge	Business in the Community [BITC]
Samantha Payne	Open Bionics
Simon Earles	Bristol Airport
Natasha Swinscoe	WEAHSN

WECA attendees: Patricia Greer; Stephen Bashford; Jess Lee; Lynda Bird; Menna Davies; George Margesson

1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

The Chair welcomed all attendees and thanked them for joining this extraordinary meeting of the Taskforce.

Apologies were received from Cllr Toby Savage, Mayor Marvin Rees, Andy Forbes, Ian White and Dick Penny.

The Chair then made introductory comments as follows:

* This meeting had been called at short notice to discuss the impact of the lockdown restrictions announced by the government at the weekend, that will come into force on 5 November and run until 2 December.

* Nationally and regionally, these were challenging times and events were moving at pace. It was important to recognise that the work taken forward through the Taskforce over the last 6 months had helped ensure that a clear Recovery Plan, setting out actions to be taken, was already in place that built on the strengths of the region and looked to address key challenges faced as the pandemic continues.

* As the region moved into this second lockdown period, it would be essential for all Taskforce members to help to ensure that businesses and residents are able to benefit from the support available to them through our recovery programme

2. IMPACT OF LOCKDOWN

Update on support/measures already in place:

The Chair commented that today's single item agenda was focused on the impact of lockdown but he would like to start this meeting by reflecting on the support that was already in place.

Stephen Bashford, WECA's Director of Business & Skills, then gave an overview / update, highlighting the following:

a. The government was providing additional support to business during the new lockdown period, including an extension of the existing Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (furlough) scheme and increased support to self-employed people. It would be important to look to align regional and national funding support to best meet the demand for business support.

b. Key measures already in place / underway include:

* Access to a wide range of support for businesses through the West of England Growth Hub providing a 'one front door' offer to businesses so they can access the help and support that they need. The range of services include:

- Universal Business Support providing additional capacity to increase local outreach and help local areas respond more flexibly to business needs.
- Small Grants Programme (in conjunction with Business West) for business adaptation with focused support available for the tourism / hospitality sectors.
- Business Innovation Fund – match funding to provide SMEs with the opportunity for tailored support and funding to bring new products, services and processes to the market.

* The Recovery Plan was backed by a £9.4m Recovery Fund agreed by the WECA Committee. Proposals being taken forward backed by this initial funding included:

- Digital Skills Investment Programme (£2m)
- Low Carbon Challenge Fund - Phase 2 (£1.9m)
- Small Business Resilience Grant Programme (£1.5m)
- Culture & Creative Industry Business Support Programme (£0.5m)
- Covid-19 Community Recovery Fund (£1.5m)
- Talent Retention Scheme (£300K)
- High Streets renewal (£1.5m catalyst fund)

Every effort was being made to bring these initiatives forward at pace with the overall objective of achieving a sustainable positive impact.

The Chair thanked Stephen Bashford for the update and advised that a full briefing note on the measures being mobilised and the support available to businesses would be circulated to the Taskforce members so they could share it through their networks. In sharing this information, as part of their shared ambassadorial role, it would be vital for all to communicate clearly so that businesses and individuals / residents can easily understand the support options available and how they can be accessed.

Initial comments / feedback from Taskforce members:

* In terms of government funding during lockdown, £20 per head discretionary funding will be available to be used locally (approx. £23m for the West of England region). It was suggested it will be important to support as many business and companies as possible – many will be in acute need of support in this period. It was noted that the WECA and UA Chief Executives were investigating options for the use of additional discretionary business support funds. It was suggested that support should perhaps be prioritised to businesses impacted by mandatory closure, but which currently fall outside of the current grants regime, e.g. supply chain companies to closed sectors.

* Not all businesses will be able to contemplate 'growing' at this time – for some, support is needed to enable their continued existence. Support needs to be available for businesses of all sizes. It will be critical to ensure simple 'key contact' detail / information is available.

* A concern was expressed about the implications of lockdown at the individual employee level, e.g. in terms of those facing uncertainty as they approach the end of furlough; concerns around employer ability to pay a living wage; uncertainties caused through being required to self-isolate. It is essential that communication is as wide as possible about the support available.

* Major difficulties are faced by some very small businesses and self-employed people.

* In response to a question, the Chair confirmed that working with the M9 Metro Mayors, he was closely involved with ongoing lobbying of politicians and government in the context of aiding the region's recovery.

* In response to a question, it was confirmed that in addition to the Rapid Redundancy Response, the Talent Retention Scheme (£300K) being taken forward as part of the Recovery Plan would provide a bespoke regional talent retention platform to help individuals via a job matching/brokerage service.

* It will be important to maximise the retraining / upskilling of individuals facing redundancy so they are equipped for future job opportunities that arise. There is a skills gap in the region – it will be important, at the granular level, to help individuals access the support they need.

* Some sectors, e.g. tourism / visitor economy face additional uncertainty as further government lockdown guidance is awaited.

* In terms of communications, whilst recognising that the 'Growth Hub' terminology reflected national government 'language', a simple re-naming of the service should be considered to help keep 'messaging' simple and easily understandable to the wider public audience.

Reflections from the informal meeting of the LEP Board (held earlier that day):

Steve West highlighted the following points:

* The LEP Board recognised the hard and difficult circumstances faced by many business and residents across the region, which in many cases will be heightened during the forthcoming lockdown situation.

* Whilst the Board must soon consider the medium and longer-term aspects of regional recovery, the immediate focus must now be on the immediate situation. The Board recognised the importance of and encouraged the Combined Authority and the unitary authorities to work together in a joined-up way to maximise the impact of their interventions. It will be essential to target support and available resources to maximise positive impacts.

* The Board recognised the importance into the medium-longer term of re-skilling and re-training people to help them secure re-employment.

* The Board also fully supported the view (as expressed at this meeting) about providing clear and simple information to connect to people (e.g. through websites) about the support that is available to businesses and individuals.

Implications of lockdown:

Whilst noting that further government guidance was awaited, which would lead to closure/adaptation as necessary for business sectors and related supply chains, the Taskforce was asked to give feedback/views on the following questions:

Where will impacts be felt beyond the legally closed sectors and are there any 'gaps' that need to be considered?

Are businesses better prepared this time around, and will that mitigate the effects?

What will be the jobs impact - will businesses postpone any impending redundancies due to the furlough scheme extension, or carry on as planned? Will there be recruitment freezes?

What additional support would help?

How will this affect preparations for EU transition?

Comments / feedback from Taskforce members:

- * Whilst the indication from government was that construction would continue, there may be issues and knock-on implications for the construction industry if agreements are defaulted on due to the economic situation.
- * It was noted that the situation in relation to the operation of Bristol airport would be reviewed depending on the impact of government guidance that all non-essential travel be avoided during lockdown.
- * Impacts for non-rate paying companies should be assessed.
- * In terms of the logistics / goods delivery sector, there is an issue around goods vehicle driving recruitment due to the backlog caused by driving tests not proceeding.
- * It was noted that the region's 4 universities will remain open, with face-to-face teaching taking account of relevant government guidance. The universities could not though prevent students returning to their homes if they chose to do so; campuses remained open but there are ongoing issues about what can best be done to support students.
- * Whilst the extension of furlough will help affected individuals very immediately, the threat of redundancy will increase anxiety for many people and within communities.
- * The sharing of any available information on local supply chains for closed industries will be useful in terms of targeting support to businesses as best as possible.
- * The implications and wider impact of Brexit will need to be considered, particularly about the potential impact for employment rates and lay-offs

At the conclusion of the discussion, the Chair thanked Taskforce members for their comments and encouraged members to e-mail through any further thoughts/comments.

3. NEXT STEPS

The Chair again thanked to everyone for making the time to attend this meeting and for their contributions.

He reminded all that the next Taskforce meeting was on 13 November – a progress update on delivery of the Recovery Plan and further next steps will be brought to that meeting for discussion.