

**West of England Economic Recovery Taskforce – 15 December 2020**

**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
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; David Carter; Jess Lee; Lynda Bird; David Henderson, George Margesson

## 1. WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

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

Apologies were received from Mayor Marvin Rees (Cllr Cheney attending), Dick Penny and Simon Earles.

The Chair then made introductory comments and set the context for the meeting as follows:

\* Since the last meeting of the Taskforce, the region had moved from national lockdown into living under Covid tier restrictions; the next government announcement on Covid tiers to apply across the region's authorities is due on 16 December. Dr Christina Gray, Bristol's Director of Public Health was attending today's meeting to give a detailed update on the Covid situation.

\* Work has continued apace since the last meeting on the recovery agenda, including through further meetings of the Regional Insights Panel and business representatives through the LEP Board. He continued to link in with government through the M9 metro mayors group.

## 2. UPDATE ON CURRENT RESTRICTIONS

With reference to slides, Christina Gray, Bristol's Director of Public Health gave an update on the current Covid situation.

Key points highlighted included:

- \* The region was recognised as having a strong public health platform.
- \* 5 key factors were taken into account in determining decisions on Covid tiers:
  - The background rate of infection.
  - The growth rate of infection.
  - The positivity rate (proportion of positive tests).
  - Pressure on the NHS; in particular, the cumulative pressure which resulted in having to reduce capacity to create Covid secure environments. Currently there were approx. 200 people hospitalised with Covid in Bristol/North Somerset/South Gloucestershire, approx. 10% of whom required intensive care.

- Local contextual factors.

\* Given the current 'infection' situation, and with the Christmas 'relaxation' period to come, there was a strong public health expectation that there is very likely to be a 'third wave' of high infection rates to come in late December / early January – in overall terms, the prevalence of Covid remains dangerously high. This was notwithstanding the significant hard work that has taken place locally to reduce infection rates since the most recent Covid tiers had been announced.

\* She suggested that given this context, the Taskforce should keep a sharp focus on preparing for the reality of the next 3-4 months and consider how best to invest in skilling / training for the future.

Points raised in discussion:

\* In response to a question about when it would be realistically possible to evaluate the effectiveness of the vaccination programme, it was noted that it would necessarily take time to understand the effectiveness of vaccination in practice (i.e. as opposed to laboratory conditions) and to assess how long immunity lasted. There will though be significant benefits if the vaccine quickly brings protection to the most vulnerable people.

\* A question was raised about apparent variations by area in terms of school-age children contracting Covid. It was noted that this has recently been a particular issue in London and south east England – it had been announced by the government that lateral flow testing would start to be introduced in English schools from January. In the Bristol area, the 30s-40s age group was experiencing the highest proportion of infections; hospital admissions were more likely to be driven by those contracting the virus in the over 60s age group, especially those who are disadvantaged by inequalities factors.

\* It was suggested that notwithstanding the mass vaccination programme to come, it will be important for the Taskforce to accept the reality that some form of lockdown / Covid restrictions are likely to apply across the region for at least the next 3-4 months; this will continue to be a key factor influencing the regional economy and the ongoing recovery response.

### **3. REGIONAL RECOVERY PROGRAMME – UPDATE AND DISCUSSION**

It was noted that the slide deck circulated as part of the agenda papers contained a detailed update on the action being taken forward through the Regional Recovery Programme.

With reference to the pre-circulated slide deck and updated slides, Stephen Bashford and David Henderson particularly highlighted the following:

\* There has been encouraging take-up from businesses of the support available through the Additional Restrictions Grant administered through the unitary authorities.

\* Good progress is being made in terms of the business cases to secure Regional Recovery Fund allocations; business cases in relation to future skills forecasting and the talent retention platform have already been approved; it is still anticipated that 50% of the business cases for Recovery Fund projects will be brought through for approval by year-end with all business cases signed-off by the end of March.

\* The call for expressions of interest in the Digital Skills Investment Fund is underway.

\* Small Business Resilience grant making is progressing.

\* There has been good engagement across the unitary authorities, particularly on the High Streets Renewal project, helping to set parameters and expectations.

\* The budget for the Cultural and Creative Support Programme has been increased to £1m. £0.5m that had been ringfenced to support the Cultural and Creative sector as part of the Small Business Grant Scheme has been moved between projects to ensure a consistent approach to allocation.

\* The Trading Better Online pilot has been extended into Quarter 4 to support 125 business up to March 2021.

\* Overall, 4,500 interactions have taken place with businesses through the Growth Hub, with over 1,000 business receiving some form of substantive support.

\* Green recovery initiatives being taken forward include:

- a business case to extend the Low Carbon Challenge Fund (LCCF) & Green Business Grants were due to be brought through for approval in the very near future as part of the Recovery Fund process.

- a procurement process has started to appoint a contractor to undertake a green skills analysis of the region, to highlight skills gaps and opportunities within the retrofit and broader green skills sector. This will be used to inform the regional skills offer.

In terms of the green skills agenda, it was suggested that a holistic view needs to be taken to interventions; this area of skills development needs to be seen as wider than just tackling the issue of reducing carbon.

It was noted that the updated slide deck would be circulated to Taskforce members.

### **Feedback / discussion:**

Feedback was then sought from Taskforce members on the following points to help shape the next stage of the recovery programme:

\* Do we need to prioritise and/or tailor particular interventions given the impact of lockdown and the Covid tiers?

\* In relation to take-up of existing projects and government support, how can the Taskforce further raise awareness to promote opportunities and access, including for those sectors and cohorts with greatest need?

\* Looking ahead to further national policy changes on the horizon, including the end of the furlough scheme, what additional things could we be putting in place to maximise responsiveness?

\* And, in light of the earlier discussion, how should we prioritise given the likelihood of continued Covid restrictions as we move into 2021?

### **Points raised:**

\* We need to accept the context that Covid restrictions are likely to apply across the region for at least the next 3-4 months and plan accordingly; there are limited quick solutions and no easy answers, recognising also the very significant pressure on health and social care services.

\* The education sector (universities; colleges; schools) will continue to face disruption.

\* It was suggested there will need to be particular priorities around what can be done to help protect people, e.g. in terms of the end of the furlough scheme; prospects for young people.

\* The Skills Advisory Panel will appreciate any thoughts / guidance on metrics to help evaluate the impact of digital upskilling.

\* There is a digital poverty issue to address in terms of provision of IT equipment, training and connectivity. It was noted that in tackling these issues, there is an opportunity to work collectively, e.g. through colleges to rationalise procurement, for example around software platforms. It was also noted that as part of the current call for expressions of interest in the Digital Skills Investment Fund, there is an opportunity to access funding for IT support and kit.

\* It was suggested that there should be a focus on supporting skills development in those areas of the economy that are thriving under lockdown / Covid restrictions e.g. online retail, accountancy, logistics. We need to invest in those areas of the economy that have growth potential. It was noted that this was a key focus for the sector based work academies.

\* It is important to maximise opportunities through the Kickstart programme – whilst noting that there is more to be done in this area, the Chair pointed out that the region has already made good progress when compared with other Combined Authority areas.

#### **4. CONCLUDING COMMENTS / NEXT STEPS**

The Chair thanked attendees for their contributions at this meeting. The points raised today will be taken fully into account in planning next steps.

It was noted that the next meeting of the Taskforce will be held in February 2021.