

West of England Economic Recovery Taskforce – 24 February 2021

Minutes / action notes

Taskforce membership:

Mayor Tim Bowles	WECA
Steve West	Local Enterprise Partnership
Andy Forbes	City of Bristol College
David Lees / Simon Earles	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
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

Other attendees: Patricia Greer, Lynda Bird, 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, Bristol City Council

Cllr Toby Savage, South Gloucestershire Council

Cllr Donald Davies, North Somerset Council (Jane Harrison attended for NSC)

Ian White, Bath University

David Coombes, Skills Logistics & The Skills Group Ltd

Katharine Finn, PWC

Cllr Craig Cheney, Bristol City Council

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

- * He thanked Taskforce members for their work and contributions over the last 11 months.
- * It was also important to recognise the involvement and valuable contributions enabled through the Taskforce and more widely across partners and business, in meeting the challenges presented by the pandemic.
- * At today's meeting, there will be an opportunity to discuss and assess issues around the government's published 'COVID-19 response – Spring 2021' setting out the four-step roadmap out of the current lockdown in England.

The Chair also reflected on the most recent meeting of the Business Insights Panel where it had been identified that the regional economy is showing tentative signs of recovery, for example in terms of job vacancies being recruited to in some sectors; it is recognised though that recovery will take longer in those sectors that have suffered the greatest impact from the pandemic, such as hospitality and tourism.

2. ECONOMIC UPDATE AND TAKE-UP OF SUPPORT AVAILABLE

With reference to a slide-deck, George Margesson, WECA Principal Economist highlighted the following key aspects of the latest available Covid / economic data:

- * Covid case numbers have fallen significantly across all areas of the region in recent weeks.
- * The Covid vaccination programme is going well, with approximately a quarter of the region's residents receiving their first vaccination dose
- * In overall terms, data suggests that businesses / the economy are now coping slightly better in dealing with lockdown restrictions. There are variations in the impact of the

pandemic on trading status and financial performance of business. The three most adversely affected sectors are the accommodation and food services industry, the arts, entertainment and recreation industry, and the 'other service activities' industry (e.g. hairdressing, beauty treatment).

* There is a mixed picture in relation to the labour market; following a sharp decline in the initial stages of the pandemic, there is now some evidence of upturn in recruitment, particularly in terms of the health and care sector and ICT/programming work.

* WECA's latest West of England Economic Briefing for February will be available shortly (note: this can now be found [online](#))

In discussion, it was suggested it would be useful to track impacts across different demographic groups (e.g. young people, other age groupings, by gender) and also in terms of impacts on deprived communities and across the urban/rural divide. It was noted that all available data 'breakdowns' would be shared.

3. REFLECTIONS ON ANNOUNCEMENT OF GOVERNMENT 4 STEP ROADMAP & 4. IMPACT ON CURRENT RESTRICTIONS AND VIEWS ON NEXT STEPS

The Taskforce reflected on and discussed these issues, with a particular focus on these aspects:

* 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?

* Reflecting on the emerging roadmap, what should we consider as we move forwards?

Points raised:

* A time of economic uncertainty is likely to see a significant shift in terms of people looking to retrain and reskill; we also need to be aware of the demand from young people seeking work in the post-Covid environment and how to help them into opportunities.

* Universities are carefully managing a phased return of students given the need to provide a Covid secure environment. There is a significant cost attached to this.

* There is still a need for continued government support to businesses as lockdown eases – without this, there could be a spike of redundancies / unemployment.

* Recovery of the tourism sector will take time - self catering holiday accommodation could be open in April but in cities, for example, many attractions will not be open so this may inhibit bookings and will inevitably restrict the visitor experience.

* As lockdown eases, there will be an ongoing impact of Brexit on some businesses, especially SMEs, which may become more apparent as furlough ends.

* The road map to ease lockdown will need to be viewed in the context of the announcements to be made in the 3 March Budget; a further extension of furlough could be crucial to the survival of some businesses.

* Bold action from the government should be encouraged to support those workers who need to self-isolate through the lockdown easement period.

* Careful attention needs to be paid to address individual levels of understandable anxiety about returning to a workplace environment.

* In terms of the professional services sector, working from home has seen benefits in terms of productivity and collaboration – it will be important to capture these benefits, perhaps through a balanced approach to home/workplace working in some sectors.

* There will be some conflicting issues in the months ahead – e.g. landlords will wish to collect rent from businesses who may in turn struggle to make payments, particularly during the early stages of lockdown easing.

* A view was expressed that whilst understanding the rationale for the top 9 priorities set out in the government's Covid vaccination programme, consideration should perhaps be given to lobbying around teachers being afforded a higher priority, in light of schools re-opening from 8 March; a lot of teaching staff are nervous about a full-time return to class-based learning at this point. In relation to this issue, noting that the government was committed to the identified 9 priority groups, it was suggested that lobbying could perhaps be focused on encouraging priority as a next phase to priority groups of workers e.g. teachers, drivers, public transport workers.

* The hospitality, arts and entertainment sectors will take a long time to recover, especially since they depend on public confidence in terms of social proximity of people, alongside the uncertainty around how long social distancing requirements may need to be in place. Brexit will also have an ongoing impact on performing arts. These sectors are likely to need support beyond the point of all restrictions being lifted.

* Apprenticeships will be crucial for young people – the co-ordination of apprenticeships and training will be made more difficult by different sectors opening up at different times.

5. RECOVERY PROGRAMME UPDATE

The Chair updated as follows:

* He continued to link in with government on the recovery of the region through discussions with government ministers and through the M9 metro mayors group.

* Work was ongoing to secure delivery of the projects and initiatives supported through the £10m regional recovery fund. For example, in terms of the most recently approved interventions, the Green Business Grants programme was now underway and the Talent retention platform would go live in April. The Small Business Grants programme was also being launched and business cases for the Community Recovery Fund, Digital Skills Investment Programme and Culture & Creative Support were all in the final stages for approval being secured in March.

* It was noted that in response to the pandemic, many of the Combined Authority's programmes had been adjusted, e.g. FutureBright.

6. NEXT STEPS

It was noted that this would be the last meeting of this Taskforce.

The Chair and Vice-Chair reflected that through the Taskforce and related activity, very significant short-term challenges brought about by Covid have been addressed at pace. There are important medium and longer-term challenges ahead, including how best to take account of post-pandemic, potentially permanent changes in working patterns and the implications this may have for city and town centres, and high streets. There is also a challenge in terms of improving the region's digital infrastructure to reach and serve all communities at a cost that is affordable. The intention is that, building on the Taskforce's

work, the response to these challenges will be shaped by and managed through the Local Enterprise Partnership Board.

The Chair concluded the meeting by again thanking Taskforce members, officers, businesses and partners for all their work.