



Economic Growth Board

Friday 22 September 2023 at 9.00 am

Minutes

Present

Councillor Adrian Andrew
Councillor Ian Courts
Councillor Stephen Simkins
Councillor Bob Sleigh (Chair)
Sarah Windrum
Professor Aleks Subic

Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council
City of Wolverhampton Council
Portfolio Lead for Finance & Investments
Business Representative
Higher Education Sector

In Attendance via MS Teams

Councillor Paul Bradley
Councillor Matthew Dormer
Corin Crane
Matthew Hammond

Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
Non-Constituent Authorities
West Midlands Chamber of Commerce
West Midlands Growth Company

Item No.

19. Appointment of Chair

The board agreed to appoint Councillor Bob Sleigh to chair this specific meeting and to note that Councillor Stephen Simkins has been appointed by the Mayor as Portfolio Lead for Economy and Innovation and would assume the chair of the board with effect from the next meeting.

20. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Cotton (Birmingham), Councillor Duggins (Coventry), Councillor Piper (Sandwell), Andy Street, Anita Bhalla and Mike Wright.

21. Minutes - 12 July 2023

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 July 2023 were agreed as a true record.

22. Economic Conditions in the West Midlands

The board considered a report of the Executive Director for Strategy, Economy and Net Zero that provided a summary of the latest quantitative economic and regional labour market intelligence and qualitative insight from West Midlands businesses via the Regional Business Council and the West Midlands Business Insight Forum to help support the board in making decisions.

Councillor Simkins (Wolverhampton) commented that as an authority, Wolverhampton looks at its claimant count figures and found these to be misleading if badged with zero-hour contracts as people could work one month and not the following month. He considered the need to remove Universal Credit from the figures to provide data on sustainable employment that reflects the true picture across the West Midlands.

It was agreed this issue would be taken forward.

Councillor Courts (Solihull) commented that youth unemployment continues to be a real problem in North Solihull and Birmingham and considered the need for the board to focus on the matter. He enquired whether officers have any potential action streams for dealing with the issue.

Jonathan Skinner, Head of Economic Policy & Partnerships, explained the work being undertaken across the WMCA with local authorities and colleges with regards to skills and youth unemployment and reported that this was a 'hot spot' issue as the challenge was not evenly spread.

Charlie Hopkirk (Economist Intelligence Unit) reported that he would share the online link that was related to the skills activity with the board.

Councillor Courts (Solihull) added that the private sector would resolve youth unemployment and reported of the importance of engaging with employers on skills shortages for them to train young people.

Councillor Andrew (Walsall) considered it would be helpful to set out what is happening with regards to youth unemployment across the West Midlands and referred to schemes introduced in Walsall to help young people. He also felt that it would also be useful to understand how the apprenticeship levy was being spent.

Corin Crane (West Midlands Chambers of Commerce) considered the need for a 'deep dive' into the key issues raised to identify the practical actions that can be taken forward.

Resolved that:

The current economic conditions for the West Midlands including the monthly dashboard (Appendix 1) and insight from the region's businesses via the WM Business Insights Forum and the WM Regional Business Council be noted.

23. Deeper Devolution Deal - Economic Elements, including the Strategic Productivity Partnership

The board considered a report of the Executive Director for Strategy, Economy and Net Zero that provided an overview of the work being undertaken to capitalise on the Deeper Devolution Deal with a specific focus on three economic areas relevant to this board; business productivity, innovation and trade & investment.

The report also sought endorsement to the draft terms of reference for the Strategic Productivity Partnership, the approach to the West Midlands International Strategy and for the West Midlands Growth Company (WMGC) to act as the lead agency for trade and investment of behalf of the West Midlands.

Jonathan Skinner, Head of Economic Policy & Partnerships, introduced the report and Katie Trout (WMGC) outlined the work being undertaken with regards to trade and investment.

Further to a comment from Councillor Courts (Solihull) regarding the need to utilise every asset in the region for its promotion to sell the West Midlands, Sarah Windrum (Business Representative) concurred and reported that the Innovation Board was engaging with businesses including smaller businesses through science parks and was looking to join up youth unemployment with productivity.

Councillor Simkins (Wolverhampton) commented on the need to obtain sustainable funding for the long-term, noting the loss of EU funding and with regards to the draft terms of reference for the West Midlands Strategic Productivity Partnership and its objectives, considered that Business Support *must* form part of the WMCA's simplified funding settlement in the future rather than 'may' as stated in the report.

The Executive Director for Strategy, Economy & Net Zero, Ed Cox, reported that he agreed more long-term, sustainable funding for business support was needed from Government. However, the single settlement was currently being negotiated with Government and whilst the WMCA could push for further funding for business support and include 'must' in the terms of reference, this was not the WMCA's decision.

The board discussed whether the inclusion of the word 'must' in the terms of reference for the West Midlands Strategic Productivity Partnership, could harm/hinder the WMCA's negotiating position with regards to the single settlement and agreed to the Chair's proposal that advice be sought on the matter and it be discussed further at the next meeting.

Resolved that:

1. The economic rationale and approach to the Strategic Productivity Partnership, as set out in paragraphs 2.4- 2.7 of the report be endorsed;
2. The draft terms of reference for the Strategic Productivity Partnership attached as Appendix 1 be agreed in principle, subject to advice being sought on the inclusion of the word 'may' or 'must' for Business Support (to form part the WMCA's simplified funding settlement in the future) and this be discussed at the next meeting and

3. The approach to the Trade and Investment strand, including the West Midlands International Strategy and to agree the West Midlands Growth Company acts as the lead agency for trade and investment on behalf of WMC be endorsed.

24. Presentation- Overview of the Digital Workstream

This item was deferred to a future meeting.

25. Business Growth West Midlands

The board considered a report of the Executive Director for Strategy, Economy & Net Zero that provided updates on Business Growth West Midlands since July; UK Shared Prosperity Fund grant, the commissioning of regional programmes and Department for Business and Trade Growth Hub funding.

The report set out a proposed approach for delivering additional support to West Midlands businesses following the securing of £380,000 of Department for Business and Trade 'Growth Hub' funding.

Paul Edwards, Head of Economic Development & Delivery, summarised key highlights from the report and conveyed his thanks to local authority and Growth Hub colleagues for shared and excellent working towards a common goal for the region.

Sarah Windrum (Business Representative) reported that the launch event held earlier in the month was a fantastic event which had received very positive feedback from those businesses attending and the website was easy for businesses to navigate.

In relation to comments from Councillor Simkins (Wolverhampton) regarding the need to have conversations/communications with businesses to ascertain how they can be supported, especially small businesses to help formulate the strategy for the five-year plan, the Executive Director for Strategy, Economy & Net Zero, Ed Cox, reported that a 'Hub and Spoke' model was in place for business support whereby local authority business advisers would be speaking to SMEs in their respective areas about opportunities and their needs to help shape funding strategy.

Corin Crane (West Midlands Chambers of Commerce) added that there were hundreds of business federations across the West Midlands and the Chambers of Commerce could provide feedback to local authorities upon request.

Councillor Andrew (Walsall) commented that business engagement has been undertaken via the LEPs for a long time and following the demise of the LEPS it might be timely to look at a refresh to ensure knowledge is retained.

Resolved that:

1. The updates be noted and

2. The proposed approach for delivering additional support to West Midlands businesses be agreed.

26. Further Education Innovation Fund

The board considered a report of the Executive Director for Strategy, Economy & Net Zero that set out plans for a new Further Education Innovation Fund for further education colleges in the WMCA area and sought agreement to the proposed governance arrangements.

Steven Heales, Policy Manager (Innovation) reported on the new Innovate UK Further Education Fund that has grant funding of £10m to award to further education colleges in the UK for new pilot projects to strengthen their role in local innovation ecosystems.

It was noted that as part of the Devolution Deal, Innovate UK has ringfenced £2.5m from the Further Education Innovation Fund for the WMCA area further education colleges. The funding pool would open in October 2023 and the WMCA would make the final selection of projects by the end of March 2024. The board was invited to share their advice on how to maximise the impact of the fund.

Councillor Simkins enquired as to how the funding would be distributed across the WMCA and reported that he did not want colleges to compete with each other.

David Gaughan, Head of Employer Services, reported that he was looking at sub-regional bids from a collection of colleges across the Black Country alongside colleges from Birmingham & Solihull and Coventry & Warwickshire to ensure there was no competition between colleges.

Resolved that:

1. That WMCA area further education colleges are invited to submit bids for a share of £2.5m grant funding from Innovate UK to run further education innovation policies be noted;
2. That the WMCA is convening and supporting relevant education colleges to develop bids for the grant that align to the West Midlands Local Skills Improvement Plan and the West Midlands Plan for Growth be noted and
3. Authority be delegated to the interim Director for Employment, Skills, Health & Communities in consultation with the Section 151 Officer and Monitoring Officer, to make the local selection decision for funded projects.

27. Major Events Fund Update

The board considered a report of the Director of Finance & Commercial, West Midlands Growth Company (WMGC) that provided an update on progress of the Major Events Fund since the last meeting. The report also sought approval of various documents listed in the report that were agreed by the Major Events Advisory Group.

The Director of Finance & Commercial, Pip Abercromby, provided an update on key activities since the last meeting including the first meeting of the major Events Advisory Group held on 4 August where Councillor Andrew was elected Chair.

Councillor Andrew (Walsall) reported of the need to ensure the major events held are successful, and impact the whole region given that the Leader of Walsall considered Walsall did not benefit from the Birmingham Commonwealth Games.

Resolved that:

1. Approval be given to the following documents which were considered and agreed by the Major Events Advisory Group:
 - (a) the governance for the Major Events Fund;
 - (b) the guiding principles for evaluation;
 - (c) the process timeline and process flow;
 - (d) the application form which has been issued to all eligible authorities, the scoring mechanism and criteria and
2. That a prioritised list of projects be submitted to the November meeting of the board for consideration and approval be noted.

28. Leadership and Management Skills Training

The board considered a report of the Interim Director for Employment, Skills and Health & Communities that outlined how the WMCA would respond to recent reports setting out that deficits in leadership and management skills are holding back the region's growth and creating a productivity challenge. The report sought approval to increase investment in leadership and management skills through the devolved adult education budget.

The Head of Employer Services, David Gaughan, advised the board that £3m from the devolved Adult Education Budget would be invested in four key areas of skills and management to training (aspiring leaders; strategic leadership, healthy and inclusive workforces supporting good work and adoption of technology) to support businesses and their employees through a range of engagement platforms including Business Growth West Midlands to support SMEs.

Councillor Courts (Solihull) reported that he supported the need for this training which was important but enquired as to how the WMCA knows these are the real areas that businesses think are important and how would the training proposed be adding value to what is already be provided. He added that businesses need to be asked what they think are the right areas of focus.

Sarah Windrum (Business Representative) advised that Midlands Engine Mental Health Productivity Pilot has undertaken a lot of work with line managers in this area and data has revealed managers are required to look after the mental health of staff as well as their own mental health. She indicated that as many line managers would be leaders/aspiring leaders of the future, she would like to see mental health training included as part of the training offer on healthy and inclusive workforces.

Corin Crane (West Midlands Chambers of Commerce) commented that the Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) identified businesses did not know where to obtain good quality project management and leadership training and considered that business engagement would be key to the success of the project.

Resolved that:

1. Approval be given to increase the investment of leadership and management skills training across the WMCA through the devolved adult education budget and
2. The WMCA response to the local skills investment plan report specific to leadership and management training needs to employers be noted.

29. Economic Growth Board Work Programme

The board considered a report of the Executive Director for Strategy, Economy & Net Zero that provided an update on the board's work programme.

Councillor Courts (Solihull) considered that reports for this meeting needed to be reduced in length to a more manageable size as he felt it was not efficient to have lengthy document packs of more than a hundred pages. He reported of the need for reports to focus on the real issues and salient points.

The Executive Director for Strategy, Economy & Net Zero, Ed Cox, acknowledged the size of the board pack was large and advised that it was difficult to strike the right balance on the length of reports as there was a lot going on/ to report on. He informed the board that moving forward, he would look to group together several issues in a single report rather than submitting multiple papers.

He advised that further to the discussion at today's meeting on youth unemployment, he would add a 'deep dive' on the forward plan for a future meeting.

Resolved that:

The updated work programme attached at appendix 1 of the report be noted.

- 30. Date of Next Meeting**
Thursday 16 November 2023 at 1.30pm

The meeting ended at 10.15 am.

DRAFT