



**West Midlands
Combined Authority**

Skills Advisory Board

Date: 1 November 2021

Time: 2:30 - 4:00pm

Location: Microsoft Teams

Attendees

Cllr George Duggins, Chair	City of Coventry Council
Dr. Fiona Aldrige	West Midlands Combined Authority
Prof. Julian Beer	Birmingham City University
Rob Colbourne	PTP Training
Clare Hatton	West Midlands Combined Authority
Mike Lewis	West Midlands Combined Authority
Kirston Nelson	City of Coventry Council
Michael Nicol	Education and Skills Funding Agency
Dr. Julie Nugent	West Midlands Combined Authority
Miriam O'Leary	Colleges West Midlands
Richard Smith	Department for Work and Pensions
Tim Steele	University of Wolverhampton
Tom Westley	Black Country LEP
Katharine Willmette	Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

Observers

Iris Both	West Midlands Combined Authority
Keiran Casey	West Midlands Combined Authority

Secretariat

Tanya Patel	West Midlands Combined Authority
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1. Introductions and apologies

Apologies were received from: Prof Philip Plowden, Nick Page, Matt Jones, Ron Lee, Marc Romain, Marion Plant, Tim Pile, Paul Kett, Joanna Searle, Helene Dearn and Karen Riley.

Colleagues received updates on the two outstanding actions from the last meeting:

1. Future boards to include updates from other Local Industrial Strategy Sectors.
2. Future board meetings to have a more substantive item on the role of universities on regional skills.

Both actions were address via the presentations on the day.

2. **Regional productivity and skills – the local perspective**

Kirston Nelson, Director of Education and Skills for City of Coventry Council provided an overview of the key challenges facing the education system, locally. The presentation started by outlining the pre-existing challenges in the school system coupled with legacy of Covid-19, these issues included funding and the retention of school leaders.

An overview of the Budget and Spending Review was also provided and here further challenges around funding were outlined, namely the need to cover pay rises and the national fair funding formula which could have a detrimental impact on the West Midlands region. The Board also heard about concerns around SEND, and the need to continue to fund ESOL and literacy courses.

The Board were presented with three key areas of focus for the region:

- (1) **School improvement** – including recruitment and retention, transition for KS2 to KS3 and school readiness. This is an area that the regional DCSs are looking at.
- (2) **Inclusion and SEND** – including guiding young people with SEND into employment.
- (3) **Skills** – including, tackling youth unemployment, NEETs and the development of pathways from school (informed by the labour market), skills landscape and gaps. Here, the DWP representative Richard Smith stated that Kickstart has emphasised the importance of developing pathways. Clare Hatton, Head of Employment and Skills Delivery (WMCA) stated that the CA's community learning provision will play a key part in supporting ESOL and literacy in adults in the region.

3. **Regional productivity and skills – challenges and opportunities**

The WMCA's Head of Skills Insight, Dr. Fiona Aldridge, provided an overview of the key regional challenges and opportunities. Data shows that the region was experiencing good growth prior to pandemic, which is shown in good GVA, NVQ and business base growth. However, there are also long-standing challenges including in work poverty, persistent skills shortages and uneven development and attainment through early years, primary, secondary and tertiary education and training.

The Board also heard about the impact of the pandemic on the region, which is really pronounced because of the population and sectoral makeup of the region. Economic recovery in the region is variable and significant challenges remain, including higher than average unemployment, youth claimants and lower than average employment rate. It was said that the vacancy position remains strong, however more work is needed to understand whether these are new jobs or people moving between jobs. There are also further challenges associated with Brexit, COVID, an ageing workforce and a shift in manufacturing employment to other sectors.

The presentation concluded by focusing on next steps for tackling these challenges and taking advantage of opportunities, this includes focusing on productivity including through the HE Productivity Forum - opportunity for intelligence sharing.

4. **Regional productivity and skills – priorities for adult skills budget**

Clare Hatton provided an overview of the priorities for AEB. The presentation started with an overview of the work that's been done to date:

- Moving more people into employment, including through Digital offer.
- More people into higher skilled jobs, particularly at Level 3.
- More skilled residents to support businesses growth and productivity, including in construction and manufacturing.
- Connecting more of our communities to economic opportunities, including through youth hubs and youth platform.
- Creating an agile and responsive skills system more aligned to individual and business need.

There was discussion about needing to connect communities to provision and the Kickstart programme highlighting some of the key training needs that young people have.

There are four key areas of focus for AEB for 2022 onwards, these are:

1. **Jobs** – getting more people into good jobs.
2. **Upskilling** – getting more people trained at Level 3.
3. **Good basic education** – including, aligning English and maths to employment.
4. **Support for communities** - a strong, place-based community learning offer in all areas – clear on links to local/LA priorities.

The Board noted that the WMCA would continue to work with local partners and employers to ensure the delivery of skills provision to meet key priorities. The approach will remain as agreed by CA Board before, through a combination of strategic discussions with grant-funded providers (colleges and adult ed) and procurement of contracts with independent training providers.

5. **Regional productivity and skills – the role of HEs**

Prof. Julian Beer presented the item on the role of HE organisations in addressing the challenges outlined and taking advantages of opportunities. The key discussion point here were:

- Level 3+ qualifications are a priority
- Local universities are drivers for levelling up – high proportions of first-generation students from diverse backgrounds and areas of deprivation.
- Increasingly students “commuting” – remaining in their local area to study and thereafter to work as graduates.
- Universities in the West Midlands as sector, contribute £8.6bn to the region economy and support 67k jobs – though the sector isn't often thought of in these terms.
- West Midlands Universities are providing a significant amount of training and upskilling to businesses and the community over the next five years.
- There are examples of universities working collaboratively to address the challenges outlined in other presentations, including via Kickstart between Birmingham City University, West Midlands Police and DWP with 22 local long term unemployed graduates securing roles in phase 1 with 70+ vacancies live for phase 2.

The discussion concluded with focus on how best the HE sector can work with partners to address challenges and take advantage of opportunities. This includes exploring future funding through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. Director of Productivity and Skills, Dr. Julie Nugent welcomed the discussion around the role of HE and stated that now is opportune time to explore a closer working relationship with the sector.

6. Any other business

There were no other items of business.

The date for the next meeting will be communicated to members by email.