

GLOUCESTERSHIRE ECONOMIC GROWTH JOINT COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Gloucestershire Economic Growth Joint Committee held on Wednesday 15 September 2021 commencing at 10.00 am at the Council Chamber - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

PRESENT MEMBERSHIP:

Cllr Rowena Hay	Dev Chakraborty
Cllr Richard Cook	Cllr Bernie O'Neill
Cllr Tony Dale (Chair)	Cllr Victoria Atherstone

Substitutes: Cllr David Gray

Apologies: Cllr Rob Bird and Cllr Philip Robinson

297. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Cllr Rob Bird (Tewkesbury Borough Council) and Cllr Philip Robinson (Gloucestershire County Council). Cllr David Gray substituted at the meeting for Cllr Robinson.

298. ELECTION OF VICE-CHAIR

Following the standing down of Cllr Bernie O'Neill as Vice-Chair of the Committee, members voted to elect a new Vice-Chair.

Cllr Philip Robinson, Gloucestershire County Council, was duly elected as Vice-Chair of the GEGJC for the 2021/22 Civic Year.

299. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 9 June 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

300. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made at the meeting.

301. GLOUCESTERSHIRE ECONOMIC GROWTH SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Cllr Matt Babbage, Chair of the Gloucestershire Economic Growth Scrutiny Committee (GEGSC), provided the Committee with an update on the activities of the GEGSC.

Minutes subject to their acceptance as a correct record at the next meeting

It was noted that the GEGSC were due to meet this afternoon for their first official meeting in person since the local elections in May. Members had been working offline with officers to produce a work plan for the rest of this year.

It was understood that the GEGSC would now receive a regular item on the Economic Recovery dashboard. Additionally, it was noted that the main item at this afternoon's meeting was the future of the high streets where the GEGSC would be receiving a presentation from Nigel Jobson, Chair of the LEP Retail and the High Street Sector Group and Chief Commercial Officer for Maybe, and Andy Sanders, Community and Economic Development Manager at Tewkesbury Borough Council. The GEGSC would discuss the presentations and consider bringing a short report back to the GEGJC for further investigation.

302. OVERVIEW OF GLOUCESTERSHIRE'S FARMING AND FOOD SECTOR

The Committee received a presentation from Lizzie Dyer and Ben Dent, Gloucestershire Food Partnership, on Gloucestershire's farming and food sector, its contribution to the local economy, and the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Members were advised that the Gloucestershire agri-food sector, representing the "end to end" food chain, employed just over 50,000 people, or 14.9 % of the workforce compared to 13.2% nationally; and that in 2019, the agriculture, forestry, fishing, mining and quarrying sectors contributed around £187 million to Gloucestershire's GVA, equating to around 1.0% of total GVA which was more than the national average of 0.7%.

Tourism also had a direct contribution to the sector and was an area that could be exploited, with 32% of the spending by tourists in Gloucestershire being devoted to food and drink, generating £340m annually.

The Gloucestershire Food & Farming Partnership built on the strengths of the County and the work already going on across public, private, research and voluntary sectors, working alongside a number of partners including Hartpury College, the Royal Agricultural University, and Campden BRI.

The Committee was informed that the County's agri-food sector had the potential to address a number of challenges, in addition to supporting economic development in Gloucestershire. In particular, it was explained that the sector could be utilised to address social inequality and health issues. In some parts of Gloucestershire, 10 percent of adults experienced hunger because they could not afford food; and more than 60 percent of adults in the County were overweight. Local food businesses and farmers could be involved in helping to improve the County's health and eating habits.

It was also noted that the food and farming sector could have a significant role to play in addressing the climate change emergency through the reduction of carbon emissions and capturing and storing emissions, as well as in improving local biodiversity.

Members understood that this sector was facing significant post-Brexit policy changes. The end of the Basic Payment Scheme since leaving the European Union would result in the removal of nearly £40million of support every year for Gloucestershire farmers between now and 2028. A new Government agricultural funding scheme was not due to come into place until 2024, and it would not be designed to replace the Basic Payment Scheme. The financial implications of this were significant and could impact the survival of smaller farms; food security and self-sufficiency; and the agricultural landscape.

Members were advised that the sector also faced challenges relating to climate change adaptation and the use of new techniques and processes to meet new climate conditions, as well as labour shortages.

The Committee was informed that as well as the challenges faced by the agri-food sector, there were also a number of opportunities for the sector in Gloucestershire. These included developing partnerships to enhance Gloucestershire's food supply chains, such as through opening public procurement and anchor institution contracts to SME suppliers; as well as encouraging more demand for Gloucestershire produce, such as by introducing a 'Produced in Gloucestershire' scheme. Additionally, a 'Food for Life' model could be used in schools to educate on food in order to drive up the demand for local and more ecological produce.

The Committee was advised that work had begun on a draft strategy by the Gloucestershire Food Partnership encompassing their vision to build a healthy circular economy in food and farming that enabled a viable future for farmers, created jobs across the supply chain, optimised natural capital and reduced food-related illness. The Partnership would be keen to talk to the district and county councils in order to progress their strategy.

The Committee discussed the presentation they had received. In particular, a question was asked as to how young people and graduates could be retained to work in this sector in the County. In response it was recognised that there was a perception issue around jobs in farming and food, and that this needed to be addressed.

It was recognised that the agri-food sector had the second largest growth potential in Gloucestershire, after cyber and digital, and that it was a sector often overlooked.

Members were informed that GFirst LEP was working alongside Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) on a joint 'Made in Gloucestershire' initiative. An update on progress with this would be provided at the next Committee meeting.

In response to a query relating to opportunities to grow procurement and sales through local companies such as Gloucester Services, it was explained that Gloucester Services had provided many local food businesses with a foot on the ladder, and that there were lots of opportunities for retail procurement in the County. It was also important to consider opportunities for the sector through public procurement and hospitality.

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One member queried how local food supplies could be made more affordable. In response, it was explained that fresh local produce could be inexpensive, however thought needed to be given as to how to improve access for those without cars and to improve supply chains. The public also needed to be given the confidence that local produce could be fresher and last longer than produce from a supermarket.

It was also queried how local authorities could provide support for farmers in light of the gap in funding and the climate emergency.

There was a discussion as to how the public's relationship with food could be improved, particularly in order to reduce waste. It was recognised that a reduction in food waste would also lead to a reduction in carbon emissions, and education, particularly of children, had a role to play in achieving this. The Committee thanked the presenters for their presentation and noted the report.

303. GLOUCESTERSHIRE COVID-19 ECONOMIC RECOVERY PLANNING

Colin Chick, Executive Director for Economy, Environment and Infrastructure, GCC, provided the Committee with an update on GCC's Covid-19 Economic Recovery Plan.

Members were informed that the recovery plan mirrored the Council's ambition for Gloucestershire as set out in its Looking to the Future strategy, to make Gloucestershire a place where people want to visit and live, to improve the quality of life for residents, and to provide opportunities for businesses to be successful. Numerous infrastructure and connectivity schemes were being pursued by the Council as part of this, including the M5 J9 improvement scheme, and a network of cycle routes between Gloucester and Cheltenham.

Members were reminded of the three priority areas for recovery: people, place and connectivity; employment and skills; and infrastructure, economy and growth.

The Committee was informed that work was underway to develop an Employment and Skills Hub as part of the employment and skills priority of the recovery plan. Members were provided with an overview of the factors contributing to the need for the Hub, and the benefits of introducing it. The Hub would provide a "single front door" offer, whereby key partners, such as the GFirst LEP, schools, colleges, universities, independent training providers, and the DWP/Jobcentre Plus would work alongside each other to help get people into employment and education. The Hub would also enable gaps in adult education to be identified and courses to bridge these gaps could then be developed.

The Committee was informed that a response from the Government regarding the Community Renewal Fund bid had not yet been received, nor had there been an update on Levelling Up bids.

One member asked whether help could be received from the County Council to improve rail connectivity in the Forest of Dean and Cotswold districts. Colin Chick advised that the focus was on increasing rail services on the M5 corridor between

Bristol and Birmingham to help alleviate overcrowding on the motorway. Currently only 1 percent of travellers chose to travel by rail instead of using the M5. However, lobbying had taken place to secure a number of additional rail services, particularly those which would benefit the south Cotswolds, in addition to the introduction of a new demand responsive bus service in the Cotswolds.

One member asked a question as to how the skills hub would relate to increasing opportunities for local employment, particularly within the development of major local projects. In response it was explained that GCC procurement staff had received training on building social value into contracts. An update on the upskilling and employment of local people would also be provided at the next Committee meeting.

There was a further question relating to the cost of public transport, which was too expensive for some young people. In response it was noted that this was an issue that was being looked at. In terms of access to the Employment and Skills Hub, members were informed that the aim was to work outreach within libraries in rural areas and towns to build those connections with people who may find it difficult to travel.

Lisa McCance, Director at Shared Intelligence, provided the Committee with an update on the Economic Recovery Dashboard. The Economic Recovery Dashboard was attached as a supplement to the agenda papers for this meeting.

District council representatives were invited to provide the Committee with an update on the work being carried out in their areas to promote and support economic recovery.

Cotswold District Council

- Progress was being made on the development of the Gloucestershire Applied Digital Skills Centre at Cirencester College.
- There had been an increase in the demand for warehouse space in the district, and the sale of the Mitsubishi site was to be completed by the end of this month and would be retained as a site for employment.
- A number of projects funded through the Welcome Back fund were progressing.
- A number of larger events in the district, such as motoring shows, were bringing people back to town centres.
- A number of local businesses had expressed their ambitions to implement green measures.

Forest of Dean District Council

- The Forest Recovery Action Group continued to meet on a monthly basis.
- Focus was on developing tourism within the Forest of Dean and Wye Valley.
- Local towns had been encouraged to submit bids for funding through the Welcome Back fund.
- A new Growth Hub in Mitcheldean had opened in August to support local businesses.
- Local businesses could sign up to receive a regular 'Business Matters' email.

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Stroud District Council

- The Council was working with local market towns on the allocation of Welcome Back funding.
- The Brimscombe Port project was moving on to its next stage to find a development partner.
- Permission to begin the canals project had been secured.
- A district-wide economic development strategy would be considered by the Council this autumn/winter.

Tewkesbury Borough Council

- The Council was looking to relaunch the business support grant scheme in the autumn.
- The Growth Hub in the district had reopened to provide face-to-face support to local businesses.
- An event was taking place today where local businesses could exhibit their carbon neutral activities.
- An economic development tourism strategy had been developed for launch in 2022.
- A bid for a youth enterprise hub had been submitted.

Gloucester City Council

- Work to pursue funding, support local events and progress regeneration projects was continuing.

Cheltenham Borough Council

- There had been lots of interest in the Golden Valley development scheme following its launch.
- Funding had been set aside to drive footfall on the high street, such as for an ice rink.

There was a discussion as to the shortages of HGV and delivery drivers and the impact it could have on supply chains. An analysis of this issue and its impact in Gloucestershire would be presented at the next Committee meeting.

304. GFIRST LEP UPDATE

Dev Chakraborty, Deputy Chief Executive of GFirst LEP, presented the Committee with an update on the work of the GFirst LEP.

The Committee was informed that Ruth Dooley, partner and head of the litigation support team at Hazlewoods LLP, had been announced as the new Chair of the GFirst LEP.

Members also noted that four new Board members had been appointed to the LEP Board after the four previous members had come to the end of their permitted terms on the Board.

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The Committee noted that 107 grants had been awarded to businesses across Gloucestershire from the Additional Restrictions Grant (Discretionary Scheme) to help get more of them online and trading online, after the six local authorities agreed to pool their funds together to provide these grants to support local SMEs.

The Committee was advised that the LEP hoped to develop a further similar scheme whereby councils pooled their funds to provide local businesses with support to become more sustainable and carbon neutral.

Finally, members were also advised that there had been a delay in the announcement of the outcome of Levelling Up fund bids due to the significant number of applications that had been received. It was hoped that an announcement would tie in with the autumn budget.

305. BUSINESS RATE POOL

Andrew Cummings, Strategic Director of Resources, Stroud District Council, provided the Committee with an update on the Gloucestershire Business Rate Pool.

The Committee was advised on the pool outturn position for 2020/21. In particular, there had been a pool gain of £3.66 million, and £731k of this has been distributed to the Strategic Economic Development Fund.

Members were updated on the forecasts for the pool for 2021/22. Pool gains for this year were expected to be higher, and were currently estimated at £4.238million.

The Committee noted that the future for the business rates pool was uncertain and was dependant on potential government reforms; however there was no update on this currently. Members would be updated once more information was known.

Following a query, it was understood that the expectation was that the pool would continue for the next year as a consultation on reforming the system had not been carried out.

306. FORWARD (WORK) PLAN

Requests were made for an update on the Made in Gloucestershire proposals and for an analysis on delivery/HGV drivers in Gloucestershire to be presented at the next meeting in November 2021.

An SEDF funding request to investigate options to better connect Kemble Town Centre with Cirencester Town Centre would also be received at the next meeting.

307. FUTURE MEETINGS

The Committee noted the meeting dates for the remainder of 2021 and for 2022.

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CHAIRPERSON

Meeting concluded at 12.00 pm