

GLOUCESTERSHIRE ECONOMIC GROWTH JOINT COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Gloucestershire Economic Growth Joint Committee held on Wednesday 16 March 2022 commencing at 10.00 am at the Cabinet Suite - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

PRESENT MEMBERSHIP:

Cllr Rowena Hay	Cllr Tony Dale (Chair)
Cllr Rob Bird	Dev Chakraborty
Cllr Richard Cook	Cllr Philip Robinson (Vice-Chair)
Cllr Doina Cornell	

Substitutes:

Apologies: Cllr Bernie O'Neill

In Attendance:	Mike Dawson (TBC)	Jon McGinty (Glos City)
	Steve Mawson (GCC)	Peter Williams (FODDC)
	Simon Excell (GCC)	Pete Carr (GFirst LEP)
	Angela Presdee (GCC)	Paul James (CDC)
	Gillian Parkinson (GCC)	Andrew Cummings (SDC)
	Katherine Martin (GCC)	Kathy O'Leary (SDC)
	Laura Powick (GCC)	Lisa McCance (Shared Intel.)
	Tim Atkins (CBC)	

330. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Cllr Bernie O'Neill.

331. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 January 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

Gillian Parkinson, Assistant Director of Legal Services, Gloucestershire County Council (GCC), provided the Committee with an update on the Inter Authority Agreement (IAA), which had been extended until 1 April 2023.

Members were advised that all district councils had formally agreed to this extension through their governance procedures, except Gloucester City Council. Gloucester City Council would be formally agreeing to the IAA's extension at its full Council meeting which would be taking place next week. In the meantime, Gloucester City Council had indicated its commitment to the continuation of the GEGJC in a letter. Having considered the options, officers felt that on balance the

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decisions due to be considered at today's meeting on the SEDF bids could continue to be taken, given Gloucester City Council's written commitment.

It was noted that all legal formalities would hopefully be confirmed at the next GEGJC meeting in May.

332. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made at the meeting.

333. BROADBAND IN GLOUCESTERSHIRE

Simon Excell, Assistant Director of Planning and Economic Development, presented the report on progress with the Fastershire Strategy in Gloucestershire.

It was recognised that since the pandemic, demand for high quality digital infrastructure had grown as a result of the increase in home working. GCC was currently working alongside Herefordshire Council with support from Building Digital UK (BDUK), which managed the delivery of broadband networks nationally, on the Fastershire Broadband Strategy 2019-22, which aimed to increase superfast broadband coverage across the two counties through a mixture of contracts and grants.

Members were informed that premises with access to superfast broadband in Gloucestershire had increased from 45% in 2012 to 96.5% in 2022. However it was understood that the remaining 3.5% of premises were the most difficult to connect, reflecting the rural nature of the County, and the high costs associated with this were not commercially viable even with Government investment. Therefore different solutions for these properties were being considered.

Members were advised that a dispute between BDUK and Fastershire was resolved in August 2021, which led to some of the remaining properties either being included as part of the commercial delivery programme or being transferred to BDUK's Project Gigabit. However the dispute had caused some delays to the programme.

The Committee was informed that in 2019, a new stage of the project was launched, whereby communities not covered by existing roll out plans could collectively approach suppliers using a Dynamic Purchasing System. 11 broadband contracts had so far been secured through this process, and a further 4 were being progressed.

It was determined, in conclusion, that the project had been successful overall; however some challenges remained as the project aimed to reach 100% superfast broadband connectivity in Gloucestershire.

It was commented that in terms of digital inclusion, connectivity was only part of the issue, alongside digital skills and affordability. It was also queried whether there

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was a role for a successor to Fastershire and how this would relate to the national infrastructure strategy.

In response, assurance was provided that the national picture was being monitored, and members were informed that the Fastershire partnership was currently being reviewed, alongside the annual review of the strategy.

It was also commented that Cotswold District Council had set aside money for broadband in the district, and a recent report to its Cabinet recommended that officers work alongside Fastershire on a top-up scheme to assist with the delivery of broadband in the district that otherwise would not be viable.

The Cabinet Member for Economy, Education and Skills, GCC, explained that the Government had raised its aspirations to deliver improved infrastructure networks capable of supporting far greater digital download speeds, however in Gloucestershire the dissatisfaction was where pockets of premises with very low broadband speed remained.

One member suggested that the Committee consider how it could support aspirations for Gigabit broadband connectivity in Gloucestershire, as well other aspects including supporting the elderly to access the internet, and providing good Wi-Fi connections in town centres.

334. CYBER PROJECT

Tim Atkins, Managing Director for Place and Growth, Cheltenham Borough Council, provided the Committee with a presentation on progress with the Cyber Project in Cheltenham.

It was noted that the profile of the project had been successfully raised through a media campaign; after appointing a developer, it was hoped the innovation centre would be ready on site in 2025; Cheltenham had been mentioned in the national cyber strategy by Government; the project was showcased as part of digital acceleration at the Western Gateway conference; officers were working alongside the LEP on an inward investment proposition; there would be an opportunity to pitch the project to the Prime Minister at a meeting in May; and two ministerial visits had taken place (involving Michael Gove and Julia Lopez) in relation to the project.

Members were also reminded that it was not only the Cyber project in Cheltenham promoting cyber innovation in Gloucestershire, with other sites, such as Berkeley Green, playing an important role, and consideration was being given as to how to attract businesses to the County.

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Consideration was also being given as to how to develop the talent base for the project by working with schools, as well as the project's role in levelling up ambitions for the County.

Members took the opportunity to congratulate Tim and his team on progress with this project.

335. STATEMENT OF COMMON GROUND

Mike Dawson, Chair of the GEGJC Senior Officer Group (SOG), provided a verbal update on the Statement for Common Ground.

It was understood that work on the statement had not progressed since the last update to the Committee. It was also understood that Cheltenham Borough Council, which had been leading on this work, no longer had the capacity to do so and therefore consideration needed to be given as to how to take the next phase forward.

336. GCC ECONOMIC DASHBOARD

Katherine Martin, Data and Analysis Manager, GCC, provided the Committee with an update on GCC's Economic Dashboard, the contents of which had been reviewed since the last meeting. The Dashboard was attached to the agenda papers for this meeting.

There was a query as to whether the data reflected the effect of the self-employed moving into paid employment during the pandemic. In response, it was acknowledged that the data on self-employment was not particularly robust; however this was an area that could be looked into.

337. GFIRST LEP UPDATE

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

In particular, it was noted that the Government had now published its Levelling Up white paper, which set out the Government's aims to make people happier and live longer. The paper also provided the first details of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, which would replace the old European funds that had supported projects in the County. LEPs, however, were still waiting to hear from Government as to their function and form moving forward.

Members were informed that one-to-one meetings between all Gloucestershire Local Authorities and Ruth Dooley, new Chair of GFirst LEP, David Owen, Chief Executive of GFirst LEP, and Dev Chakraborty, would be taking place after Easter, during which discussions would be held on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

In an update on the Inward Investment project, members were advised that the number of enquiries from potential investors in the County had increased significantly.

It was commented that funding allocations from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund would increase over three years, with the Government confirming that allocations for skills would only be made during the third year, which was of concern both nationally and locally for the Growth Hubs. Consideration would therefore need to be given as to how these could be funded before then.

338. BUSINESS RATE POOL

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

Members were advised that the expected pool gain for 2021/22 was £4.17million, which would lead to an allocation of £833k to the SEDF. It was noted that there was currently £259k of unallocated money remaining in the SEDF, which did not include the expected gain to the SEDF from 2021/22 and 2022/23.

It was noted that the final settlement for local government for 2022/23 had confirmed that pooling would continue, and business rates growth would not currently be reset. However, a consultation was expected in the spring as part of the Government's review of local government finance.

The Committee considered two SEDF funding requests.

The first SEDF bid was presented by Dev Chakraborty for £150k to launch the 'Made in Gloucestershire' Initiative.

One member requested that evidence be shared relating to the success of other areas that had launched similar projects. In response, it was explained that feedback on proposals for the initiative in Gloucestershire from local businesses had been positive, and data could be shared with members from the 'Produced in Northumberland' initiative.

Another member queried whether the initiative could be launched to coincide with the Tour of Britain, which would be travelling through the County. In response, it was explained that there was a two-pronged campaign for the project, with the recruitment of investors commencing after Easter, and a big launch in September, which could potentially coincide with the men's race in Gloucestershire.

There was a further query as to whether the initiative would be duplicating the work of other schemes such as Cotswold Taste. In response, it was asserted that there wouldn't be any duplication; however the initiative would engage with the Cotswold Taste brand on how they could work alongside each other.

Clarification was sought on the membership model for the scheme and how small local producers could be supported to sell to bigger chains. It was understood, in response, that part of the scheme would include working with producers such as by providing dedicated events through the Growth Hub.

One member queried whether the working group for the initiative was too top-heavy, and whether any consultation with small businesses had been carried out. In response, it was explained that it was considered important to have a group of 'heavy-weights' as part of the working group as they were the ones with the experience. It was also understood that the LEP had presented the initiative to its retail and high street group, as well as its agritech group, and the feedback had been positive and encouraging.

There was a comment as to how affordable membership would be for small businesses, and in response the Committee was advised that membership fees could be based on the number of employees or turnover.

There was also a question as to how quickly the initiative would look to involve other products in addition to food and drink. Members noted in response that it was important initially to focus on the launch of food and drink, with consultation on any expansion happening in the second year of the initiative on the back of feedback from businesses involved in the scheme.

On being put to a vote it was

RESOLVED to

Approve funding of £150,000 to launch, promote and project manage the 'Made in Gloucestershire' Initiative for 2 years.

The second SEDF bid was presented by Simon Excell for £850k of development funding for the Central Gloucestershire Mass Transit Scheme.

There were a number of comments in support of the principle of the scheme however concerns were raised about the amount of money being requested from the SEDF.

Officers advised that the Committee could agree the decision despite the amount of funding requested being in excess of the money currently in the SEDF. Funding could be agreed by splitting it across a two year period, which would need to be

underwritten, or by allocating from the City Region Board fund. Members were advised that should they wish to approve this decision it would not be ultra vires.

There was a comment from a member that the scheme would not benefit those on the peripheries of the County, such as in the Forest of Dean.

Another member praised the scheme as being ambitious and would provide efficient public transport for the future that would benefit everyone in the County, despite its central location. They appreciated the situation relating to the funding, however argued that there were options around this.

A further member spoke of the scheme in the context of the National Bus Strategy, stating that the Mass Transit Scheme was an important component of Gloucestershire's Bus Service Improvement Plan, which was submitted to the Government in October 2021. They expressed the view that the scheme would have an important part to play in helping to achieve the modal shift from private car use to public transport, and therefore would have a beneficial effect in reducing carbon emissions.

Several members reaffirmed their concerns about the amount of funding that was being requested from the SEDF. They queried whether the SEDF should be used to fund highways schemes and what the purpose of the Committee would be if there was no money left in the SEDF to allocate for future bids. They also commented that they had not received an update on progress with the Multi-Modal Model Study which had previously been funded by the SEDF.

It was commented that the Committee needed to consider its priorities when considering this decision, as by agreeing to fund this bid, the Committee would then be unable to consider funding for other projects.

One member felt that they had not had enough time to fully consider the information and discuss the options relating to this bid. They suggested that the pandemic had resulted in people working from home and travelling less and that this should be encouraged, rather than 'putting all of our eggs into one basket' with this central infrastructure project. They also commented on the current lack of funding for basic bus services and the impact this was having, and expressed the view that there was a lack of strategic oversight.

Another member suggested that the focus should be on smaller projects which would boost the economy now as the County continued to recover from the pandemic.

One member queried the concerns that had been raised by other members, expressing the view that the bid marked the starting point for improving public transport for the future.

Simon Excell summed up the bid and asserted that it wasn't unreasonable, having considered the advice from officers relating to how the bid could be funded, for the

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Committee to commit to funding to this vitally important project which would benefit all in the County.

The Chair summed up the discussion before the Committee voted on the bid.

On being put to the vote, the bid was refused.

339. FORWARD (WORK) PLAN

The Committee noted the work plan for upcoming meetings.

340. FUTURE MEETINGS

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

CHAIRPERSON

Meeting concluded at 12.45 pm