

GLOUCESTERSHIRE ECONOMIC GROWTH JOINT COMMITTEE

MINUTES of the meeting of the Gloucestershire Economic Growth Joint Committee held on Wednesday 15 March 2023 commencing at 10.00 am at the Cabinet Suite - Shire Hall, Gloucester.

PRESENT MEMBERSHIP:

Cllr Rob Bird	Cllr Bernie O'Neill
Cllr Richard Cook	Cllr Philip Robinson
Cllr Tony Dale	Cllr Catherine Braun
Dev Chakraborty	

Substitutes: Cllr Max Wilkinson

Cabinet Members: Cllr Philip Robinson

Apologies: Cllr Rowena Hay

2. MINUTES

2.1 The minutes of the meeting held on the 9th February 2023 were signed by the chair.

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

3.1 Cllr Richard Cook declared an interest as he sat on the board of the Gfirst LEP. He agreed to leave the room for item 5, the SEDF LEP bid and abstain from voting.

4. ALIGNING GLOUCESTERSHIRE'S FOOD AND FARMING POLICIES

4.1 Paul James explained that following a meeting of the Senior Officer Group, the Farming bid had been deferred to a future GEGJC meeting.

5. GFIRST LEP - GLOUCESTERSHIRE'S LOCAL ENTERPRISE PARTNERSHIP

5.1 Dev Chakraborty, GFirst LEP, presented this bid. He explained that the first tranche of funding had been approved by this Committee for £125,000 in November and that this second tranche had been held back until it was clear what the Government's core funding was going to be and until it was clear that the Business Rates Pool would have sufficient funds.

5.2 A member asked whether the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) would be with the County Council and whether this Committee would see the objectives set out by the MOU. It was explained that it would be with the County Council and that it could be shared with the committee once it was signed.

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5.3 It was noted that Stroud's representative had been omitted from the membership in the published template of the bid and that the template referred to the Capital Investment Pipeline which no longer existed.

ACTION – Officers to correct both errors.

The item was voted for in favour unanimously.

6. NATIONAL GRID'S VISUAL IMPACT PROVISION PROJECT IN THE COTSWOLDS NATIONAL LANDSCAPE

6.1 Robbie Griggs, Mohammed Farooq and Stuart Fox, National Grid, gave a presentation on the National Grid Visual Impact Provision project. They outlined that the Cotswolds area of Natural Beauty had significant lengths of National Grid overhead lines and a 7km route comprising of 20 pylons had been identified for replacement with underground cables. The project was in its early stages. Engineers were looking at front-end designs and construction access points, while stakeholder meetings and community engagement events were being held. Construction was planned to start from 2025/26. The topography, potential for archaeological findings and the need to avoid disruption in the local area, in particular for walkers, represented key challenges. It was explained that as part of the project, a Community Grant Programme would provide grants of up to £20,000 for projects that would provide a community benefit. It was also explained that local suppliers and expertise would be used where possible.

6.2 In response to a question about the depth and signage for the underground cabling, it was explained that the cables would be about 1.5 metres underground, potentially in a ducted system which had several layers of protection from the cables to the surface. There would also be warning tape underground and small markers on boundaries and crossings to indicate that there was underground cabling. Landowners would also be made fully aware of the location of the cables.

6.3 A member asked for more detail about the reinstatement of the land after construction. It was explained that it would be done in conjunction with the landowner's wishes. In previous projects, crops have been growing on the land within a year and they aimed for a minimum of 10% biodiversity net gain at the end of the project. In a previous project in the Peak District, they had achieved an 18% biodiversity net gain.

6.4 There was concern raised by members and officers over the extent of the construction and its impact on the environment. It was explained that the temporary haul road put in place would use techniques that reduced the amount of stone used. The road was there to avoid construction vehicles putting strain on public roads as large volumes of material would need to be transported as part of the project.

6.5 It was noted that the County Council and District Councils were on the stakeholder reference group, but officers were not able to give full details of who represented them at meetings with the National Grid team.

ACTION – Stuart Fox and Simon Excell to discuss District and County Council co-ordination with the National Grid project team.

6.6 A member asked about the cost of the project and about where the funding came from. It was explained that a detailed costing had not yet been completed but there had been a project in

Dorset on a slightly longer line of cable that had cost around £116 million. The officers explained that there was £465 million set aside by Ofgem for these types of project as part of regulatory arrangements with National Grid across England and Wales and that this pot was ring-fenced specifically for visual landscape improvement in Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and national Parks. The fund is also available for National Grid's equivalents in Scotland. There were separate efforts on improving grid capacity but the money that went towards this project would not take away from the those. Ultimately, the money that went towards this or other visual improvement projects came from the National Grid element on electricity bills. This amounted to around £20 per year per household and covered all National Grid's activities in developing, maintaining and operating the transmission network in England and Wales and the money for projects like these represented a fraction of that total amount. In total, in the region of £1 billion had been allocated to these projects since 2013. Customer willingness to pay surveys were carried out throughout projects to assess whether consumers still wanted money to be spent on this. To date, the outcome of the research had been consistently positive.

6.7 Several members raised concern around grid capacity citing it as a barrier to new businesses and to electrification. The team explained they were committed to sustainable targets and to improving system capacity and they could come back at a future date to the Committee to discuss that further. It was also explained that the underground cables had the same capacity as the 400kV overhead cables and that grid capacity issues usually came from smaller 132kV cables. Efforts would be made to future proof these new cables and future proofing of the project would be scrutinised by Ofgem.

ACTION – DSU to add National Grid Capacity to the Forward Plan

6.7 A question was raised about the topsoil underneath the haul road. It was explained that the topsoil would be removed and then labelled and stored correctly so it could be replaced in exactly the same location at the end of the project.

6.8 It was asked whether there were further benefits to grid capacity or reliability from the project and whether there were plans to do this more widely across the County. It was explained that it would not make a significant impact to grid performance but that the projects would bring benefit to the local area. It was also explained that the entire length of cabling within the UK had been evaluated but it would take a long time to do it all. Therefore, the areas that needed it most were being targeted first. In 2026 the regulator and stakeholders would evaluate whether continuing visual improvement projects was a sensible use of bill payers' money.

6.9 In response to a question about landowner issues, it was explained that the landowner response so far had been very encouraging. There were specific negotiations that would take time such as purchasing land or compensation for lost income at the farms that were disrupted.

6.10 In response to a question about the social value of the project, the National Grid team highlighted that they did focus on upskilling local workers and working with local schools to promote STEM subjects. It was suggested that the team collaborate with Pete Carr, Head of Employment and Skills, to collaborate with ongoing projects in the County like the Skills Hub.

ACTION – National Grid Team to collaborate with Pete Carr for local upskilling projects.

6.11 A member asked if the team were aware of highways issues on the A40 by the project site. It was explained that there were working with the Highways team.

7. CIRENCESTER-KEMBLE TRANSPORT STUDY REPORT

7.1 Hannah Fountain, Sustainable Transport Officer, gave this presentation. £65,000 of SEDF funding had been provided to explore transport links primarily from Cirencester to Kemble as well as exploring wider transport links for Cirencester. Roughly 2/3 of the funding had been spent so far across three study areas:

1. Interchange location for Cirencester
2. Cirencester-Kemble-Tetbury transport study
3. Options or direction of public transport contributions from the Steadings development

Two locations for the transport hub had been identified and a 9am-7pm scheduled hourly bus service that aligned with rail services had emerged as the recommendation for the Cirencester-Kemble public transport provision.

7.2 Two further studies are expected to be completed by late summer:

1. Study of Education transport in Cirencester
2. Access and Movement study for Cirencester

7.3 It was asked whether they considered including Wiltshire in the study. The officer explained that they did evaluate including Malmesbury and the recommended option 7 did have flexibility in the timetable to extend the service.

7.4 A member also expressed a wish that this kind of study would be run in the Forest of Dean to link up towns with the hospital that had recently moved.

7.5 In response to a question about a bus service between Tetbury and Cirencester it was explained that there was a bus service, but it was infrequent, was not aligned with the rail service and did not operate long enough through the day. There was some uncertainty over the exact operation of the current bus provision.

ACTION – DSU to share information regarding the current Tetbury-Cirencester bus connections when the minutes are published.

7.6 There was considerable discussion whether this study was necessary, whether the money that had gone into the study had been appropriately spent and whether it had been conceived to support a pre-determined preference for a Very Light Rail (VLR) service. It was explained that the Department for Transport had accepted the strategic outline business case for the VLR and had provided funding for further business case assessment. This study was authorised to evaluate alternatives to the VLR proposal and it was important to make an objective measure of the available options. The money for the study had gone into projects beyond just the Cirencester-Kemble transport link so was delivering on planning for several projects and the study proposal had been supported by the County Council.

7.7 The Cabinet member for Education, Skills and Bus Transport explained that a two-bus operation like the one recommended in the report would likely cost £700,000 and that would not feasibly sit within the bus subsidy budget. It was suggested that a single bus provision might fit within the current bus operating budget.

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7.8 A member noted that the National Model for funding bus services was not working sufficiently, particularly for rural areas, and asked whether extending the evidence-based approach from this study had been explored for other areas. It was explained that bus operators had been engaged as part of the study and the study did involve developing a bus network for The Steadings. Discussions had not been had around rolling the approach out beyond these specific locations.

8. GFIRST LEP UPDATE

8.1 Dev Chakraborty gave an update on LEP funded projects.

9. GCC ECONOMIC DASHBOARD

9.1 Katherine Martin, Data and Analysis Manager, highlighted some of the key points from this report. It was noted that the number of people applying for benefits had increased to 5.3% and this was looking like a trend rather than an anomaly. This had also been observed on a national level. It was also noted that job postings were at a record high and were driven predominantly by jobs that required middling experience.

9.2 There was some discussion around whether the number of benefits claimants and economically inactive people would fill the available job postings. It was explained that whilst the gap could be filled in theory, not all those of the economically inactive cohort were looking for work.

9.3 It was also explained that it was difficult to make a distinction by industry as, for many job postings, it was unclear what industry the job belonged to. It was also explained that on the 28th March 2023 a break-down of the economically inactive cohort would be given and with that GCC would have a better idea of where the problems were and how to approach them.

9.4 There was interest around the skill level of the job postings mostly requiring just a small amount of work experience. It was questioned whether it was worth re-engaging with schemes like the Government's Kick-Start Programme to make job seekers in the County sufficiently desirable to most employers.

10. FORWARD (WORK) PLAN

10.1 The forward work plan was noted.

11. FUTURE MEETINGS

11.1 The dates of future meetings were noted.

CHAIRPERSON

Meeting concluded at 11.43

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