

Herefordshire Business Board (HBB)

Notes / Actions from the Meeting held on Monday 7 June 2021, 4-6.00 pm via Zoom

Chair: Frank Myers (FM) **Present:** Abigail Appleton (AA); Christian Dangerfield (CD); Christine Snell (CS); Cllr David Hitchiner (DH); David Williams (DW); Debbie Gittoes (DG); Gareth Williams (GW); James Newby (JN); John Reed (JR); Mark Pearce (MR); Nic Millington (NM); Paul Stevens (PS); Sharon Smith (SS); Stephen Eckley (SE)

In attendance: Gill Hamer, Marches LEP (GH); Roger Allonby, Herefordshire Council (RA);

Speaker: Mark Thomas, 99% Organisation (MT)

Apologies: Doug Barrat (DB); Helen Bowden

Minutes: Jan Bailey (JB)

1. Welcome

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. A particular welcome was extended to Mark Thomas from the 99% organisation.

2. Apologies for Absence and Declarations of Interest

Apologies are as noted above. There were no Declarations of Interest.

3. Minutes of the last meeting

The Minutes of the Herefordshire Business Board meeting held on 29 March were approved as a correct record, subject to an adjustment to item 10.3, regarding the Community Renewal Fund.

4. Matters arising (not covered elsewhere on the agenda)

Item 5.6.1 (DH to contact British Land for an update on the Old Market Retail Lettings): DH advised that he was encouraged by the current situation. Two restaurants at the Old Market had been let to independent providers and landlords were talking to a number of parties interested in the Debenhams site. However, he remained concerned about the number of empty shops elsewhere in the city centre.

Item 5.7.1 (Local Business database): JB advised that database information had been received from RA and CS and that work was ongoing on developing a 'Top Businesses' contact database.

Item 6.1 (Herefordshire Business Board Terms of Reference): Draft Terms of Reference had been circulated to members in advance of today's meeting. FM provided background information on how these had been developed and requested that members send any feedback on these to him.

Action 1: All to feedback to FM on draft Terms of Reference

Item 8 (Discuss county careers provision with KJ): FM advised that he had not specifically discussed this item with KJ but that it would form part of ongoing discussions with KJ / the LEP.

5. Updates and progress report

5.1 Marches Investment Fund (MIF) – Update on Visitor Economy Marketing Project

5.1.1 RA confirmed that the campaign was ongoing, with significant PR and advertising being undertaken. This included an offer of a free full-page advertisement in the Metro newspaper nationally (c1 million copies produced). RA will send a copy of this advert to JB, together with a summary of PR coverage achieved so far, for onward circulation to members.

Action 2: RA to send copy advert and PR summary to JB for onward circulation to members

5.1.2 RA highlighted the MIF Steering Group's concerns about being able to continue the momentum on tourism when MLEP MIF funding ends (July 2021). He advised that the Steering Group had made a bid for investment in tourism to Herefordshire Council as part of its COVID Recovery Plan. If successful, this would provide interim funding until a Destination Improvement District is established. The Cabinet is due to consider bids to the COVID Recovery Plan at its meeting on 24 June.

5.2 Stronger Towns Fund

5.2.1 The Chair advised that a decision on the City's bid for £25 million funding was expected imminently. In the meantime, he said that the Steering Group was working actively to ensure they are ready to 'hit the ground running' once the award is announced. He said that once the award is announced, he would be approaching individual Board members for help with mentoring specific project leads. He thanked CD for the huge amount of work he has undertaken on this project.

5.3 Knife Angel Project Hereford

5.3.1 The Chair advised that the Knife Angel is arriving in Hereford on Monday 14 June and would remain in the city for four weeks. He also advised that a Crime Conference was taking place on Wednesday, 9 June via Zoom.

6. An Economic Strategy for Herefordshire that Addresses the Climate Emergency

6.1 GW provided an overview of issues that he would like to develop at a further meeting of the Business Board. These included:

6.1.1 Reference to the G7 Summit taking place in Cornwall this week and the COP 26 Summit in Glasgow in November, Government had made lots of promises about climate change, he said, but specific policies had not been forthcoming.

6.1.2 Reference to Herefordshire Council's declaration of a climate emergency and ambitious pledge to be net zero by 2030 and progress towards achieving this. GE is a member of the Steering Group looking at Herefordshire's net zero plan for energy.

6.1.3 The challenge for businesses is transferring from fossil fuels to more environmentally friendly options. Alongside this are the huge opportunities for skills development and new businesses creation.

6.1.4 The cost savings that could be achieved through using renewable energy sources and the opportunities this provided for saved money to be used on other initiatives.

6.2 In response to GW's presentation Board members commented as follows:

6.2.1 DG highlighted the problems her company had experienced in recruiting employees who are skilled and interested in working in green energy.

6.2.2 JN said that climate change is of great interest to the cohorts being recruited at NMITE. DW stressed the importance of including tradespeople in these discussions and ensuring they are trained in future technologies. Current apprenticeship, etc, programmes he said tended to focus on existing rather than future technologies and are restrictive in terms of what can be included. DW and JN to discuss this further.

Action 3: DW/JN to discuss approach to skills development

6.2.3 The Chair stressed the Business Board's role in being able to take these discussions forward. JR suggested an event to bring businesses together to discuss these issues. DH advised that the Council's new Chief Executive was shortly planning an industry meeting, which might provide this opportunity. He will talk to him about this.

Action 4: DH to discuss industry meeting with Council CEO

6.2.4 SS mentioned the Chamber's Business Energy and Efficiency Programme, which provides grants to businesses and delivers forums on this subject. She also offered to include questions on this topic in the Chamber's Q3 Economic Survey.

6.2.5 CS asked for clarification regarding the Council's policy on providing help to businesses to instal electric charging points. This is particularly pertinent, she said, for agricultural businesses in rural and remote locations where public transport isn't available. RA replied that the Council is reviewing its transport strategy, but the issue CS raised wasn't specifically covered. GE directed CS towards a Government website with information on charger grants:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/government-grants-for-low-emission-vehicles>.

7. The Herefordshire 2030 Project

7.1 MT provided a brief overview of this project, which has the objective of making Herefordshire more prosperous, fairer and greener by 2030. The project is non-political and has three areas of focus, he said: economic, environmental and equity. CD is leading the economic area. The project asks the question: If Herefordshire develops a shared vision, how much progress could be made without having to wait for central Government support.

7.2 CD provided details of economic analyses which showed that Herefordshire's relative position has declined in the years since 1998 (when it separated from Worcestershire to become its own local authority). In order for the GVA (gross value added) gap that exists between Herefordshire and the rest of the country to be closed (Herefordshire is currently 206/223 LAs), significant additional investment would, he said, be required.

7.3 CD advised that the project is currently focussing on data analysis and collection and reminded members to complete the survey previously circulated (see: <https://forms.office.com/r/EfDKBcHMmE>). He asked SS to circulate this survey to Chamber members. SS agreed to do this, and asked CD to provide some introductory text to accompany her request to members.

**Action 5: SS to circulate Herefordshire 2030 Project Survey to members.
CD to provide introductory text**

7.4 Members agreed that funding from the Stronger Towns Fund could help address some of the issues identified. However, it was important to continue to try and influence Government Policy and the Chair reminded members of the significant role the Business Board has in lobbying Government (via the LEP) regarding business interests.

7.5 CD advised that he and MT had also been holding discussions with two community banking providers to investigate opportunities to increase rates of investment via this route. In response to a comment from DH regarding philanthropic investment, MT said DH would be welcome to join future discussions with the community bankers.

8. Marches LEP

8.1 GH outlined the changes being introduced by Government in terms of the role of the LEPs. She referred to her document 'Review of LEPs – progress report' (attached) which outlines these changes. In particular, Government has decided that LEPs will no longer be responsible for capital / infrastructure projects. Instead, their focus will be on business needs for their economic area.

8.2 GH raised the particular challenge with regard to future revenue funding, which has not currently been identified.

8.3 GH referred members to the Marches LEP Recovery Plan (circulated). She said any further comments on this document would be welcomed.

8.4 In light of GH's resignation from the LEP, the Chair thanked GH for all her hard work and for the diligence and commitment she has shown during her time as Chief Executive.

9. NMITE

9.1 JN confirmed that Terence Jaeger is now in post as the new Chair of NMITE.

9.2 JN advised that the main focus for the university is now recruiting students to its pioneer cohorts, starting in September 2021 and January 2022.

9.3 JN advised that land had now been acquired at Skylon Park and thanked MP for his help and support with this. He also advised that a long-term lease had been secured on a property in Eign Gate, which would become available from September 2022.

9.4 JN further advised that the University was looking at widening participation in higher education. This is part of the University's mission and particularly pertinent in Herefordshire where participation rates are lower than in other areas of the country. He stated that the University has collected a lot of data on this subject, which it would be happy to share with CD for the Herefordshire 2030 Project research. DW said that Hereford & Ludlow College had also investigated this subject and would be happy to share its findings with JN. DW and JN to meet to discuss further.

Action 6: DW and JN to meet to discuss widening participation

10. Horizon Scan

10.1 RA advised that the Council has launched its Discretionary Restart Grant, details of which are available via the website: <https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/discretionarygrant>. Payments from this Grant have to be made by the end of June 2021.

10.2 RA advised that a COVID19 Recovery Plan was being drafted and would be discussed at Cabinet meeting on 24 June. As soon as the draft has been finalised, RA will send it to JB for onward circulation to members.

Action 7: RA to send COVID19 Recovery Plan to JB for circulation to members

11. Herefordshire Vision – Herefordshire Investment Partnership

11.1 No update provided as apologies received from DB.

12. Sector Updates

12.1 Sector updates were provided by Business Board members as follows:

- DG/JR/SE – Manufacturing
- AA – Creative Industries
- CS – Agriculture
- GW – Energy
- CD – Tourism

See Annexe 1 attached.

13. Any Other Business

13.1 MP advised that Robert Jenrick, Secretary of State for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, had visited Skylon Park last week.

13.2 MP stated that the construction industry had suffered from price increases and delays in deliveries, which had affected progress at Skylon. Therefore, a full launch of the site would not now take place until this autumn.

13.3 JR advised that the new High Sheriff of Herefordshire, Jo Hilditch, would be focusing on connecting businesses and the community. She is holding an event on 29 June to bring these two parties together, details of which had been previously circulated to members.

14. Date of Next Meeting

Monday 26 July at the Shell Store, Skylon Park, Rotherwas

3.30 pm – Tour of Shell Store (further details to follow)

4.00 – 6.00 pm - Business Board meeting

Following meetings – all at 4.00 – 6.00 pm, venue tbc

Monday 4 October

Monday 6 December

Annexe 1: Sector Updates

Manufacturing:

- DG**
- Experiences vary, according to sector
 - Raw materials supply is main issue across all sectors
 - Businesses feel they are at their maximum debt level. Would not want to incur any additional debt if further 'shocks' to the system are experienced (ie due to COVID).
- JR:**
- Biggest issue is lack of labour. Lots of Europeans have now returned home
 - Brexit – slow recovery in terms of moving product into Europe, also difficulty in recruiting lorry drivers
 - COVID – business reflects community levels. Vaccination roll-out welcomed.
- SE:**
- Life sciences sector buoyant
 - Staff turnover has increased as a result of buoyant market and change in people's priorities due to COVID
 - No difficulty in employing at lower levels; some shortages in particularly specialist areas
 - COVID testing well embedded
 - Lots of supply issues, eg re PPE / lab supplies
 - Issues to do with import / exports – expensive, slow, uncertain.

Creative

- AA**
- Much of creative industry hit badly, although digital is thriving
 - Seems to be increasing optimism locally.
 - Confidence issue regarding careers in the arts. Pipeline challenge due to education policies, exacerbated by the pandemic. Working hard to broaden knowledge of creative careers
 - Critical period for the arts, but many people have recognised the importance of the arts
 - Focusing on supporting recent graduates.

Agriculture

- CS**
- Regular testing sites established. New labour tested on days 2, 5 and 8 and thereafter on a twice weekly basis
 - Biggest difficulty is managing shopping for quarantining workers. Very difficult to support hundreds of people who are not allowed offsite. Have requested dedicated shopping time at supermarkets for these workers.

Energy

- GW** - Lots more interest / orders being received in business
- Difficulty is slower delivery of materials. Most suppliers are threatening significant price increases, which will affect costs to consumers.

Tourism

- CD** - New visit Herefordshire website is massive improvement and attracting significantly more visitors
- Working with market towns – huge appetite to improve Herefordshire’s business economy. Growth in staycations has provided a big boost
- Big hole in Hereford itself – doesn’t have viable visitor economy. Stronger Towns Funding will help to address this.