

7 Business Engagement Event Plan

WLEP BOARD RECOMMENDATION

The Board is asked to:

- Note the revised business engagement event proposals;
- Attend, support and promote the Worcestershire Business Forum event series; and
- Where invited, participate in the Forum events as a speaker or panel member.

7.1 Background

7.1.1 As part of the Levelling Up announcement by Government, the role of Local Enterprise Partnerships and Growth Hubs has been confirmed to ensure that we act as the voice of business, gathering intelligence from local businesses on key challenges and opportunities and use that to both inform local activity where possible and feedback to Government with a view to influencing policy and decision-making at a national level.

7.1.2 To address this requirement of the LEP and WGH, the need was to adjust our traditional event plan delivery to ensure that we could act as this voice of business, listening to business concerns and opportunities to build a greater evidence base which can be used to inform decision-makers.

7.2 New event series proposal

7.2.1 Previously, the Worcestershire LEP saw success with delivering our Virtual Conference package during COVID in 2020. We were able to adjust our traditional annual conference event into five, 1 hour long, videos which during the conference week generated 1,500 views and presented content from the team in a more digestible format.

7.2.2 Across the business community we are still witnessing behaviours which result in potential delegates avoiding large-scale physical events. Recognising this behavioural shift, and the objective for the LEP to be the voice of business, we proposed the plan to deliver smaller business events on focused business themes. This approach would allow the LEP and Growth Hub to be more visible with businesses and more agile in our delivery, ensuring higher-quality and more granular business engagement across the year.

7.2.3 These smaller business events will be more manageable for the team and the topics will be reflective of current business challenges or opportunities fed in by the business community, providing more benefits for businesses who attend. The smaller events will become part of the LEP and Growth Hub Communications activity plan, which will also incorporate video content as we have seen the success this brings and allow for support for other partner business events.

7.2.4 By implementing this new event series plan, the Worcestershire LEP and Growth Hub would be able to achieve our objective of being closer to business and acting as their voice, whilst costing significantly less than a one-off event. In addition, this approach also allows the LEP and Growth Hub to hold events across the county, strengthening and widening our relationships with harder to reach business communities.

7.3 Worcestershire Business Forums

7.3.1 The inaugural Worcestershire Business Forum event was held in May 2022, with 50 businesses attending a three-course dinner at the Sixways Stadium. Businesses who attended were from a variety of sectors and different sizes to provide a closer representation of the business community without relying on one sector which could distort the outcomes.

7.3.2 The event was focused on a business survey which the LEP team created. The survey covered general business topics to provide an overview of the local economic landscape which could be discussed at the event and referenced in future LEP work. To reflect on and discuss the survey data, a panel of speakers were invited, consisting of business leaders and public sector leaders, to engage in a 'question time' style discussion with attendees.

7.3.3 The key insights from the survey data were that:

- Current business optimism compared to pre COVID was in total 56% positive.
- The level of growth ambition for the next 3 years for businesses was 80% for growth.
- 51% of businesses who have tried to recruit in the last 12 months, 40% of them experienced problems.
- *The further support businesses wanted, 56% eligibility for grants, 33% more information on where to source funding and 22% wanted support with recruitment or training.

**This question was a multiple-choice option and these were the three highest answers.*

7.3.4 This survey provided the main evidence and talking points for the forum dinner event, with the panel of speakers reflecting on this data and drawing on attendees to understand how accurate this data was.

Out of this discussion there were three main findings:

- Skills and recruitment is still a big challenge for businesses.
- Innovation, how can we enable more innovation in the county.
- Commercial properties, there were concerns around the types of premises being built and did that reflect the types of businesses being attracted to invest in the county.

7.3.5 With this event concluded, the survey data and key findings from the discussion have been shared across the LEP team to inform future project delivery and has also set the themes/areas of focus for the next events in the series. By using the topics from the inaugural event for the next events, it will serve as a follow up for attending businesses and will help to build an engaged group of businesses.

7.3.6 Learning from the first event, future forum events needed to add more value for businesses and support LEP and Growth Hub delivery activities, as well as being an opportunity to listen to business feedback. The following structure was approved for the forum events going forward:

- Gather research and business intelligence.
- Present the existing solutions and support schemes available to raise awareness/engagement.
- Instigate discussions around new ideas and opportunities.
- Present these findings to local boards and report into central Government.

7.3.7 The findings from each of the future forum events will be shared across the LEP and Growth Hub teams to inform delivery work and implementation into work with the relevant boards and sub-boards.

7.4 Future event plans

7.4.1 Following the positive feedback from attendees regarding the event and the ambition to deliver a series of forum events, we have now planned a series of events as follows.

- 27 September 2022 – Skills and recruitment focused forum
- November 2022 – Innovation focused forum
- March 2023 – General business forum event

7.4.2 The WLEP board are asked to support, attend and promote these forum events where possible. All board members will receive the details of the forum events as they are launched. With the ambition to grow our engaged business audience, board members are asked to share the forum details with businesses they work with/part of supply chain, to help grow the community.

- 7.4.3 Where the opportunity presents, various board members will be asked to play a role in delivering the forum event, as a speaker or panel member. This will be picked up individually closer to the events.
- 7.4.2 Alongside the future forum event plans, there are a plethora of other business engagement events which will be taking place in the remainder of the year. Below you can find the key events from across the teams to be aware of.
- Worcestershire Festival of Innovation – 6th October
 - Worcestershire County Council Business Event – October
 - BetaDen, Cohort 5 showcase – November
 - Worcestershire Apprenticeships Awards – 17th November
- 7.4.3 This proposal outlines a physical series of business engagement events, but we are also exploring options to supplement this with a virtual offering to extend our network and reach even further.

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