WORCESTERSHIRE LEP BOARD MEETING

Friday 31st January
10:00 – 13:00
Venue: DRPG, Unit 212 Ikon Estate, Droitwich Road, Hartlebury, Worcestershire, DY10 4EU.

PRESENT:

Paul Walker	(PW)	Chair Worcestershire LEP
Jennifer Long	(JL)	Vice Chair- Director, Ice Blue Marketing and Design
Gary Woodman	(GW)	Chief Executive, Worcestershire LEP
Michelle Dowse	(MD)	Principal, Heart of Worcestershire College.
Cllr Karen May	(KM)	Leader of Bromsgrove District Council (Rep for N Districts)
Sue Jordan	(SJ)	Non-Executive Board (ONLINE)
Cllr Douglas Godwin	(DG)	Portfolio Holder for Strategic Planning, Economic Development and Tourism (Rep for the S Districts)
Jane Britton	(JB)	Pro Vice Chancellor of Communications and External Affairs at the University of Worcester
John Dillon	(JD)	Managing Director, GJS Dillon (ONLINE)
Carl Arntzen	(CA)	Managing Director, Worcester Bosch Group
Nigel Hall	(NH)	Chair/Lead for WLEP Innovation Board
James Speller	(JS)	Managing Director, Speller Metcalfe

IN ATTENDANCE:

Luke Willetts	(LW)	Deputy CEO, Worcestershire LEP
Alex Price	(AP)	Communications & PR Manager, Worcestershire LEP
Helena Augousti	(HA)	Executive Assistant, Worcestershire LEP
Alex Collins	(AC)	Area Lead, DBT
Judy Gibbs	(JG)	Director of Skills, LEP
Ryan Protheroe	(RP)	Midlands Cyber, Cluster Manager
Darren Schrouder	(DS)	Worcestershire Growth Hub Manager
Sharon Smith	(SS)	CEO, H&W Chamber of Commerce
Nigel Morgan	(NM)	CEO, HWGTA

APOLOGIES:

Steph Simcox	(SS)	Head of Finance, Worcestershire County Council
Jeremy Cieslik	(JC)	Non-Executive Board Member
Cllr Simon Geraghty	(SiG)	Leader of WCC and Cabinet Member for Finance
David Blake	(DB)	Managing Director of Worcester City Council (Cex Rep)

1.	**Welcome and Apologies**	**ACTION**
1.1	**PW** welcomed everyone to the meeting and apologies were given.	

1.2	**PW** introduced the new members and visiting contributors to the Board.	
1.3	**PW** asked for any new declarations of interest. No new interests declared.	
2.	**Minutes of Last Meeting and Matters Arising**	
2.1	Actions from previous meeting: • Issue letter of support for Midlands Engine. **GW** informed the Board that the letter was sent and that another consultation has opened for WLEP funding with a 10th February deadline.	
2.2	The minutes were agreed as a true and accurate record.	
3.	**Business Confidence and Latest Intelligence – BRO's**	**ACTION**
3.1	**SS** presented the Chamber of Commerce's Q4 Report to the Board. The meeting was opened to comments and questions.	
3.2	**GW** commented that this report helps bring us back to the strategy for WLEP and guide the direction in the current business climate.	
3.3	**NM** presented to the Board. Main headlines being: • Employer forum this week and beginning to see more positive recruitment and business growth in the F&B sector. • The current trend in Manufacturing is a failing to match their sales forecasts, and recruitment is to replace people rather than grow. • Engineering apprenticeships are going well. • Commercial training: keep reading from LSIP etc, that businesses want skills around behaviours, but we've found that there's a reluctance to pay for the courses and give their workers the time to complete them. • Herefordshire's fully funded training courses are proving popular, 130+ delegates in 3 weeks, free courses might be the key. • We have seen that the demand for apprenticeships is strong; businesses are seeing the benefits. • Seeing possible positive changes to policy, DfE have stated shorter apprenticeships, and business admin level 2 (most popular entry route) has been approved as a standard and available for delivery in Sept 25. The meeting was then opened up to comments and questions.	

3.4	**JG** commented that initially apprenticeship providers forecasting wasn't positive, but this attitude has flipped to be much more positive, and recruitment next year is already looking good.	
3.5	**DG** commented his thoughts, that issues with University Courses and associated costs are driving the increased demand for Apprenticeships, as they learn on the job and get paid for it.	
3.6	**MD** further commented that one of things that HoW College are work on with their students is the 5 C's. Education providers have a responsibility, to arm their students with the relevant skills be in a workplace, at 18 they are not going to be the finished article, which is expected.	
3.7	**PW** asked what the difference is between apprenticeship training, where they are equipped to do the job, to the other side of training. How much focus is there on the business to make their offering more attractive, and then how do you calibrate a balance.	
3.8	**NM** replied that some businesses are embracing it, with training plans focussed on upskilling their workforce, or they don't do anything, there seems not to be an in between.	
3.9	**DS** commented from a WGH perspective, the Wychavon apprenticeship grant has closed due to a huge uptake, SkillsBoost has had 400+ applications, starting to feel like the tide is turning in a positive way. Seeing the trend in business confidence in line with the HWCC Q4 report, worry about NI costs etc, is echoed through the businesses that WGH support.	
3.10	**JG** commented that in October unemployment went up, but is now declining, remembering that seasonal jobs are included in that (2% decline). However employers are very cautious going into 2025.	
3.11	**PW** asked **JG** if the increased demand in apprenticeships is a broader need or same businesses/sectors. **JG** answered that it's a broader demand.	
3.12	**CA** commented that there is a limit due to the business landscape, Worcestershire businesses are proportionally SME's. These businesses' day to day focus is on trying to survive.	
3.13	**MD** commented that with apprenticeships there must be a balance between supply and demand, both are now starting to align. Seeing queues on open days at the apprenticeship stands, young people are now also seeing the benefits.	
3.14	**NH** further commented that now there is a balance of supply and demand, this should show us where we can move in the future, in line with innovation. In this area we need to build entrepreneurs, SME's are the start of the journey to creating bigger companies.	

3.15	**JG** further commented that when talking or thinking about apprenticeships we must remember that other dynamics play in to making the eco system work. Issue in the tech space that make it difficult e.g. 100 applications and only 7 are taken (TDM)	
3.16	**NH** asked do we need to look at how we can help students fill the gap and give them the skills to do tech apprenticeships.	
3.17	**JG** commented that there seems to be an issue with finding providers of construction apprenticeships.	
3.18	**SJ** commented that issues with construction, might be an opportunity to approach the governing body to reach out to their members.	
3.19	**JS** commented that there has always been a skills gap in construction, Speller Metcalfe have made the decision to do apprenticeships, giving us different aged workers with degrees. They might not know how to manage people, but we send them on leadership and management courses, even if they aren't in management, giving them the tools early on.	
3.20	**JL** commented that it can cost £10k for recruitment fees in the technology arena and since the changes in Employment Law there isn't the ability to wait 3 months and see if a new employee will work. This makes apprenticeships more appealing, a good way to mould young people, it takes longer, but less costs associated with it.	
3.21	**DS** presents to the Board. The meeting was then opened up to questions and comments.	
3.22	**NH** asked when benchmarking Worcestershire Growth Hub with others in the UK, which is the one to model on. **DS** answers Oxford and Hertfordshire are known be to very good, but their models are very different to ours. Companies are outsourced to deliver the business support for them, not many offer business support from within or the same person managing the account, whichever sub-contractor is available will go on the visits, meaning there is no consistency. Our Professional Business Advisors programme is another differentiator.	
3.23	**JB** asked how the WGH finds good Account Manager's and upskills them. **DS** answered that the Growth Hub haven't had to recruit an Account Manager for approximately 18 months. The current Account Managers come from industry, and some are business owners, they bring a wide range of skill sets. They have the knowledge to sit down with businesses and knows their issues and understand the local business voice. Training plan in place for 25/26 to upskill them in project management etc.	
3.24	**PW** congratulated the Growth Hub team and then commented that 80% of the jobs created in the last 5 years, are from 20% of the total Worcestershire companies. WGH are constrained by the need to deliver Vs the business	

	need, going forward they may need to focus their resource on the high growth businesses. **GW** updates the Board that the WLEP is currently looking at the WGH business process and part of the new process will address this.	
3.25	**KM** commented that in Redditch and Bromsgrove engagement with businesses is hard, but with a new shared service, this might get easier. **KM** then invited **DS** to come and meet Rachel Egan.	
4.	**<u>Innovation and Technology in Worcestershire:</u>**	**<u>ACTION</u>**
4.1	**RP** presented to the Board on Midlands Cyber. The meeting was then opened to comments and questions.	
4.2	No comments or questions were raised, although praise for the work internationally and building the database of 'real' cyber security contacts in the region.	
4.3	**RP** presented to the Board on TechFest. The meeting was then opened to comments and questions.	
4.4	**GW** commented that the TechFest events filled, with only a short turnaround time on Marketing, giving a good message that delegates need to book and we are hosting great events. Nice to see the WLEP teams working together to create an events programme that incorporates involvement of each team in each event.	
4.5	**JL** commented that it was successful due to the subject matter being relevant to business issues, TechFest captured the right topics.	
4.6	**NH** started by thanking everyone involved in organising TechFest and then commented that the conversation about Innovation in Worcestershire started less than 12 months ago, and now the WLEP have an Innovation Board and TechFest. The WLEP is building an Innovation community and TechFest is the first step to getting this message out there, engagement with businesses flows into the business support and back to Government, supporting bids for funding.	
4.7	**JL** then spoke as a Director of Midlands Cyber, commenting to the Board how difficult this year has been for **RP**, with issues with funding etc but what a great job he has done.	
4.8	**GW** then updated the WLEP Board that the Innovation Board is looking to recruit more business members.	

	GW presents the proposal to the Board. The meeting was then opened up to questions and comments.	
4.9	**NH** commented that the Innovation Board would ideally welcome members who know what good looks like in the Innovation space, who understand the landscape, who have been involved in a start-up and want to make a difference.	
4.10	**PW** commented that historically Innovation within the WLEP Strategy has taken less priority, but it is now gathering momentum. In a future Board Meeting, there need s to be a discussion about the different brands around Innovation Worcestershire, to decide what it looks like and where BetaDen and TechFest fit into it.	All.
	Action: Send thoughts on the Innovation Worcestershire Brand to **AP**. Bring a summary back to the next Board Meeting on the brand and how it all fits together.	AP/GW
	Board Approval for Board recruitment given.	
5	**Strategic comms update:**	**ACTION**
5.1	**AP** presented to the Board. The meeting was then opened to questions and comments.	
5.2	**JG** commented that since the trainee teacher event at Mazak, the Careers & Enterprise Company have taken the idea to the DfE as they believe it should be rolled out nationally.	
5.3	**JD** updated the Board on GJS Dillon's upcoming Commercial Property Report Launch event on Wednesday 12th February, there are 160 attendees booked on, but expecting a 20 – 30% drop out, has been extended to a wider agenda around the local economy.	
5.4	**PW** then commented on the Quantum Technology subject for the upcoming WLEP 'Big Conversation' Conference, stating the technology has been around for years, why this year and why the drive/increase in interest around it.	
5.5	**JL** replied that AI has been the main topic recently but give it 18 months and it'll be Quantum technology, maybe the WLEP could link it with AI.	
5.6	**NH** commented that the conversation on Quantum Technology might not be relevant now but will be good for the 'Big Conversation' to start the conversation and be ahead of the curve.	

5.7	**PW** commented that it might be better to tackle the question of how businesses integrate AI.	
5.8	**GW** commented that WGH need to talk to businesses around AI and how to start using it, there might be a course that can be put together.	
5.9	**DG** commented that we need a working example of a business who has successfully used AI.	
5.10	**JL** commented that Ice Blue have a client who sells Calor gas to petrol stations, they processed 1,500 invoices a day and needed 4 staff to do this. AI is now being used to scan these invoices. The AI automatically uses the programmed knowledge on pricing etc and then sends them the same day. Now the 3 employees that aren't needed to do this focus on sales and are earning them more money a day.	
5.11	**GW** also commented that the WLEP moving forward will have a yearly events programme, meaning they is more organisation, so resources aren't stretched. **ACTION**: talk to Donston around the Quantum session with the possibility of broadening it to include AI.	AP/GW
6.	**Central Government updates**:	**ACTION**
6.1	**AC** updated the Board. Headlines being: • This meeting has been useful to understand the challenges local businesses are facing and where the investment opportunities are, reporting this back to central government and start to try to get some actions. • The current Industrial Strategy is open to consultation until mid-February – the above issues and opportunities can be emailed to me, to be added to the consultation. • The consultation on the WLEP funding is formally ending. This won't affect WGH or Skills. • Devolution – giving more power to the already existing combined authorities and to merge 2 tiers of Local Government with the aim to give more power to the communities they serve. The meeting was then opened to questions and comments.	
6.2	**PW** commented that it is a work in progress on how we understand how these changes will impact Worcestershire. Can't discuss all of the ramifications at this Board Meeting, but by the next Board Meeting, there might be more information which we can discuss then.	

6.3 6.4	**KM** wanted **AC** to feedback to Central Government that with housing numbers needing to be built, (30,000 homes to be built in North Worcestershire) alongside the expectations in the background for District Councils to be allocating resource to the devolution plan, it is stretching resource and economic growth areas can't be put forward. **JG** commented that at the upcoming Skills Show, the Employment and Skills Board, will be having a panel discussion on the state of the nation, there's a lot of change in the skills arena as well so will invite the WLEP Board to this discussion on the 6th March	
	AOB None.	
	Dates of Next meeting 2025: 28th March – 10am – 1pm. 16th May – 10am – 1pm. 18th July – 10am – 1pm. 26th September – 10am – 1pm. 28th November – 10am – 1pm.	