

Note of Employers' Skills and Education Board Meeting on 22 April 2020

1. Welcome and introductions

List of attendees and apologies at Annex A.

Clare welcomed everyone to the meeting – in particular Joe Manning who had recently joined the LEP as Deputy Chief Executive.

Clare invited everyone to introduce themselves and highlight any key issues that were concerning them in the current Covid-19 crisis.

In the subsequent conversation the following points were highlighted:

- Concerns about digital inclusion – with the growing emphasis on digital working and digital learning there is a major concern about our residents who do not have access to the internet or computers at home
- How some businesses have responded quickly to the crisis and have significantly increased their markets – e.g. Thor Chemicals who are manufacturing hand sanitiser and a small company who was previously struggling and who now has a growing business producing PPE.
- The imperative of getting cash out quickly to the front-line and coordinate response to the crisis as quickly as possible.

2. Note of last Meeting and Matters Arising

The note of the last meeting on 18 March 2020 was approved and Clare suggested that all matters arising were on the agenda for the meeting.

3. Action List from Previous Meetings

Clare noted the actions from the previous meeting and asked for these to be updated. Many of the outstanding actions would be covered during the meeting.

4. Responses to Covid-19

Clare suggested that Members should review the impact of the current crisis on our skills and education priorities, consider the actions taken to date in response to the crisis and identify where any further action was required either to move faster, modify activity or take addition actions.

4.1 The Pledge

Trevor Langston and James Richard noted that they had been very impressed by the reaction of local schools to the crisis. After the initial focus on ensuring safeguarding arrangements and on-line learning was in place, schools were now resuming their work with the Pledge on careers activity. For example, the meeting earlier in the day with Careers Leads had attracted half of all our secondary schools.

The Pledge had responded to the crisis by accelerating the work they had already started with Learn Live. The first of a series of Learn Live broadcasts had been transmitted earlier I the week and the broadcast with James Richards and Network Rail had attracted a live audience of 6,840. The majority (87%) of the audience was based in Cheshire and Warrington.

The Pledge will take learning from the first broadcasts. Further on-line activities including an on-line careers festival and career fares are planned.

A key area of concern is Year 13 students leaving school this year – how can we support the vulnerable students to progress. Also concerned about young people who cannot access internet or computers at home.

In the subsequent discussion the following points were made.

- Dhesi noted that all the colleges had responded very quickly to the crisis. For example, in the first week of the crisis Cheshire College South and West had delivered 3,500 on-line lessons as well as careers advice and general support for students.
- Dhesi reported that about 40% of their apprentices had been furloughed but 80% of these are continuing to learn. The College is also providing access to computers and the internet for some disadvantaged students and the College are planning a virtual open day for later in the week.
- The colleges have some concerns around the next intake of students who will have to transition to college after a big gap in attendance at school. There are also concern about delivering training in trades where they need practical experience for learning.
- Charlie Woodcock noted that the University has seen a significant increase in the quantity and quality of on-line learning as well as on-line tutoring and support for students. However, work experience is a challenge. The University has taken a significant hit in the decline of foreign students attending the University as well as pauses in health-related graduate apprenticeships. There has been an increase interest in leadership and management training.
- Pat Jackson reported that the LEP had been concerned that as all our schools move to on-line learning wherever possible, there is a serious digital divide – some schools (mainly in our most disadvantaged areas) do not have virtual learning environments and so do not have a strategic approach to on-line learning. Some schools are still relying heavily on a paper-based approach.
- Our check with schools in Crewe and Nantwich suggested that in our most deprived areas, at least 15% of students do not have access to broadband or computers in their homes. We estimate that this means that that in Crewe and Nantwich alone there may be around 400 households where children cannot access on-line learning or some of the internet/live broadcasts from employers and careers advisors about career opportunities.
- In many instances there will also be challenges for young people wanting to apply for apprenticeships and other job opportunities – most of which are now done electronically. This is going to create an even bigger divide between the children in deprived areas and those in more affluent areas.
- The LEP has issued a questionnaire to all our schools to ask head teachers whether there are similar challenges in other areas. We are already briefing Government Departments about this issue and working with local partners to identify potential sources of support.
- The DCMS's 'FutureDotNow' campaign is a coordinated programme of industry action, supported by DCMS to target the 1.7 million households who don't have access to the internet and are digitally excluded. Through the initiative businesses can donate equipment or make financial contributions and local vulnerable people can make requests for kit. We have put a link to the initiative on the LEP/Growth Hub website:-
<https://futuresdotnow.uk/devicesdotnow>.

4.2 Feedback from LEP Board and DSP

4.2.1 LEP Board

Clare Hayward reported that the LEP Board had met at least weekly during the crisis and had engaged in different ways with other organisations for example, by linking to the Northern Power-House group of LEPs they had ensured effective communication with Government. They were also lobbying banks and facilitating the NHS procurement processes.

Clare noted that the crisis could potentially result in 6 million people in the North West becoming unemployed. In Cheshire and Warrington, the LEP, local authorities and other partners were coming together to support businesses who are having to change business practices and adopt digital. Many local businesses and residents are struggling. The Growth Hub, working with Marketing Cheshire and Catherine Walker, has been communicating regularly about the support and advice that is available. The challenge is how we can use our funds more flexibly -we don't need more buildings, we need more revenue support.

Key areas of LEP work include:

- Accelerate how put more money in to enable targeted 100% grant training for smaller businesses.
- Consultancy support to help businesses rethink their business models.
- A re-think about infrastructure priorities with a stronger focus on digital infrastructure.

4.2.2. Digital Skills Partnership (DSP)

Nicola Dunbar noted that it was brilliant how the LEP and other partners had responded to the crisis.

The Digital Skills Partnership (DSP) is focusing on encouraging and promoting digital skills. Sarah Williams has worked with other DSPs to draw together a list of free on-line training which is now on the LEP website.

The DSP Board is focused on spreading the digital word using collaboration, connecting across networks and scaling up activity. Nicola has issued a questionnaire to DSP Board Members to gauge what is already happening and then agree follow up action.

The DSP is particularly keen to ensure that the Local Growth Fund skills investments widen access to new technologies and digital training opportunities.

4.3 Accelerate (Phil and Maud)

Phil Atkinson and Maud Duthie reported that the Accelerate Governing Board had met on 21 April and had agreed to reconfigure their priorities for the next 6 months in order to respond to Covid-19. Subject to negotiations between the LEP and Central Government, the LEP Board want to allocate funding to Accelerate in order to offer 100% grant funded training to a targeted group of employed people who are aged under 35 and working in businesses employing fewer than 50 people. The level of LEP has not yet been confirmed – it could initially be around £500K up to a maximum of £2 million.

The University has already approved a number of training providers via the dynamic procurement system and a second tranche of training providers should be approved by the end of the week – making a total of 36 approved training providers.

The University will also be launching a series of mini competitions for the delivery of specific training. The initial competition will run for 10 days but will include a request that future competitions will run for only 5 days. The aim is to start the first training by the 18th May.

The marketing message is being developed by Marketing Cheshire. 'Soft' marketing will start immediately but the 100% grant offer can only be marketed when the Department for Work and Pensions approve Marketing Cheshire as a delivery partner and agree that some of the employers contribution to the cost of training can be replaced by LEP funds. The marketing of the 40% grant funded offer continues to be promoted via the Growth Hub.

Charlie commented that change request to DWP will be made by the end of the week. If the fully funded offer is approved this could support a significant number of learners – particularly if the learning is on-line.

Nicola Merriman noted that the information about Accelerate has been circulated around the nuclear network and asked if anyone was aware of support available to help training providers to move training on-line. Clare Hayward noted that this might be anti-competitive. Dhesi suggested that there might be some funding available and agreed to share this information. **ACTION DHESI – completed.**

In response to a query from Bill Carr, it was confirmed that individuals who had been furloughed were being encouraged to train provided that the training does not generate income for the business that has furloughed them.

Julia Teale asked to see the LEP Board paper that proposed the LEP funding for Accelerate and the proposed targeting of the support. This paper is attached at Annex B.

In summary, Clare thanked everyone for their efforts to accelerate Accelerate.

4.4 Local Growth Fund

Pat Jackson shared a spread sheet listing all the Local Growth Fund skills investments, progress to date and next steps for each investment.

Clare invited the sponsors of each investment to comment on progress.

- Stephen Fitzsimmons noted the good progress of the Warrington project and the extent to which they had modified their delivery model to move on-line.
- Paul Colman noted that the Reaseheath project was on hold until after lockdown.
- Julia Teale reported that she was in continuing dialogue with Cheshire College South and West – Julia is pleased that the momentum is continuing.
- Nichola Dunbar had not yet been in contact with the smaller Warrington and Vale Royal College project or the Macclesfield project and asked Pat and Sarah to facilitate this – **ACTION PAT JACKSON AND SARAH WILLIAMS.**
- Dhesi noted that he had met with Youth Fed before the lockdown.
- Bill Carr had not heard from Blue Beck but this investment had not yet been ratified by the LEP.
- Phil Atkinson spoke to Warrington Vale Royal College pre lockdown but will follow up.

Clare thanked Members for their reports and stressed the need to maintain momentum.

Joe Manning commented that we may need to reprofile spend to reflect the delays resulting from the current lockdown.

4.5 Additional Actions Required

Clare Hayward invited Members to comment on the actions taken to date by the Pledge, Accelerate and the Local Growth Fund skills investments and suggest where any further action was required either to move faster, modify activity or take additional actions.

In discussion the following points were raised:

- Stephen Fitzsimmons reported that some of his colleagues had expressed concern about the recent press release about the Growth Fund projects. The press release was considered a little misleading in that it implied it was a response to Covid-19. Catherine Walker noted that the press notice was not intended to imply it was an action as a result of Covid-19 rather that it was an action that could be helpful in the current crisis.
- Stephen Fitzsimmons also noted that Connecting Cheshire are developing an investment proposal to go to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department of Digital, Culture Media and Sport in response to the Covid-19 crisis. Stephen suggested that this might be linked to how Accelerate could help to redeploy people into more digital-related roles.
- Bill Carr noted that he was also thinking about how to shift the focus of his work to support more re-training. Accelerate could be very useful in this regard. If the 100% grant funding from Accelerate is used effectively we could develop a strong case for continued Government support for this during the recovery from the lockdown. It is essential that we are creative in helping to develop solutions.
- At this point in the meeting Clare Hayward reported that she had just received a message from Philip Cox to say that we could proceed with confidence on the first tranche of 100% grant funded Accelerate funding.
- Clare Hayward suggested that Members might establish a core group to explore any actions required to support re-deployment and job matching. The group would review progress, identify gaps and suggest potential ways forward. The group would need to draw together various activities for example, Jobcentre Plus, Accelerate, Good Things Foundation On-line Centres, community pod cast networks, Learn Live and Youth Federation. **ACTION - to set up group to include** JCP, Trevor, Phil Atkinson and Clare Hayward and Bill Carr and James Nicholas.

5. Marketing and Branding

Nicola Said noted that the initial phase of marketing would focus on marketing the 100% grant offer. Marketing was ready to go - subject to approval from DWP of the changes in match funding requested and confirmation of funding from the LEP.

The first phase of the marketing plan would promote the 100% grant to individuals and the next phase would market the 40% grant.

Marketing to business will be through the Growth Hub and the skills brokers. The initial marketing campaign will be targeted at individuals including people who are furloughed.

Marketing Cheshire will also be marketing the Pledge.

Catherine Walker reported that, from a corporate perspective, all MPs and Board Members are receiving regular updates from the LEP.

The LEP has also started a business hour on twitter which will be built up over the next few weeks. The LEP are keen to pass on good news and human-interest stories to Granada and North West Tonight but mindful that these are regional platforms so, inevitably Manchester and Andy Burnham will tend to attract more coverage.

Members suggested that it would be useful for Clare to have a diary blog - reflecting on what has happened over the previous week – in a business context. **ACTION Catherine Walker.**

6. Data and Labour Market Intelligence

Pat Jackson reminded Members of the paper they had received suggesting the scope of the next phase of data and labour market work. Pat invited Members to comment on the paper.

Joe Manning highlighted the need to share the proposed next phase of work with DfE to check it is in line with their requirements. Joe suggested it would also be useful to see sectoral breakdowns and where job opportunities arise.

Clare Hayward noted the recent Boston Consulting Group report on how Covid-19 is changing business. Clare commented that slow recovery in the North West is an issue that we need to address. We need to ensure infrastructure is in place to enable individuals to access jobs.

Phil Atkinson asked about the methodology of the recent Powerhouse paper and Pat Jackson was asked to check the details with David Levene. **ACTION Pat Jackson**

7. Any Other Business

It was suggested that Colin Billingsley from Jobcentre Plus should be invited to the next meeting. **ACTION Pat Jackson**

The meeting closed at 15.30 hrs

List of attendees

Clare Hayward (Chair)

Nicola Dunbar (Deputy Chair)

Phil Atkinson (Daresbury)

Cllr James Nicholas (Cheshire East Council)

Julia Teale (Bentley Motors)

Paul Colman (South Cheshire Chamber)

James Richards (Network Rail)

Bill Carr (Carpe Diem)

Nicola Merriman (National Skills Academy Nuclear)

Jasbir Dhesi (Cheshire College South and West representing the training providers)

Charlie Woodcock (University of Chester)

Stephen Fitzsimmons (Warrington Borough Council)

Pat Jackson (LEP)

Apologies

Louise Higgins (United Utilities)

Philip Cox (LEP)

Lisa Harris (Cheshire West and Chester)

Martin Wood (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy – an observer)

Also attending

Joe Manning (Cheshire and Warrington LEP)

Sarah Williams (LEP)

Andy Devaney (LEP)

Maud Duthie (University of Chester)

Papers copied to:

Jamie Zucker (Department for Education)

Clare Cassidy (Department for Education)

Mike McLoughlin (Department for Education)