# **NOTE OF EMPLOYERS SKILLS AND EDUCATION BOARD MEETING ON 21 APRIL 2021**

Meeting was held via Microsoft Team - list of attendees and apologies (**Annex A)**.

**THE MAIN PURPOSE OF THE MEETING WAS:**

* Members to review key developments since the 17th March – in particular the impact of lifting some of the Covid restrictions
* Members to receive feedback from meetings/activities of key groups held since last meeting
* To note the final version of the Skills Report and agree next steps
* To review progress of the Local Growth Fund projects
* To seek Members approval for the proposed funding for the Jobs Opportunities Portal and the programme of online jobs fair
* To note the draft Covid Recovery Plan – the subject of a consultation

**KEY POINTS DISCUSSED**

**1. Welcome, and declarations of interest**

Clare Hayward welcomed everyone to the meeting and then formally handed over the chairing of the meeting

to Kath Mackay – recently appointed to the LEP Board and to the chair of the Employers’ Skills and Education

Board.

Kath thanked Clare on behalf of the Board for all her amazing work in chairing the Employers’ Skills and

Education Board over recent years.

Kath also welcomed Lucy Liang – a new voting Member, and Paul Kelly from BAE Systems who was attending

the Board meeting for a second time with a view to becoming a Member.

Lucy provided a brief overview of her background and work on international education programmes.

**2. Members updates on key developments since the last meeting on 17 March**

Clare reported that the LEP Board had recently made a number of new appointments to the main LEP Board

as well as to the various sub-committees. Formal announcements would be made following purdah.

Clare also noted that Marketing Cheshire are working on a refresh of the LEP Brand.

Dhesi referred to the ‘Catching Up’ paper circulated in advance of the Board meeting and explained that the

paper had been released at the same time as the Treasury and Department for Education were discussing the

need to fund catch-up for all students affected by the pandemic. Dhesi expected some catch-up funding to be

made available and will share further information as it becomes available. **ACTION DHESI**

Dhesi also reported on the current major lobbying campaign by colleges about the increase in the claw-back

thresholds associated with the Adult Education Budget. Last year, because of the pandemic, colleges had

been allowed to keep 100% of their Adult Education Budgets provided they delivered at least 67% of their

contracts. This year Government had raised the threshold to 90%. This higher threshold risked destabilising

some colleges and local authorities that deliver the Adult Education Budget. Dhesi explained that

Government was arguing that providers should have switched to online delivery of training, but this was not

viable for some practical courses such plumbing. The Government had also earlier instructed colleges that

they should not furlough staff on the assumption that the clawback threshold would reflect challenges

created by two lockdowns.

Pat Jackson suggested that if this was a serious issue for the Cheshire and Warrington colleges then the

Employers’ Skills and Education Board might consider joining the lobbying. Dhesi did not know the position of

other colleges but agreed to ask other colleges for the information. **ACTION DHESI.**

Clare Latham noted that this was also a serious issue for some local authorities who are also lobbying

Government to reduce the threshold.

A number of Members noted that the removal of Covid restrictions was having a positive impact on the local

Economy – in particular the visitor economy. This might provide work placement and job opportunities for

young people later in the year.

**3. Feedback from key meetings/activities since last Employers’ Skills and Education Board**

**3.1 LEP Board meetings**

Nicola Dunbar reported that the last LEP Board meeting on 17 March had considered a range of issues:

* the draft Covid Recovery Plan – and the consultation events over the next few weeks
* the Levelling Up fund
* the review of the LEPs’ roles
* the confirmation of Liverpool as a location for a free port with Ellesmere Port identified as a possible site for extension of the free port.
* the Sustainability and Inclusion Commission who are currently collecting data to inform their work
* the Growth Hub work with businesses impacted by withdrawal from the European Community.

Members were asked to review the Covid Recovery Plan and provide comments as soon as possible. **ACTION**

**ALL MEMBERS**. It was agreed that over the next few weeks a meeting would be organised to provide

Members with a briefing on the Covid Report and an opportunity to suggest revisions to the draft. **ACTION**

**PAT JACKSON**

Clare Hayward noted that the Sustainability and Inclusion Commission is identifying the skills requirements of

a number of low carbon related projects including retrofitting.

**3.2 Levelling Up Fund**

Clare Latham noted that Cheshire West & Chester are inviting bids for the Ministry of Housing, Communities

and Local Government Community Renewal Funding (national pot £220m) and held a webinar for potential

bidders – slides available on request.   The bid deadline is 28th May with a shortlist of bids submitted to

Government on 18th June.  Results will be known from the end of July with delivery to be completed by March

2022.   £3m per ‘place’ is available.

3.3 **Pledge**

Trevor reported that the Pledge Board had met earlier in the day. Their main ask of the Employers’ Skills and

Education Board was to help identify organisations that might undertake the planned stocktake of the Pledge.

The following is the link to the invitation to tender - http://www.871candwep.co.uk/resource-types/tenders/

Trevor noted three key sources of funding for the Pledge:

* the Careers and Enterprise Company who were working with the Pledge on plans for a Careers Hub that would provide additional resources to work more strategically with local schools from September
* the European Social Funds – the funds had supported phase 1 of the Pledge and the Department for Work and Pensions are currently processing 2 other bids for phases 2 and 3 of the Pledge.
* The Westminster Foundation who are already working with the Youth Federation and keen to support the Pledge in Chester and Ellesmere Port

A key priority over the next few months was to attract more employers to work with the Pledge.

In addition, the Pledge are running a series of ‘Industry Insights’ - for example, to explain the career

opportunities for people interested in maths, a group of employers are working with the Pledge to support a

programme of virtual work experience, the Pledge is developing a video to illustrate the science-related

career opportunities in Cheshire and Warrington and the Pledge is working with teachers who

are subject specialist to help them link with key areas of the local economy.

Philip Cox noted that the success of the Pledge meant that in 12 months-time it was likely to become the

biggest LEP programme – there was therefore a need to understand and manage the risks associated with this

growth. The stocktake was an opportunity to look forward and make sure the Pledge is fully integrated into

supporting the economic recovery.

3.4 **Digital Skills Partnership (DSP) Board**

Nicola Dunbar noted a number of key developments:

* The evaluation by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) of the 7 local Digital Skills Partnerships – Nicola thanked the Members who had contributed to the evaluation. The findings of the evaluation are expected by the end of April.
* The last meeting of the DSP Board on 23rd March had reviewed the Skills Report
* A meeting of employers, chaired by Bentley to explore the development of Digital Bootcamps
* A meeting with Blake Bower, DCMS’s new Director, Digital and Technology Policy
* DCMS’s plans to grow their regional Cyber Clusters in the North West – an opportunity to link businesses and local training providers.

**3.5 Institute of Technology (IOT)**

Dhesi reminded Board members that the focus of the IOT is to increase the numbers of people with Level 4 and 5 skills. Cheshire College South and West had submitted a bid in January on behalf of the local colleges and the University of Chester. They had received positive feedback on the bid from the Department for Education and last week received confirmation that the bid was through to the second stage of the bidding process.

The Department for Education have allowed 6 bidders from the North West through to the next stage but intend to only issue 5 contracts – it is a competitive process. Over the next 8 weeks there is a considerable amount of work needed to prepare for the next submission. Dhesi met all the College Principals + Kurt Allman on 20 April to agree next steps and to discuss the importance of ensuring the capital bid from each college is in proportion to the numbers of Level 4 qualifications they intend to deliver. Dhesi is also planning a meeting with the core employers who will become part of the IOT governance structure.

In response to questions about how the Employers’ Skills and Education Board could support the IOT, Dhesi stressed the importance of maintaining a very clear focus on the vision for the IOT. Members recognised the importance of delivering the vision and the need to avoid drifting away from the vision as operational issues emerge.

Philip Cox noted that the Employers’ Skills and Education Board had also recommended the LEP to provide £25K to support the development of the business case for the IOT.

Dhesi will provide further updates as the IOT plans develop. **ACTION DHESI**

**3.6 Chambers meetings**

Paul Colman noted that the Cheshire and Warrington Chambers have not met for a while but are planning a meeting over the next few weeks. They continue to support the Recovery Plans and Kickstart in particular.

Paul made the following points:

* On Kickstart, progress is being made but there have been frustrations with the DWP administration
* The North West Chambers are working together on the Levelling Up fund to ensure the North West gets its fair share of funding
* Businesses are reporting an acceleration of their digital strategies in response to Covid restrictions with more people working from home.
* There is an increasing demand for digital skills as well as demand for drivers to support distribution businesses.
* Human Resource issues have always been important but there is increasing demand from businesses for support to tackle new working practices and remote working in particular.
* HS2 is a major opportunity

Bill Carr commented that in the digital sector, offering flexible/home working is becoming a much bigger issue and there is plenty of information about the impact of this new approach. Bill is happy to share this information.

3.7 **Skills Accelerators – Skills Improvement Plan Trailblazers and the Strategic Development Fund**

Philip Cox noted that on 20 April the Department for Education published further details of the Skills Accelerators – including the trailblazers for Skills Improvement Plans and the Strategic Development Fund. LEPs, Mayoral Combined Authorities and Skills Advisory Panels (SAPs) are not eligible to bid – only employer representative groups such as the CBI and Chambers can bid for the Skills Improvement Plan trailblazers. The colleges and a range of other partners can bid for the Strategic Development Funding. There is an expectation that SAPs should be involved in the preparation of the bids.

Philip and Paul Colman had already had an initial discussion around the possibility of the Chambers, the Employers’ Skills and Education Board, Cheshire Business Group and other business representative organisations working together on a bid to become a trailblazer for a Skills Improvement Plan. There is also the potential to link the bids for the Skills Improvement Plan and the Strategic Development Fund and the proposed Institute of Technology. The key focus of the Strategic Development Fund is to encourage collaboration between training providers. The deadline for the bids is 25 May.

As a next step it was agreed that a small working group should be established to include Paul Colman and other partners. **ACTION PAT JACKSON**

4. **Accelerate Training Support Programme**

Kurt Allman reminded Members that Accelerate was a £30m employer- led programme using £15m of funding from the European Social Funds. Over 3 years it was contracted to support the training of 19,000 individuals.

Accelerate has contracted with 76 providers to deliver a range of training support but 15 months of operation during the Covid crisis has brought considerable challenges. The European Social Fund brings stringent requirements, and the financial profile of the programme is currently contracted.

Members had a full and frank discussion of the performance of the Accelerate project, particularly in respect to its contracted financial profile. This now requires the project team to undertake a Project Change Request (PCR). Two options were presented, and these were based upon discussions with the managing authority – the Department for Work and Pensions. The Accelerate Project Governance Board, as well the University and LEP, will further consider options moving forward. A final decision on the future profile of Accelerate will is expected in June 2021. This will be reported back to the Employers’ Skills and Education Board in due course.

Kath Mackay summarised by saying that we faced a very challenging situation and asked Kurt to report back to the next meeting. **ACTION KURT ALLMAN**

**5. Jobs Opportunities Portal and Plans for online jobs fair ‘NorthWESTWorks4U’**

Pat Jackson summarised the paper that had been circulated prior to the meeting. As a direct response to the current and growing unemployment levels which are nearly twice the pre-pandemic levels, we want to provide local people with direct access to job opportunities – in particular, the individuals who have become unemployed because of Covid and those who are expected to seek work when furloughing ends.

Members were asked to approve funding to extend the online Job Opportunities Portal for 11 months to 31 March 2022 (£38K including cost of marketing and maintenance) and to fund a programme of online Job Fairs over the next year (£12K). The job fairs programme will involve 5 one-day online job fairs focused on Cheshire and Warrington and one 3-day online jobs fair for the North West.

The funding will be a cost on the LEP budget so will require a reallocation of funding from within the LEP budget, but there is a risk that we would need to draw on LEP reserve funds. Members need to be clear that this funding is in direct response to the pandemic and represents good value for money.

Members will also want to consider the reputational risks of discontinuing the Job Opportunities Portal in April 2022 – it will be very important to stress that the funding for the Portal and online job fairs is in direct response to Covid and ends in March 2022.

Philip Cox stressed that funding cannot be guaranteed beyond 31 March 2022, but we will continue to

monitor the impact of the funding and hope to contract for a longer period. Members would need to be

prepared to handle any adverse publicity if funding was stopped in March 2022.

Clare Latham commented that it would be much easier to take criticism about closing the Portal on the chin

next March than now - the 11 months extension would get us through the end of furlough and it is something

that is there to benefit every single unemployed/at risk of redundancy/job change resident in Cheshire and

Warrington.

Following further discussion, Kath Mackay summarised that Board members were supportive of the proposal

which should now go to the 28 April meeting of the LEP’s Performance and Investment Committee for

ratification. **ACTION PAT JACKSON**

Colin Billingsley (Jobcentre Plus) noted that the online job fairs have achieved a step change in Jobcentre

Plus’s approach to supporting and engaging with unemployed people.

**6. An update on traineeships and the Level 3 entitlement and the extent of the funding that**

**Cheshire and Warrington will receive**

Dhesi will circulate a one-page summary – **ACTION DHESI**

**7. Skills Report and next steps**

Pat Jackson informed Members that the Skills Report was posted on the LEP website on 12 April –

http://www.871candwep.co.uk/resources/skills-education-plan/. The Report is currently being type set so a

more professional version will replace the current version as soon as possible.

Pat drew Members’ attention to the action plan (section 5 of the Report) and suggested this should be the

focus of Members’ attention. Members agreed that future Board meetings should focus on the action plan

and Kath and Pat agreed to follow up on this as they prepare for the next Employers’ Skills and Education

Board meeting. **ACTION KATH AND PAT**

**8. Local Growth Fund update (spend and outputs)**

Sarah Williams presented a series of slides to illustrate the spend to date and delivery of outputs from the 17

projects (Annex B).

Members were thanked for all their efforts in working with projects to ensure the investments in equipment

were completed by the end of the financial year. Members who are sponsoring projects were asked to

contact their projects before the next Employers’ Skills and Education Board so they could understand

how the projects are progressing in terms of delivering outputs. **ACTION ALL MEMBERS TO REPORT BACK AT**

**NEXT MEETING**

Members agreed that an event to showcase the Local Growth Fund projects should be held an hour before

the June meeting of the Employers’ Skills and Education Board. **ACTION PAT JACKSON AND SARAH**

**WILLIAMS**

**9. Note of last meeting on 17 March 2021 and List of Outstanding Actions**

Members agreed the note of the last meeting. The list of outstanding issues was reviewed and updated –

Annex C.

**10. Any Other Business**

* Phil Atkinson reported that Daresbury are doing a lot of work at national level on skills gaps associated with advanced manufacturing and digital technologies. It was agreed that Daresbury colleagues would be invited to present the work at a future meeting of the Employers’ Skills and Education Board. **ACTION PHIL ATKINSON AND PAT JACKSON**
* Maggie Chen noted that Katie McConnell from the LEP’s Engagement Board would work together with the Employers’ Skills and Education Board. **ACTION PAT TO FOLLOW UP WITH MAGGIE AND KATIE**
* **Date of next meeting -** 19 May 2021

**EMPLOYERS SKILLS AND EDUCATION BOARD MEETING ON 21 APRIL 2021 Annex A**

The following members of the Employers’ Skills and Education Board attended the meeting:

* \*Kath Mackay - Chair
* \*Nicola Dunbar (Deputy Chair)
* *\**Clare Hayward *–* Chair of LEP Board
* Sarah Hopkinson (Engie)
* Kurt Allman (University of Chester)
* \*Eleanor Blackburn (Warrington Borough Council)
* \*Bill Carr (Carpe Diem)
* \*Phil Atkinson (Daresbury)
* Paul Colman (South Cheshire Chamber)
* Nicola Merriman (National Skills Academy Nuclear)
* Maggie Chen and Katie McConnell (LEP Engagement Board)
* Dhesi (Cheshire College South and West – representing the training providers)
* \*Cllr James Nicholas ( (Cheshire East Council)
* \*Clare Latham (Cheshire West and Chester)
* Gemma Betteridge representing Nicola Johnson (Bentley Motors)
* \*Lucy Liang (AUE Ltd)
* Paul Kelly (BAE Systems)
* Philip Cox (LEP)
* Pat Jackson (LEP)

\*With voting rights

**Apologies**

* Louise Higgins (United Utilities)
* Nicola Johnson (Bentley Motors)
* Kim Hardman (Astra Zeneca)
* Martin Wood (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy) – observer

**Also attending**

* Joe Manning, Andy Devaney, Trevor Langston and Sarah Williams for specific agenda items

**Papers copied to**:

* Trevor Brocklebank (Deputy Chair of LEP)
* Jamie Zucker (DfE)
* Clare Cassidy (DfE)
* Mike McLouglin (DfE)
* Peter Skates (Cheshire East Council)
* Nicola Said (LEP)
* Joe Manning (LEP)
* Andy Devaney (LEP)
* Sarah Williams (LEP)
* Trevor Langston (LEP)