

NOTE OF CHESHIRE AND WARRINGTON - EMPLOYERS SKILLS AND EDUCATION BOARD MEETING ON 19 MAY 2021

The main purpose of the meeting was for Members to:

- Review key developments since the 21 April
- Share feedback from activities of key groups since the last meeting
- Provide a steer on proposed work to establish a better understanding of the demand for technical skills across Cheshire and Warrington
- Review the action plan in the Skills Report and start to focus on key aspects of the plan to ensure direction of travel and outcomes are clear
- Review progress of the Local Growth Fund projects
- Advise on how best to assess the added value of the Opportunities Portal

1. Welcome, and declarations of interest

Kath Mackay welcomed Members to the meeting. There were no declarations of interest. List of attendees and apologies at Annex A.

2. Information Sharing on key developments since the last meeting on 21 April

2.1 Covid Recovery Plan

Seven Members of the Employers' Skills and Education Board met on 18 May to review the draft Covid Recovery Plan. The following points were noted:

- Eleanor Blackburn commented that it had been a good, positively challenging meeting where all Members present had agreed the need for a stronger focus on inclusion and recognition of the potential conflict between 'fast growing' and 'inclusive'.
- Paul Colman noted that the Recovery Plan seems to be very high level and needs to link more effectively with local communities, including the third sector.
- Lucy Liang had attended an earlier consultation on the Covid Recovery Plan and commented that the attendees at the earlier consultation had been looking to the Employers' Skills and Education Board to support the delivery of the Plan. There had also been an emphasis on the importance of the LEP working in collaboration with other partners to deliver the Plan and to improve communication at all levels.
- All Members agreed that the LEP's influence with employers is key to the successful deliver of the Plan.

It was suggested that the Chair of the Sustainability and Inclusion Commission should be invited to the next meeting of the Employers' Skills and Education Board to discuss these issues – **ACTION PAT JACKSON**

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

3.1 LEP Board meetings

Kath Mackay reported that she had attended her first meeting of the LEP Board on 21 April. A number of new Members were attending for the first time and a significant part of the meeting was spent on introductions. **ACTION PAT JACKSON TO CIRCULATE A LIST OF NEW BOARD MEMBERS.**

The LEP Board had received a presentation on the new LEP website and branding, and Kath asked Pat Jackson to share links to the new website and any collateral. **ACTION PAT JACKSON**

The last LEP Board meeting had also reviewed the Covid Recovery Plan and discussed the Government's current review of LEPs.

3.2 Accelerate

Kurt Allman reported that there had been a meeting involving Clare Hayward, the University Vice Chancellor, Phil Atkinson, Philip Cox and Joe Manning to review the recommendations that had been discussed at the last Employers' Skills and Education Board meeting on 21 April. The recommendations would go to the next LEP Board meeting on 16 June and Kurt would feed-back the outcome of the meeting to the Employers' Skills and Education Board. In the interim, recruitment to the Accelerate program continues and Kurt is working on a project change request that will be submitted to the Department for Work and Pensions.

3.3 Digital Skills Partnership (DSP) Board

In Nicola Dunbar's absence Sarah Williams reported the following:

- **DCMS Evaluation of the 7 Local Digital Skills Partnerships** - DCMS have advised initial feedback from the evaluators has some positive messages about the Local Digital Skills Partnership model. The final report is expected late May/early June.
- **IBM Partnership** - IBM are working with the DSP and National Citizen Service (NCS) to create content and activities for use initially in the NCS summer school (in the same way as we did with Google in 2019). Sessions include:
 - **Empowering Youth with Digital Skills & Readiness (6 hours)**. These sessions move young people from being consumers of technology into being creators, makers and doers empowered by technology.
 - **Inspiring Youth with Entrepreneurial Spirit (3 hours)**.

Following the NCS Summer School we will be able to use the videos and activity kits across Cheshire and Warrington.

- **DSP Board Meeting on 18 May focused on:**
 - Digital Bootcamps and a presentation from Priestley College about digital T-levels
 - Digital skills required for hard to fill vacancy jobs – to inform future funding of the Institute of Technology and the Skills Accelerator
 - An agreement to revisit the DSP's aims and priorities, identify gaps and realign Membership as necessary
 - Implementation of the Skills Action Plan including the preparation of case studies to inspire people into digital careers.

3.4 Institute of Technology, T-Level Capital Investment, Skills Accelerator and the 'Skills for Jobs' White Paper

Dhesi presented a series of slides to update Members on a number of issues.

3.4.1 Institute of Technology (IoT)

The Cheshire and Warrington bid is one of 6 in the North West that has moved into the second phase of approval when we expect 5 to be short-listed. To date the Department for Education feedback on the Cheshire and Warrington bid has been very positive.

The initial indicative budget was £20 million per IoT but the Government has now said the budget is £13 million per IoT with an additional 35% to be contributions in kind. The Department for Education are holding back the remaining funding to fill any gaps in provision once the bids are short-listed.

The IoT's Employer Board will meet for the first time on 24th May. The focus of the IoT is higher level (Level 4 and 5) technical skills to improve productivity.

3.4.2 T-Level Capital

The national roll out of T-levels has already started. Priestley College started in the first phase of the

roll out, Cheshire College South and West are in the second phase (starting in September 2021) and Warrington Vale Royal, Macclesfield and Reaseheath Colleges will join the third roll out phase (starting September 2022).

Cheshire College South and West has secured £3.8 million to support the roll out of T-levels. A new college building will be constructed in Ellesmere Port – to open in September 2022.

Dhesi noted that demand for T-levels has varied and is strongest where existing courses are being converted into T-level courses. The Digital T-level which is a new course has weaker demand with fewer than 20 students currently recruited by Cheshire College South and West. The interviews for T-level courses involve every student being interviewed by an employer.

Members noted that there are high numbers of digital job vacancies and these jobs attract high wages. Bridging the gap between the numbers of digital job vacancies and the numbers of people studying digital skills is a big challenge. Members also noted that T-levels are a great initiative for students to gain solid work-based experience and for employers to ‘talent pick’.

3.4.3 Skills Accelerator

Dhesi summarised the Skills Accelerator programme that had been announced in the January ‘Skills for Jobs’ White Paper and the Queen’s Speech with a Skills and post-16 Education Bill introduced into Parliament on 18 May. The Skills Accelerator comprises a Skills Improvement Plan and a Skills Development Fund that are intended to address major technical skills shortages highlighted most recently by Covid and labour market movement restrictions associated with Brexit.

The Skills Accelerator will focus on technical skills to improve productivity. Dhesi noted that the Skills White Paper recognises the importance of employer representative bodies but does not recognise LEPs within this context.

Dhesi commented that whilst everyone recognises the need to change it is essential that we do not lose what has been achieved to date via the Employers’ Skills and Education Board and the valuable data and labour market work that they have led.

Paul Colman explained that the Cheshire and Warrington expression of interest in a Local Skills Improvement Plan is being led by Chester and North Wales Chamber in collaboration with the other four Cheshire and Warrington Chambers working closely with the Federation for Small Business, the North West Business Leadership team and other employer representative organisations. The initial phase of approving 6 to 8 trailblazers for a Local Skills Improvement Plan is very competitive.

A bid for an associated Skills Development Fund is being developed by all the local colleges with Cheshire College South and West leading the bid. The bid has themes around decarbonisation (training the trades), the creative and digital technologies and food sustainability.

4. Technical Skills

Members were asked to provide a steer on proposed work to establish a better understanding of the demand for technical skills across Cheshire and Warrington – in particular, to support the development of the Institute of Technology and the Skills Accelerator. In the subsequent discussion the following points were made:

- While digital skills are an integral part of many college courses, Members are concerned about the lack of interest from young people in digital T-levels and other digital specific courses – they queried whether we need a stronger focus on this issue?

- Digital is a very broad subject and there needs to be a focus on outcomes and opportunities with examples of learner journeys and salaries. Gender is also an issue in terms of the numbers of females acquiring higher level digital skills.
- We need to spend more time with students to understand why choices are being made - the Engagement Board might be able to help with this.

Members agreed the need for a task and finish group to explore these issues in more detail – working through the Digital Skills Partnership Board **ACTION NICOLA DUNBAR**

5. Skills Report and Associated Skills Action Plan

Kath Mackay noted that the Skills Report had been published on the LEP website and would be revisited regularly to monitor progress of the action plan (section 5 of the Skills Report) and develop the plan further as necessary.

An updated skills action plan was reviewed by Members who agreed that the updated action plan should be shared with Members for comment and update. **ACTION ALL MEMBERS**

Lucy Liang asked if there would be initiatives to open up training facilities to provide ‘tasters’ for courses and it was suggested that this might focus on the Local Growth Fund projects that the Employers’ Skills and Education Board had approved and were now sponsoring.

Sarah Hopkinson commented that the details in the skills action plan were helpful and provided a good balance between a strategic overview and the need to understand sufficient details of delivery.

6. Jobs Opportunities Portal

Sarah Williams updated Members on the outcome of the Performance and Investment Committee meeting on 28 April where they had agreed a three-month extension of funding for the Portal but before further funding was agreed wanted more evidence of the value added by the Portal – particularly to individual job seekers.

Sarah shared the proposals for monitoring the impact and added value of the Portal over the next three months and Members stressed the need to get feedback from employers about how the Portal had helped them to fill vacancies. **ACTION SARAH WILLIAMS**

7. Local Growth Fund update

Sarah Williams shared slides showing the progress of each investment project in terms of delivering outputs. Members have also provided feedback on the projects they are sponsoring. Some concern was expressed at the delays in the Youth Federation project going live as well as delays in the University of Chester project.

Dhesi reported that there was concern amongst some of the colleges that the amount of reporting was too high and disproportionate to the level of funding. It was noted that reporting requirements would be eased as projects started to deliver outputs and that the definitions of some outputs had been revised to make reporting easier and more consistent.

8. Note of last meeting on 21 April

The note of the last meeting was agreed and the action list reviewed.

9. Date of next meeting is 16th June

PLEASE NOTE - the meeting has been extended to include a show case for the Local Growth Fund projects.

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

- *Kath Mackay - Chair
 - Sarah Hopkinson (Engie)
 - Dhesi (Cheshire College South and West – representing the training providers)
 - *Lucy Liang (AUE Ltd)
 - Paul Colman (South Cheshire Chamber)
 - Kurt Allman (University of Chester)
 - *Eleanor Blackburn (Warrington Borough Council)
 - Kim Hardman (Astra Zeneca)
 - *Clare Latham (Cheshire West and Chester)
 - Nicola Johnson (Bentley Motors)
 - *Cllr James Nicholas (Cheshire East Council)
 - Nicola Merriman (National Skills Academy Nuclear)
 - *Phil Atkinson (Daresbury)
 - Gemma Betteridge (representing Nicola Johnson, Bentley Motors)
 - Pat Jackson (LEP)
- *With voting rights

Apologies

- *Nicola Dunbar (Deputy Chair)
- Philip Cox (LEP)
- *Bill Carr (Carpe Diem)
- Maggie Chen
- Louise Higgins (United Utilities)
- Paul Kelly (BAE Systems)
- Martin Wood (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy) – observer

Also attending

- Trevor Langston, Sarah Williams and David Brennan for specific agenda items

Papers copied to:

- Trevor Brocklebank (Deputy Chair of LEP)
- Jamie Zucker (DfE)
- Clare Cassidy (DfE)
- Mike McLoughlin (DfE)
- Peter Skates (Cheshire East Council)
- Maud Duthie (University of Chester)
- Chris Koral (University of Chester)
- Nicola Said (LEP)
- Joe Manning (LEP)
- Andy Devaney (LEP)
- Sarah Williams and Trevor Langston (LEP)