

Engagement Board 2020 Review



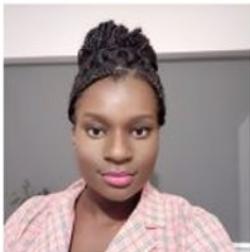
Ryan Burke



Maggie Chen



Connor Diskin



Yulanda Duff



Katie McConnell



Joe Toward

Introduction

In June 2020, a new board within the Cheshire and Warrington Enterprise Partnership was founded. This board was composed of 18-27 year olds from a wide array of backgrounds across the sub-region. The purpose of this board was to offer a unique perspective to the LEP, and get involved in other initiatives with the ultimate goal to improve the lives of young people, now and in the future. Individuals were interviewed and seven chosen who reflected our community and who were committed and enthusiastic towards making Cheshire and Warrington a great place for people.

- Chair: Joe Toward, Business Development Executive, Cirrus
- Deputy Chair: Maggie Chen, CEO, Girls in Charge, OxICE, and shutup.dance.
- Ryan Burke, Young Entrepreneur, Designer and Model
- Connor Diskin, Entrepreneur, electronic engineer, RBL branch vice-chairman
- Yulanda Duff, Senior Project Consultant, CEO The Millennial Introvert Lifestyle
- Katie McConnell, Research & Development Scientist
- Cameron Turpin, BTL Investment Property Sourcer/Property Development [left in November 2020]

This report reflects on the first 6 months of this board, the challenges faced, and the aspirations for the future.

Overview

The first official meeting of the new board took place in April 2020 over video mere months into what would become the biggest health crisis of a generation. Despite not being able to meet in person, we have managed to create a strong team, engage in stimulating discussion regarding the challenges faced by young people today, and brainstorm our ideas and solutions.

It was in our first meeting that we began to consider the purpose of our group. This led us to reconsider the title under which we operated, the Youth Board. As we discussed the issues facing young people, age was not the factor that defined the struggle. Youth was not so much an identity but a label, given to millions of people facing profoundly different challenges depending on race, age, education and income. The more we discussed, the more we felt the key responsibility was to reach out and represent those in difficulty. After a lengthy consultation process, the 'Youth Board' was renamed the 'Engagement Board'.

In May, we joined sub-boards and sub-committees of the LEP. One member on each board to understand the issues facing that sector, and to offer an intergenerational perspective. While not experts, this was a hugely positive experience for each one of us and enabled engagement in high-level discussion.

Strategy Programme Board - Connor Diskin

Employers, Skills and Education Board - Maggie Chen

Growth Corridors Boards - Science and Enterprise - Katie McConnell

Performance and Investment - Joe Toward

Sustainability and Inclusivity Commission - Ryan Burke

Local Transport Board - Formerly Cameron, now vacant

Digital Connectivity Board - Joe Toward as Interim

Business Growth - Yulanda Duff

Over the course of the following months, the members of the Engagement board became involved with different projects within the LEP. Joe Toward and Yulanda Duff joined the Pledge as Enterprise advisors, helping to advise young people on career and skills development. Yulanda also modelled for Marketing Cheshire for the #simplepleasureschester campaign. Joe Toward and Connor Diskin have been working with Marketing Cheshire to review the new LEP website. And Maggie Chen took part in the LEP's Economic Summit AGM in September as a panellist.

In addition, the Engagement Board was keen to connect with other relevant and related groups in the area and we spoke at length with the newly established Chester Zoo Youth Board and Warrington Youth Cabinet. From these conversations, we learnt that each organisation had very different governance structures. The Chair of the Chester Zoo Youth Board was selected by the main board, and an executive attends all meetings. Warrington Youth Cabinet was founded by its members, and due to an energetic recruitment campaign, had over 60 members at the time of our meeting. This organisation had formed a complex hierarchy and elected officers to focus on various social and economic issues. A common theme in our conversations about local and private authorities was a lack of strong representation and to some extent, perspective, on factors pertaining to age and race.

Challenges

Without a doubt, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has placed an unimaginable strain on the economic, social and political infrastructure of Cheshire and Warrington during 2020.

As with recessions before it, one of the most harshly affected groups has been young people. This impact is not just felt during a downturn, but is likely to have life-long ramifications on productivity and economic output of a region. Programmes such as Accelerate and the Pledge have offered opportunities to those entering the workforce, however roles in schools such as Enterprise Advisors have understandably faced limitations in the degree of contact. Many of the students and apprentices that needed the support most were inaccessible and subject to uncertainty about their future. As Enterprise Advisors with the Pledge, Joe and Yulanda did not have the opportunity to enter schools and support the Enterprise teams.

Before the Youth Board was even established, much of the work of the nation had shifted to prioritise safety and minimise risk. During our initial meetings, it was feared that there would be challenges in bringing together a team that would not have the luxury of being able to meet in person. However, we were well positioned to embrace a digital switch and were able to engage in meaningful discussion and debate, bandwidth allowing.

Unfortunately, Cameron Turpin left the Engagement Board in October. Cameron offered excellent insight into his profession and supported the team, including the creation of the EB's Terms of Reference, and his departure was only due to mounting work pressure. For young professionals, taking two, and often more, hours out of the working day is often not feasible due to a lack of control in professional scheduling. With the mounting pressures of work in an increasingly competitive workplace, we have all at some point found it difficult to attend our sub committee meetings. Hence, we have found scheduling our own board meeting on Monday evenings the only method to ensure fair and equal attendance.

As mentioned numerous times through the C&W LEP 2019-2020 Annual Report and Strategic Economic Plan, inclusivity plays a central role in the values and strengths of Cheshire and Warrington. We have identified a lack of geographic and economic diversity in our board, and have sought to rectify this by focusing recruitment on young people from East Cheshire, around Congleton and Macclesfield, and by targeting those in disadvantaged socio-economic groups. During this recruitment drive across the LEP, we will also encourage the organisation as a whole to reflect on their inclusivity and the communities they represent.

Future

Looking to the year ahead, the Engagement Board has many aspirations and ideas for how to harness our enthusiasm and drive into making a meaningful impact for young people across the region.

One aspiration for the board is to host a Youth Summit across Cheshire and Warrington – a flagship conference where youth leaders and organisations across Cheshire and Warrington can come together for a series of talks, roundtables and networking. This will allow young people to be inspired, share ideas and forge meaningful business connections across the region. Due to the current climate, the first iteration of this summit may be run digitally during the summer over 2-3 days. Notable young people and local leaders would be invited to present short talks and host discussion sessions. Funding for such a summit would require support and engagement from the local authority, the LEP, and private sponsors. In order to maximise engagement and attendance at the summit, we hope to offer support to aspiring future leaders through training initiatives, angel investment, and networking opportunities.

Additionally, we would like to recruit further members to the Engagement Board (EB). This has been identified by the LEP, but it is unclear how the EB is able to engage with the recruitment process. The initial recruitment for the EB in 2020 had limited reach, as identified by how each of the current members came to apply for the role. We would be keen to drive that recruitment process, and work collaborative with the main board during candidate interviews. Furthermore, we are keen to define a clear onboarding process for new Engagement Board members. This will require the role and positions on the board to be clearly defined.

A further area we want to continue to champion is diversity and equality. Inclusion is a key part of the LEP's future vision and therefore it is vital that the Board leads by example. This an area that the EB are passionate about and we are keen to keep driving this conversation forward in 2021.

Over the next six months, the Engagement Board needs to solidify its presence, value and merit significantly. We need to find a way to effectively engage with the sub-boards we have each been assigned in a way that fits more flexibly with our full-time jobs and perhaps reevaluate our rotations. We would like to continue our collaboration with Marketing Cheshire and The Pledge as we believe we can offer invaluable support to those areas. To enable us to achieve these goals, we need a high -level understanding of the main board's pipeline of concerns over the coming months. This will allow us to make a more meaningful contribution within the LEP.

Conclusion

While it has been an exciting start to the Engagement board, there has been limitations to the speed of establishing ourselves in a rapidly changing world. The ramifications of the current crisis has been felt throughout the country, and young people are set to face challenges due to missed education, lack of jobs and a recession that will have permanent knock-on effects. As a sub-board in the Cheshire and Warrington Enterprise Partnership, it is our privilege to be in a position where we can offer advice and support to those most in need. We will continue to work for our friends, colleagues and young people in our subregion by supporting the LEP, and promoting projects that minimise damage caused by the recession and strengthen opportunity for young people. We are growing, and in 2021, we hope to make Cheshire and Warrington truly the healthiest, most inclusive, most sustainable, and fast growing economy in the United Kingdom.