

Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board

Council Chamber, County Hall, Worcester

Wednesday, 6 September 2023, 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Tom Wells (Chairman), Cllr James Stanley (Vice Chairman),
Cllr Alastair Adams, Cllr Brandon Clayton, Cllr Matt Dormer, Cllr Steve Mackay,
Cllr Shirley Webb and Cllr Richard Udall

Also attended:

Cllr Marjory Bisset, Worcester City Council
Cllr Ben Hurdman, Wychavon District Council
Paul Walker, Chairman, Worcestershire Local Enterprise Partnership (WLEP)
Gary Woodman, Chief Executive WLEP
Luke Willetts, Deputy Chief Executive, WLEP

Steph Simcox, Deputy Chief Finance Officer
Samantha Morris, Interim Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Manager
Emma James, Overview and Scrutiny Officer

Available Papers

The members had before them:

- A. The Agenda papers (previously circulated);
- B. The Minutes of the Meeting held on 26 July 2023 (previously circulated).

(Copies of document A will be attached to the signed Minutes).

1334 Apologies and Welcome

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and paid tribute to Cllr Andy Roberts who had recently passed away following a short illness. The Chairman invited everyone present to stand for a minute's silence in Andy's memory.

Apologies were received from Board Members Cllr Emma Stokes and Tim Reid, as well as from Councillor Simon Geraghty (Leader of Worcestershire County Council and Vice Chairman of the Worcestershire Local Enterprise Partnership (WLEP) Executive Board.

1335 Declaration of Interest and of any Party Whip

Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board Wednesday, 6 September 2023
Date of Issue: 22 September 2023

Cllr Tom Wells, Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Performance Board (OSPB), declared an interest as he was the Representative for South Worcestershire Local Authorities on the WLEP Board. Cllr Wells joined the witnesses from the WLEP to be available to respond to questions as appropriate.

Cllr James Stanley, Vice-Chairman Chaired Item 5 (WLEP Annual Report 2022/23).

Cllr Matt Dormer advised the Board that he was a substitute member of the WLEP Board (for Redditch Borough Council), although he believed he had only attended one meeting.

1336 Public Participation

None.

1337 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 26 July 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

1338 Worcestershire Local Enterprise Partnership (WLEP) Annual Report (2022/23)

In attendance for this item were:

Worcestershire Local Enterprise Partnership (WLEP)

Paul Walker, Chair

Gary Woodman, Chief Executive

Luke Willetts, Deputy Chief Executive Officer

Steph Simcox, S151 Officer

Witnesses

Cllr Tom Wells, WLEP Representative for South Worcestershire Local Authorities, and Leader of Malvern Hills District Council

Cllr Ben Hurdman, Vice Chairman of Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Wychavon District Council

Cllr Marjory Bisset, Joint Leader of Worcester City Council

The Vice Chairman Cllr James Stanley chaired this Agenda Item and introduced the guests from the Worcestershire Local Enterprise Partnership (WLEP), and from the District Councils.

The WLEP Chief Executive (CE) summarised the main points from the Agenda report. LEPs had existed for some time and in Worcestershire since 2011. The WLEP Strategic Plan set out key performance indicators up to 2025 and the refreshed economic strategy (the Plan for Growth) extended to 2040, therefore provided a long-term economic view.

The WLEP was involved in a long list of the work, which focused around the three themes of innovation, business environment and skills and these areas encapsulated much of the partnership's work.

The Government's policy on LEPs was changing and in August it had confirmed that core funding would be withdrawn from LEPs and functions transferred to upper tier local authorities (Worcestershire County Council for the WLEP) from April 2024. However in Worcestershire, the good relationships in place meant that the way forward would be informed by discussion with partners and stakeholders. Importantly, it was highlighted that the business community valued the support and engagement provided rather than the actual source of funding.

There had been several changes to the WLEP Board including the new Chair.

The Chairman commented that the report was helpful in setting out the journey of the WLEP to date. Questions were invited and the following main points were made:

- Several members had questions about the future of WLEP and how it would work, and the WLEP CE explained that the letter from the Government on 4 August (included at Appendix 1) referred to further guidance but this had not yet been received. The technical guidance already published stated that LEP functions would move to upper tier authorities although LEPs may choose to continue to operate and if upper tier local authorities continued using LEPs as a vehicle to continue delivery of these core functions, they were free to do so. The Government would therefore provide some revenue funding to support local authorities from 2024/25 to maintain delivery of functions and guidance would follow. The WLEP Board wanted to keep the current structure together by use of various funding sources to maintain the partnership structure and this was supported by the Council.
- The WLEP Chair believed that improved relationships between local government and businesses was a direct result of the WLEP and it was therefore vital to sustain the partnerships and dialogue, regardless of the form it took, in order to continue to help the sector to grow.
- The WLEP Chair also explained that the success of LEPs across the country had varied which he felt had prompted the Government's review, but in Worcestershire there was no question that the WLEP had achieved the objective of building relationships between businesses and local government – further clarity about the future direction was awaited but he remained motivated to continue the WLEP's work over the next two or so years pending commitment to continue funding.
- In terms of what other areas were doing, the WLEP was involved in various clusters and met regularly with the West Midlands LEPs and was involved with the national LEP network. The Coventry and Warwickshire LEP and the Black Country LEP had taken early decisions to wind up from March 2023, although Coventry and Warwickshire had retained a growth hub with a commercial arm. Within Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire there was a mood to continue the model.

- Assuming that funding was provided for 2024/25, a Board member asked what the 'break even' point was for the WLEP to continue, and the CE pointed out that the WLEP had always scaled its model on available funding and operated a balanced budget. Confirmation of funding was not untypical at this point in the year and the staff team was flexible, although the situation was more challenging.
- The S151 Officer for WLEP advised that over the past three years the WLEP had operated from contributions of £150,000 across the seven county and district council partners. The WLEP Board had agreed it wanted to continue in its current form until 2024/25 and was able to use its reserves. Government funding was not yet known but was estimated to be around £200,000 and if less, there was sufficient reserves to be able to continue at least until the end of 2024/25.
- A Board member suggested that delivery of WLEP projects was actually achieved by the District Councils, and asked what would change if there were no WLEP. The WLEP Chair explained that before taking on his new role he had sought reassurance about the performance and funding of the WLEP and he believed the business community had benefitted by the collective strategic oversight at county level, combined with the District Councils' awareness of specific needs and challenges. An overarching strategic view was important to try and overcome cross-cutting issues.
- In response to a request for further clarification the WLEP Chair said there was no way of knowing whether projects would continue without the role of the WLEP, as it would depend on how the District Councils and the County Council worked; there would still need to be structures and mechanisms to ensure a plan was in place.
- Comments were invited from the District Council representatives present, and the representative for South Worcestershire Local Authorities (Cllr Tom Wells) explained he was new to the WLEP and believed there was a need for a co-ordinated voice to champion Worcestershire, rather than districts working in isolation, since the actions of one impacted on others. Relations between District Councils and the WLEP could be improved, but he believed there was a case for the WLEP to continue – however it would need to think carefully about aims and objectives and a relationship with the West Midlands Combined Authority would be helpful around work and leisure.
- The Worcester City Council representative explained she was also new to the work of the WLEP and agreed with Cllr Well's comments, since the District Councils' roles were not self-contained, however the way forward with funding after the next two years would remain to be seen.
- The Chairman observed that a key word used during the discussion was 'overview', as he felt there was a patchwork of areas within Worcestershire.
- A Board member commented that having been initially sceptical about LEPs was impressed by the WLEP's engagement with businesses to identify needs, build plans and enable grants, which had helped bring in critical money and engagement. The WLEP had also been valuable in coordinating the ambitious vision of individuals.
- The Chair of the WLEP was asked how he planned to continue engagement with businesses, and in response explained about the

WLEPS's renewed focus to maximise resources to direct appropriate support to Worcestershire's businesses which varied according to their type and size. WLEP resources were limited therefore the District Councils had a fundamental role in maintaining insight from businesses in their area and working together with the WLEP.

- The WLEP Deputy CEO advised there was a return to networking events which had been very successful pre-pandemic, now scheduled each quarter around a particular theme, and as engagement tools. The WLEP team had been added to, in order target businesses with the most potential to expand and grow, involving phone conversations and visits. Engagement with businesses was captured and District Councils were provided with quarterly reports.
- The WLEP Chair commented that Worcestershire had around 30,000 businesses, and the primary objective was business growth as well as employment and raising Gross Value Added (GVA). Therefore it would be important to coordinate work with the Districts to ensure resources and advice were focused and more tailored to business need, according to size and type; it was the value of services to support businesses which was important.
- When asked what the WLEP was doing to promote business support to Worcestershire's smallest businesses, such as those run from home, it was explained that resources did not extend to having contact with every individual business, and while the Growth Hub made around 1000 to 1500 individual engagements each year, there were 30,000 businesses across the county – at the very least the aim was for every business to receive an email so they knew where to get support.
- In response to a members' concern expressed about the lack of facilities in Worcestershire to support home based businesses to grow, for example through a co-operative model of support for HR and payroll, the WLEP representatives acknowledged that partners such as the Federation for Small Businesses could work better together, and the Deputy CEO offered to discuss opportunities outside of the meeting.
- The Board was advised that the Business Improvement Districts would be better placed to respond to questions about the particular challenges faced by the night-time economy in city centres.
- A Board member raised the crisis in the agricultural sector and asked what was being done to address the skills gap and was advised that the WLEP had good dialogue with the National Farmers Union and had done some work with particular areas such as Pershore, but acknowledged the numbers were very small, and a big issue was uptake of technology.
- The WLEP Chief Executive highlighted that whilst the Board was preparing for changes, the neutral role of the WLEP was important.
- When asked about capacity to support local businesses to access national funding programmes, which could be very time consuming, the Board was advised that part of this work involved bringing consortiums together for joint bids, and applications were monitored. Success was variable and sometimes businesses found they could not work together or the paperwork was off putting.

- Access to capital was a key obstacle for business expansion and the WLEP was about to hold its first event for those wanting to invest in business innovation, which was an example of its fundamental role.
- The Worcester City Council representative believed that the general focus should be on standalone businesses, to keep the money generated within Worcestershire and asked how this was prioritised. The WLEP representatives advised that there was lots of thought given to prioritisation including finance, and marketing depending on the type of support needed. Of all businesses in Worcestershire, only a small number employed more than 250 staff, and whilst these were supported by the WLEP, their growth would be much more affected by other elements within the United Kingdom and overseas.
- A Board member continued to question the value of the WLEP, which he felt to have been more led by politics than by business need. He felt the WLEP had less value for north Worcestershire districts which had access to the West Midlands Combined Authority, whereas there was potentially more value for districts in south Worcestershire – although he admired the WLEP Board staff and supported the Growth Hub and work to address skills gaps.
- A Board member suggested it would be helpful to highlight the main themes of the meeting to the Council’s Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Economy and Infrastructure.

In summing up, the Chairman supported the work of the WLEP but acknowledged the range of views, some of which it had not been possible to resolve at this meeting. He thanked everyone for a stimulating discussion and suggested that working together as a team would be important, and that the move towards 2023/24 gave further opportunity to enhance some of the relations involved.

1339 Scrutiny Chairmen (and Lead Member) Update, Work Programme and Cabinet Forward Plan

Cllr Tom Wells took the Chair.

Member Updates

The Chairman explained that updates from Scrutiny Chairmen and the Lead member for Crime and Disorder would not be required since no meetings had taken place during August.

There were no Scrutiny Task Groups currently and whilst scrutiny officer resources were limited, there was some scope, therefore the Chairman invited suggestions which would then be discussed at the Board’s October meeting.

The Chairman invited suggestion for possible Task Group’s. Initial discussion by Board members identified the topics of:

Challenges for those with sight loss in accessing council services – a recent walkabout of Worcester city centre with the organisation Sight Concern had

prompted questions about general access to services and Councils' engagement with Sight Concern.

West Mercia Police staff morale

Traffic calming – to review the Council's current policy including use of chicanes and speed bumps which had success in other countries, and use of 20 mph speed limits in residential areas.

It was agreed that an email would be sent to all councillors from the OSPB Chairman and Vice-Chairman to invite suggestions for the next scrutiny task group.

Scrutiny Chairmen were also asked to seek suggestions from Panel and Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee members, and a reminder of the criteria used to determine a topic's suitability for scrutiny, would be circulated.

Work Programme

The next Board meeting would be the annual crime and disorder meeting.

It was confirmed that Royal Mail and post offices had been added to the Work Programme for the Economy Overview and Scrutiny (O&S) Panel.

Regarding scrutiny of the Budget 2024/25, Board members were reminded of the areas for early budget scrutiny proposed by the Leader during his discussion with the Board in July, which Scrutiny Officers were now scheduling for September (December for home to school transport) with follow-up as required:

- Cost pressures relating to Adult and Children's Social Care placements.
- Home to school transport.
- Contract and pay inflation.

The Chairman of the Environment O&S Panel reported that his Panel had already written to the relevant Cabinet Member/s with Responsibility with comments around funding suggestions, and encouraged other Board members to do the same.

The Chairman thanked everyone for attending the meeting.

The meeting ended at 11.50 am

Chairman