

Minutes of the Economy Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Council Chamber, County Hall, Worcester

Wednesday, 7 June 2023, 10.00 am

Present:

Cllr Matt Dormer (Chairman), Cllr Karen Hanks (Vice Chairman),
Cllr Martin Allen, Cllr Allah Ditta and Cllr Tony Muir

Also attended:

Gary Woodman, Assistant Director, Economy
Samantha Morris, Interim Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Manager
Jo Weston, 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 27 March 2023 (previously circulated).

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

37 Apologies and Welcome

Apologies were received from Councillors Mel Allcott, Bob Brookes, Ian Hardiman and Craig Warhurst.

38 Declarations of Interest and of any Party Whip

None.

39 Public Participation

None.

40 Confirmation of the Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 27 March 2023 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

Worcestershire's Workforce Skills including the Role of Colleges

The Interim Assistant Director of Economy summarised the Agenda Report and highlighted key points. Worcestershire had 3 Further Education (FE) colleges, 1 Higher Education (HE) University and several training providers. FE and HE institutions were generalist, to reflect the County's economic needs, and no longer provided A Level qualifications. The training providers were more specialist, supporting the County's high level of engineering and the growth of digital skills.

The qualification level of Worcestershire residents was broadly in line with England figures. 43% of residents had a Level 4+ qualification with the same number in England, however, Redditch had a higher proportion of no qualifications than the County and England.

Adult education and training achievements were mainly in 2 categories, health, public services and care and preparation for life and work. Figures showed slight growth in areas such as engineering and health, demonstrating the economic importance of these sectors for the County. Construction training had experienced significant challenges in recruitment of tutors, however, the expectation was that the figures would recover in future years. HE qualifiers in subjects allied to medicine, biological sciences, social sciences and education were far greater than England due to University of Worcester specialising in these subject areas.

The majority of Worcestershire employers, similar to employers across England, provided some training, mainly job specific training, health and safety and induction for new starters. A Local Skills Improvement Plan was in development by the Chamber of Commerce and due to be published in Summer 2023.

Job adverts remained above pre COVID-19 pandemic levels at around 6,000 at any one time and the highest levels of employment were in health, manufacturing and retail. Unemployment claimant count was 3.1% in April 2023, below the national rate of 3.9% and significantly below the national rate of 5.1%.

Education funding was complex and at times inflexible. Apprenticeships were often challenging to deliver for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and FE Government funding focussed on capital equipment rather than curriculum development. In addition, a minimum number of learners was needed to make a course viable and it was noted that all courses now had some digital content.

The population profile of Worcestershire showed a higher proportion of residents over 50 than nationally, resulting in a lower proportion of working age population compared to the England average. Workforce planning and development was key to business continuity.

Levels of deprivation were generally below average, although there were some pockets of deprivation in Worcester, Redditch and Wyre Forest.

The role of the Council was to work with Worcestershire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) to support the skills strategy and look at the needs of employers both now and in the future. Relationships with stakeholders, including FE providers, employers and schools were key.

The Chairman invited questions and the in the ensuing discussion, the following main points were made:

- In relation to the proportion of neighbourhoods in the 10% most deprived nationally, by District, it was clarified that Bromsgrove had none, in either income, employment nor education, skills and training. Members were interested in learning more and it was agreed to provide a detailed breakdown for each of the Districts
- There was no longer a FE College in Malvern, with students advised that alternative provision was available. However, transport to other provisions out of area was of concern and the Assistant Director agreed to clarify whether a travel subsidy was available. The Council and Malvern Hills District Council were working together to investigate alternatives
- When asked how high skilled companies could be attracted to the County and whether training providers were pushing skills forward, it was reported that when benchmarking with neighbouring authorities, such as Warwickshire, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire, Worcestershire was in the centre. In addition, conversations would be had with companies locating to the County on their skills needs and what their training and business plans involved
- The relationship between the Council and training providers was evolving. The training landscape was also evolving, with most students undertaking some study online rather than all in person. It was noted that parents continued to have influence in discussions over higher level qualifications. Furthermore, funding mechanisms were complex, for example with the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy
- With reference to the adult education and training achievements by sector in 2021/22, a Member asked about Preparation for Life and Work. It was reported that dedicated courses were taught in areas of deprivation nationally and locally, they were centred in Redditch and Worcester
- In relation to training for manufacturing industries, it was clarified that Heart of Worcestershire College (Bromsgrove Campus) was a FE provider and MGTS, an independent provider of apprenticeships and training, ran courses in Redditch
- The Panel agreed that there should not be any education deprivation in Worcestershire, with the Assistant Director of Economy highlighting that education colleagues were better placed to respond. The Council was acutely aware of pockets of deprivation, however, nationally, areas of higher urban deprivation were greater supported
- There was a whole County approach to careers information, advice and guidance, however, individual schools and colleges were responsible for allocating resources and it was known that provision across the County was not equal. The Careers and Enterprise Company

Programme, supported by Worcestershire LEP and delivered by the Council was an exemplar nationally for its high levels of employer engagement and experiences. When asked whether it was delivering, the Panel learned that activity was reported and regulated via the education Ofsted reports. It was agreed to provide the Panel with data on young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)

- The Chairman referred to a 'Jobs Fayre' programme in Redditch, where business leaders had agreed to visit local schools to promote future opportunities and apprenticeships. When asked whether the Council would support such a venture, the Assistant Director advised that as some schools already organised such events, the Council would not want to take it from them, however, was always looking to build relationships with both employers and schools. Some Members also referenced activity that they were aware of in their local areas, including employers working with schools with activities such as mock interviews and employment skills
- The Panel agreed to wait until after the Redditch events to determine whether the approach was one which they would support in each of the District Council areas, however in the meantime, the Assistant Director agreed to discuss with the Chamber of Commerce. Members were encouraged to engage with their local schools and attend appropriate events. It was agreed to share details of the Primary Schools STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) Challenge final.

42 Work Programme

No further Items were added to the Work Programme.

The meeting ended at 10.50 am

Chairman