

**DRAFT MINUTES OF A MEETING OF THE SKILLS, EDUCATION & EMPLOYMENT (SEE)
STRATEGY GROUP HELD ON 25th November 2020**

PRESENT:

Name	Organisation
Becky Beechan	Ways into Work representing VCS
Mark Browne (MB)	West Berkshire Council representing Berkshire Local Authorities
Joanne Harper (JH)	Activate Learning Education Trust representing Berkshire secondary schools
Sue Taylor (ST)	CLEO representing the Berkshire Training Provider Network
Dom Unsworth (DU)	Resource Productions – employer representative (Acting Chair)
Paul Newman (PN)	Activate Learning representing FE
Sarah Atkinson (SA)	Microfocus – employer representative
Lucy Bowman (LB)	Job Centre Plus/DWP
Nicola Penfound (NP)	Bayer – employer representative
Matt Garvey (MG)	West Berkshire Training Consortium (items 3 - 6) representing Private Training Providers
Nigel Horton Baker (NHB)	Reading UK CIC (Curious Lounge) (item 2 only)
Oliver Chapman (OC)	Hatch Regeneris (item 2 only)

STAFF MEMBERS:

Joanna Birrell (JB)	Thames Valley Berkshire LEP
Alison Webster (AW)	Thames Valley Berkshire LEP
Susan Jones (SJ)	Thames Valley Berkshire LEP (observer)

APOLOGIES:

Imelda Goldsboro (IG)	Job Centre Plus/DWP
Katharine Horler (KH)	Adviza (Chair)
Darren Browne (DB)	University of Reading representing HE
Kevin McDaniel (KM)	Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead representing Berkshire

1. Welcome and apologies

DU welcomed everyone to the meeting and **noted** the apologies.

2. Skills Capital Investments – Getting Building Fund

JB noted that Group members had declared in advance whether they had a conflict of interest in one or more applications. This had previously been recognised as an exceptional circumstance by the then Chair of the LEP's Nominations & Governance Committee, who advised the following process for the assessment of expressions of interest (EoI) in Local Growth Funds (LGF) for skills capital projects:

- all members to:

- declare their conflict of interest and remain in the meeting or
- declare their conflict of interest and leave the meeting for that item of business
- this information has been recorded - see Appendix 1 – and will be available to the LEP Board when it comes to determine the award of GBF at the December 2020 Board meeting. This will allow directors to make an informed judgement as to whether any recommendations have been skewed in any way by any of the interests declared.

SJ advised the SAP that five applications had been invited to submit a full business case, for independent assessment by Hatch Regeneris. OC outlined HR's assessment of the five applications. It was **agreed** to recommend to the Board the following

- Activate Learning – Bracknell Pharma and Life Sciences Lab – Application to be approved
- Activate learning – Bracknell Care Skills Training Centre – Application to be approved
- Berks. College of Agriculture –Hybrid and Electric Vehicle Training Centre – Application to be approved
- Newbury College – Renewable Resources Training Facility - Conditional approval subject to provision of further detail on how the college will stimulate demand for this provision.
- Slough Borough Council – Future Skills Hub - Conditional approval subject to the following:
 - Slough Borough Council committing to covering any shortfall in revenue funding to cover the rent and salary for the Hub Coordinator for three years
 - Confirmation of the DWP grant for the first year (£50k with roll over allocation for 2 subsequent years). Post meeting update – DWP Grant has been awarded for the first year
 - Details of the partnership arrangements to ensure engagement from employers
 - Details of how the additionality for HE provision will be achieved
 - A vision for the project after the initial 3 years of guaranteed revenue funding

Skills Capital Project – Curious Lounge

NHB provided an update to the meeting to provide context for a request for revenue funding to support the Curious Lounge.

TVB LEP awarded £261,250 of Local Growth Funds (LGF) to Reading Borough Council (RBC) for the Reading Digital Skills Hub - The Curious Lounge in September 2019. RBC has been delivering this project through its New Directions College, in partnership with Connect TVT and Reading UK CIC. The Curious Lounge opened in November 2019. Prior to the first lockdown in March, the Curious Lounge was meeting its financial projections and on track for delivering against the outputs agreed for the LGF investment.

In March 2020, the LEP became aware that there was a very real threat that the Curious Lounge would not be able to meet its ongoing financial commitments, putting its future into jeopardy as a result of the impact of Covid19 and the national lockdown. A case for Rate Relief was considered by the RBC Economy sub-group on the 9th April but it was determined that the Curious Lounge did not qualify for rate relief under the terms of the Government-funded scheme and that there are no flexibilities which could be applied locally. At that point the LEP provided a £15k grant to allow the CL to remain operational. However, the continued restrictions have impacted on the revenue for the CL and there is a real risk that it will close in December

2020.

All partners in the scheme (RBC, Connect TVT and New Directions) have identified that losing this resource at a point in time where need and therefore demand is anticipated to intensify post lockdown would seem counter-intuitive and out of step with the area's pledge to support the Business Community; and would also be lost skills capital investment by the LEP.

NHB outlined that if revenue support from the LEP is not available, the Curious Lounge will have no option but to close (possibly as soon as at the end of December 2020) and the original capital grant would have to be written off. The CL Management Board is seeking support for a request for additional revenue funding from the LEP to the Curious Lounge. This could be in the form of a grant or a loan.

1. The Curious Lounge partnership is requesting:

- a. Access to revenue funding (grant or loan) of £40k revenue funding spread over the next 4 months to 31 March 2021 plus an option for a further £10k top up in summer 2021 if needed
- b. Assistance in finding a major corporate business champion (sector relevant) to provide some mentoring support and to help give a business perspective and a sector insight and contacts.
- c. Assistance in accessing business support and advice to help develop their business plan, fine tune marketing and to develop management style and governance as well as ways of pivoting the business within the objectives it was set up for.

2. In return, the CL Team is committed to

- d. Making this project a success and sustainable
- e. If the decision is to offer a loan, seeking to repay the gap funding if possible, by the end of 2022
- f. Welcoming the direct involvement of the LEP to strengthen the relationship with the partnership (Reading UK and New Directions).
- g. Providing a full review and report to the TVBLEP in May 2021 to ensure progress has been made against the points made in this report and plans are fully up to date for the coming year.

The SAP noted that whilst it was keen to protect the initial skills capital investment there must be conditions on any additional funding and the business plan, revised cashflow forecast and roadmap would need to be ratified by the SAP. It was agreed that the LEP Board would be asked to decide if additional funding should be made available to the Curious Lounge on the following basis

- a. The Curious Lounge be provided with a grant of £40k to be paid in four monthly instalments provided the following conditions are met (due consideration is given to changing the business to a registered charity or CIC which would enable it to access other forms of funding
- b. CL to provide
 1. a business plan for how they intend to increase sales/diversify the business model so

that it is less reliant on memberships and identifies other sources of income.

2. a revised cashflow forecast based on the revised business plan
3. A roadmap of planned digital training over the next 12 months to be outlined identifying expected outcomes

3. Berkshire Opportunities

JB provided an update on the Berkshire Opportunities Portal and advised that Gasp had been appointed the Communications Agency to raise the profile of the portal. A steering group has been established with members representing the following organisations

- Local Authorities
- the CEC
- FE Colleges
- DWP

4 DWP update

LB provided the following update from DWP on the Kickstart programme

The Kickstart Scheme provides funding to create new job placements for 16-to-24-year olds on Universal Credit who are at risk of long-term unemployment. Employers of all sizes can apply for funding which covers:

- 100% of the [National Minimum Wage](#) (or the [National Living Wage](#)) depending on the age of the participant) for 25 hours per week for a total of 6 months
- associated [employer National Insurance contributions](#)
- employer minimum automatic enrolment contributions

Employers can spread the start date of the job placements up until the end of December 2021.

A Kickstart Scheme application must be for a minimum of 30 job placements. If a single employer cannot provide this many job placements, they can find a Kickstart gateway, such as a local authority, charity or trade body for help applying.

The local programme has had a very slow start with currently only 9 vacancies in Berkshire. LB advised that

- a lot of applications have failed
- there are a number of local gateway bids pending (PN advised that Activate had submitted 3 Gateway bids with 142 vacancies)

ST advised that the Surrey Chamber were acting as a gateway and had 400 vacancies pending. LB advised that Thames Valley Chamber had determined not to act as a gateway.

Action

JB to investigate the potential for the business membership organisations getting involved in Kickstart either as a gateway or by promoting the scheme to their members.

LB provided an overview of the HR1 data for Berkshire – the October showed that there had been 513 potential redundancies declared.

5 SEE Project Delivery Plan

The SAP noted the delivery plan.

Action

JB to work with DU/BB/SH to raise the profile of the Berkshire Community Grants programme to encourage more groups to access the funding.

6 ESF Reserve Fund

JB gave an update on the ESF reserve fund and the potential opportunity to support activities identified in the Recovery and Renewal Plan where it was unlikely that alternative funding sources could be identified.

Action

Whilst it was recognised that ESF funding was not without its challenges a subgroup of BB/KM/MB/MG agreed to investigate its potential and report back to the SAP by written procedure. JB to facilitate.

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