

Midlands Engine APPG – Skills Subgroup

Tuesday 20 April 2021, 14:00-15:00

Attendees:

Baroness Burt of Solihull (Liberal Democrat) – Subgroup Chair (LB)
Darren Henry MP (Conservative, Broxtowe) – APPG Co-Chair (DH)
Lord Ravensdale (Crossbench) – APPG Co-Chair (DR)
Tom Randall MP (Conservative, Gedling) (TR)
Khalid Mahmood MP (Labour, Birmingham Perry Barr) (KM)
Jane Stevenson MP (Conservative, Wolverhampton North East) (JS)
Baroness Verma (Conservative) (SV)
Taiwo Owatemi MP (Labour, Coventry North West) (TO)
Anne-Sophie Faivre, Office of Shaun Bailey MP (Conservative, West Bromwich West) (AF)
Hamish Mundell, Office of Mark Fletcher MP (Conservative, Bolsover) (HM)

Guests:

Scott Grindey, Senior Skills Researcher, Midlands Engine Observatory (SG)
Shane Chowen, Midlands Director, Association of Colleges (SC)

Apologies:

Lord Hunt of Kings Heath (Labour)
Pauline Latham MP (Conservative, Mid Derbyshire)
Mark Pawsey MP (Conservative, Rugby)
Lord Taylor of Holbeach (Conservative)

Secretariat:

Gayle Aughton, Midlands Engine (GA)
Tom Day, Midlands Engine (TD)

Minutes:

- 1) Welcome and introduction - LB
 - Introduction from LB – welcomed all participants and noted that DH will have to leave the meeting shortly in order to speak in the House of Commons.
 - LB introduced herself and the importance of skills in her background – both professionally and through her work as a parliamentarian.
 - Skills is quite probably the most important factor in the success of our region – Covid has been a huge factor, but skills is crucial in the recovery.
 - Our job this afternoon is to understand what is going on, what the practical challenges are on the ground, and then what we can do as a cross-party group to improve things.
 - Introduced SG and SC, and their backgrounds and areas of interests
- 2) Midlands Engine Observatory – SG
 - SG began with information on the overall skills picture in the Midlands, including updating on data which was released today, showing more positive trends than the Midlands Engine Observatory’s Independent Economic Review in April 2020 showed.
 - Focus needs to be on digital skills, workplace training, transition into the workplace.

- Pandemic has upended 'business as usual' for colleges, employers and independent training providers.
 - Over 2/3 of skills provision in the Midlands is public sector – with over 40% of the total delivered by FE Colleges.
 - Participation last year was down in all levels, except into Level 4+ - which increased. Suggesting that these are the skills needed by business.
 - Apprenticeship starts fell by 20% in the Midlands region during the pandemic, as opposed to 18% nationally.
 - Digital skills – polarisation in employment opportunities exists. 9 million people are currently unable to use the internet by themselves – 16% of the UK population. Another 7% are almost completely offline.
 - Most important sectors like retail, manufacturing and construction have much lower levels of digital take-up – they are in need of support.
 - Over the course of the pandemic, 1.3m unique job postings across the Midlands – employer demand up 24% in the last month, 7% in the last quarter, and 3% in the last year. Down 0.3% on the same period in 2019, pre-Covid.
 - Unsurprisingly, most prevalent in-demand occupations are nurses, care workers, cleaners, drivers – plus digital occupations (programming/software development)
- 3) Skills provider perspective – SC
- College picture in the Midlands is ever-changing picture.
 - SC gave an overview of the colleges in the Midlands – 29 General/Tertiary FE Colleges, 4 Sixth Form Colleges, 15 Specialist Colleges, 2 Agricultural and Horticultural Colleges, and 1 Designated Institution – residential adult education.
 - Combined, total number of college students in the Midlands roughly matches population in Coventry.
 - Young population (16-18) is increasing in every constituency, bar one, in the Midlands.
 - Colleges closed in March 2020 and switched immediately to online learning. SC gave a view of the student experience after this change.
 - Broadly, recovery in apprenticeships is matching the wider recovery. Good to see that the construction sector came straight back to apprenticeships etc.
 - 83% of colleges reported an increase in mental health referrals since Sep 2020 compared to Sep 2019.
 - 94% of colleges had students that had attempted suicide in the last year, between 1 and 44 students.
 - Students that have suffered the most in their learning this year have been those on more practical courses – engineering, motor vehicles, construction, hair and beauty.
 - Significant proportion of students are performing behind expectations, 75% of 16-18 year olds are 1-4 months behind.
- 4) Discussion – led by LB
- DR thanked the presenters for their presentations and asked how they linked in with Government's aims for levelling up, and achieving net zero. How can we manage that disruption to skills in construction/chemicals/manufacturing?

- SV also thanked the presenters. Noted that the problem for Leicester is the high population from immigrant families – and family skills are lower. How do we get investment in skills into places like Leicester? Leicester has lagged so far behind that the majority of jobs created are in the public sector – need to get the jobs in the private sector too. Similar problems in other cities across the Midlands too.
 - AF – passed on her experiences of going through the skills system in the Midlands. Took a long time to adapt school infrastructure to accommodate the digital skills transition. At the beginning of the pandemic, they had to start immediately teaching online. Interested in thoughts on how that kind of experience can be brought into less privileged areas.
 - SG gave his perspective on the online skills issue – provision of devices for online learning statistics includes mobiles – you need different metrics to understand who has iPads/computers.
 - SC addressed DR’s comments. In practice, need to be very clear about how those two ambitions, levelling up and net zero, can complement each other. Employers can have a really strong leadership role – manufacturing industry, digital industry, and technology sectors.
 - SC also noted that the Government’s decision to claw back £4m from Leicester College alone will have significant implications for the city in exactly the ways SV describes.
- 5) Next steps – led by LB.
- Proposed outcomes could be a set of draft parliamentary questions to be circulated around the attendees focusing on key issues for skills in the Midlands, as well as an application for a Westminster Hall debate. In addition, potential for a further meeting later in the year with Minister Gillian Keegan.
- 6) Thanks and close – LB
- LB invited DH to give some views on the skills picture. DH commented that the issues discussed today would be relevant for a huge number of MPs and Peers across the Midlands. Perhaps might need a part 2 to this session – and thanks to LB for organising and chairing.
 - LB commented that hugely important points had been made – not least the opportunity in manufacturing and low-carbon across the Midlands. Hopes that we can do some lobbying for some funding for equipment and for the things that we need.
 - Meeting closed