

Heart of SW LEP Board meeting

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Report title: Rural Productivity Commission

Report theme: LEP Board

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Purpose of the report

To update the LEP Board on the SW Rural Productivity Commission

Recommendations

To note the work underway and provide feedback on how this can drive best opportunity for our LEP and our priorities.

Background

The Gov't's Industrial Strategy Green Paper was very light on how improvements to productivity and prosperity could be achieved outside the traditional growth corridors / cities. Recognising the importance of prosperity for all is a core part of our LEP's vision – so rural growth, productivity and prosperity has to be addressed alongside urban growth.

At our instigation, the SW Rural Productivity Commission has been established and is now supported by four LEPs in the SW of England: HOTSWS LEP, Dorset LEP, Swindon & Wiltshire LEP and Cornwall & IoS LEP to explore and highlight the issues around rural productivity and growth. The commission is a great example of Great South West joint activity.

The commission will be chaired by David Fursdon, the Devon based Chair of the SW Food and Farming network established by Defra, and the Commission will consist of a series of panel members; one from each of the four LEP areas. The HotSW panel member is Sarah Bryant, the Chief Executive of Exmoor National Park.

The commission has been set up to hear and review evidence from a range of sources and stakeholders with the following objectives:

- Frame the south west response to the Industrial Strategy and forthcoming DEFRA 25 year plans for 'food, farming and fisheries' and 'environment'
- Draw out the opportunities for the south west and individual LEPs to drive rural productivity improvements

- Understand the wider economic functioning between rural and urban to identify opportunities to drive growth across the whole area
- Secure Government support for specific initiatives in the 2017 autumn statement
- Influence national and local policies where appropriate to improve rural productivity

The commission will collect and review evidence through a number of steps. The process began in April with an 'open call for evidence', which has been promoted widely across the region. This gives all stakeholders, businesses and interested parties an opportunity to submit written evidence to the commission; this open call closes on the 19th of May.

This will be followed by a series of 5 panel hearings in June & July (one in each county across the whole 4 LEP area). We will therefore have one panel session in Devon and one in Somerset. The panel hearings will provide an opportunity for the commission to hear and question evidence from stakeholders to inform their conclusions. Indicative dates are:

- 9th June
- 20th June
- 28th June
- 6th July
- 18th July

Wider engagement and debate will also be encouraged through social media throughout June.

Following the hearings in June & July a final report will be produced by the end of first week of September, providing recommendations for both Government, LEPs and other rural stakeholders.

The commission will be seeking evidence in relation to a wide range of research questions including:

1. What does the economy look like in rural areas? (sectors, jobs, innovation, productivity, demography, housing, skills)
2. What are the opportunities for growth/productivity improvements in rural areas?
3. What are the barriers to growth/productivity improvements in rural areas?
4. How does the rural economy interact with the urban economy and how can this be optimised? To what extent are market and coastal town providing a 'hub' for their rural hinterlands?
5. What skills are needed in rural areas, do skills issues differ from urban areas?
6. How do we ensure skills needs are met?
7. What are the implications of Brexit for the rural economy?
8. Is there evidence of innovative clusters in the rural economy? If so, how can these be identified, nurtured and replicated?
9. Drawing on our experience of delivering rural support programmes in the SW, what sort of interventions have been successful and what sort of interventions proved less effective?

10. What is the potential for businesses to 'scale-up' in the rural economy? How do Local Enterprise Partnerships and government bodies identify these businesses and support them to grow?
11. Are there specific challenges for deeply rural areas and how can economies be supported in deeply rural areas?
12. To what extent have rural areas been able to benefit from wider growth initiatives (e.g. Growth Deals, European funding etc.)
13. Are there any other issues relating to rural growth/productivity that you would like to raise?

We are currently in the 'call for evidence' phase and have been encouraging stakeholders from across the region to submit evidence and / or highlight their interest in attending a panel meeting. The process is starting to gain some traction.