

ANNEX 10 – Minutes of an oral evidence session with Surrey Chambers of Commerce CEO Louise Punter and Local Skills Improvement Plan Project Manager Rob Gibson, on 31 January 2023

Adult Learning and Skills Task Group – Surrey Chambers of Commerce oral evidence session

12pm on Tuesday, 31 January 2023

Witnesses:

Louise Punter, Chief Executive Officer

Rob Gibson, Local Skills Improvement Plan Project Manager

Key points raised in the discussion:

1. Louise provided an overview of Surrey Chambers of Commerce – took on designation of the Local Skills Improvement Plan. The other local Chambers do not report into the Chamber, but often affiliate with them.
2. When did work begin on Surrey's LSIP, what stage is it at and when do you expect to submit it to government? Does it involve an analysis of where Surrey's immediate and long-term skills needs lie?
 - Rob: about 18 months ago. Received a letter on 1 August 2022 to be designated, got final sign-off for the budget on 18 November 2022. Need to send government a summary list of priorities by the end of March 2023 and a full report by the end of May 2023. Draft priorities are predominantly there for colleges and providers. Covers north and mid Hampshire as well, the Enterprise M3 LEP [West Surrey] area plus the four East Surrey districts and boroughs (Coast to Capital LEP sit on our steering group and are contributing to the labour data). [The focus is on skills needs now through to three years across Surrey and North/Mid Hampshire. LSIPs will:
 - set out key priorities and changes needed to make post-16 technical education more responsive and closely aligned to local labour market needs
 - focus on the key changes and priorities that can gain traction and maximise impact
 - need to consider how skills and capabilities support Net Zero, Climate change or other environmental goals].
 - Jonathan: What's the time horizon for a provider developing a new course? How does the collaboration work/governance arrangements? Louise: Some colleges doing more of the delivery than others. Rob: LSIP is there to provide a guide to highlight priorities for change and colleges are required to respond to that. Ofsted monitor how well providers deliver on the LSIP. Louise: The priority list is due end of March so that it can go into curriculum planning for next September (2023). There have been examples of things getting up and running quicker. Rob: LSIP is looking not just at what is delivered but also how, e.g. short modular courses.

3. Which adult learning and skills providers have helped you work on the plan?
 - Louise: all FE providers within the patch have contributed. We work closely with ALPS [represents training providers in Surrey and Hampshire] – this picks up private training providers, who we’ve met on three occasions.
 - [Rob: Providers are key stakeholders in the LSIP process, however it’s important to recognise that this needs to be employer-led and an articulation of employer needs for providers to then review and consider ways to respond where needed.]

4. What are the main skills shortages in Surrey (a) currently and what do you think these will be (b) in the medium term and (c) long term?
 - Rob: It is still early in the process to give definitive answers to this question. Our area has an above average concentration of high skilled occupations, four in 10 residents have a degree or above. Young people in the area generally tend to overlook apprenticeships.
 - Chris: why do they not engage with apprenticeships?
 - Louise: parents (saying they should go to university). It has started to get better, when they realise the types of companies offering them. It’s lot of people to communicate the message to. Schools have been slow to present but it is now moving at pace. Rob: provider access legislation was introduced from January – schools and colleges required to give students a certain number of experiences with businesses.
 - Rob: we’ve got an online survey running for employers to talk about what their skills gaps are. The main one is not on the technical side, it’s employability skills stopping them from being able to recruit – presentation and communication skills, answering the telephone, emailing. We haven’t yet unpicked the technical skill requirements – we’re early in the process. Green skills contributing to net zero – businesses are struggling to articulate what they think green skills are and to understand what the opportunity of the green economy is. Part of the LSIP will be doing a deep dive into this so we can highlight the opportunities to businesses and to give providers confidence to make changes, e.g. a domestic electrician course may not be focusing on the solar panel element. [We have agreed to commission this research by a partnership of WPI Economics, Lightcast, and The Data City to: *Understand current green jobs and occupations within the LSIP area, including an analysis of occupations, skills, employer demand, and qualifications (for present day and projected into the future).*]
 - Jonathan: Is it more about supporting new start-ups; existing businesses may not be the target audience for green skills?
 - Rob: yes but there are opportunities for existing businesses as well to upskill. Colleges to equip young people. Louise: Many businesses just get their heads down and don’t necessarily do a lot of training with their existing staff (not just new staff) which is not a good thing. Green tech is going to improve the productivity and profitability of businesses. The colleges certainly are working on it, the benefits may have been communicated to businesses but they may not have heard it.
 - Jonathan: how to address skills for those with SEND?
 - Louise: It’s not a specific objective of the report, but the Chamber is part of the No One Left Behind Group and the All Age Autism Strategy Group. I coined the phrase ‘hidden pools of talent’ – a whole raft of people with disabilities, women returning to work, ex-

offenders, who could be doing fantastic work if employers understood how to support them.

5. To what extent are local businesses struggling to hire at the moment? How has this changed (a) as a result of the pandemic and (b) since?
 - [Rob: Again, it's still early in the process to give definitive answers to this question. Labour market data is showing:
 - Employment rate is high at around 80%.
 - Large numbers of vacancies and a shortage of applicants.
 - Persistent vacancies in many sectors including Digital, and Health & Social Care.
 - Employability skills are a challenge post-Covid.]
 - Louise: The pandemic has had a massive impact particularly on 18 to 24-year-olds. Very involved in the kickstart project which offers those young people a six-month placement – number of examples of not being able to complete the six months due to lack of confidence, trying to get into a role online etc.
 - Are we actually talking about lack of skills provision or a lack of people to train – sometimes it is the latter and a significant part of that is down to Brexit.
 - Fiona: What retraining is available for older people?
 - Louise: It is a misconception (perhaps a misnaming?) that apprenticeships are for younger people – they are available for a person of any age e.g. a 55-year-old who needs upskilling can access the funding in the same way.
 - Jonathan: There's the challenge of having financial continuity giving the confidence to retrain, is that an issue?
 - Rob: businesses think they do not have the capacity to give them time off of the job to complete an apprenticeship. Can be hard to maintain financial continuity.
 - Jonathan: The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's ['Addressing labour skills and shortages post-Brexit'](#) recommends reforming the apprenticeship levy to create a broader, more flexible training levy to boost employer investment in skills.
 - Louise: This is the sort of things we'll be pulling out of round tables.
6. What are the reasons businesses cannot fill vacancies? How do we know people don't have the skills, rather than this being due to other reasons e.g. having more attractive packages elsewhere?
 - Louise: a lot of competition for people with certain technical skills e.g. an IT engineer who moved employer is earning three times as much a year on because his skills are in such demand.
 - [Rob: This is something we are trying to understand through the LSIP process. For example, Health and Social Care is a major sector in the LSIP area and has consistently high vacancies. How much of this is to do with lack of people rather than lack of skills or lack of provision locally to train people? That must be our benchmark for the LSIP- combination of what are the skills gaps/needs and what provision exists locally. If it doesn't exist, then the LSIP can play an important role in shaping how colleges might respond.]
7. In your view, are there any gaps in the provision of adult learning and skills in Surrey and if so, what are they? Are you anticipating these will be met on publication of the LSIP and if so, how and by whom?
 - Louise: Social care has been identified; part of it is bodies, part of it is training. We are having a round table with a number of businesses and

organisations that employ care staff, and we're talking to providers about it as well. We have a list of 11 sector areas – social care does keep coming up, it's the biggest employer in the world. Sometimes it is as simple as introducing the employer to the provider.

- [Rob: LSIPs have a role in identifying these gaps in provision, but greater focus on identifying priorities for change in the local area that providers will then have the opportunity to consider and respond to. This might be new provision, but could be changing how provision is delivered, or looking at how they engage with businesses and particular sectors.]

8. Do you feel there is any overlap right now in the provision of adult learning and skills in Surrey - are there any areas in which more than one provider is delivering the same thing in the same area? If so, do you see this as a good thing giving learners choice, or as inefficient (would providers be competing for the same government funding)?

- Louise: There will always be overlaps because the learners don't live right next door to the providers. There is a lot of really good collaboration between the providers. There is an objective to get specialists in certain areas – some taking on certain delivery whilst others do not. The SDF funding has been divvied out to the colleges providing the land-based courses, the retrofit, the carbon literacy. We're trying to enhance those collaborations.
- Chris: Are providers competing for government funding and diluting it?
 - Louise: they will compete for funding, but at least they are still all sitting round a table together, better than it used to be. We're meeting all colleges in March.
 - Rob: In a way the LSIP process is more important than the final report – building partnerships between the providers. We want to move to a system where if a business contacts a college and they do not provide the relevant course, they signpost them to one that does.
- Catherine: £2.69m SDF 2022/23 fund – how was that distribution decided?
 - Louise: In a perfect world the LSIP would have been set up and then given rise to the SDF. Surrey Chambers were invited to give some input and at that time the thing everybody was talking about was sales and business development and international trade knowledge. It was up to colleges to put themselves forward and say what they would like to do, they did that collaboratively. Sparsholt College and Nescot College worked together to lead the process. A lot of the funding is being spent on the capital equipment. There is an SDF project manager.

9. As the ERB, what more do you think Surrey Adult Learning should be doing? Do you anticipate the LSIP will transform their curriculum?

- [Rob: Continue to work with us and support the development of the LSIP. Accountability statements will be an important mechanism for the LSIP to influence what SAL plans for. But there are other sources of information they can use to help inform their Statements. Statements should describe key aims and targets for the year ahead – reflecting national, regional, and/or local priorities (inc. LSIP priorities).]
- Louise: I think we're more likely to make a big difference in one or two particular areas of the curriculum, rather than transform the overall curriculum. We've not got the final answers as to which one or two. If you just ask a business, what are the skills you need, they don't know the answer.

- Chris: In this economic climate, is training taking a back seat as businesses are so engrossed with just keeping the companies going?
 - Louise: Training and marketing get put on the back burner and they're the two things that make the difference to the business in the slightly longer-term.
 - Chris: Some companies are surviving rather than looking to recruit or to train at this time?
 - Louise: I think that's fair but we have identified a lot who want to give their views, much more than I expected for the reasons you give. I don't know if that will translate into them actually training their people.
 - Rob: We've had good responses from businesses about their skills needs, but it is a different matter whether businesses respond practically and invest in training.
 - Jonathan: Are you able to share the March report publicly so we can reference it in the report?
 - Julie: The task group report was due to come to the March meeting but could be deferred to May.
 - Rob: Your recommendations could reference the importance of the LSIP.
 - Louise: SCC also sit on the steering group, we work closely with them and Hampshire CC. The green technology project is joint with SCC and the LSIP, Jack Kennedy sits on that Board.
 - Catherine: What's the timescale for the Secretary of State approval for the LSIP?
 - Louise: continue working on this – iterative process. Three-year project when we signed up as the designated body.
 - Rob: Secretary of State makes decision after 31 May 2023 deadline Annual accountability agreements for schools and colleges will be happening at the same time as LSIP.
10. Do you feel the benefits of adult learning and skills to the community and society (e.g. social contact for wellbeing) are of equal importance to the economic benefits? Do you have any thoughts on how both could be achieved simultaneously?
- Louise: non-business learning and skills is also good for a person, especially if they are between jobs. Prepares them for learning other skills.
 - Chris: a lot of this cohort are retired – has value especially in an ageing community.
 - Rob: more formalised or accredited training requires a lot of commitment. Softer skills are a good steppingstone to further training.
 - Jonathan: We'll have a different lifestyle when living in a green low energy economy. Travelling less might mean that we need to have more local provision. How can we train differently to not just support employers but also community?
 - Chris: Unpaid carers within the family might benefit from adult learning.

This page is intentionally left blank