

**Unconfirmed Minutes of SEMLEP's Growth Hub Board Meeting  
28<sup>th</sup> February 2024 9.00-10.30am  
Via Teams**

**Attendees:**

Rachel Mallows, Chair and SEMLEP Private Sector Board Member  
Hilary Chipping, SEMLEP CEO  
Ruth Roan, SEMLEP Growth Hub Manager  
Irene Okere, SEMLEP Project Officer (Minutes)  
Justine Ives, Bedford Borough Council  
Jennifer Thomas, FSB  
Debbie Poole-Hunt, Luton Borough Council  
Ian Achurch, North Northamptonshire Council  
Pim Van Baarsen, Silverstone Technology Cluster  
Helen Miller, University of Northampton

**Apologies:**

David Sheridan, Deputy Chair and SEMLEP Private Sector Board Member  
Darren Lambert, Accountable body Luton  
David Bailey, SEMLEP Private Sector Board Member  
Justin Richardson, Bedfordshire Chamber of Commerce

	Item	Actions
1.	<b>Welcome and Introductions</b>  RM welcomed everyone to the online meeting. Key discussion was around the update on SEMLEP, the transition to West Northamptonshire council and the Growth Hub Board priorities and purpose.	
2.	<b>Declarations of Interest</b>  There were no declarations of interest to share.	
3.	<b>Minutes of meeting held on 7th November 2023</b>  There were no amendments to the previous minutes.	
4.	<b>Update on SEMLEP – Hilary Chipping</b>  Hilary confirmed it was business as usual for the Growth Hub and was working closely together with other colleagues in West Northamptonshire Council to ensure the transition of SEMLEP to West Northamptonshire council is as smooth as possible.  Despite the uncertainty, the Growth Hub Team have all been fantastic, which is evident in the Growth Hub performance update shared with the board.	

	Item	Actions
	<p>From a staffing point of view, everybody will move across to West Northamptonshire Council under a TUPE transfer process on the 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2024 except the CEO. It was deemed that, there would no longer need to be a Chief Executive, because the SEMLEP company and a SEMLEP board will cease to exist.</p> <p>Regarding financial transfers, the SEMLEP accountable body, Luton Borough Council are working with the SEMLEP finance manager and West Northamptonshire Council on how funds are going to be handled going forward. The remaining Growing Places Fund money will transfer across to West Northamptonshire Council, who will then look after it on behalf of off the whole area. To ensure all the six local authorities are part of this process, there is an introduction or authority document being drawn up. Also, the task and finish group that was established last summer with local authority officers, are scheduled to meet on the 13<sup>th</sup> of March, where there will be discussions to make sure that all six local authorities are part of this process. She reiterated WNC is acting as a host and the LEP functions transferred will continue to be delivered in the same impartial objective way across the whole of the of the South East Midlands area.</p> <p>The Central Area Growth board, where the six local authority leaders sit, met on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February and are intending to move towards a position where CAGB becomes a joint committee. The joint committee will formally be made up of the six local authorities and there may be an opportunity for the chair of the new Business Advisory board to be part of that joint committee as a non-voting associate member. There is a commitment to recruit people to the Business Advisory board in an open and transparent way, which will take time and in the interim period, the work of this Growth Hub board is particularly important.</p> <p>Finally, it was proposed by the CAGB to rebrand SEMLEP especially the Growth Hub. The leaders are keen to rebrand and have employed consultants for the rebranding. In the interim, it was proposed that the LEP acronym is dropped and the Growth Hub to be called the Southeast Midlands Growth Hub until the rebranding process is complete.</p> <p>AGM coming up on 5<sup>th</sup> March will discuss business representation and the role of the Growth Hub board.</p> <p><b>Vickys Hlomuka – Update</b></p> <p>Government has asked for business engagement in the voice of business be an important part of the functions going forward. Further guidance came out from Government in December, which included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open recruitment to that business board.</li> <li>• Ensuring it was representational and diverse.</li> <li>• Representing different business interests across the area.</li> </ul>	

	Item	Actions
	<p>During January and February, a more detailed proposal for the business board put together a discussion paper, which the SEMLEP board had a chance to input into, as well as a few business representative organisations. A final draft was prepared and presented to the CAGB in mid-February and they are setting out how the proposals could be implemented.</p> <p>The purpose of the board is to be a coordinated business voice on key business issues, such as helping to shape economic strategy for the area and ensuring the availability of the right resources to support businesses across the area.</p> <p>Included in the paper are the proposed composition of the board, which was adequate representation for each of geographical areas represented, ensuring diversity, representation of different sectors, the rural community as well as further and higher education.</p> <p>They proposed an open recruitment process, potentially starting in April 2024 and the first meeting to start in June 2024. The terms of reference have been drafted on the back of the principles that were laid out in the paper to the growth board.</p> <p>One of the principles was to ensure that the board is connected to other local business representative groups, as well as looking at the regional picture and how it connects and links to business subgroups, that would report into that business board.</p> <p>The leaders really value this Growth Hub board and the role that this has played and would like it to continue in the interim, if the board members are willing and particularly in the recognition of the fact that it was going to take time to set up the Business board.</p> <p>Questions:</p> <p><b>Pim Van Baarsen</b> - Wanted to know if the new board was going to replace the Growth Hub Board eventually, because it seemed there was a massive amount of overlap.</p> <p>Vicky stated that the Growth Hub board had always existed to be the oversight of strategic direction for the Growth Hub and in the current environment has provided that link into the SEMLEP board. Once the Business board is setup, it will play a similar role, steering the strategic direction of growth and support the growth hub to be an important part in the business voice picture.</p> <p><b>Jennifer Thomas</b> - It is helpful to have meetings where there is a wide range of representation which can influence policy. She stated there was no point in having meetings where nothing really is being worked on. From her perspective, the business voice, especially the small business voice, must be the mood music and core to decisions and policymaking. Be it through different boards, different meetings, or whether that's through having particular champions on all of the other sorts of decision-making boards.</p>	

	Item	Actions
	<p><b>Helen Miller</b> - The partners at the table should be dictated by what is to be achieved and the priorities of the businesses. She was of the view that, if this board is to exist, it should be able to influence policy-making and keen to ensure the Growth Hub Board reviewed its membership to include a proportionate number of the private sector organisations.</p> <p><b>Rachel Mallows</b> - Due to the new economic strategy required for the area, there is an important need for this board to be doing what it can do to influence as well as monitoring the activities of the Growth Hub.</p> <p><b>Pim Van Baarsen</b> - PVB was of the view that, whatever structure was in place, it delivers what is really needed and can deliver on that strategic vision. Be it this board or the new board, it was about the organisation's needs and the best way to go forward. He added that, it was critical, given the different sectors and the number of SMEs that are representative in this area, the need for those voices to be represented, whatever the structure may be. He suggested an organogram to show the future structure and how that would work, because it would be useful to know what each group does, how they interrelate, and what they are there to do.</p> <p><b>Debbie Poole-Hunt</b> - Massive period of transition across board and things will evolve as they go forward. She agreed with JT and PVB on influence, organogram and the right people in the right groups linking together and how decisions are filtered down.</p> <p><b>Ian Achurch</b> - Ian agreed with Helen and suggested better representation of other sectors on the board and that to avoid proliferation of groups and suggested a collective discussion will be better.</p> <p><b>Hilary Chipping</b> - There was a reason why all these groups evolved, and the rich advice from these groups is important, but could be reviewed and refreshed rather than discontinued, because it is more difficult to establish new groups.</p> <p><b>Helen Miller</b> - What does the team think in terms of direction of travel?</p> <p><b>Ruth Roan</b> - Priorities of the Growth Hub team is to be accountable to the Growth Hub Board which has representation across all 6 local authorities, especially now that it's being hosted by WNC. Ensuring we are building relationships with partners across the room. We value the independent business voice as they hold us accountable. Also, most of the time strategy is not aligned with business needs and The Growth Hub Board had been able to influence and impact strategy.</p>	
5.	<b>Growth Hub Risk Register</b>	

	Item	Actions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff retention and recruitment</li> <li>• Funding for Growth Hubs - unconfirmed post March 2024 by government</li> <li>• Branding – Reputation of SEMLEP and the confidence businesses have with the Growth Hub may be affected. May lose engagement with businesses.</li> <li>• Competitive nature of the sector – Lost out on bids for UKSPF in our region to a Growth Hub outside our region.</li> </ul>	
6.	<p><b>Round Table Updates</b></p> <p><b>Pim Van Baarsen</b>          Cautious environment, with investment slowing down. Businesses focused on ongoing projects rather than new investment but still busy and progressing.</p> <p><b>Helen Miller</b>          Continue to support problem solving initiatives with students, academics and businesses.          Support Innovation UK with our KTPs and what the University needs to do to respond to innovation needs.          Regional innovation funding has been very successful with the initiatives that have been put forward.          A convened group to look at the university's role and to have a plan for the innovation agenda.</p> <p><b>Jennifer Thomas</b>          From the campaigning on policy aspect, building up to the Spring budget. Focusing on a pro growth budget with the government and on the things they can do to promote real growth in the economy. Upgrade the employment allowance and raising the VAT threshold. Submitted a comprehensive list to government but will have to wait for the budget to be read.</p> <p>With elections looming this year, we have released a business crime report to all police and crime commissioners and hoping to see them focusing on small business crime.</p> <p>Had a Leicestershire innovation festival in February and released the Tech Tonic report focused on innovation but specifically looking at technology, the uptake of digital technology among small business and looking at how to increase productivity across all businesses.</p> <p><b>Justine Ives</b>          Continue to support businesses under UKSPF, but still limited applications to the rural fund. 2 tenders out for rural support and town centre</p>	

	Item	Actions
	<p><b>Debbie Poole-Hunt</b>            Formally launching the Investment Prospectus and Investment website on 5<sup>th</sup> March 2024            UKSPF business support out for tender. 2 strands – Net Zero and Social Media Support.            Supporting the supply chain in tendering and procurement through meet the buyer events.            Focusing on a new economic strategy for Luton</p> <p><b>Ian Achurch</b>            Held a UKSPF session in Kettering this week with a lot of local businesses attending.            Launching the decarbonisation support programme            Currently running the rural grants scheme.</p> <p><b>Rachel Mallows</b>            Interacting with 25 businesses in the food and drink as well as the hospitality sectors this week through group mentoring or other mentoring arrangements.            Businesses concerned about staffing and wage increases in April and seeking help to keep costs down, cashflow and VAT for hospitality businesses            Some are doing well but many are hanging on a cliff edge.</p> <p><b>Vicky Hlomuka</b>            Launching UKSPF decarbonisation programme in the next few weeks            Good uptake on a rural grant scheme and have the first grant panel on the 4<sup>th</sup> of March.            Launched our tourism strategy in January 2024 and have a tourism event on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March.            Local plan goes for consultation in April on economic strategy and place shaping. As most small businesses complain they cannot find grow-on industrial space. Hoping to commission a piece of work to find out if the spaces businesses need are available and evidence for local planning.            Going out to procure some specialist support in scale up, decarbonisation, innovation and a contractor to help deliver rural grants schemes.            Had a workshop with Public Health colleagues looking at wellness and employment/skills. One thing that is working quite well is that they've part funded a careers hub enterprise co-ordinator.</p>	
7.	<p><b>Growth Hub Performance Update/ Future of Growth Hub</b></p> <p>Slide set circulated. Refer to the full details within.</p>	
8.	<p><b>Growth Hub Board Priorities and Purpose</b></p> <p><b>Jennifer Thomas</b>            Acting as a first point of contact, providing advice and signposting is incredibly valuable, which is needed now more than ever and should be the main priority on the Growth Hub.</p>	



	Item	Actions
	<p><b>Helen Miller</b> Need to understand how skills will be addressed. LSIP investment is going on, but the ongoing work for skills is something that should feature more as part of the work of this board.</p> <p><b>Ian Achurch</b> The Growth Hub should be looking at filling in the gaps rather than duplicating the offering of the grants. There is potential for confusion, especially with the UKSPF. Thinks the Growth Hub and the Careers Hub should be merged.</p> <p><b>Ruth Roan</b> The Growth Hub grant schemes are adding value to the offerings available and working with all local authorities to add value to their grant schemes.</p> <p><b>Debbie Poole-Hunt</b> Agreed with Ian on the merger of the Growth Hub with the Careers Hub and reiterated on groups linking together and how decisions are filtered down.</p> <p><b>Rachel Mallows</b> Agreed with DPH as it would make more sense to the businesses.</p> <p><b>Ruth Roan,</b> The Careers Hub and the Growth Hub are intertwined and though it may not seem that way externally, they work closely together internally.</p>	
9.	<p><b>AOB</b></p> <p>RM and board members thanked HC for being phenomenal and for what she had done for the Growth Hub and SEMLEP as this was her last board meeting.</p> <p>Next meeting to be 10<sup>th</sup> April in person.</p>	