

Minutes of Marches Business Support (MBS) Steering Group 27 April 2023

Present		
Dave Courteen	DC	MBS Steering Group Chair & Managing Director - Mosaic Group, Marches LEP Board Member and Small Business Champion
Rachel Laver	RL	Marches LEP CEO
Mark Schneider	MS	Marches LEP Head of Business Development and Delivery
Amy Bould	AB	Marches LEP PR and Marketing - Director Be Bold Media Ltd
John Wigley	JW	Business Development Manager, Department for Business and Trade
Matt Potts	MP	Head of Business Growth and Inward Investment, Shropshire Council
Mike Goodall	MG	Federation of Small Businesses
Ruth Ross	RR	Deputy CEO, Shropshire Chamber
Frank Myers	FM	Chair of Herefordshire Business Board, Director - MCP Systems Consultants Ltd
Sharon Smith	SS	Chief Executive Officer, Herefordshire & Worcestershire Chamber of Commerce
Paul Kalinauckas	PK	Marches LEP Board Access to Finance Champion, Midlands Engine Investment Fund Strategic Oversight Board Member
Shane Stark	SSK	Managing Director, Ridgebourne Management Ltd.
Ian Traynor	IT	Managing Director, Luminate Ventures
Steve Parry	SP	Director, Q Commercial Finance Ltd.
Alex Collins	AC	Deputy Area Lead, the Marches, Cities and Local Growth Unit, Department for Business & Trade
Kathy Mulholland	KM	Inward Investment & Business Support Service Delivery Manager, Telford & Wrekin Council
Kathryn Jones	KJ	Head of Partnerships and Strategy, Marches LEP
Stephanie Jones	SJ	Growth Hub Project Support Officer, Marches LEP (Secretariat)
Guests		
Michelle Sillence	MS	Information and Relationship Manager, National Business Support Helpline
Apologies:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Graham Guest – Telford Business Board, Principal Telford College Nadine Kinsey - Economic Development Manager, Herefordshire Council 		

ITEM		ACTION
1.	<p>Welcome and Introductions</p> <p>DC welcomed everyone to the meeting and invited three new members who had joined the group following the recent recruitment campaign to introduce themselves.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IT outlined his experience of over 35 years in corporate life, spanning utilities, telecoms, technology, international and financial service roles. He has run his own business for the last 8 years advising SMEs and was motivated to join the group as a way of putting back into the local economy, creating better businesses and retaining talent in the UK. • SSK is a business consultant. Originally from Indianapolis he worked for Enterprise Rent A Car and moved to the UK as part of their European expansion, locating to Shropshire in 2017. He now works as a business consultant helping SMEs to overcome challenges and aims to bring his experience to highlight opportunities to the group. • SP is Commercial Director at Q Financial Services. After 10-15 years in corporate banking, he set up a business 6 years ago in the broker market and now works with trading businesses, looking at how they access finance and understanding their challenges. The business is Shropshire based and he is keen to get involved with the group to support businesses in the area. <p>DC thanked and welcomed the new members to the group.</p> <p>Apologies were received from Graham Guest and Nadine Kinsey.</p> <p>Members agreed for the meeting to be recorded to support minute taking.</p>	
2.	<p>Declarations of Member Interest</p> <p>None received. DC asked for hands to be raised should any conflicts arise during the meeting.</p>	
3.	<p>Minutes of the last meeting held on 26/01/23.</p> <p>The draft minutes were approved as an accurate record of the meeting.</p>	
4.	<p>Marches Growth Hub Update</p> <p>MS provided the following update:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growth Hub funding had been announced with an increase of £30k to the MLEP allocation to £261k for FY 23/24. • The LEP had streamlined central budgets to enable an increase in allocations to the physical Growth Hubs from £19k in FY 22/23 to £35k in FY 23/24, with the total package worth £51k to each hub. • UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) – Shropshire has gone out with a call and Telford & Wrekin and Herefordshire calls likely to go out after local elections in May. • Events – the LEP is being more proactive in organising events to support Growth Hub activity across the patch. An Innovation event is being held at the Shell Store in Hereford on 22 May with presentations from Innovate UK EDGE, including R&D tax credits. An Access to Finance event on MEIF funds, led by the British Business Bank, is being held at the Shell Store in Hereford on 21 June, following the event in Cosford. A procurement event is being planned in Shropshire in June. Events will be promoted on the events calendar on the MGH website. <p>The following points were discussed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The new members were asked for their impressions of the Growth Hub, giving positive feedback on branding and visibility, grant finding functionality of the website, the proactive approach and presence of Growth Hub staff on the ground. Businesses seem to either interact with the Growth Hub regularly, or not at all. Observations were that the Growth Hub needs clear objectives for who it is targeting and what it is trying to achieve, both for businesses and partners in the network, and that the offer needs to be clear for businesses to see the value of engaging. MS commented that the Growth 	

	<p>Hubs work differently in each area to respond to local needs and there is not a uniform Marches approach.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RL asked the group for ideas for the events programme, specifically the MEIF event on 21 May, or generally on topical issues, event timing or effective methods of promotion. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PK observed that speakers from a commercial background seemed to work well, using feedback from the A2F event at Telford College as an example. • IT emphasised the importance of funding events distinguishing between ‘grants’ and ‘finance’ which are very different. • DC suggested that from experience, breakfast or lunch events tended to be better attended than after work or evening events. <p>Action All to email RL with further ideas or feedback to shape the events programme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UK Shared Prosperity Fund – DC asked MP for a short briefing on the UKSPF. MP outlined that Shropshire Council had been allocated just over £15m across UKSPF strands - Supporting Local Business, Community and Place, People and Skills - plus an additional element of funding for Rural Prosperity. Early calls had been launched before the end of 22/23 FY, in spite of delays to the release of funds, enabling delivery of early-stage funding for the Growth Hub and feasibility work. A call for Community and Place and Supporting Local Business, closing on 12 May, focused on bringing the broader programme together following the closure of the EU funded projects and is not at the business level of delivery yet. Spending needs to be complete by March 2025 so the priority is to mobilise projects as quickly as possible. Expressions of Interest and early-stage applications were looking positive and hoped to enable the allocation of the majority of funding. Calls for People and Skills and Rural Prosperity would follow. <p>As to whether the UKSPF application process would be more straightforward for businesses than ERDF processes, MP replied that this was the aspiration but noted that funding requirements need to be met. The process would be evaluated after the first funding round. An Assessment Panel made up of public and private sector partners from across Shropshire has been established for each UKSPF theme, and a strong team with extensive experience of EU/grant funding regimes has been put in place.</p> <p>It was agreed a presentation on UKSPF would be added to the agenda for the next meeting.</p> <p>Action MP to present on UKSPF at the next meeting.</p>	
<p>5.</p>	<p>Business Challenges</p> <p>The group discussed current business challenges:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SS reflected on results of the BCC Q1 Economic Survey that over half of firms responding believed turnover would increase in the next 3 months, but 75% were not investing. Challenges with inflationary and cost pressures - labour and energy costs - were primary concerns. Some signs of a return of confidence, but margins still weak. • DC noted that at the last meeting recruitment and skills, particularly the work-readiness of young people aged 16-18, had been identified as issues. IT agreed there are issues with the employability skills of some young people, which can add pressure for small businesses already paying the minimum wage to source and invest in additional skills support, and suggested more needs to be done with schools and colleges. KJ noted that the Chambers of Commerce are developing Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) which may inform further work, but that the LEP already has a project to link businesses with education as part of the Marches Careers Hub. The Careers Hub is always looking for businesses to get involved would be happy to discuss opportunities with any members of the group who may be interested. RL reminded the group that the LEP has a small amount of funding which could potentially fund a skills 	

	<p>project or further research. Ideas for how the money could be utilised should be sent to RL. RL also shared a link to the Skills Bootcamps in the meeting chat.</p> <p>Actions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • KJ to circulate details of the Marches Careers Hub engagement opportunities with schools/colleges • Members to email RL with ideas of how LEP funding could be utilised to address skills issues 	
6.	<p>National Business Support Helpline (NBSH)</p> <p>DC introduced the guest speaker Michelle Sillence, Information and Relationship Manager, National Business Support Helpline (NBSH).</p> <p>MS gave a presentation on the NBSH highlighting the following points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The NBSH was set up by BEIS in 2012 as a central point of contact for business advice, dealing with an average of 25,000-35,000 enquiries a year from across England. • NBSH provides an impartial triage, diagnostic and sign-posting service, representing a range of national and local information and providers, and linking businesses to Growth Hubs to continue the customer journey. • Two tiers of Advisors work through phone, email and webchat. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tier 1 Advisors provide a basic level of service, gathering information on the business needs and location, answering straightforward enquiries, signposting to relevant support and referring customers to their local Growth Hub. The NBSH has separate agreements with individual LEPs who specify the criteria for referrals. The Marches LEP wants all Marches based businesses referred to the Marches Growth Hub. Other LEPs prefer to have only high growth or businesses in growth sectors referred in. If a customer needs more in-depth interaction, they are moved on to a Tier 2 Advisor. • Tier 2 Advisors provide a free-of-charge, pre-arranged appointment for a more in-depth diagnostic around key business areas, resulting in an Action Plan with suggested next steps. It is up to the customer to take actions forward. NBSH is an in-bound only service and does not undertake any follow-up work, which is why Advisors are keen to refer customers to the Growth Hubs for local support and to develop a longer-term relationship. Advisors are restricted by the contract to recommending government/publicly funded support and are not able to promote commercial businesses. • A key role for the Advisors is to curate the Knowledge Bank which holds information about national and local programmes so customers can be sign-posted to appropriate support in their area. With EU programmes coming to an end, new UKSPF schemes are starting to come onstream on the Knowledge Bank. Anyone with programmes in the pipeline should contact MS to highlight. • In 22/23 there were 347 enquiries from Marches businesses with the majority signposted to Growth Hub. The level of pre-start enquiries in the Marches (47%) was lower than the national average (65%) with more established businesses and B2C businesses reaching out. Typically, the top reason for businesses contacting the NBSH is for start-up support, but the Marches bucks the trend with more businesses looking for finance to grow than start up. Start-up enquiries seem to be picking up since the start of the year, but people seem to be taking fewer risks, for example, working from home rather than investing in premises. Tax and legal advice are other common reasons for enquiries – the NBSH is not able to advise but will signpost to organisations that can. Part of the Advisor role is to draw attention to the regulatory side of running a business and to help simplify it for customers. • Current concerns and challenges being seen by Advisors include - utility costs, businesses in financial difficulty trying to avoid closure, cash flow, cost of living, business survival. <p>The following points were discussed:</p>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In response to a question about the low number of enquiries from Marches businesses (2%), MS replied that analysis of the data would be needed to draw any conclusions but it could be a good sign that the Marches Growth Hub has good coverage and a reputation as the 'go to' place for help – where a Growth Hub is more active there tends to be fewer calls to the NBSH. In other areas, where there is no local phone number or it is more difficult to get in touch with the Growth Hub, enquiry numbers are higher. • AB noted that local data bears out the high level of brand awareness of the MGH across the area with 292 enquiries coming through the Virtual Hub in last quarter alone, compared to 347 to the NBSH in a year. <p>DC thanked MS for an informative presentation.</p>	
<p>7.</p>	<p>Department for International Trade / Department for Business & Trade</p> <p>JW gave a comprehensive presentation, with case studies, to showcase the range of support provided by DBT to help businesses enter or grow in export markets.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doulton Water Filters were supported by the Export Support Service (ESS), Complex Markets Advisor, market research reports, on-going 1-2-1 ITA and £9k ERDF Internationalisation grant to maximise export opportunities in the US and China, resulting in expected £2.4m sales contact and other outcomes. • Addfield waste company supported by £9k Internationalisation grant for market research, 1-2-1 ITA support, introductions to DIT overseas officers based in-country, recognized as Export Champion to promote DBT overseas, exhibition support in Dubai, West Africa and Germany, some of them difficult markets to break into. • Rokholt Acquisitions received 1-2-1 ITA support, training/guidance on fundamentals of exporting, £9k Internationalisation grant, introduction to DIT France via EU Hub to support company set up and VAT registration to move away from expensive third party fulfilment, connection to UKEF for working capital finance resulting in a significant new contract, opening of an office in France, orders from household names, increased turnover and new jobs created. • Other case studies highlighted examples of ITA and specialist support (Complex Markets Advice, Business and Culture Advisor, Digital Trade Advisors, in-country DIT support for trade visits and exhibitions, Internationalisation grants etc.) and how they have helped businesses achieve their international goals including in unusual and difficult to access markets. • An example of a collaborative project was the DBT Africa team bringing a delegation of South African buyers to LAMMA, an Agri-Tech trade show at the NEC, where the ITAs arranged face-to-face meetings for potential suppliers with buyers with sales contracts achieved. • Businesses can access online information and support via www.great.gov.uk to create their own export plan, identify markets, explore finance options, register the business for opportunities and bid for contracts. • DBT support includes - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Export Training through the Export Academy great.gov.uk/exportacademy • Events, seminars, trade shows at events.great.gov.uk • ITA support – one-to-one support, export plan creation, training recommendations, introduction to specialist support (e.g. sector specific advice, complex markets, digital advisors, language and culture advisors, export champions, overseas network, introductions to export finance) • Getting answers to questions about selling into Europe and South Asia from the Export Support Service gov.uk/ask-export-support-team <p>At the end of the presentation JW invited questions from the group.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SS commented the My Export Plan is a great tool and wanted to know if it had good traction with businesses. JW replied that businesses tend to prefer a one-to-one dialogue and discussion with an advisor rather than self-serve through the website and this is how the ITAs can help by creating a plan specific to the business. JW did not have feedback on whether businesses drop out of the on-line tool due to the time it takes or because of lack of confidence. DBT could look at this to see if it could be 	

	<p>improved. IT suggested it would help to flag up to businesses in advance the information they will be asked for as they work through the form to make it quicker and easier to complete.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IT asked about support for services, as an important part of UK exports, as the case studies seemed to focus on goods. JW replied that services account for around 65% of total UK exports but agreed that the published case studies did focus on goods. It has been recognised locally that export support for services could be improved. DBT is talking to service sector businesses and planning networking events in localised settings to hear about their issues and how DBT can help them, with tentative dates from June. It has been recognised that more needs to be done to support services and is trying to do more on this. • KJ asked if JW could provide an up to date list of Export Champions. • DC asked for a copy of the presentation to be provided for circulation. <p>Actions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • JW to email and copy of the presentation to SJ to circulate to the group • JW to email a list of Export Champions to KJ <p>At the end of the discussion DC thanked JW for an informative presentation.</p>	
<p>8.</p>	<p>Marches LEP Update</p> <p>RL provided the following update:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the context of uncertainty about future funding for LEPs, the key message from the Marches LEP is ‘business as usual’ with a busy year of activities ahead. The LEP has funding for FY 23/24 from a range of sources, including government, and as a private limited company government cannot mandate what the LEP does. • The Board held a facilitated discussion on 24 April to consider the future of the LEP. It was agreed that the local authorities would consider whether they wished the LEP to continue and, if so, what role the LEP would play. A paper would then be taken to the LEP Board in July. If the local authorities decide not to support the continuation of the LEP, the Board will explore opportunities to generate commercial income. • The Key Account Management (KAM) and Careers Enterprise Company (CEC) contracts are in the pipeline, due imminently. The CEC contract would run to August 2024, beyond the LEP’s current core funding period. • The LEP is working with the Department for Education (DfE) to explore the potential of delivering a Skills Bootcamp to fill any gaps in existing provision. RL would welcome suggestions about skills gaps where there is no existing provision. <p>Action</p> <p>Group to email RL with any suggestions for new Skills Bootcamp provision to explore with DfE</p>	
<p>9.</p>	<p>Cities and Local Growth Unit Update</p> <p>AC reported that there was no update by exception.</p>	
<p>10.</p>	<p>PR/Marketing Update</p> <p>AB provided the following update:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Q4 activity focused on an access to finance campaign, as part of a year-long building your business campaign, to promote the remaining pots of ERDF funding particularly Business Growth Programme (BGP2) and Marches Small Equipment Grant (SEG) coming to an end. There was a push on the Marches Energy Grant (MEG) launched at the start of the year and already oversubscribed. BGP2 and MEG publicity was picked up by the BBC online which helped increase reach and improve SEO on the MGH website. Case studies and videos have been used to demonstrate successful support. Messaging around the events programme, energy support and skills bootcamps should also drive traffic. • Referring to the Q4 Marketing and PR Report, AB asked whether the group wished to continue to have the ranking against other West Midlands Growth Hubs 	

	<p>requested by the group over 2 years ago. Since then, some of the Growth Hubs have closed, others use a different operating model or are commercial enterprises making the indicator meaningless as a comparator, and still taking time to compile. PK agreed that reporting could be reviewed and cut back to put more money into direct support rather than reporting.</p> <p>There was a discussion about an awareness campaign around UKSPF. IT suggested it would be useful to raise awareness of the new funding to businesses. SJ noted that calls for UKSPF projects have been advertised on the tenders page of the MGH website and the business support schemes will be promoted on MGH as they come into delivery. MP reiterated that Shropshire Council is aiming to have schemes coming into delivery in the summer. AB cautioned against building expectations too soon and generating a large volume of enquiries before schemes go live as it puts pressure on resources, but suggested a Q&A on UKSPF could be looked at. MP agreed with the risks around raising expectations too soon but that a Q&A event could be a good idea. MS noted that businesses call the NBSH if there is a whiff of funding so to be careful about publishing anything before a scheme is launched – openness and transparency is key. IT asked what role the Steering Group should take in raising awareness and educating businesses to create a roadmap and promote the economic benefits of UKSPF to businesses. SSK agreed that general information could be put out without publishing specific deadlines. MP reminded the group that generic messages could be communicated but that the local authorities in the Marches have different allocations and have their own approach, priorities, offers and timelines.</p> <p>Action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BeBold/LEP to consider UKSPF comms 	
<p>11.</p>	<p>AOB</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The group agreed to MBS SG minutes being published on the MGH/LEP website • The next meeting on 15 July was noted. The option of in-person meetings will be discussed by DC with RL/MS offline. 	