

Heart of the South West Productivity Strategy Consultation Exeter & the Heart of Devon Economic Partnership



Following a series of presentations to members of the 4 Exeter & Heart of Devon (EHOD) authorities, there was a shared commitment to providing a joint response to reflect our economic geography.

In addition to the individual authority responses to this Draft Productivity Strategy consultation, our respective economic development teams and Exeter Science Park have discussed the overarching vision and objectives of the Strategy and the degree to which the work reflects the needs and priorities of our districts and wider functioning economic area.

The following key messages are offered by way of a joint response:

Consensus and Concern

Collectively, the target to double the size of our economy by 2036 is felt to be ambitious yet achievable and we applaud the HotSW LEP's continued focus on productivity. Our EHOD authorities cite examples of growth plans, significant investment and recent achievements which will all contribute to improved productivity beyond our political boundaries. Examples include the first occupiers of our speculative office building at Skypark, further collaborative development at Exeter Science Park, the new Met Office super computer and plans for developments to the East of Tiverton, Culm Garden Village and at Junction 27 of the M5.

Exeter City, East Devon, Mid Devon and Teignbridge District Councils agree that the three Strategic Objectives: Leadership and Knowledge; Connectivity and Infrastructure; and Working and Learning are the right areas of focus to raise productivity.

Whilst the high level focus of this work is acknowledged, there is concern within respective teams that the document's development could have benefitted from a greater degree of business engagement. A degree of disconnect has been articulated by some businesses (and of varying sizes), notably some attending the LEP Conference on 10 Nov. It will now be key to ensure as many businesses as possible are engaged and encouraged to review the strategy prior to adoption.

Connectivity and Infrastructure

Unsurprisingly, teams see Investment in broadband, access to WiFi and more reliable mobile data as essential to supporting economic growth. Superfast broadband and mobile connectivity is required if we are to attract the new tech and advanced manufacturing businesses we will need to boost local productivity. Likewise, it is an enabler of enterprise and self-employment to those in more deeply rural settlements with less access to public transport.

For broadband the focus needs to move away from coverage to take up, and to have greater scrutiny on how well 'commercially covered' areas are actually covered. Business digital take up needs to increase to enable an increase in productivity and it was felt the Strategy needs to be more aspirational in terms of Greater Exeter being a test bed for 5G.

Working and Learning

The focus on higher skills is welcome, but the importance of support to Primary and Secondary education providers was highlighted. Across EHOD, the aspirations of young residents need to be raised so that we are training local residents, rather than pulling in expertise from surrounding areas/nationally. Specific comments offered include:

- Schools should be allowed more opportunity to work with businesses to get students ready for work (and life), including communication skills, household budgeting, punctuality and enthusiasm for the job.
- The Strategy could include a mechanism to lobby Government on greater support for all levels of education.
- The Strategy for skills does not focus enough on vocation. Not every person can or wants to go through the traditional university approach. The emphasis on the knowledge economy only serves to reinforce a message that some skills are valued more than others.
- There is also a need to communicate well with local business at all levels, working with them to establish a relationship which will bring benefit to all involved, and most importantly, the lifelong benefits to the student.

Lastly, it was felt there should be greater 'future proofing' in the skills agenda. The growth in automation and mechanisation will see increases in productivity for businesses but less demand on the workforce. We would encourage a more proactive approach that seeks to work with industries and businesses to reskill workers displaced by advances in technology.

Golden opportunities and inclusive growth

Our collaborative approach to strategic development has underpinned our emerging Greater Exeter Strategic Plan, identifying and seeking to deliver strategic employment, housing and infrastructure across our area to 2040. Given both timeframes and focus, we will need to ensure this work, and activity to promote our own 4 key sectors (smart logistics; knowledge based industries; data analytics and environmental futures) is in synergy with the Productivity Strategy.

It is appreciated that many activities in the key sectors identified within the Productivity Strategy will take place in other parts of the LEP area. However, it is essential that all areas and all sectors have opportunities to bid into any funding opportunity and that these opportunities are not limited geographically or by size of business.

Inclusive growth would mean productivity within traditional sectors also needs to be included more clearly in the Strategy. Tourism, hospitality, health, social care, agriculture and public sector bodies. These sectors are key to so many of our local economies in the HotSW area.

Lastly, a common view was offered that more office and workspace is needed across our districts to support small businesses and for innovative / high tech businesses to become established and grow. New development at Exeter Science Park is without doubt an essential step forward given its centrality to our travel to work area. We are, however, minded that with the increased cost of transportation coupled with an increased rollout of digital connectivity, more rural areas of our geography should not be overlooked.

Natural capital

Across our shared economic geography, our approach to growth and improved productivity has maintained an awareness of our environment as an economic driver. This is not just in terms of our more traditional rural economy sectors, but as an attractor for inward investment to those seeking the benefits of strong road, rail, air and digital connectivity, good access to markets, a highly skilled labour force as well as the wider wellbeing and leisure benefits that our beautiful country and coastal landscape offers.

It was felt that the Draft Strategy is weak on its statements about natural capital which is not simply about leisure activities and life choices. The quality of the environment across EHOD sets us apart as an exemplar location. It needs to be made clear that our natural capital a focus for leisure activities and the tourism industry it has an economic value in its own right – through agriculture and the food and drink industry, through micro energy generation linking to energy storage technologies, and electric vehicles, through environmental sciences and consultancy, through green construction and others. Many of these opportunities are not yet being fully harnessed. Moreover, the EHOD authorities recognise that there is a need to improve sustainable transport models from rural and coastal communities into Exeter - such as Devon Metro, bus routes, and dedicated cycling routes.

Delivery

We welcome the recognition given in the Industrial Strategy white paper to the emerging environmental sciences research cluster in Exeter with the combined research strengths of the university and the Met Office. Similarly, the government's commitment to expand the specialist maths school model pioneered by Exeter University is an acknowledgement of best practice following from focussed collaboration.

We have achieved substantial growth, and with our focussed development strategies, have established important in roads into increasing productivity more widely. Across our Growth Point, and now within our Enterprise Zone, we have demonstrated the benefit of investment in infrastructure provision to promote both growth and productivity in high GVA sectors and we welcome the opportunity to deliver more through further investment in this exemplar EHOD location.

As a principle driver of productivity, investments in physical capital, such as the passing loop on the Exeter/Waterloo line, improvements to the A30/303 and the provision of workspace offer clear opportunities to spread wealth. The joint approach we have taken to Strategic Planning with our neighbouring authorities presents a timely opportunity to engage with you in these and other potential Delivery Plan initiatives.

We look forward to supporting the development of the Delivery Plan in due course.

Robert Murray, Economic Development Manager, East Devon District Council
Victoria Hatfield, Economy & Enterprise Manager, Exeter City Council
John Bodley-Scott, Economic Development Team Leader, Mid Devon District Council
Neil Blaney, Economy Manager, Teignbridge District Council
Dr Sally Basker, CEO, Exeter Science Park