



## Economic Recovery Plan 2021-22

DRAFT V4

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## Introduction and Overview

This plan considers actions to be undertaken by the Marches LEP in response to the economic downturn associated with the Covid-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdowns.

It is predicated on the Marches Strategic Economic Plan<sup>1</sup> (SEP) and supporting evidence base<sup>2</sup> finalised in 2019 which was developed with partners to demonstrate our informed view of our local economy and a shared vision of our priorities.

It also draws upon our draft Local Industrial Strategy<sup>3</sup> (LIS) and evidence base<sup>4</sup> which set out how the Marches can build on its strengths and areas of competitive advantage to ensure a balanced and inclusive economy for the future. This demonstrates how, with the right investment, the Marches can contribute to the UK's shift to clean growth and zero carbon delivered through productivity improvements in local businesses and new opportunities for our communities. Our draft LIS identifies major growth opportunities to be developed in:

- Ensuring future competitiveness and success in high-tech, energy efficient manufacturing and engineering
- Securing the future food supply chain and achieving modern and environmentally sustainable production, processing, packaging and distribution through agri-tech innovation
- Developing world-renowned excellence in cyber security and resilience

The recent economic shocks have had a profound effect across the Marches. They have exacerbated some of our deep-rooted challenges around low GVA, an ageing workforce and the need for investment in our physical and digital infrastructure.

We have witnessed a significant increase in unemployment, particularly in our younger age groups and those over fifty. This reinforces the need for collective action to promote employment opportunities and to encourage investment in reskilling and upskilling.

Through the Marches Growth Hub partnership, we will help our business communities plan for the future and encourage businesses from all sectors, including those most severely affected by the economic downturn, to consider their next steps and how to make the most of potential opportunities.

The Marches LEP will continue to work tirelessly to articulate our area's needs, challenges and opportunities across Government departments in order to attract funding which supports inclusive, clean growth for the benefit of our businesses, residents and communities.



Mandy Thorn MBE DL  
Marches LEP Chair



Gill Hamer DL  
Marches LEP Chief Executive

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.marcheslep.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Marches-LEP-Strategic-Economic-Plan-2019.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.marcheslep.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Marches-SEP-Evidence-Base.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.marcheslep.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Marches-Local-Industrial-Strategy-Final-draft-20.12.19.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.marcheslep.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Marches-LIS-Evidence-Base-Final-version-December-2019.pdf>

## Supporting Recovery and Restart

This economic recovery plan seeks to identify immediate actions that that LEP and partners could take to focus on recovery and restart. The Marches LEP Board and team have strived to maximise all available funding and delivery flexibilities to direct investment and activities towards recovery.

The Government’s recently published Build Back Better - Plan for Growth<sup>5</sup> sets out a departure from its Industrial Strategy which means that the Marches LIS will not be recognised by central government. However, the breadth of knowledge and understanding gained during the local industrial strategy consultation and development process will not be wasted. With a growing sector focus on cyber, IT, digital and technology businesses and the explicit government commitment to supporting the transition to net zero, the Marches region has effectively positioned itself to reimagine and restart its economy in this new economic environment.

All Marches LEP funded projects and pipeline projects have been reviewed to establish potential areas for additional investment that will support recovery. Indeed, following the request from central government to submit ‘shovel ready’ infrastructure projects, the Marches LEP was successful in bidding for £14 million Getting Building Fund for new projects to drive economic activity.

The five foundations of productivity<sup>6</sup> provide a framework when considering the interventions that will help enable the Marches region to recover and restart.

Business	People	Place	Innovation	Infrastructure
Understanding our sectors and business base, entrepreneurialism and employment demand. The ambition is to become ‘the best place to start and grow a business’.	Population, demography, skills, economic activity and inactivity. The government ambition is to ‘generate good jobs and greater earning power for all’.	Understanding how a prosperous place can not only drive productivity but also deliver inclusive growth across the whole geography.	Investment in R&D, new product and service development. The ability to create new ideas and deploy them is essential to becoming ‘the world’s most innovative economy’.	Highlighting the major infrastructure in the county, both physical and digital. This is key to understanding the conditions that hinder business performance.

We will continue to use the economic indicators contained in our Performance Management Framework<sup>7</sup> to monitor progress made towards achieving the ambitions outlined within our SEP. Consideration will be given to changes required to this framework in light of the economic conditions.

<sup>5</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/968403/PfG\\_Final\\_Web\\_Accessible\\_Version.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/968403/PfG_Final_Web_Accessible_Version.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/industrial-strategy-the-foundations/industrial-strategy-the-5-foundations>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.marcheslep.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Marches-LEP-Annual-Economic-Review-2019.pdf>

## Business Environment

The Marches LEP area has a supportive business environment. The Marches Growth Hub, the gateway to business support, enjoys an enviable reputation and offers a wide range of support for businesses at all stages of their development. This support has been flexed to tailor for specific business sectors, for example the Visitor Economy, facing immediate challenges and provision has been shifted online to allow continued delivery of the Marches Growth Hub's event programme and access to more focussed support.

The medium to long-term impact on the Marches business community remains under review. The **estimated** number of businesses directly affected by the third UK national lockdown (January 2021) is detailed below. The table demonstrates business activities that were mandated to close<sup>8</sup> by the restrictions and an estimated number of businesses affected within each local authority area across the Marches.<sup>9</sup> It does not include other businesses that were indirectly affected by lockdown restrictions or wider economic issues.

*Table 1: Estimated number of Temporary Business Closures due to Covid-19 Restrictions*

Estimated No. of Temporary Closures by Business Activity	Herefordshire, County of	Shropshire	Telford and Wrekin	The Marches	England
<b>TOTAL BUSINESSES</b>	<b>10,350</b>	<b>15,870</b>	<b>5,560</b>	<b>31,780</b>	<b>2,390,970</b>
<b>TOTAL BUSINESSES MANDATED TO CLOSE/UNABLE TO OPERATE AS NORMAL</b>	<b>1,625</b>	<b>2,730</b>	<b>980</b>	<b>5,325</b>	<b>417,845</b>
NON-ESSENTIAL SHOPS	545	875	315	1,720	137,545
PUBS & BARS	185	350	100	630	31,600
RESTAURANTS	255	520	185	955	88,855
PERSONAL CARE (HAIRDRESSERS ETC)	200	400	170	775	58,750
GYMS & LEISURE FACILITIES	75	100	25	195	14,385
ACCOMMODATION & TOURISM	115	140	30	285	16,900
ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT	55	75	25	170	21,415
EDUCATION FACILITIES (INC. SCHOOLS <sup>10</sup> )	195	270	130	595	48,395
<b>BUSINESSES CLOSED AS A % OF ALL BUSINESSES</b>	<b>15.7%</b>	<b>17.2%</b>	<b>17.6%</b>	<b>16.8%</b>	<b>17.5%</b>

Source: Black Country EIU Analysis of ONS UK Business Counts (2020)<sup>11</sup>

In the Marches, an estimated **5,325** businesses had to temporarily close, or not open as usual due to Covid-19 restrictions. The data suggests that **16.8% of all businesses in the Marches were temporarily closed** by the third lockdown restrictions.

Recovery in these sectors will depend on the duration of restrictions, consumer confidence (both economic and social) and in businesses identifying alternative routes to market or new ways of working.

<sup>8</sup> In this analysis, "closure" is defined by the inability to open as normal; it is noted that many businesses in the business activity categories will operate - for example through online/click and collect.

<sup>9</sup> The business activity categories have been developed via sector definitions through 5-digit Standard Industrial Classification ('SIC') codes, assessing the ability for businesses in each industrial classification to open as normal. The resulting business activities are deemed to reasonably reflect all sectors that must close because of the restrictions, but do not reflect all individual businesses attached to the activities and SIC codes.

<sup>10</sup> While the majority of schools are not businesses, they are included within education facilities also to demonstrate the scale of closures in this sector.

<sup>11</sup> ONS UK Business Counts data reflects The UK Business: activity, size and location dataset released in September 2020, providing a snapshot of the of the Inter-Departmental Business Register (IDBR) taken in March 2020. The dataset provides business count data by local authority and LEP across 5-digit SIC codes, allowing for sector analysis across geographies. Please note, as the latest data reflects 2019-2020, the impacts from Coronavirus on business counts is not captured.

### Immediate actions (April 2020 – March 2021)

- Updated [www.marchesgrowthhub.co.uk](http://www.marchesgrowthhub.co.uk) with all government-related advice and worked with local authorities and other partners to communicate support available
- Convened Economic Impact Group to gather information from key stakeholders, including business representative organisations, to feed into senior civil servants and Ministers
- Launched Digital Strategy to highlight support available to businesses to digitalise their operations
- Worked with partners to deliver additional support for businesses through Marches Growth Hub:
  - Developed virtual events programme to maintain contact with businesses and highlight support available
  - Developed and delivered the new European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) Covid-19 Small Business Recovery Grant programme using £630k additional funding
  - Developed and delivered additional adviser support including 1:1 sessions with specialists, having secured £257k additional funding
  - Developed and delivered Peer Networks programme having accessed £75k additional funding
  - Established and implemented additional advice and support services for businesses to address the end of EU transition period having secured £136k additional funding through working with the WM Growth Hub cluster
- Refocused Inward Investment activities to support the region's existing foreign-owned companies to safeguard jobs within and identify additional business investment from UK-based foreign owned companies
- Worked with the Department for International Trade (DIT) to establish a food and drink cluster to support businesses in finding new international markets and increasing export.

### Medium term actions (April 2021 – March 2022)

- Advocate for additional and longer-term funding for Marches Growth Hub services
- Reconfigure the Marches Growth Hub Steering Group into a broader Business Support Policy Steering Group to respond to new economic situations and proposed government reform of provision
- Consider opportunities for new/revised provision including:
  - Increased start-up support in response to an increase in unemployment levels and growth in business start-up/self-employment
  - Opportunities to flex provision, e.g. to concentrate on jobs safeguarded or productivity improvements rather than jobs created outputs.
  - Increase support for social enterprise development
  - Engagement with sectors most affected by the lockdown, including the leisure, cultural and creative sectors
  - Engagement with emerging sectors<sup>12</sup> that have high future economic and productivity growth potential, including environmental technologies (low carbon environmental goods and services)<sup>13</sup>, cyber security, agritech and innovative health and social care
- Continue to work with the Marches Access to Finance Forum to understand operating context and support available including:
  - Replacement for Enterprise Finance Guarantee
  - The role of business and professional services sector in advocating the Marches Growth Hub
- Support businesses in developing new markets, both local/national and international in line with the Government's vision of Global Britain

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.marcheslep.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Marches-LEP-Strategic-Economic-Plan-2019.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Marches LEP Low Carbon Environmental Goods and Services Market Snapshot Midlands Energy Hub

- Share feedback from local businesses with the LEP Network and Ministers on the challenges faced by businesses in dealing with new trading arrangements post EU Exit
- Support the LEP Network's work with government to understand the forthcoming UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and options for local delivery of the Community Renewal Fund and Levelling Up Fund.

## People

The 2019 SEP outlined that the Marches had *'a tight labour market with almost full employment ... our firms risk struggling to recruit'*. Since then, the area has seen a fall in employment and a significant increase in unemployment with percentage changes in some months higher than the national average.

The Marches had 20,285 claimants in February 2021, an increase of 5.7% (+1,085) from January 2021; the UK increased by 5.3%. The Marches has 10,735 more claimants compared to March 2020. This is an increase of 112.4% - matching the UK average increase.

Overall for the Marches, the number of claimants as a percentage of residents aged 16 years and over was 3.5% compared to 5.0% for UK in February 2021.

In February 2021, there were 4,095 youth claimants in the Marches, an increase of 4.2% (+165) from January 2021; for the UK there was an increase of 3.9%. The Marches has 2,070 more youth claimants compared with March 2020. This is an increase of 102.2%, while the UK increased by 112.3%.

Overall, for the Marches the number of youth claimants as a percentage of residents aged 16 – 24 years old was 6.5% compared to 7.3% for the UK in February 2021.

*Table 2: Claimant numbers and change for selected months*

Local Authority	Feb 2020	Mar 2020	Jan 2021	Feb 2021	% Change (Feb 20 – Feb 21)	% Change (Mar 20 - Feb 21)	% Change (Jan 21 -Feb 21)
Herefordshire, County of	2,045	2,110	4,435	4,825	135.9%	128.7%	8.8%
Shropshire	3,840	4,010	8,255	8,745	127.7%	118.1%	5.9%
Telford and Wrekin	3,325	3,430	6,510	6,710	101.8%	95.6%	3.1%
<b>The Marches</b>	<b>9,210</b>	<b>9,550</b>	<b>19,200</b>	<b>20,285</b>	<b>120.2%</b>	<b>112.4%</b>	<b>5.7%</b>
UK	1,255,770	1,268,620	2,558,550	2,694,760	114.6%	112.4%	5.3%

In addition, provisional figures show there were 41,700 posts furloughed as of February 2021 (although the rate of furlough is lower than the West Midlands and UK average).

When compared to 31 January 2021, the number of employments furloughed in the Marches had decreased by 1,600 people (-3.7%) more slowly than the UK rate.

For the Marches, there was a slightly higher percentage of females furloughed, 15.7% (23,500) compared to males, 12.5% (18,200).

Across the Marches area, on 28 February 2021, the sector with the highest number of employments furloughed was the accommodation and food services sector at 9,440, followed by wholesale and retail repair of motor vehicles at 9,070. This was followed by manufacturing at 3,330 employments furloughed.



Table 3: Employments furloughed, eligible employments and the take-up rate for the Marches area by gender on 28 February 2021

Local Authority	Female			Male			Total employments furloughed	Total eligible employments	Total take up-rate
	Female employments furloughed	Female eligible employments	Female take up-rate	Male employments furloughed	Male eligible employments	Male take up-rate			
Herefordshire, County of (UA)	6,500	40,900	15.9%	4,900	38,900	12.6%	11,400	79,800	14.3%
Shropshire UA	11,600	68,200	17.0%	8,600	64,800	13.3%	20,200	133,000	15.2%
Telford and Wrekin UA	5,400	40,700	13.3%	4,700	41,900	11.2%	10,100	82,500	12.2%
<b>The Marches</b>	<b>23,500</b>	<b>149,800</b>	<b>15.7%</b>	<b>18,200</b>	<b>145,600</b>	<b>12.5%</b>	<b>41,700</b>	<b>295,300</b>	<b>14.1%</b>
West Midlands	189,400	1,267,500	14.9%	173,300	1,284,800	13.5%	362,700	2,552,300	14.2%
United Kingdom	2,244,900	15,170,100	14.8%	2,144,700	15,005,800	14.3%	4,650,200	30,175,900	15.4%

Training, re-skilling and redeploying the significant number of people who will become redundant during 2021 when the government's furlough scheme ends, loans are repaid and businesses find they may not be able to operate profitably in the new working environment, will need careful planning and coordination. It will be essential to make the most of the funding and provision available.

Support will be sought to enable employers to identify and articulate their priority skill requirements for business recovery and growth. This should include encouraging providers to work with businesses in the design and development of bespoke programmes to meet employer needs and considering new ways of delivering sector-specific skills and qualifications.

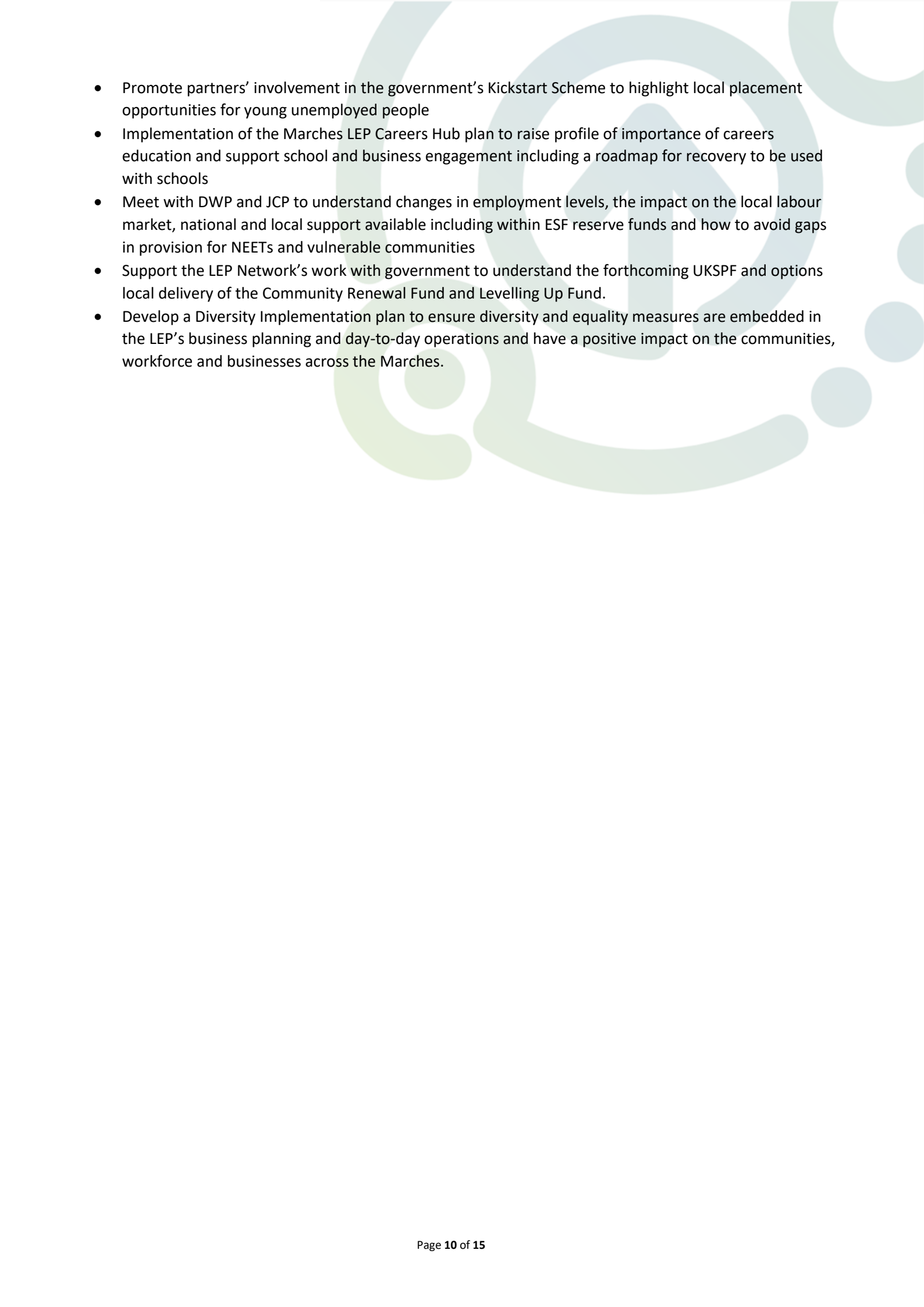
#### Immediate actions (April 2020 – March 2021)

- Convened Economic Impact Group to gather feedback from across the Marches geography and feed back to Ministers, senior civil servants and across LEP Network channels
- Support available under the HM Treasury Plan for Jobs<sup>14</sup> highlighted within Business Recovery Week and the LEP's [Marches Work and Training Tool](#) launched
- Worked with Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Jobcentre Plus (JCP) and European Social Fund (ESF) projects to direct support to areas of most need and promoted support available
- Provided access to data and research, including the Skills Advisory Panel (SAP) analytical toolkit, for partners to highlight understanding of local economy and provide an evidence base for funding bids
- Secured additional funding through the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) project to begin the development of the Marches Careers Hub
- Identified a Diversity and Social Inclusion Champion at Board Level

#### Medium term actions (April 2021 – March 2022)

- Develop the Marches Local Skills Report, as required by Department for Education, to provide overview of evidence base and priority areas for intervention to support economic recovery through skills development
- Work with Further Education leads and SAP members to understand implication of Skills for Jobs: Lifelong Learning for Opportunity and Growth and its contribution to economic recovery
- Work with SAP members to raise the profile of growth sectors, including those within and outside the environmental technologies sector which can directly support the transition to net zero

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-plan-for-jobs-documents/a-plan-for-jobs-2020>

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- Promote partners' involvement in the government's Kickstart Scheme to highlight local placement opportunities for young unemployed people
  - Implementation of the Marches LEP Careers Hub plan to raise profile of importance of careers education and support school and business engagement including a roadmap for recovery to be used with schools
  - Meet with DWP and JCP to understand changes in employment levels, the impact on the local labour market, national and local support available including within ESF reserve funds and how to avoid gaps in provision for NEETs and vulnerable communities
  - Support the LEP Network's work with government to understand the forthcoming UKSPF and options local delivery of the Community Renewal Fund and Levelling Up Fund.
  - Develop a Diversity Implementation plan to ensure diversity and equality measures are embedded in the LEP's business planning and day-to-day operations and have a positive impact on the communities, workforce and businesses across the Marches.

## Place

The Covid-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdowns have affected all areas within the Marches region. They will have disproportionately impacted some communities more than others, particularly those which have historically experienced higher levels of deprivation. They have also highlighted the importance of community connections and of the local natural environment.

It is largely a rural area, with the most developed areas located in Telford, Hereford and Shrewsbury. It has three Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The largest is Shropshire Hills which is the expanse between Bishop's Castle and Ludlow. The other two are the Malvern Hills which crosses over into Worcestershire and Wye Valley which extends over Gloucestershire. Telford Town Park has previously been voted the UK's Best Park.<sup>15</sup>

These natural assets make the Marches an extremely attractive area offering a high quality of life and excellent visitor experience. They contribute to the UK's natural capital, including natural resources, biodiversity and ecosystem services, and the health and wellbeing benefits of green space. Harnessing opportunities for investment in natural capital and green innovation is a significant area of future development for our rural areas. Demand from the corporate sector is growing for ecosystem markets, including national carbon markets, regional ecosystem markets, and green finance<sup>16</sup>.

We will continue to emphasise the economic and social importance of the land-based sector, our rural businesses and communities.

### Immediate actions (April 2020 – March 2021)

- Convened Economic Impact Group to gather feedback from across the Marches geography (including rural and farm business information) and feed back to Ministers, senior civil servants and across LEP Network channels
- Secured £14 million of Getting Building Fund to support the recovery of the regional economy including the Telford & Wrekin Stronger Communities project
- Held Business Recovery Week to raise profile of investment by LEP in projects across the Marches geography, including the Integrated Construction Wetlands in Herefordshire and repurposing of Shrewsbury's Pride Hill retail complex to support strategic town centre development plans
- Completing delivery of Local Growth Fund projects to support place-making agenda and maximise impact within current investment programme
- £1.58 million Marches Investment Fund granted for projects developed by local authorities in partnership with their Business Board to support strategic and tourism businesses following the impact of flooding and Covid-19 and to encourage footfall into market towns and high streets upon lifting of lockdown restrictions
- Made the Marches Visitor Economy Strategy available to support local authority tourism teams in working with associations to consider opportunities for the domestic tourism sector
- Delivered ERDF Covid-19 Small Business Recovery Grant scheme for visitor economy sector (£215k of £630k allocation) to support tourism businesses
- Delivered DIT Key Account Management project to support foreign owned businesses in order to safeguard jobs and supported the local authorities' inward investment teams in promoting the Marches area

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<sup>15</sup> Marches LEP Local Industrial Strategy Evidence Base

<sup>16</sup> <https://ncl.ac.uk/WhatisthecontributionoruralenterprisetoLevellingUpandhowcanthisbefurtherenabled.pdf>

- Supported the local authorities' economic recovery groups, including investing in EMSI tool for local authority data teams
- Supported the development of Towns Fund investment plans for Telford and Hereford with business boards, local authorities and other stakeholders to build on existing investment and contribute to place-based regeneration
- Digital Strategy launched to promote the Marches as being at the forefront of changes in how people live and work using new technologies
- Outline ideas for cross border projects with Growing Mid Wales partners developed ahead of the Comprehensive Spending Review

#### Medium term actions (April 2021 – March 2022)

- Continue to work with partners to advocate for area, using LEP funded data and research to demonstrate a deep understanding of our economy and local issues, including the changing nature of our high streets and the importance of our market towns
- Identify inward investment opportunities linked to remote/new ways of working and work with DIT to understand the role of the new Office for Investment and how this, alongside DIT's global network, can benefit inward investment into the Marches
- Continue discussions with Growing Mid Wales partners to identify potential projects for joint working.
- Continue to work with the River Severn Partnership to understand opportunities for the Marches economic growth projects
- Continue collaboration with the Marches Nature Partnership to respond to national policy development, to shape future rural support programmes and to consider economic opportunities related to the transition to net zero
- With partners, gather information on the likely local economic impact of changes to changes to farm subsidies following EU Exit
- Understand the findings of the review into the Green Book: Central Government Guidance on Appraisal and Evaluation and how this will help the Marches LEP advocate for the Marches and its specific social and economic features thus ensuring that our rural areas receive an equitable and proportionate share of future funding
- Support the LEP Network's work with government to understand the forthcoming Levelling Up Fund, the UKSPF and options for local delivery.

## Innovation

Investment on innovation within businesses, spend on research and development and take up of available funding and tax credits in the Marches is historically lower than in other places. The Marches ranks as the second lowest LEP for business expenditure on R&D at around £46m, or £69 per person, and the fourth lowest LEP for Innovate UK funding.<sup>17</sup>

However, information recently released from BEIS<sup>18</sup> highlighted Marches businesses shown as being more innovative than the national average during 2016-2018, ranking 9<sup>th</sup> out of the 38 English LEPs.

The economic downturn may act as a driver for innovation, product, service and supply chain development. The Marches Growth Hub and the LEP's Higher Education (HE) Group have a critical role to play here.

### Immediate actions (April 2020 – March 2021)

- Convened Economic Impact Group to gather feedback from businesses and key institutions to demonstrate how Covid-19 had led to new operating practices including speeding up the digitalisation of businesses
- Focused on delivery of Local Growth Fund innovation projects, including Midlands Centre for Cyber Security, NI Park, NMITE and Oswestry Innovation Park to add to asset base
- Confirmed investment in the development of the Shell Store incubation centre through Marches Investment Fund
- Additional support for businesses delivered through Marches Growth Hub:
  - Delivery of 'virtual' events programme online to satisfaction of participants
  - ERDF Covid-19 Small Business Recovery grant programme (£630k) delivered to support businesses in adopting new ways of working
  - Additional adviser support including 1:1 sessions delivered online
- The LEP's HE Group considered approaches to online delivery to best meet student needs
- Digital Strategy launched to highlight key assets and support available to businesses to drive digital innovation and digital adoption
- Development of Energy Strategy working group to co-ordinate priorities for delivery and implementation and highlight opportunities for innovation in energy production and storage

### Medium term actions (April 2021 – March 2022)

- Broaden the scope of the Business Support Steering Group to include a stronger innovation focus
- Consideration of opportunities to develop local supply chains, encourage re-shoring and promote diversification
- Identify ways of building links between UK Research and Innovation and the Marches LEP's HE Group
- Finalising the Energy Strategy Steering Group action plan to confirm priority strategic actions and how these will contribute to both the local authorities' net zero targets and a green recovery
- Support the LEP Network's work with government to understand the forthcoming UKSPF and options for local delivery of the Community Renewal Fund and Levelling Up Fund.

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<sup>17</sup> Innovate UK 2020

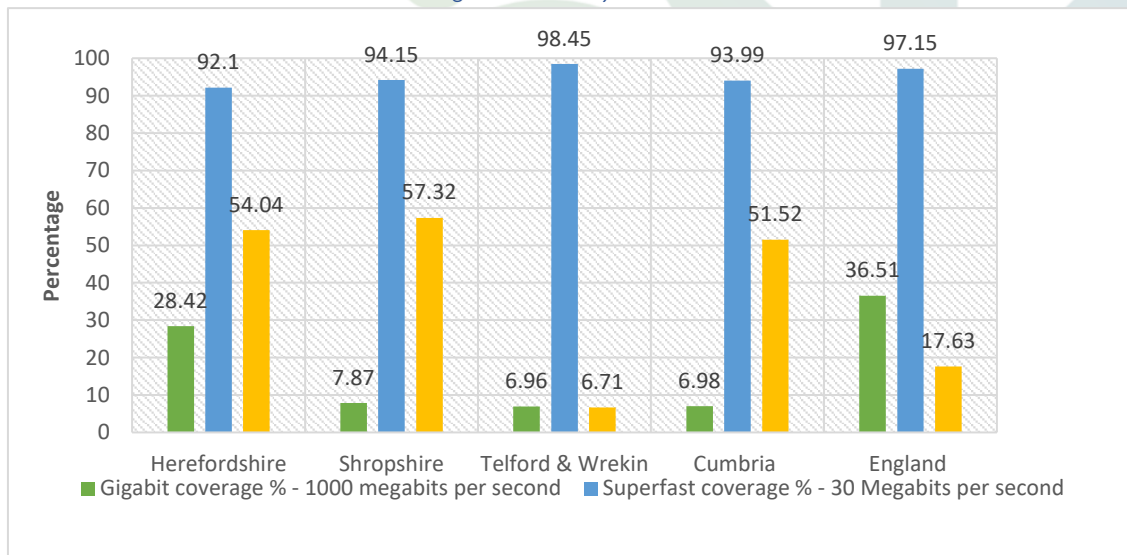
<sup>18</sup> UK Innovation Survey 2019

## Infrastructure

Marches LEP Local Growth Funding is supporting infrastructure development, both digital and physical.

Good progress has been made towards the target of 96% coverage for high-speed broadband but coverage remains uneven and digital connectivity remains a challenge for some businesses and communities. Targeted investment in the Marches digital infrastructure is now needed more than ever.

Table 4: Marches LEP Broadband 2021 coverage vs. Rurality <sup>19</sup>



Funding secured under Getting Building Fund is unlocking commercial space and housing sites and the Marches Energy Strategy is supporting the delivery of new programmes to support clean growth and sustainability.

### Immediate actions (April 2020 – March 2021)

- Focus on delivery of Local Growth Fund projects to drive strategic infrastructure projects
- Launched Getting Building Fund, commissioned and contracted capital projects to value of £14 million including development of Oswestry Innovation Park, NMITE investment on Hereford Enterprise Zone and the Tackling Fuel Poverty through Carbon Innovation projects to support local economic recovery (£7 million of expenditure allocated to 2020/21)
- Supported the development of Towns Fund investment plans for Telford and Hereford with business boards, local authorities and other stakeholders
- The Marches LEP's Digital Strategy launched in Business Recovery Week to highlight the importance of connectivity (particularly in rural areas where it is a critical enabling technology)
- Promotion of Broadband grants delivered by local authority partners to drive connectivity
- Development of Energy Strategy working group action plan to co-ordinate priorities for delivery and implementation, including promotion of new national and regional schemes
- Providing resource local authorities' commitment to zero-carbon through the Senior Regional Energy Officer funded post
- Outline ideas for cross-border projects with Growing Mid Wales partners developed ahead of the Comprehensive Spending Review

### Medium term actions (April 2021 – March 2022)

- Digital Leads to continue working with partners to understand Building Digital UK (BDUK) procurement, outcomes of 5G pilot and associated opportunities for the Marches area

<sup>19</sup> 'Think Broadband' statistics January 2021

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- Continue to work with the River Severn Partnership to understand opportunities for infrastructure development and economic growth projects
  - Understand local opportunities associated with the Government's Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution, the Energy White Paper and the National Infrastructure Strategy and shape areas for intervention
  - Work with Transport Officers Group members to support Midlands Connect's response to the Union Connectivity Review and the development of Building Back Better (Midlands Connect Budget Submission)
  - Support the LEP Network's work with government to understand the forthcoming Levelling Up Fund and options for delivery
  - Identify an Energy Champion at Board Level to drive a strategic approach to delivery of the LEP's Energy Action Plan and opportunities associated with the transition to net zero.