

**Minutes of the Meeting of the Cross-Party group for  
North Wales  
Convened by Teams on 9<sup>th</sup> February 2024 12:00 to 13:32**

**Present Senedd Members:**

Mark Isherwood (Chair), Carolyn Thomas, Sam Rowlands,  
Gareth Davies

**Senedd Support staff:**

Rhys Hughes for Rhun Ap Iorwerth, Daniel Starkey for Darren Millar

**Local Authority Leaders and Representatives:** Cllr. Jason McLellan  
(Denbighshire), Cllr Ian Roberts (Flintshire), Cllr Charley McCoubrey (Conwy), Cllr  
Gary Pritchard (Ynys Mon)

**Guest speakers: Dr. Michael Roberts, School of Ocean Sciences, Bangor  
University**

**Ashley Rogers, North Wales Mersey Dee Business Council**

**Sarah Reardon, Network Rail**

**Alwen Williams, Ambition North Wales**

**WLGA Officials:** Chris Llewelyn (Chief Executive), Lucy Sweet (Group Secretary),  
Luke Nicholas (Corporate Policy Officer), Evelyn James (Support Officer), Tim  
Peppin (Director of Regeneration)

**Translation:** Bethan Mair Evans

**Actions agreed:**

- Write collectively to the Secretary of State for Transport Mark Harper MP re. development funding for North Wales Main Line Electrification.
- In due course support Dr Rogers' call to Welsh Government for a national Marine Mapping programme.

**1. Welcome from the Chair and Introductions:** The Chair opened the meeting and made introductions.

**2. Minutes of the Previous Meeting held on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2023 and Matters Arising.** The note of the previous meetings was accepted as a true and accurate record.

**3. Members were asked to elect Luke Nicholas as Secretary in place of Lucy Sweet** of the WLGA for the coming year and no other nominations were put forward. Luke Nicholas was elected as Secretary.

**4. Presentation by Mr. Ashley Rogers, CEO North Wales Merseyside Dee Business Council (NWMDBC) on the Flintshire Wrexham Investment Zone.** Slide presentation.

- Ashley Rogers outlined the history of the campaign to secure a Wrexham and Flintshire Investment Zone (IZ). The NWMDBC established a steering group. The

initial emphasis was to promote the IZ concept in Wales and campaign for one in Wrexham/Flintshire.

- Aim was for £80m over 5 years. In July 2023 things changed dramatically and the campaign kicked off in earnest, meeting over 40 organisations including major employers, Councils (briefed council leaders), higher/further education providers etc.
- Advanced Manufacturing (AM) and Creative & Digital (C&D) identified as the two priority sectors. C&D is not mentioned in the policy guidelines in England but is seen as a strength for the region.
- AM is a huge sector in the region with a range of important companies ranging from aircraft to recycling-manufacturing.
- Creative & Digital includes Theatr Clwyd, Wrexham University, Games Talent Wales, and new businesses moving in including links to Workerbee. This is due to local talent and the awareness globally around Wrexham FC. Harnessing this added value is an opportunity.
- There is also an intersection point between the two, e.g University and Unimac working together using VR for training.
- Further activity on the campaign included an expanded steering group, a cross-party political briefing for MSs and MPs in September 2023, a look at potential tax sites, business growth retention sites, and existing investment that might be leveraged or pulled in by the IZ which came in at £1.7bn potentially. The campaign also looked at mapping deprivation and centres of employment for the two priority sectors. An IZ could connect people to training and jobs (including at Wrexham Industrial Estate and Deeside Industrial Park).
- Activity following the September 2023 meeting included large-scale engagement event at Theatr Clwyd. Press coverage around the priority sectors.
- Engagement with the Economy Minister in October 2023. Followed by Welsh Government announcement of support for IZs, subject to announcement by UK Government on funding.
- Moved on to lobbying UK Government and Senedd representatives.
- Autumn Statement was positive but on Advanced Manufacturing only. However, £160m over 10 years was pledged for the IZ, which was a longer period than originally expected.
- In summary: the aim of building an offer and gaining IZ status has been successful.
- LAs/CJC now involved at the business case level.
- **Discussion:**
- Members discussed the sectors, and Mark Isherwood asked how the zone would benefit the wider region.
- We are not there yet with Creative & Digital, although we are continuing engagement with UK and Welsh Governments and will have to push for it.
- On the regional question, the IZ will complement the freeport in the west and will be led by the CJC which can dovetail it into other policies. There is nothing conflicting about the vision in the north-east with the north-west's interests from a business perspective.
- Carolyn Thomas believed that the strengths of the sectors should be promoted with statistics and data and how the IZ will add value. She noted how digital connectivity and broadband are vital and need improvement, and that this requires investment

including from the UK Government. Promoting the IZ should also include a diverse range of people/supporters. Noted that weather at the engagement event prevented this.

- Ashley Rogers agreed on the importance of Creative & Digital. Wider work needed with Creative Wales.
- Cllr McLellan was keen to see any further work on regional impact and working with Ambition North Wales/CJC.
- Sam Rowlands asked about the role of NWMDBC now the IZ has been transferred over to the CJC. Business needs to retain a strong voice. Ashley said a sub-committee will exist from the CJC and the Business Council would like a defined and decision-making role on this. This is still to be decided.
- Alwen Williams (Ambition NW/CJC) came in and noted they are in a process of engagement with UK Government over the business case. There is no upfront funding for developing the business case. She has agreed with the CJC that some funding can be put forward through their budget to go through the gateway process to develop the business case plan. The mechanics of the private sector role in decision-making remain to be worked out. While the campaign was ongoing, the government side (UK/Welsh) drew up data on travel routes to help achieve the decision. This worked alongside the campaign to secure the IZ.
- Ashley Rogers finished by welcoming the cross-party political support from North Wales reps, saying it was vital to the decision.
- Members were ready to work further to support the IZ.

#### **5. Presentation by Dr Mike Roberts of Bangor University on the Prince Madog research Vessel (slides available for circulation):**

- Dr Roberts highlighted the work of the School of Ocean Sciences on marine mapping, delivering £3m worth of mapping activities across the Welsh seabed, working with major marine organisations. Part of £50m in total over the whole Seams project from 2021-2030.
- School is strategically placed to carry out these activities, particularly using Prince Madog. The Marine Centre Wales was opened in 2016 and demonstrates the school's strong location and facilities. End of EU funding means that the centre has not necessarily been populated with collaborative projects and activities, but there is a desire to repopulate it through the mapping activity and other initiatives.
- A fantastic asset, used as a teaching platform and for commercial activities with partners. This includes investment in hydrogen to modernise and improve the vessel's sustainability.
- The vessel's range was outlined, as were its survey locations and various other activities. It contributes to understanding the seabed environment, for infrastructure and other users.
- Proposed that there be a national marine mapping programme for Wales as we have the expertise, capacity, and equipment. A strategic, demand-led programme that would replace ad hoc activity. And a better understanding of the near-shore

environment, where data is scarce. This might cost £130k-160k, and Dr Roberts will be making the case to the Welsh Government.

- **Discussion:**
- Group agreed to support the call for a national marine mapping programme.
- Some further discussion on commercial mapping.

## **6. Transport: Presentation by Sarah Reardon, Head of Strategy Network Rail Wales: update on the £1 billion North Wales Main Line Electrification announcement:**

- Following the £1bn North Wales Main Line Electrification announcement, Network Rail are producing a paper at DFT's request.
- Looking at cost of strategic alignment, quick wins, regional connectivity and rolling stock strategy. Governance and assurance also key particularly for stakeholder engagement.
- Clarified that no funding received yet by NR to work on electrification. It could be post-election. But NR doesn't want to stand still and has started work. No clarity yet on key questions like geographical scope, £1bn cost, what enabling work will be needed. Key questions remain over wider electrification outside of the line, power supply and operator rolling stock requirements. This would all come out during development work.
- Initial engagement is taking place with interested stakeholders.
- **Discussion:**
- Sam Rowlands asked where initial discussions were going? Mostly discussions with DfT at this point. NR hoping that the case can be made by DfT to Treasury for funding. Sam Rowlands suggested politicians could interact with DfT on this.
- Carolyn Thomas raised the question of cost and whether the whole line would be electrified. She asked whether this really mattered compared to addressing strategic priorities across the whole area including around Chester with freight.
- NR is conscious about issues with tricky structures like Conwy Castle and how these would need to be addressed, and where part-electrification might be advised. It's 'all in the mix' but impossible to confirm yet.
- Development funding is the biggest priority so that we can answer these questions.
- Action: Secretary to work with the Chair to capture these questions in letter to DfT.

## **7. Update from Ambition North Wales including the North Wales Growth Deal, the North Wales Corporate Joint Committee including the Regional Transport Plan and Strategic Development Plan: Alwen Williams, Portfolio Director presented in the absence of Cllr Dyfrig Siencyn.**

- Three outline business cases have been outlined and approved for the Growth Deal. Anaerobic Digestion, Tourism Talent and Egni Energy Solutions, Enterprise Engineering and Optics centre along with Wrexham University.

- The Board has approved the outline business case for the former North Wales Hospital in Denbigh. Bringing in £100m over 10 years, led by Jones Brothers for a residential/commercial development including restoration of the main listed building.
- CJC work has included the IZ, and the two statutory duties. For regional transport a draft case for change is in circulation, with a final draft expected by end of this month. Regional transport plan to be presented to Welsh Government by end of March 2025. Work ongoing around Strategic Development Plan, key meeting with officials to go through how it can be better linked to transport in the context of wider socio-economic benefits.
- **Discussion:**
- Sam Rowlands asked for thoughts from Council Leaders about governance issues with the CJC and region. Some discussion about the importance of regional working and the importance of recognising that it extends across the border to England and working alongside neighbouring local authorities including Cheshire West and Chester, and Wirral.

## **8. Any Other Business**

WLGA to set date of next meeting and circulate.