



APRIL 2026

<https://foresteconomicpartnership.co.uk/>



FOREST
ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP

Business Plan



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Executive Summary



MISSION

The mission of the Forest Economic Partnership is to champion, and nurture a thriving, resilient, and innovative economy that benefits all communities and businesses within the Forest of Dean.



VISION

Our vision is for the Forest of Dean to be recognised as a leading example of a resilient and prosperous rural economy and for the Forest Economic Partnership to be a key driver in this.



PURPOSE

The business voice of the Forest of Dean.

Business-led voice of the Forest of Dean

The Forest Economic Partnership (FEP) exists to champion a thriving, resilient and innovative economy that benefits all communities and businesses across the Forest of Dean. As the region navigates economic change, devolution and evolving local government structures, the need for a clear, consistent and independent business perspective has never been greater.

“FEP is a business-led, Council-supported platform representing the voice of the Forest of Dean’s economy, representing the interests, ambitions and challenges of local enterprises, education providers and communities. Through collaboration, evidence-led insight and practical action, FEP works to ensure that economic decision-making reflects the realities of local businesses and supports sustainable growth.

FEP is evolving into a confident economic leadership platform, business-led in voice, collaborative in approach, and focused on delivering meaningful outcomes for the Forest’s economy.

The Directors



Nicola Bird
Chair



Cllr Jonathan Lane
Vice Chair



Stuart Emmerson



Natalie King



Gareth Sheppard



John Fisher



Deborah Flint



FULL BIOGRAPHIES CAN BE FOUND:

[HTTPS://FORETECONOMICPARTNERSHIP.CO.UK/AB-OUT-THE-FEP/](https://foresteconomicpartnership.co.uk/ab-out-the-fep/)

FEP operates as a business-led partnership, with all Directors contributing on a voluntary basis, bringing direct industry insight, leadership and connectivity from across the Forest's key sectors.

Values

BUSINESS-LED

- Practical solutions, not policy jargon
- SMEs at the centre of decision-making



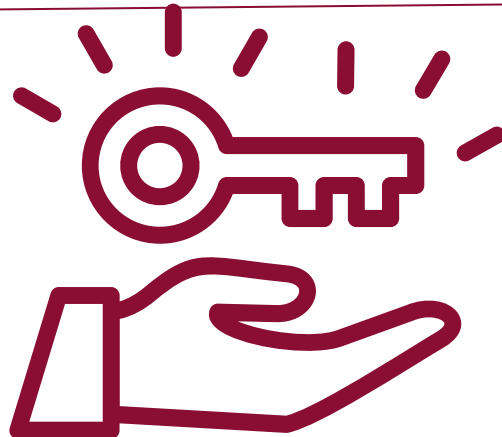
COLLABORATION



- Strong links between business and schools
- Cross-sector partnerships
- Shared responsibility for skills and growth

OPPORTUNITY & ASPIRATION

- Tackling skills gaps and youth outmigration
- Raising awareness of local careers
- Supporting progression, not just entry-level jobs
- Attracting inward investment



PLACE & PRIDE



- Championing local businesses
- Challenging negative perceptions
- Building a confident, outward-looking economy

The Foundations

The Forest Economic Partnership (FEP) was launched in 2018 by the Forest of Dean District Council. Its mission is to deliver a thriving economy in the Forest of Dean District by connecting business, Councils, people, ideas and resources. There are over 350 organisations/individuals making up its membership and currently two active sub-group meetings.

Sub Groups



Education & Skills



**Climate Action & Net Zero
(CANZ)**

Channelling a New Direction for FEP

FEP is evolving from a traditional partnership group into a proactive business-led platform for economic leadership, advocacy and collaboration.



WHO WE SERVE

FEP supports:

- Local SMEs and family businesses
- Large regional employers
- Start-ups and entrepreneurs
- Education and training providers
- Community and voluntary organisations

WHAT MAKES FEP DIFFERENT

Unlike traditional economic forums, FEP is:

- Business-led and Council-supported
- Evidence-driven, not policy-driven
- Collaborative, not bureaucratic
- Action-focused, informed by listening and collaboration

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH

FEP's next phase of growth will focus on:

- Expanding business membership and sector representation
- Developing targeted programmes that address priority economic challenges and opportunities
- Strengthening regional and national partnerships
- Creating a recognised "Forest of Dean Business Voice"
- Supporting investment-ready projects and joint ventures

WORKING ALONGSIDE STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

FEP recognises the emerging Forest of Dean Biosphere initiative and the opportunities it may present across sustainability, skills, community engagement and local economic resilience. FEP remains supportive of the ambition behind the Biosphere and committed to engaging constructively with partners as the initiative develops.

The Forest of Dean's Core Economic Sectors



Construction & Infrastructure



Forestry & Agriculture



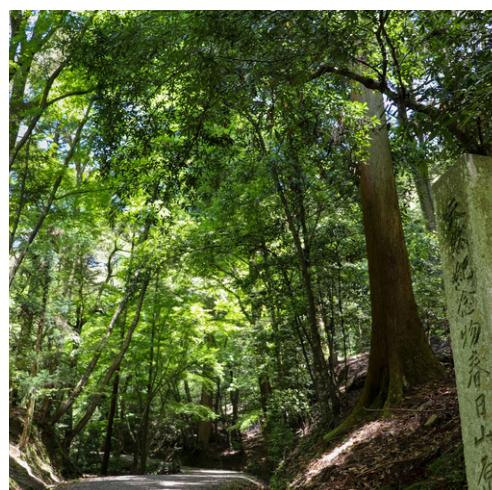
Retail



Hospitality

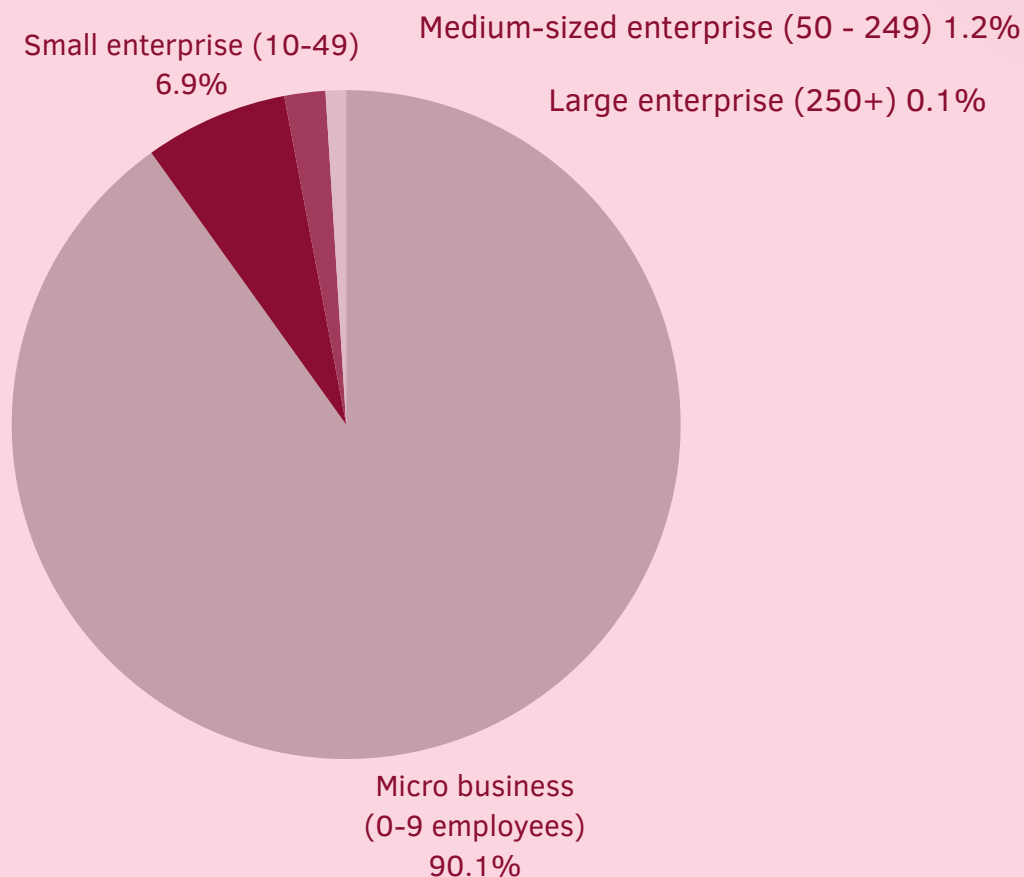


Manufacturing & Engineering



**Tourism & Visitor Economy
(aligned with FDWVT
partnership)**

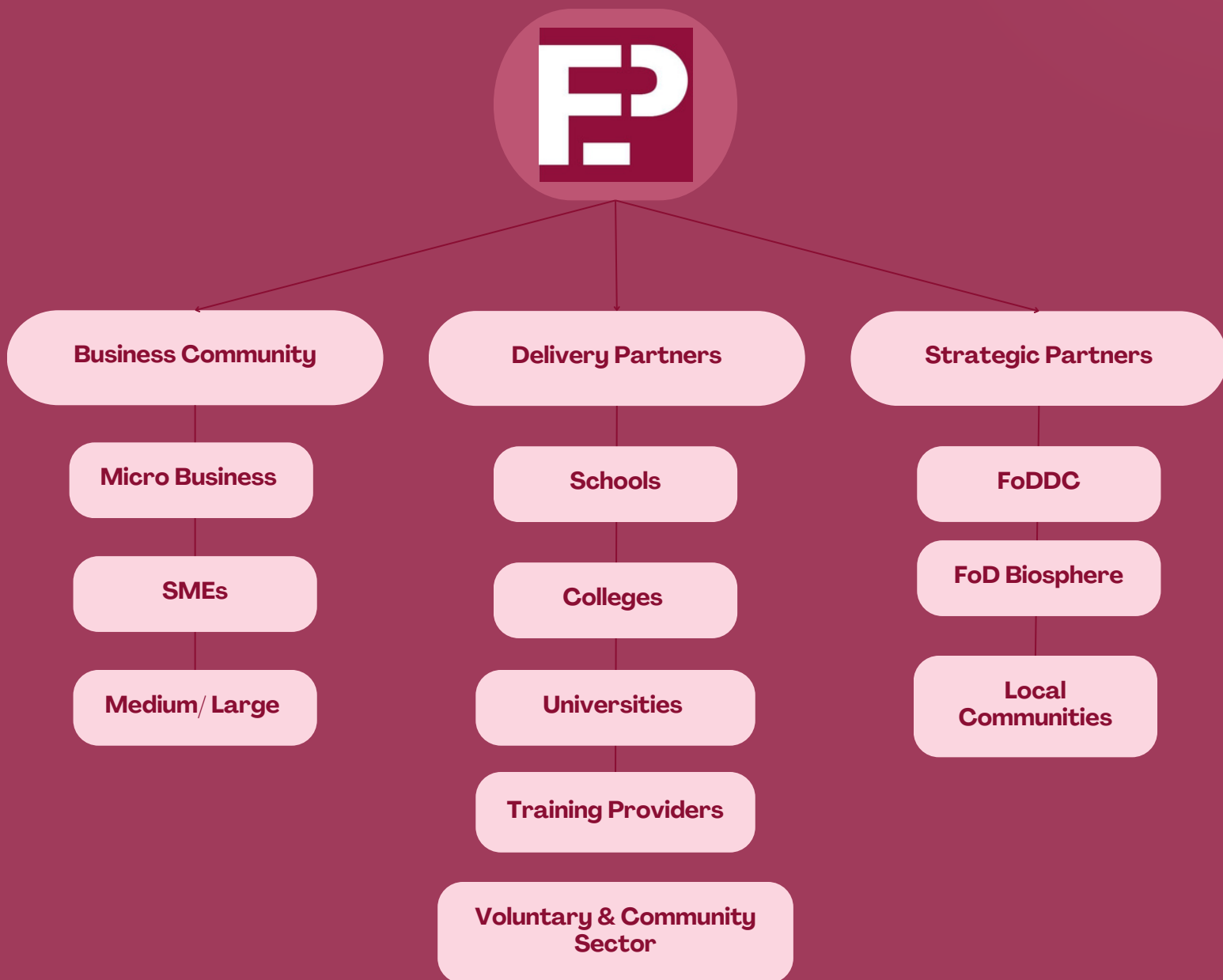
Our Economy



The Forest of Dean has an economy that is overwhelmingly driven by small businesses. In 2025, the district recorded 3,770 enterprises, with virtually all classified as micro, small or medium-sized businesses and only five large enterprises. More than 90% of local businesses employ fewer than ten people, a higher proportion than the county, regional and national averages. This reflects a strong culture of entrepreneurship and locally rooted enterprise, but it also highlights structural limitations in business scale, productivity and inward investment.

With relatively few medium-sized or large employers, opportunities for higher-skilled jobs and wage progression are constrained, increasing the risk of talent leaving the area. While the Forest of Dean's NEET rate among 16–18 year olds (3.19%) remains below the Gloucestershire average and significantly lower than Gloucester City, it still represents a cohort of young people disconnected from education or employment. Together, these trends illustrate an economy that is resilient and community-based, but highly dependent on SMEs and in need of targeted investment in skills, infrastructure and business growth to unlock its full potential.

Our Stakeholders



Together, these stakeholder groups highlight the need for coordinated collaboration between business, education, public sector and communities to support sustainable economic growth in the Forest of Dean.

Local Engagement Model



FEP will deliver a structured programme of stakeholder engagement across the Forest of Dean's four key market towns: Cinderford, Coleford, Newent and Lydney.

These sessions will form the foundation of FEP's engagement model, bringing together local businesses, education providers and partners to identify priorities and shape action.

Each location will act as a hub for themed discussions aligned to the Forest's core sectors, forming ongoing working groups that feed directly into FEP's strategy, advocacy and delivery activity.

This approach ensures that FEP's direction is informed by real business insight, rooted in place, and representative of the wider Forest economy.

SWOT Analysis

STRENGTHS

- A strong SME-led economy, with over 90% of enterprises classified as micro businesses and almost all businesses operating as SMEs, demonstrating a resilient entrepreneurial culture.
- Diverse economic base across construction and infrastructure, agriculture, retail and hospitality, supported by manufacturing, forestry and tourism.
- Deep-rooted local supply chains and family-owned businesses, creating economic stability and community cohesion.
- Strategic geographical position between Gloucestershire, South Wales and the Midlands, offering cross-border market access.

WEAKNESSES

- Limited presence of medium-sized and large employers, restricting productivity growth, wage progression and career pathways.
- Skills shortages across key sectors, particularly construction, engineering, hospitality and care.
- Weak alignment between businesses and education providers, resulting in fragmented skills pathways and limited awareness of local career opportunities.
- Infrastructure constraints, including transport connectivity, digital coverage and availability of suitable business premises.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Strengthening the skills pipeline through closer collaboration between business, schools, colleges and training providers.
- Scaling SMEs into larger, higher-value enterprises through targeted business support and investment.
- Leveraging the Forest's construction, agriculture, retail and hospitality sectors as integrated drivers of economic growth.
- Growth in green economy, forestry, renewable energy and sustainable construction.
- Universities (e.g., Hartpury University)
- Potential to align business-led economic activity with emerging initiatives such as the Forest of Dean Biosphere, where this supports sustainable growth, investment and local employment.

THREATS

- Continued skills shortages and youth migration, weakening the future workforce.
- Rising operating costs (energy, business rates, labour) disproportionately impacting micro and small businesses.
- Overdevelopment or poorly planned growth undermining the Forest's unique identity and environmental assets.
- Failure to invest in infrastructure and digital connectivity, limiting business growth and inward investment.

Our Strategy

REACHING A WIDER AUDIENCE

FEP's strategy is centred on strengthening its role as the independent, business-led voice of the Forest of Dean, expanding engagement across key sectors, and ensuring that local businesses are represented clearly within regional and national economic discussions.

By connecting businesses, education providers, public sector partners and community organisations, FEP provides a unified platform that translates local insight into practical action — influencing decision-making while supporting collaboration and growth.

WHAT FEP CAN OFFER:

- A unified business voice for the Forest of Dean
- Strategic insight and evidence-based economic intelligence
- Stronger links between business, education and policy
- Partnership opportunities and collaborative projects
- Advocacy on key economic issues
- Collaboration with universities to support applied research, innovation and business-led funding bids.

RESOURCE:

FEP's effectiveness is underpinned by a combination of:

- Business leadership and expertise from micro businesses, SMEs and larger employers
- Partnerships with schools, colleges and independent training providers
- Collaboration with local authorities and regional bodies
- Networks across the voluntary and community sector
- Access to economic data, research and intelligence
- Funding, sponsorship and grant support
- Digital platforms and communication channels

PROMOTION:

How FEP communicates and engages

- Direct engagement with businesses and sector groups
- Digital channels (website, social media, newsletters)
- Events, forums and roundtables
- Collaboration with schools, colleges and training providers
- Thought leadership through evidence-based reports, insights and media engagement.

PLACE:

Where FEP operates and connects

- Physical presence through meetings, events and local forums
- Digital platforms to reach businesses across the Forest
- Cross-border engagement with regional partners in Gloucestershire and South Wales
- Integration with existing business and education networks

Year 1 Operational Priorities (2026)

Priority 1 — Establish FEP as the Independent, Business-Led Voice of the Forest of Dean

Build visibility, credibility and recognition of FEP as the collective voice representing the Forest's economy, ensuring that local business perspectives are consistently heard, understood and reflected in regional conversations and decision-making.

Key Actions:

1. Deliver a structured stakeholder relaunch programme across Cinderford, Coleford, Newent and Lydney, establishing place-based engagement and forming themed sector groups aligned to local priorities.
2. Implement a coordinated communications and positioning strategy that reinforces FEP's role as the independent, business-led voice of the Forest of Dean across all channels.
3. Maintain active involvement in key lobbying and advocacy platforms, including sector-led initiatives such as HOOP, ensuring that emerging business challenges — particularly within hospitality and local SMEs — are represented and amplified through collective action.
4. Publish regular business insight updates informed by engagement activity, sector forums and member feedback, strengthening FEP's evidence-led influence.
5. Contribute a regular fortnightly column within the local press to provide consistent thought leadership, highlight local business issues and showcase the Forest's economic strengths and opportunities.

Ensure consistent messaging across events, digital platforms, media engagement and partner communications.

Owner: Chair + Communications Lead

Priority 2 — Membership Growth and Business Engagement

Strengthen FEP's representation by growing active membership and improving direct engagement with SMEs across priority sectors.

Key Actions:

1. Develop a clear membership structure and engagement pathway
2. Deliver place-based stakeholder meetings across the four market towns, feeding into sector-focused themed groups (e.g. construction, hospitality, skills), ensuring engagement is both geographically representative and sector-led.
3. Expand and maintain a centralised business database to support outreach and communication
4. Prioritise engagement with micro and SME businesses to ensure representation reflects the Forest's economic profile

Owner: Director/Sector Lead

Priority 3 — Policy Influence and Strategic Representation

Ensure the voice of local business informs decision-making during a period of significant economic and governance change.

Key Actions:

1. Maintain active representation on the GCC Business Panel and other strategic forums
2. Develop and publish a “State of the Forest Economy” report to provide evidence-led insight
3. Establish clear and consistent engagement routes with local and regional authorities
4. Advocate for investment and policy decisions that reflect local economic realities

Owner: Chair / Policy Lead

Priority 4 — Skills and Workforce Collaboration

Strengthen collaboration between business, education and training providers to address workforce challenges and support future skills development.

Key Actions:

1. Build stronger links between employers, schools, colleges and universities through structured engagement
2. Pilot sector-specific skills discussions aligned with priority industries identified in the business plan
3. Support initiatives that improve awareness of local career pathways and address skills gaps
4. Align skills activity with wider economic priorities emerging through FEP engagement forums

Owner: Director/Sector Lead



Growing Our Membership

Phase 1 — Reactivation (0–6 months)

Objective: Re-engage existing network and establish active membership baseline.

Actions:

- Deliver stakeholder meetings across the four market towns, establishing local engagement hubs
- Reconnect with existing contacts (approx. 350) through targeted outreach linked to these sessions
- Each Director, as a Market Town Lead, to engage directly with businesses in their area
- Capture and centralise engagement data to build an accurate and active business database

Success Measures:

- Minimum of 4 place-based stakeholder meetings delivered
- 100+ businesses engaged through initial sessions
- Active engagement baseline established for ongoing tracking

Phase 2 — Sector Expansion (6–12 months)

Objective: Deepen engagement and improve representation

Actions:

- Continue regular stakeholder meetings within each market town
- Capture recurring priorities across locations (e.g. skills, workforce, sector challenges)
- Strengthen participation from micro and SME businesses
- Identify engaged businesses to support wider outreach

Success Measures:

- Consistent attendance and repeat engagement
- Clear, recurring themes identified across locations
- Broader representation across sectors and towns

Phase 3 — Scale (Year 2+)

Objective: Transition from growth to sustained influence and community ownership.

Actions:

- Introduce a structured membership approach, aligned to engagement and value
- Develop sponsorship and partnership opportunities
- Strengthen collaboration with business networks, education providers and regional organisations
- Encourage peer-led engagement through active participants

Success Measures:

- A sustainable and engaged membership base
- Increased participation in meetings and activity
- Evidence of business-led input shaping FEP priorities



Governance & Delivery Capacity

Directors as Market Town Leads

To strengthen engagement across the Forest of Dean, FEP Directors will take on defined leadership roles as Market Town Leads, providing local leadership, connectivity and coordination aligned to FEP's place-based engagement model.

Each Director will be aligned to one of the Forest's four key market towns:
Cinderford | Coleford | Newent | Lydney

This structure ensures that engagement is rooted in place, reflects local priorities, and strengthens representation across the district's diverse business communities.

Role of a Market Town Lead

Directors acting as Market Town Leads will provide leadership and representation by:

- Planning and hosting local stakeholder meetings within their town, forming the foundation of ongoing engagement (Minimum: 2 meetings per year per town)
- Acting as a visible point of contact and advocate for businesses, partners and stakeholders within their area
- Facilitating themed discussions and working groups, aligned to key sectors such as construction, hospitality, retail, skills and enterprise
- Maintaining awareness of local challenges, opportunities and priorities, ensuring these are clearly understood and represented
- Encouraging participation and engagement from local businesses, education providers and community organisations
- Feeding local insight into Board discussions, ensuring that FEP's strategy, priorities and advocacy are directly informed by place-based engagement

Board Meeting Dates 26/27

24th June

16th Sept

2nd Dec

25th Feb 27

Our Goals

Build a membership of over 1,000 businesses, representing a significant proportion of the Forest of Dean's enterprise community.

Be widely recognised as the independent voice of business in the Forest of Dean.

Act as the strategic link between business and local government, ensuring that economic policy and decision-making reflect the realities of local enterprise.

Champion and lobby on behalf of businesses, education providers and charities, strengthening their collective influence and impact across the district.

Key Metrics to Track

Measure	Baseline (2025/26) (not actuals)	Target 2027
Active SME members	300 (est.)	1,000+
% of Micro businesses represented	5%	33%
% of SMEs represented	5%	
Sector coverage (core sectors)		3
Businesses engaged annually (events/consultations)	100	400
Attendance at FEP events	50	150
Policy submissions / consultations	0	2
Formal meetings with councils & regional bodies	2	4
FEP reports / position papers published	0	3
Education & training partners	3	6
Employers involved in skills initiatives	15	50
Young people reached through careers activity	150	500
Investment-ready projects supported	0	2
Annual FEP business survey	No	Yes
Media features / mentions	0	30
Website & digital engagement (annual users)	300	2,000
Core funding secured	No	Stable

Financial Planning

FEP is currently operating with approximately £25k in reserves, with a proportion of this already allocated to existing activity. These funds will be prioritised to support initial delivery, including stakeholder engagement and early-stage programme activity.

FoDDC have agreed to support FEP's initial delivery phase, recognising the role of a business-led platform in strengthening economic engagement and insight across the Forest of Dean.

This support will enable FEP to progress its immediate priorities, including stakeholder engagement, communications and early-stage programme activity.

While this enables short-term progress, a sustainable model will require a transition towards a mixed funding approach, including exploring membership, sponsorship and partnership contributions.

FEP will also ensure that existing reserves are utilised effectively alongside this support, demonstrating a balanced and responsible approach to financial management.



Future Plans & Milestones



AIMING HIGH

Future Vision – Strengthened Narrative

As FEP continues to grow, its ambition is to become widely recognised as the independent, business-led voice of the Forest of Dean, trusted by businesses, partners and policymakers alike.

Through consistent engagement, evidence-led advocacy and collaborative leadership, FEP will ensure that the Forest’s economy is represented clearly, confidently and with impact — strengthening pride in place while unlocking opportunities for investment, skills development and sustainable growth.

2026

Establish & Engage

- Deliver a structured stakeholder engagement programme across Cinderford, Coleford, Newent and Lydney, establishing place-based forums and themed sector groups
- Strengthen business representation by building an active and engaged membership base
- Work in partnership with FoDDC, whose support enables initial delivery and coordination
- Strengthen links between business, education and training providers to address local skills challenges
- Publish the first “State of the Forest Economy” insight report, informed by direct business engagement

2027

Grow & Embed

- Increase depth and consistency of engagement across all sectors and market towns
- Launch targeted, sector-led initiatives aligned to priorities identified through stakeholder groups
- Develop a sustainable funding model, introducing membership, sponsorship and partnership contributions
- Strengthen collaboration with FoDDC and regional partners to align business insight with policy and investment
- Deliver pilot projects focused on skills, workforce and SME growth

2028

Deliver Impact

- Demonstrate measurable improvements in business engagement, skills pathways and employer participation
- Support SME growth and progression into larger, higher-value businesses
- Expand cross-sector collaboration and partnership-led initiatives
- Strengthen the role of FEP as a connector between business, education and public sector partners

2030

Lead & Influence

- Establish FEP as the recognised business-led, Council-supported economic voice of the Forest of Dean
- Influence major decisions on infrastructure, skills and investment through evidence-led insight
- Support a more resilient, skilled and outward-looking local economy
- Embed a long-term framework for collaboration across business, education and public sector