House of Lords Select Committee Rural Economy Questions

General issues

1. What do you understand by the "rural economy"? How has it changed over recent years, and what has been the impact of these changes?

The Forest Economic Partnership (FEP) understands the rural economy to be all those who live, work, visit and study within the rural areas outside of urban areas. In the Gloucestershire context, we define urban as the larger centres of population within Gloucester city and Cheltenham. In the Forest of Dean, the rural economy is the geographic area covered by the Forest of Dean District. Simply put this is the area bound by the rivers Severn and Wye in the West of Gloucestershire and which stretches from Beachley adjacent to Chepstow in the South to around the M50 motorway in the North. Changes over recent years include a structural shift in employment, increased commuting and decline in rural services and increased difficulty of access to affordable housing.

Within the area there are 4 market towns which all have a population of less than 10,000 and 20 other villages with distinct identities. Often seen as a tourist and leisure area, this hides the already diversified economy leading to increasing misconceptions over its economic role. A common perception of the area is that it is one for tourism and leisure. Indeed the recent Glos2050 consultation proposed the creation of a Regional Park for the area. Tourism is an important sector contributing some £140M pa to the local economy in visitor spend and employing 7% of all employment (South West Research Company 2016).

But the Rural Services Network Economic Profile shows that 25% of all full-time employees are in manufacturing, 10% in health while education, construction, business admin, professional, scientific and technical each accounts for more than 5% of employees. For part-time employees, the skew is to education and health with other more tourism related sectors more prominent eg food and accommodation. As a rural area it's not surprising that by enterprise count agriculture, forestry and fishing is highest at 15.5%. But professional, scientific and technical are almost 13.4% of all enterprises and construction 12%. Six other sectors also account for more than 5% of enterprises.

Over the 8 years of data in view, the proportions have been relatively similar with few significant changes. Noteworthy ones are the increase in full-time employees in manufacturing increasing from 20% to 25% of total employed, which may reflect the decline of full-time employment in other sectors; and the increase in professional, scientific and technical enterprises moving from 11 to 13.4%. More significantly is the increase of proportion of employees now in the private sector which in 2010 was just below the rural average at 80%, but in 2016 was 2% above the average at 86%.

Another important general issue is one of local authority governance. FEP has not prioritised discussion on current governance arrangements or unitary status for Gloucestershire this year.

However, some stakeholders believe that three-tier arrangements struggle to be effective, can lead to public confusion and apathy and as a rural authority the Forest of Dean District can be badly served by these. We sit amongst unitary authorities with significant devolved powers granted to Wales and the West of England.

In summary caution needs to be used with the term 'rural economy' as it may create artificial conceptual barriers around problems that belong to the wider economy such as an ageing society and hide real issues like the connectivity necessary for the diversified economy of the 21st Century.

2. Could you give examples of notable success stories and good practice in the rural economy? How might rural successes be replicated and better promoted?

The Forest Economic Partnership (FEP) was launched in 2018 by the FoDDC. Its mission is to deliver a thriving economy in the Forest of Dean District by connecting business, Councils, people, ideas and resources. Already over 150 organisations/individuals participate in its quarterly steering group or four sub-group meetings. The four sub-groups focus on areas of particular challenge to the District and are shown with their individual missions below:

- **Education & Skills.** Within a lifelong learning context, how do we get the workforce we need for the District now and in the future to power and sustain economic growth by removing barriers and raising aspirations.
- **Transport & Infrastructure.** The District Plan guides future development that gives us the space to work, live and play. Once those uses are known we can consider the transport routes in the District to enable them become fit for purpose. What is the practical new vision that defines the Forest we want to be and the balance between the use of space?
- **Digital Connectivity.** We are told we live in a digital world. What practical steps can we take to get the speed, reliability and connectivity to support the ways we increasingly work, live, study and play now and in the future.
- **Bridges & Borders**. The Severn and Wye have preserved the Forest. The best future protection is connection with all those around us to ensure a mutual understanding of economic needs. Looking outwards, what do we need and want to trade for bridges; participation in the South Wales-West of England economic powerhouse; and neighbours' plans.

FEP has only recently been convened with new connections being made within and outside the District at our meetings. Work is ongoing to shape a new economic plan so that in 2050 the District is an attractive, vibrant and dynamic destination to live, work and do business. It has actively contributed to a number of consultations which are used as examples in this response.

Foresters Forest is another good example of best practice (https://www.forestersforest.uk/). It is a Heritage Lottery Funded Landscape Partnership programme, formed from an association of partner organisations and local community groups within the Forest of Dean. Its aim is to raise awareness and participation in the built, natural and cultural heritage that makes the Forest special. (NB the area covered is a particular area – "the Hundred of St Briavels" with the Forest of Dean District). It provides a range of activities, volunteering opportunities and events. Significantly it supports and promotes 38 different, diverse community based projects to uncover, reveal, share and celebrate the Forest heritage. A key objective of the programme is to look after the unique legacy we have inherited and sustain it for future generations. It champions the heritage in all its forms and adds value and quality to it for local and visitor appreciation. It is a bottom-up approach to project

delivery with a Community Stakeholders Group reinforcing local engagement and responsibility. It has incredible potential to increase tourism sustainably, with economic, social and environmental gains accordingly. As a focus point it promotes rural successes and enables replication.

3. How do you see the future of the rural economy? Where is the greatest potential for growth, and what might be the impact of technological and other changes?

Given our definition of rural economy, we are optimistic about the future, while recognising that the key challenge is to maintain the overall environmental balance that provides the distinctiveness of our working environment. An example of this would be the approach by the Forestry Commission to balance the 3 overlapping needs of providing access for leisure; maintaining and improving bio-diversity; and ensuring long term timber production. The latter two need to be planned for over decades, but then respond to events such as weather or disease; the first can change relatively quickly, eg the need to provide suitable locations for downhill mountain-biking, and might be seen to have great growth potential, but ends up destroying that which made the whole location attractive in the first place through over-use and capacity issues.

The nature of work in the whole Economy has changed radically in the 21st Century. There is a significant move away from large employers and volume manufacturing   requiring large sites towards nimbler organisations attempting to create better work-life balance and using technology which enables virtual workforces. Having said that there is still a demand for a mix of employment land and premises to serve manufacturing needs that need plenty of space eg. modular bridge and modular housing construction, transport container manufacturing etc.. Previously much has been made of the need for land-based and agricultural businesses to diversify in order to survive the globalisation of food production and logistics. The question has been diversifying into what to create long term revenue streams? Now the question becomes more about land-use in the wider rural areas including the towns and villages similar to that of the Forestry Commission. What space is needed:

- To support work to meet urban expectations of technological connectedness and exploit concepts such as Industry 4.0;
- To maintain necessary bio-diversity and rural distinctiveness and to avoid throwing away future potential
- To maintain essential commodity production.

The greatest potential is therefore to gain consensus across the area and act radically as the wider economy shifts back to exploit the opportunities in the countryside for working and living, which were not previously seen to be available.

We respond more fully on digital connectivity later, but two key discussions among that sub-group have been 'deliberate not-spots' and a 'hub and spoke model of connectivity'. In the thirty years of rapid mobile communications and internet-driven technology advance, various presumptions are now made about ubiquitous high speed connectivity. The antenna requirements of 5G might be easier to conceal in the man-made environment of cities but might be difficult to 'hide in the forest'. Actually be able to get away from a technology-driven modern world is a key plus for the rural environment. Hence the concept of, perhaps, maintaining deliberate carefully-chosen not-spots. Conversely the home-based international knowledge-based business requires robust connections at suitable speeds. Not every communication requires very high speed connection but a level of

consistent fast speed is required. Where this is breached then the ability to move from the home office to a community-based facility with consistent very high speed would provide the necessary trade-off to enable continued growth or initial consideration as a place to work.

Perhaps the best District wide potential could come from sections of the economy that can co-exist and benefit from the environment. These need conventional and digital infrastructure to support them as well as long term support from community facilities good health offer and education. The rural area can support economic enterprises that need a rural location (eg agriculture and food based, tourism as well as those that can take advantage of it to provide a suitable attractive setting (IT based businesses for example). All must maintain and enhance the Forest's local distinctiveness.

Infrastructure and services

4. How can access to transport be improved in rural areas?

Now is the time to take the opportunity to completely rethink transport in rural areas. Currently when, for example hospital transport is considered, presumptions are made about the voluntary organisations that fill the gaps created by an 'inadequate' public transport system in a world where car ownership and access is presumed.

The danger when considering transport is to continue the presumption that in 20-30 years' time individual car and road-based transport will still be king. The second dangerous presumption is to fail to consider the way that we live, work, study and play *first* and that this has fundamentally changed with the associated expectations of a very diverse group of individuals. The third presumption is a focus *solely* on solutions resolving an existing problem rather than solutions based on realising opportunities.

It is FEP's view that the Forest of Dean is a place in which there is continuing development in terms of housing and tourism, but for the Forest to thrive on an economic level, the infrastructure and transportation systems need to be able to cope with increased numbers of those who are likely to:

a) Live and work in the Forest of Dean;
b) Live in the Forest of Dean, but work in other parts of Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, South Wales and Bristol- 15%+ commute out of the core Forest each day;
c) Live outside of the Forest of Dean, but decide to run a business or are employed within the Forest of Dean; and
d) Travel to the Forest of Dean as a destination for leisure and recreation – for instance in 2016 there were 2,372,000 day visits in relation to visiting the Forest of Dean as a place for leisure

NB Work being defined as all those people who are self-employed or are employed in the public, private and voluntary sector.

This informed our response to the Cross-country rail franchise consultation which suggested reducing services to the only Network Rail station in the District, Lydney and one just across the border in Chepstow. Both it should be noted are to the South of the District. We submitted that there is a strong case for not only maintaining the existing stopping services, but improving and increasing them on the following basis:

1. In a 24-hour weekday period, Lydney Railway Station receives 17 trains that travel in the Gloucester direction and 18 in the Cardiff direction. *Frequency is already a circular problem.*
2. Lydney is the only town in the Forest of Dean that has an active railway station. Commuters from Coleford, Cinderford, Bream, Parkend, and other parts of the District regularly travel to commute whether it be to Gloucester, Cheltenham, Bristol, or Cardiff among others. *Problem*
3. There are currently plans to add further housing in the Lydney area which will see a potential increase in those who want to commute from Lydney using the railway service. Figures from FoDDC have indicated that 6,600 new homes are planned across the Forest of Dean, or 330 per year (eg. 3274 completions by end of March 2018 and 250 actual completions during 2017/18) of which 2,100 new homes are planned for Lydney through to 2026. *Opportunity*
4. There are currently plans to add further employment uses in the Lydney area which will also see a potential increase in rail commuting passengers. Figures from FoDDC have indicated a total 21.2 ha new employment land allocated through to 2026 and according to their allocation plans, 2.2 hectares of land are allocated for the development of Lydney Station and its associated facilities and a related mix of uses which can include housing - all development to be compatible with station operations. Housing is included in the mix to enable a comprehensive development so would not be allowed to come forward in isolation. *Opportunity and future problem*
5. The Ministry of Defence site at Beachley is due to be decommissioned by 2027 which will also see an increase in potential housing at Chepstow and therefore increase usage of the railway services from Chepstow. The Partnership believes that an additional 700-1000 estimated homes could be developed at the site. *Opportunity and future problem*
6. The railway station car park in Lydney has seen growth over the past three years to add 80 spaces. The car parks are again regularly at capacity. *Problem unresolved*
7. There is a strong appetite to use other means of transport to commute to and from the Forest of Dean to other parts of the country other than by car and the roads serving the Forest, particularly the A48, is already being used beyond its condition. The impact has seen this particular part of the country be in breach of its CO2 emissions in the first quarter of this year. *Problem of not linking means of transport*
8. There are plans to implement new cycle tracks around the Lydney area, one of which is to connect the town to the Lydney station. This would encourage rail users to use bicycles to get to the station from the town. Trains allow plenty of bike space so it will be useful to explore opportunities for additional secure cycle parking, e-bike charging points and bike hire options. *Opportunity through linking means of transport*
9. The removal of the tolls over the Severn Bridge should encourage those who work in Bristol to relocate to places like Lydney and Chepstow, which would mean more potential users for the railway services. According to ONS house prices increased in Forest of Dean Local Authority area by 10.1% in last year which is the 11th largest local authority increase. This is fuelled by Bristolian purchases and signals demographic change requiring improved rail connection. *Problem of changing way we live and work*
10. There is currently, albeit in its infancy, plans being prepared to enhance and develop Cardiff Airport and there is potential to link up between the Forest of Dean and the Airport in terms of railway service users. *Opportunity of changing way we live and work*
11. The plans for the new nuclear power station at Oldbury would see an increase in jobs, but there would be reliance upon the railway system to be able to travel between Oldbury and the Forest of Dean; *Opportunity of changing way we live and work*

12. There are suggestions for a new garden town as a new centre of population accessible within 15 minutes to Lydney station potentially adding more population and consequently more potential railway service users. *Opportunity of changing way we live & work*

The Glos2050 Conversation has a vision for a third bridge across the Severn between Lydney and Sharpness. This supports work done by the County and District Councils to resolve bottlenecks entering and exiting the Forest and to open up additional land for employment and living either side of the river. One option for a new crossing would be to reinstate a railway crossing destroyed by barge accident in the early 1960's and deemed then uneconomic to repair. The effect of this on the rural economy is unproven, and whether this is either feasible or beneficial.

Crossing Infrastructure. The FEP Bridges & Borders Sub-Group is looking for new infrastructure links across the River Severn and River Wye that contribute towards the growth of the local economy in the District of the Forest of Dean. As such we support the concept of a crossing re-connecting Lydney and Sharpness and appreciate the work that must be done to ensure a suitable structure is built to connect with the existing transport network at the earliest opportunity fit for the transport needs of the future. *Opportunity to increase connection for mutual benefit*

Crossing impact an opportunity and threat. A Severn crossing could provide significant opportunities for the District, but at the same time could create additional problems and threats. FEP recognises that the effects and choice of crossing would impact on a very wide area and at the same time on very specific areas. A new crossing has the potential to facilitate and increase existing traffic flows rather than question the need to travel in the first place and looking at more minor interventions eg. improving rail links, park and ride, cycling/walking etc. Forest goods might reach export ports easier, but certain leisure facilities already at capacity would not cope to meet increased demands. The impact on local housing will also need more consideration – increasing the size of the Forest towns or creating a new town may present an economic opportunity for some and present a major threat for others who may be priced out of the market.

Opportunity and threat related to how we work, play and live.

Forest of Dean Community Hospital Development and access to transport. As part of developing the healthcare provision across the Forest of Dean the local NHS has been actively involved with an Independent Citizens Jury who were asked to consider the location of a proposed new community hospital for the Forest of Dean in readiness for 2020-21

The Citizens Jury, considered a wealth of information that included travel and access issues, taking into account the challenges of transporting patients, sick and vulnerable people who are living in the more rural areas of the Forest of Dean.

The NHS has agreed with the Citizens Jury recommendation that the new community hospital will be located in or near to the town of Cinderford and that this evidenced based decision will support the long term economic future of the Forest of Dean.

From FEP's early considerations of transport and infrastructure within the District it is clear that in many cases, even with clarity of the competing demands to access to live, work, play and study,

economically the most justifiable solution could be the least worst balance of current and future needs.

5. What barriers to growth are created by poor digital connectivity? How can connectivity be improved across the board?

Digital connectivity in the context of the FEP is the blend of the physical infrastructure (fixed, mobile and other installations) needed to enable latest and future technologies, services and systems that will enhance and improve individuals, businesses and other organisations' ability to succeed. The Forest of Dean has a number of challenges that impact the success of digital connectivity in the area. These fall into two key areas which are:

1) Lack of infrastructure resulting in mobile "not spots" and some households having to use dial up internet connections (i.e. broadband not available)
2) Rural setting and a small, widely spread population. This makes delivery of services expensive, and erodes the ability for communities to command a strong voice to call for action

Ofcom regularly reports on the status and performance of fixed and mobile broadband. The latest Ofcom Connected Nations report can be found here. https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/multi-sector-research/infrastructure-research/connected-nations-update-spring-2018 A high level analysis of the report was carried out to benchmark the Forest of Dean against surrounding areas and also the City of Bristol as an exemplar of a digitally connected city. Key findings were:

- Although fixed installation broadband provision is worse than urban areas, it is generally in line with other rural areas.
- Improved fixed installation provision required to close gaps
- Greatest negative impact seems to be from lack of Mobile coverage, Fast (3G) and Ultrafast (4G) connectivity fall behind the City of Bristol especially for 4G
- Bristol as an example of a high speed connected city would suggest that the biggest impact is the provision of high-speed mobile coverage is the key to improving Digital Connectivity.

The full analysis can be found here (12 Slides).

Summary of Ofcom
Connected Nations

Opportunities to live and work remotely in a Rural Economy

In a world that is increasingly aware of the impacts of living and working in urban areas (pollution, traffic, overcrowding, time commuting, quality of life, work life balance, etc) the rural economy has great opportunity to be revitalised. Large scale urbanisation was a result of the last agricultural / industrial revolutions resulting in population movements to the cities. Digital connectivity linked with changes in working practices can allow:

- Increased homeworking via remote connections
- More flexible approaches to working patterns
- Greater internationalisation of business where virtual meetings are tied to global time zones
- Improved work life balance, well-being (both physical and mental)

- Reduced business overheads (smaller offices because of remote working)

These points mean that there is no longer a need to live near work, and that living in a rural community is a viable option. This can drive up local spend, supporting community resources (i.e. pubs / post offices)

Opportunities to delivery 21st Century on demand services:

- Provision of good levels of connectivity can enable a shift in service provision both from businesses and public services.
- Businesses are now looking at Industry 4.0 (manufacturing on demand), however without the high-speed and stable connections that approaches like this require, then rural manufacturing businesses could struggle to adopt modern working practices.
- Digital connectivity has the opportunity to revolutionise rural public service provision to increase economic and logistical efficiency.

Good Practice Examples:

- **Fastershire**, a partnership between Gloucestershire and Herefordshire councils to address gaps in high speed provision in rural areas. Fastershire has both identified where gaps exist in fixed installation broadband, and then installed high speed broadband to local cabinets to resolve these issues. A successful project which during the next phase will be delivering Fibre to the Premises (FTTP) which provides better performance than the traditional Fibre to the Cabinet (FTTC). (See: http://www.fastershire.com/)
- **Gloucestershire County Council** has now equipped their social workers with remote working tools. However this is limited in rural locations due to lack of digital connectivity, therefore staff have to drive (at cost / carbon emissions) and spend time (further cost) connecting to the internet at suitable locations.

Transferring Smart City Technology:

Modern technologies are already allowing the development of smart cities, however these technologies could reach into the rural economy reducing costs and increasing efficiency eg:

- Smart Cities Technology
  - Smart Bins, that tell providers when they need emptying
  - Live data tracking of waste services, improving modelling and on demand service
  - Modelling and information collecting, identifying peak road use, wear, repair demands etc.

- Medical / Care Provision
  - Virtual GP's, providing virtual appointments where appropriate
  - Provision of remote monitoring for medical care / GP basic checks (See (Translated) https://translate.google.co.uk/translate?hl=en&sl=fi&u=http://www.kevicon.fi/uutiset.html%3F86046&prev=search)
  - Remote provision of medical services… high speed, low latency, highly stable connections could provide for surgery via telepresence. (See: http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20140516-i-operate-on-people-400km-away)
  - Virtual care worker visits, not to replace existing visits, but to blend enhanced services (see: https://bmcgeriatr.biomedcentral.com/track/pdf/10.1186/s12877-018-0746-y)

- Education
  - Distance learning tools from education providers (virtual lectures, remote connection to live lectures)
  - *N.B. Education linked with aspiration enables social mobility*
- Public Transport
  - Blending public transport with highly automated car travel lowering overall cost of deliver of public transport (less empty buses) but filling the gap with provision of automated cars (See: http://fortune.com/2016/10/26/tesla-car-sharing-for-owners/)

Barriers to Digital Connectivity

A. Local Barriers

- Physical environment: The increase cost of connecting communities, businesses and sometimes individuals to high speed infrastructure
- A smaller voice: The rural economy has a smaller population and this voice can struggle to be heard unless amplified by the public sector supporting local needs and combining their voices. The Forest is a good example where historically there has not been a single unified voice with a clear message of wants and needs.
- Commercial barriers: As the rural economy has higher costs to deliver and a lower population base there appears to be reduced interested in providing services.
- Communication: Where an alternative high speed connection is publicly funded, there is not communication of the new service due to anti-competition rules / lack of funding.
- Local issues around the installation of larger mobile infrastructure due to environmental sensitivities of the forest and its rural setting.

B. Policy Barriers

- Mobile operators: operators not forced to share connectivity in rural areas where provision is patchy
- Planning: Requirement to provide high-speed broadband to new housing estates, this could be linked to developers having to provide a high-speed community connection in rural locations
- Lack of a "Smart Rural Economy" Strategy: There is plenty written on smart cities, government policy etc, however as yet there is no UK policy. (See: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/publications/smart-villages-smart-countryside-study_en)
- Lack of a distinct Smart Rural Economy trial area to research technologies and solutions.

6. What can be done to improve and maintain provision for essential services such as healthcare, education and banking in rural areas?

None of these issues have an easy solution but ambitions to modernise healthcare and lifelong education services should be supported. Drives for efficiency of spend lead for all three to consolidation thereby providing the desired focus and resource. There are also key differences with banking primarily a commercial service built on the historic cash and non-credit-based economy. Those who live in the rural economy may decide where to live based on healthcare and education provision, but are unlikely to base that decision on banking.

Our views are based on those provided for the consultation on hospitals in the Forest and on the request for a Sixth Form for our leading secondary school located at the College's new local campus (shown elsewhere in this response).

FEP recognised that the proposed unification of the 2 current hospitals creates opportunities for technological advancement, jobs, space and facilitation to make healthcare provision appropriate for most of the District's needs as long as those needs are fully understood. But the proposals raised issues over:

1) Current lack of clarity as to the type of hospital that might be built as there is no clear description of what might be intended. We are unsure as to what is meant by a community hospital and what a community hospital might look like in 2050. We are aware that an up-to-date community hospital might be better sited in a different location to a leading edge provision serving emergency and non-emergency needs.
2) The location of the new hospital is something that must be geographically carefully considered in terms of accessibility from the consultation cited 3 main towns of the Forest. It unwisely excluded the fourth Newent from these considerations as anecdotal evidence suggests that an existing hospital is the first port of call for many of its inhabitants and visitors.
3) The impact of future developments such as population increase from new housing development currently at Lydney and Newent, but potentially elsewhere with the new economic plans being developed; and type of individuals such as an influx of Bristol workers and families seeking rural housing with the removal of the Severn Crossing tolls or proposed South Wales-West of England Powerhouse combined with a currently demographically ageing population.

FEP also saw it as an opportunity to futureproof healthcare to the type wanted locally by asking questions such as:
- Are we going to keep it traditional but pre-dated? Or are we going to lead by example and develop a carbon neutral structure that operates as eco-friendly and green as possible. And will it have cutting edge technology, ground-breaking medicines and methods of healing modalities?
- The current hospital buildings are old with challenging problems when it comes to integrating of modern or innovative technology. Inefficient buildings that have not kept pace with modern life.
- Focussing on patient centred care, community hospitals appear more trustworthy and friendly in much the same way a local car mechanic does when compared to a main dealer
- The hospital location must also consider the wider health benefits brought about by association with the natural environment and the positive effect this can have on patient health, mental wellbeing and recovery. The location needs to provide options for both views into and direct access to the un-spoilt natural environment of the Forest of Dean, along with complementary services to encourage a range of contact with nature as part of treatment.
- DEFRA research has found that particularly strong links are found in relation to: mental health and wellbeing; development and maintenance of a healthy immune system and reduction of inflammatory-based diseases; and in relation to variation between social and demographic groups.

Key to all considerations was accessibility in multiple senses:
- Families in the Forest have strong links with their local hospital – many generations born in the same place due to residents not moving away.

- Gloucestershire has an aging population, so coupling this with the new entrants expected means the hospital needs to cater for the elderly as well as young families with young children.
- To make sure there is as little "talent drain" as possible, the hospital should also make sure it links in with teaching establishments like the University of Gloucestershire and University West of England to make sure it gets placements for nurses, OT's etc.
- On the flip side of having one hospital, if we are expecting an inflow of new residents following the building of new houses, then it stands to reason that with people living longer, the hospital of today may not cope with the demands of tomorrow. It is important that any provision retains or increases bed numbers, particularly in light of the bed blocking issues in the current acute hospital provision.
- Current poor public transport is a major issue. It's easier for some Forest residents to go to Gloucester than it is to a Forest hospital. Accessibility via better road networks and public transport enhancements will be required. Forest of Dean Community Transport Partnership (which is the not for profit providers - BVCS, Lydcare and Newent and Lydney Dial a Ride cover the whole Forest of Dean district) is integral to the plans for locating the new hospital and should be included in any future strategy. The Partners understand the challenges for transporting patients, the sick and vulnerable in rurally isolated areas; however their capacity must also be considered as part of ongoing planning.

7. What can be done to support local shops, community pubs and other rural amenities at risk of closure?

Digital connectivity has a role to play here to repurpose and support traditional rural landmarks.

These could become the new remote working hot desk locations, allowing remote workers retain the social connection of working alongside people without going to an office. They could become community assets providing a physical building, but also being a high speed hub funding a local infrastructure cabinet. Provide space for pop ups, ie police, medical, banking, and other services

 "Smart Villages, Smart Countryside study" (https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/publications/smart-villages-smart-countryside-study_en)

- Digital advisory points in local service centres;
- Strengthening digital skills through voluntary peer support organised by NGOs;
- Training digital ambassadors in municipalities and government offices;
- Transmitting voluntary help, peer support or neighbourhood help by digital means;
- A return of multi-actor, multi-functional and digitalised village schools;
- Developing the digital capital of rural businesses.

A significant danger here is to hark back to the past rather than realise that these community assets were developed as a result of need and demand. The pub resulted from converting and extending the front room of the local ale house; the inn to serve the needs for travellers; the shop to provide when it wasn't market day or not a market town. If global food chains break down, if local sourcing becomes more important and the trend towards micro-shopping rather than supermarket shopping increases then the role of the village shop may once more be important.

Revitalisation may come from repurposing the building as use is often the best way to preserve a structure. The Forest Bakehouse http://www.forestbakehouse.co.uk/ is a good example of a

conversion on a village business estate that has become a community asset. The Forest community libraries are another. Both benefited from specialist advice and help with initial resourcing. It's that people *and* financial support that is needed to enable the transitions to community assets fit for this century.

Other forms of support could include the provision of flexible accommodation, financial incentives (business rates review?), and patronage is essential. The latter needs a daytime population.

Business, employment, skills and demography

8. How can rural businesses be helped to thrive, and how can new industries and investment be supported? How might labour and skills shortages be overcome?
If as a country we focus primarily on high skills and high skilled and high pay jobs, what does this do to the aspirations of all? Traditional rural and land-based businesses are often not seen to be highly skilled or valued monetarily.

The FEP view is that the perception of rural meaning tourism and agricultural is a misperception which needs addressing. If efficiency of support is needed then the aggregation of rural businesses on small business parks with a range of premises that enable the growth of a business from concept to start-up through micro/small to medium enterprise is necessary. Such premises need a range of use which might require subsidy for those types that are unattractive to the commercial developer. This might fall to local authorities to supply.

A big challenge is to appropriately skill and educate young people for jobs and careers that have not yet been thought about. But this also applies to the older workforce on their second and third career change. Skills are a lifelong challenge in which success creates the needed workforce doing the jobs they want. It requires closer connection between business and education providers acting as collaborators. FEP's response is to develop an **Inspiring the Forest** series of events that focuses on skills within sectors to overcome misperceptions and creating experience-based engagement. This includes a district-wide event as well as local events with the secondary schools and their feeder primary schools. The organising will require close collaboration within and between business sectors and schools. Already by engaging some barriers have been broken down for instance over delivery of work experience for secondary students. The scale of the intervention required is raising questions as to how it can be financed as an innovative practical approach to unlock the skills economy.

Another opportunity is to roll-out a Shared Apprenticeship Programme being pioneered within the visitor economy by Wyedean Tourism Association. This model enables apprentices to experience work within 1-4 micro-businesses and helps these businesses share the cost of taking on an apprentice into the business. In the Forest of Dean the vast majority of businesses employ less than 10 people and this model could easily transfer to other sectors with support from SWAC and others.

9. How can deprivation and inequality in rural areas be tackled?
Could poor social mobility in rural areas such as the Forest of Dean be a basis for prioritising infrastructure development and the development of accessible (ie affordable) housing to enable equality of opportunity across an inclusive and healthy, happy county?

Or is this ambition assumed to be subordinate to other ambitions driven by urban areas?

Were both questions raised for Glos2050 to question the basis on which priorities are assessed? Equally is deprivation and inequality greater in rural areas than say inner cities? Or put another way are the issues inequality and deprivation for the economy as a whole?

Social Mobility figures for the Forest of Dean make sorry reading. The challenge for all FEP's stakeholders is to address them.

The scale of the challenge can be seen by the fact in the last school year of 10,327 pupils attending district schools 1,206 or 11.7% of the school population were eligible for Free School Meals. The voluntary Forest Foodbank covering a large part of the district is often called upon by families referred in the summer months to fill the gap when no school meals are available.

Any client is only allowed a maximum of 6 vouchers in any six month period. Between 2013 and 2017, family vouchers to access the food bank increased by over 50%. Over the same period both single person and couple vouchers doubled and the total increase was 79%. With an increase of food distributed doubling from 13 to 26 tonnes, this is another voluntary provision at risk of being overwhelmed beyond its capacity.

10. How can more young people be encouraged to stay in or return to rural areas and contribute to their communities?

As a predominantly rural county Gloucestershire has a demographic time bomb. Each year there 9,000 births; 5,000 deaths; 20,000 move in and 18,000 move out. Each year we lose 400 young people. Current predictions show that in 2039 there will be 79,000 more 65+, 7,000 more 18-64 and 4,000 more 0-18 year olds. Of particular relevance here are the 12,500 18-34 year old EU workers who by departure would increase the problem given the proportions in the land-based economy. Key here is that they saw the opportunity to be economically attractive.

An idea in the Glos2050 consultation was the creation of a Super City magnet by combining the two major urban centres to make the county more attractive to young people and provide increased facilities attractive to this demographic. This would then potentially position the Forest of Dean and other rural area as areas of leisure and not as a sustainable working community in their own right. Thereby creating an unintended impact of reinforcing a 'them and us' division among young people in the Forest of Dean, with knock on effects on health and well-being.

 One of the key reasons to support the creation of a Sixth Form at Dene Magna School to serve the central Forest was the Forest has significant issues with outbound travel at peak times among its working population.   For students, this issue can be significantly worse meaning that a proportion will stay and/or work in the school or university area once their courses have finished. For some years the Dene Magna mantra has been go out into the world and explore, but then come back. If applied to the Sixth Form Centre, the route to meet an individual's A Level and/or university aspirations can be met with an increased likelihood they would consider local Forest–based employment. This assists in the Forest economic regeneration and meets the core themes of Glos 2050 in retaining the young within the county and increasing higher skilled jobs.

Another was raising aspirations. There are many different valid routes into the workforce. Currently, the A level route is restricted, due to a lack of local provision. This results in these students needing

to travel outside of the central area, incurring additional time and cost implications that can be a barrier to our young people. The effects of this can be seen most acutely amongst those eligible for free school meals in FoDDC. 26% achieve 2 or more A levels and 12% enter higher education, which ranks the Forest as 243rd and 275th of all English Local Authorities. (Social Mobility Commission). This more accessible Sixth Form removes the travel and other real barriers to aspirations. This recognises that their university choice will take the young out of the area and that it falls to the way that we now use rural areas for work to attract them back when they wish to return.

Inspiring the Forest events will address and make explicit the many other routes for the young and others to enter the local workforce and by greater awareness of the opportunities create the demand to stay.

11. What can be done to address the challenges associated with an ageing rural population, such as social isolation and social care provision? What opportunities are there for the older retired population to help support the rural economy?

FEP has not specifically yet addressed these issues but is aware that service and infrastructure provision will address the needs of the whole community.

Rural housing and planning

12. How can the affordability of rural housing be improved? What are the other challenges associated with rural housing and how can these be addressed?

Affordability is a key issue for the District thrown into relief by the increases in the last year that put the authority in the top 15 for percentage increases in UK. The question is affordability for whom which comes back to the role of rural areas as a place to live rather than live and work. This is a key question for our bridges and borders sub-group as we connect with others to determine what role the District and counties like Monmouthshire could play in the possible S Wales/West of England Western Powerhouse . It flows on into planning policy where often the onus for infrastructure development such as MoD land conversion or rationale for a bridge is seen to be home-building rather than the sustainable, mixed-use development that might give the opportunity for places to work locally to address a home ownership affordability issue.

13. How have recent planning policy reforms affected rural housing

FEP has not specifically yet addressed these issues but is aware of the need for more housing within the Forest of Dean District to accommodate all and to enable existing and new employees to live locally. Ideally more housing along with more well paid jobs to reduce out-commuting and improve access to the housing market.

Government policy, devolution and local government

14. Do the Government and other public bodies pay sufficient attention to the rural economy and if not, why not? What might be done to ensure that Government and other public bodies hear and act on rural voices?

This assumes a 'them and us' situation which is unhelpful. A current perception is that attention is insufficient to varying degrees amongst the public bodies in relation to the Forest of Dean and to the rural economy more widely. Attention should combine planning *and* action. There is a real lack of awareness about Gfirst LEP within the wider business community and this is reflected in the limited

involvement at LEP Board and Business Group level. The LEP do not see the Forest as a priority for economic growth, the current Strategic Economic Plan focusses on the M5 corridor and the urban centres of Gloucester & Cheltenham.

One of the rationales for the foundation for FEP was to ensure that in 2050 the Forest of Dean is an attractive, vibrant and dynamic destination to live, work and do business. Its mission is to deliver a thriving economy in the Forest of Dean by connecting businesses, Councils, people, ideas and resources. This breaks down the 'them and us' and enables the area to move forward sharing and understanding a common vision. We do not have the population of a city, but by acting together we increase the likelihood of being heard consistently so our needs are understood. This is particularly useful if government bodies wish to be seen to be consulting effectively and listening to the needs of business and individuals rather than of local government.

Specifically FEP has been tasked to:

- Create a bold vision to deliver sustainable economic growth in the Forest to 2050.
- Contribute towards the Gloucestershire Industrial Strategy to inform countywide plan/policy making and to provide evidence for funding application work.
- Prioritise support for specific economic sectors in the Forest eg. Advanced engineering, manufacturing, construction and tourism.
- Connect businesses with Gfirst LEP and the Gloucestershire Growth Hub Network.
- Connect businesses with Forest High Schools/Academies, Gloucestershire College & Hartpury College (and other training providers) to their employer training programmes and apprenticeship schemes.
- Exploit the opportunity of the Severn Bridge Toll removal in 2018 and collaborate to develop a proactive inward investment marketing campaign.
- Agree key messages and co-ordinate all press/media/web/social media communications.
- Agree and monitor baseline economic indicators.

15. What is being done in local government to support rural economies? How effectively do other public bodies such as Local Enterprise Partnerships operate in rural areas, and how might coordination between bodies be improved?

FEP was set up in 2018 by the FoDDC to engage with the local economy. FEP is a separate and distinct body drawing from businesses, organisations, individuals and elected bodies interested in the area. It's Bridges and Borders sub-group includes representatives of FSB and EEF as well as Councils outside the area and the South Wales Chamber of Commerce. The encouraging growth in membership suggests it's becoming known and well-regarded. GFirst LEP and Growth hub representatives also contribute to FEP. In time, it would be a marked improvement to have Forest representation on the various GFirst LEP Business Groups – something FEP will be promoting within its emerging Economic Plan.

A recent peer review of the Council highlighted FEP as a best practice initiative with reviewer interest in how it develops and if this leads to delivery and helps build stronger rural ties within the LEP this could be shared in other rural areas. We commend FEP as a model for all rural economies wishing to act for their area.