

NATIONAL ECONOMIC FORUM – TWENTIETH MEETING : 16 MAY 2018

DISCUSSION REPORT: CREATING A NEW ENTERPRISE AGENCY FOR THE SOUTH OF SCOTLAND

Host: Keith Brown, MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Jobs and Fair Work

Facilitators: Prof Russel Griggs OBE, Chair of the South of Scotland Economic Partnership, and Amanda Burgauer, Scottish Rural Action and Director, Arena Peak Ltd, and member of South of Scotland Economic Partnership

Summary

With the Scottish Government committed to establishing a new Enterprise Agency for the South of Scotland, this discussion group provided an opportunity to explore and influence the way forward.

The discussions focused on the future of the South of Scotland, what it should look like and what the new Agency could deliver. Breaking into smaller groups, delegates shared views on the area's needs, strengths and priorities for the future, and how these could be delivered. This produced a wide range of suggestions and ideas to help drive inclusive growth in the area, an overview of which is provided below.

Introduction and Background

Establishing a new Enterprise Agency for the South of Scotland was one of the key recommendations of the Scottish Government's Enterprise and Skills Review. This recognised the particular economic circumstances of the South of Scotland and the need for a fresh approach. The Agency will focus on the needs of the area, driving inclusive growth, supporting communities and capitalising on people and resources. In the interim period, the South of Scotland Economic Partnership has been set up to ensure that people in the South can benefit now from a new and more tailored approach to supporting inclusive growth.

The Scottish Government is currently consulting on the legislation and new Agency. This an opportunity to do things differently, to benefit the area and the workshop provides an opportunity to consider and discuss this.

Topics discussed

The workshop was divided into six discussion groups to consider the South of Scotland and the role of the new Agency in terms of: Innovation, Funding and Inward Investment; Start-Ups and Microbusinesses; and SMEs and Existing Business.

Each group was tasked with identifying the needs, strengths, threats, safeguards, priorities and suggested activities in relation to these themes.

While many issues were discussed and identified, a number of common themes emerged within all the groups. These included:

- the need for a clear vision and strategy
- the importance of communication and engagement
- the need for a simpler support structure for business
- the importance of retaining or attracting young people to the area

All groups identified a range of existing strengths within the area which could be built upon. Starting with the people and the area itself (including its natural capital), this widened out to the university/colleges in the region and specific business sectors including food & drink, agriculture and forestry to name a few. Entrepreneurial talent was also suggested, although this was also identified as a skill which was needed.

In terms of signs of success, participants wanted to see effective engagement across the area, and to make the area a world destination – for business, for people, and for tourists. Higher employment with more higher value jobs, greater investment, centres of excellence and higher productivity would also demonstrate success. Achieving this however, could be threatened by a lack of funding, apathy, short termism and a lack of shared vision/voice.

Finally, the groups were asked to identify priorities for action. From the general to the specific, proposals included establishing a clear vision for the future, developing and strengthening existing assets, and investment in infrastructure and people. A range of activities were suggested which could help deliver this and finding an early win would be positive for the region, build confidence and provide a foundation going forward.

Closing Comments

Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Jobs and Fair Work delivered closing remarks, thanking the delegates for sharing their views and providing a valued contribution to the discussion. Going forward, consultation and engagement will continue in order to deliver an Agency of the South and for the South.

**Scottish Government
May 2018**