

Western Gateway Partnership Board meeting
Wednesday 27th November 2024 10:00-12:00
In person (Vantage Data Centre, Newport) and on Teams

Attendees	<p>Sarah Williams-Gardener (Chair) (SWG) Cllr Huw Thomas, Cardiff City Council (Vice-Chair) (HT) Cllr Dimitri Batrouni, Newport City Council (DB) Cllr Tony Dyer, Bristol City Council (TD) Cllr Maggie Tyrell, South Gloucestershire Council (MT) Cllr Darren Price, Carmarthenshire County Council (DP) Cllr Stephen Davies, Gloucestershire County Council (SD) Cllr Robert Francis-Davies, Swansea Council (RFD) Cllr Mike Bell, North Somerset Council (MB) Cllr Kevin Guy, Bath & North East Somerset (KG) Cllr Mary Ann Brocklesby, Monmouthshire County Council (MAB) Ruth Dooley, Gloucestershire Economic Growth Board (RD) Ben Pritchard, Arup (BP) Jo Jenkinson, GW4 Alliance (JJ) Andy Cornelius, South Gloucestershire Council (AC) Paul Orders, Cardiff City Council (PO) Nicola Knowles, Bristol City Council (NK)</p>
Apologies	<p>Cllr Rowena Hay, Cheltenham Borough Council (RH) Cllr Ian Boulton, South Gloucestershire Council (IB) Cllr David Hopkins, Swansea Council (DH) Cllr Rob Stewart, Swansea Council (RS) Cllr Anthony Hunt, Torfaen County Borough Council (AH) Cllr Richard Clewer, Wiltshire Council (RC) Cllr Jim Robbins, Swindon Borough Council (JR) Richard Bonner, Atkins-Realis (RB) Mayor Dan Norris, West of England Combined Authority (DN)</p>
In attendance	<p>John Wilkinson, Secretariat (JW) Joe Ball, Secretariat (JB) Nicola Lomax, Secretariat (NL)</p>
Chair	Sarah Williams-Gardener
Minutes	Nicola Lomax

Item	Summary of the discussion held and decisions made	Deadline
1	Welcome, apologies for absence and declaration of conflicts of interest	
	<p>SWG thanked the Board members for attending and Vantage for kindly hosting the meeting.</p> <p>The Western Gateway Partnership Board wishes to formally acknowledge the immense contribution Ian Edwards made during his tenure as a Board member. Ian was a passionate and innovative individual whose insights and dedication greatly enriched the</p>	

	<p>Board's work. The Board is deeply saddened by his loss and extends its gratitude for his invaluable support over the years.</p> <p>No new conflicts of interest were declared. Apologies for absence were noted.</p>	
2	Minutes of the last meeting, action tracker and matters arising	
	<p>JW reviewed the action log and noted that most actions set over the last Board meetings are either completed or in progress.</p> <p>Given the uncertainty surrounding the future of the Western Gateway, we have not proceeded with further governance changes, including the appointment of new business and university representatives. JW noted it is important to first establish clarity about the future direction of the Partnership before revisiting these governance discussions.</p> <p>The minutes of the last meeting were agreed and no further matters were arising.</p>	
3	Director's update	
	<p>(For full details see paper Item 3: Director's update).</p> <p>JW provided an update on update on some of the general activities undertaken by the Secretariat and emerging new opportunities.</p> <p>JW updated the Board on the partnership's mid-year review with MHCLG in early November. The Secretariat were pleased to be able to present excellent progress against all programmes set out in the funding agreement with the Department, who were delighted with progress made. The partnership continues to deliver against the agreed outcomes, making strong progress in areas such as investment and the Severn Estuary Commission.</p> <p>The Severn Estuary Commission is progressing well with growing interest from important stakeholders. The team are due to meet with Rebecca Evans MS, Cabinet Secretary for the Economy, Energy and Planning and Juergen Maier, Chair of GB Energy next week to discuss the Commission's work.</p> <p>One of the most notable events delivered by the Secretariat since the last Board meeting was the Western Gateway Convention, held in partnership with SSE Energy Solutions at the ICC Newport on 17th October. Over 600 people signed up for the Convention which raised over £160k in private sector sponsorship (making the event cost neutral). As the first event the partnership has done which looked to regain costs through sponsorship, this was a remarkable success with many businesses willing to sponsor and also expressing a clear appetite to establish long-term professional relationships with the partnership, recognising the significant value in the convening power of the partnership.</p> <p>The Convention was followed by a successful Parliamentary Reception held on 29th October through which we launched our Plan for Sustainable Growth. This was attended by over 80 attendees, with 23 local MPs from the area registering to attend.</p>	

JW outlined how we continue to be approached by organisations who see value in our convening power and wish to work with us to deliver benefits for the region. JW noted it shows that there remains a strong appetite from organisations to talk to the area at scale.

These include:

- **The Western Forest:** following agreement from the Board we collaborated in a DEFRA bid (England only) to deliver a new National Forest. The bid has been successfully shortlisted to a final 4. The value of the winning bid will be £9million and if successful the consortia is keen for the Partnership to play a leading role in the delivery of the new National Forest. The Secretariat has supported two visits by the assessor team.
- **Lloyds Bank:** Lloyds Bank will be hosting an event in Bristol this week to support the launch of the Western Gateway's Plan for Sustainable Growth with key stakeholders associated with the bank.
- **University collaborations:** As well as continuing to work closely with GW4 on the development of funding bids, the Secretariat has hosted a meeting with Business West with the Vice Chancellors of the three Gloucestershire Universities to explore opportunities for greater collaboration.
- **South West Association of Colleges:** The Secretariat will join the AoC at their annual convention in February to explore opportunities for collaboration with the FE Colleges in Western England.
- **National Wealth Fund:** We have held regular meetings with the new UK National Wealth Fund to discuss how to support greater visibility of investment opportunities in the Western Gateway and promote increased levels of investment as the new organisation sets itself up.
- **FLOW:** We have been approached by the Crown Estate, the South West Infrastructure Partnership and Ports among others to play a convening role in ensuring the economic opportunities from FLOW in the Celtic Sea materialise and benefit the area. We are exploring what role we could play within the capacity we have to develop a Western Gateway and Great South West vision for FLOW.
- **SSE:** SSE Energy Solutions are a FTSE 100 Company that are based in Perth, Scotland but operate across the UK and Ireland, helping local authorities and businesses on their journey to net zero. They were the headline sponsor for the Convention for the Western Gateway and we have now signed an MoU to support the delivery of a longer-term pipeline of investment into the Western Gateway area. They are actively engaged with the Energy Officer Group providing valuable industry input.
- **Energy Officer Group:** We have reconvened the Energy Officer Group which is an open-access offer to all of our Local Authority partners plus the likes of the SW Net Zero Hub, Wales Energy Service, Welsh Government, National Grid and NESO. The next session in December will be dedicated to sharing best practice in the development and delivery of Local Area Energy Plans as requested by the Group.
- **Department for Business and Trade:** The department has been actively approaching the Western Gateway about preparing a pipeline of large-scale investible projects to help deliver investment to the area alongside offering to bring a range of investors to the area to visit significant projects which have the potential to have a cross-region impact.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Port Talbot transition board: The Western Gateway Partnership and the High Value Manufacturing Catapult will be delivering a workshop on the creation of a long-term regeneration plan for Port Talbot on 28th November as part of the UK and Welsh Government’s Tata Transition Programme. <p>The most pressing issue for the Secretariat remains the consultation on the UK Government’s stated position that they are minded to cease funding PRPs from March 2025. The consultation is now live and the Secretariat has a Communications Plan and is working with Local Authority, private and academic partners to submit consultation responses.</p> <p>In light of this JW provided a HR update on current and future staffing levels. Given the continued uncertainty around the future funding of the Western Gateway the Secretariat’s ability to maintain a fully staffed team remains one of our highest risks, with one staff member having secured permanent employment and others likely to follow.</p> <p>HT expressed his gratitude to the Secretariat team for their efforts in delivering the Convention, highlighting the impressive scale and number of attendees. He noted that this reflects the strong appetite and commitment from the private sector to engage with the concept of pan-regional collaboration. HT also acknowledged the uncertainty surrounding the future of the partnership and its impact on staff wellbeing. HT raised concerns about ensuring critical workstreams, such as the Severn Estuary Commission, continue to receive support. JW provided reassurance that these workstreams will remain a priority.</p> <p>SWG commended the team for their outstanding work on the Convention, highlighting the positive engagement from Board members as well as the Welsh and UK governments. The success of the event underscores the value of hosting such initiatives.</p> <p>SWG expressed her thanks to the Board members who signed the supportive letter that has been sent to Jim McMahon about the future of pan-regional partnerships.</p>	
4	<p>The Future of the Western Gateway Partnership</p>	
	<p>(For full details please see Item 4 Next steps post budget 2024)</p> <p>John WG shared his recent experience of attending an OFI roundtable discussion in Manchester. The event brought together the Director of OFI; Andy Burnham, Mayor of Manchester; representatives from northern Mayoral Combined Authorities; the Director General of MHCLG and leaders from major investment funds such as Legal & General, CBPE and local authority pension funds.</p> <p>He observed that northern mayors are making significant strides in advancing devolution in the North and working collaboratively in order to do so. The development of the "Great North Investment Playbook," a unified effort to articulate and promote investment opportunities across the North was discussed. Beyond this, they are establishing a delivery body to drive major initiatives, including skills academies, regeneration projects, and substantial investment opportunities. A key part of their</p>	

approach involves pooling funds to share risk and address disparities among local authorities, with an aim to enable the public sector to deliver at scale.

JW noted the ambition and innovative strategies being pursued and remarked that it provided a strong sense of where policy and progress are currently being driven from. There is a risk that the Western Gateway region may be overlooked in government policymaking and investment decisions, as attention increasingly shifts beyond London and focuses on the North.

JW provided an overview of the Government's proposal to withdraw funding from PRPs in March 2025 and gave further details about the consultation. The Board were encouraged to provide a submission to the Consultation and the Secretariat can provide a briefing pack, outlining the projects currently being delivered, along with key data to inform and strengthen submissions.

JW provided some context for the decision, which is largely being driven by the English Devolution White Paper. From correspondence with MHCLG, JW noted a likely evolution to the establishment of regional councils, in alignment with the move to devolve authority to Mayoral Combined Authorities across England. There is no indication that Regional Councils would work pan-nationally.

There are some indications that completing this framework and mapping out MCAs and regional councils across England could take until 2030, spanning more than one election cycle. This timeline raises concerns about a potential gap in collaboration and governance between current arrangements and the envisioned future structures.

In the context of the National Industrial Strategy, the need to support significant industry clusters that do not align neatly with local authority boundaries was highlighted. When considering the timeline for establishing regional councils and the characteristics of significant industry clusters, it becomes clear that a gap is emerging in how to continue pan-national collaboration and in the delivery structures necessary to support growth in cross-border functional economic areas.

JW noted that there are ongoing conversations in relation to CJs and how they might have equivalent powers to MCAs. DB noted there is little appetite to follow the mayoral devolved model in Wales.

JW outlined a number of options for the Board to consider in relation to the future of the Western Gateway Partnership.

Option 1, advocating for the continuation of MHCLG funding as a transitional arrangement towards the new system, was discussed. JW suggested that the critical importance of the Western Gateway region as a pan-national functioning economic area that can deliver the priorities within the Government's Industrial Strategy presents a compelling case for continued funding. It is possible to argue for an 18-month transition period, emphasising the significant investment opportunities that could be lost without such arrangements. The ability to collaborate effectively across the England-Wales border remains essential to the region's success and the government's growth agenda.

Option 1b was discussed. This option explores the possibility of transitional funding coming from DBT rather MHCLG and could be an option the partnership explores.

JW outlined Option 2 which proposes the continuation of the Western Gateway with local authority (and other funding). This option considers whether a 'coalition of the willing' takes on responsibility for the Western Gateway Partnership.

This option would likely need to include a re-scoping of priorities, financing and governance and there could be a number of different options for delivering this which include:

- Individual local authorities take on responsibility for specific projects with no central Secretariat.
- Secretariat remains with funding from core set of Local Authorities/CJCs willing to invest. The Secretariat currently operates with a £1.7 million annual budget, which includes programme delivery, staffing and hosting costs. Reducing this to a scaled-back operation (~£600k) would allow for minimal operations, retaining 3-4 staff and maintaining core functions.
- A tiered funding model according to who can pay.
- Additional projects could be added if funding available/bids won e.g. National Industrial Strategy sector deals.

Under this option, the UK and Welsh Governments could be approached for matching funds based on contributions from local authorities and private sector partners. This is likely to be a transitional arrangement to a more sustainable funding model. A reliance solely on private sector funding may not be feasible in the current timescales.

JW recognised the financial constraints that local authorities are operating under.

The Board was asked to consider whether there is an appetite to continue pan-regional collaboration through the partnership or, if not, whether a group within the Board would be willing to support winding down the organisation in a way that preserves momentum on key projects.

JW noted that there is a need to initiate a formal redundancy consultation in December, with final decisions in February, should alternative funding not be secured.

KG expressed support for the continuation of the organisation or a similar structure, emphasizing that Bath and North East Somerset (BANES) Council would be keen to see it maintained. He highlighted the unique nature of the cross-border collaboration, the large-scale projects that are specific to the region, underscoring the importance of communicating this distinctiveness to the government. While he acknowledged that the organisation should continue, he stressed that the financial burden cannot fall solely on local authorities. KG proposed putting together a formal response in the coming days to support this position.

HT echoed Kevin's views, emphasizing the clear case for the organisation's continuity in some form. He stated that Cardiff City Council would be willing to contribute financially to support this, particularly if a private sector membership option could be explored to help distribute costs. He pointed out that, without such an organisation,

local authorities might ultimately create a similar structure, reinforcing the need for the Western Gateway. HT raised the question of whether an alternative option should be disclosed as part of the consultation, noting that it might not be beneficial to do so if it risks fostering a negative response. Instead, he suggested focusing on making the case for transitioning to a more locally funded arrangement, if necessary.

To enhance lobbying efforts, HT suggested approaching attendees from the Convention to submit responses and highlighted the importance of engaging in political conversations with key decision-makers, particularly on the Welsh side, and involving Chief Executives who are well-regarded within the civil service to strengthen the funding case.

DB expressed Newport's commitment to continuing the organisation, emphasising the importance of maintaining a cross-border approach. He highlighted the unique selling point of the Western Gateway as a truly cross-border initiative which is unparalleled elsewhere. DB noted that if leaders can demonstrate effective collaboration across regions, leveraging the unique attributes of each, it could create a genuine economic powerhouse rather than just a slogan.

TD shared that Bristol City Council is keen to see the organisation continue, but the key question is how to enable that. He emphasised the importance of Option 1 as a priority and suggested exploring joint funding opportunities, particularly with the DBT given its focus on regional investment. He highlighted the financial challenges faced by local authorities, making it difficult to commit further funding without a strong business case.

SWG acknowledged the challenges faced by local councils regarding their budgets and stressed that funding in the immediate and short term needs to come from central government departments and that this should be reflected in the messaging.

SD praised the great work done by the Western Gateway and its staff during this challenging time and expressed support for the organisation's continuation. He emphasised that for Gloucestershire County Council the unique connection to Wales is a key strength and forms the foundation of the partnership's case for continued existence. While he expressed support in principle for contributing funding, he raised concerns about whether the Western Gateway would retain the same influence without government recognition or funding. He questioned whether the organisation would be perceived merely as a collaboration rather than a credible voice that the government would listen to if it were no longer funded by them.

JW reflected on the recent OFI roundtable and noted that the government appears to be encouraging a move toward locally driven collaboration. He noted that Option 2 aligns with the direction the government is already steering us toward.

MB agreed with the previous points and acknowledged the uncertainty faced by the Western Gateway team. He emphasised the importance of North Somerset continuing to support the pan-regional approach, particularly given the slow rollout of the English devolution model. Mike noted the opportunity for North Somerset to be part of something larger and strategic, such as hydrogen initiatives, UKREiiF and the Severn Estuary Commission. He argued that if the Western Gateway didn't already exist, it

would need to be invented to address strategic, cross-national border issues effectively, making the need for a transitional arrangement essential. While acknowledging the financial challenges, MB expressed willingness to support the partnership in the context of government and private sector funding, provided it can move toward sustainability. Mike also suggested that considerations around the funding model should include factors such as population size and council capacity to ensure an equitable approach.

DP acknowledged the challenging situation Western Gateway finds itself in, emphasising that it is not of their own making. Representing the CJC in South West Wales, he explained that while formal processes are not yet in place, he has had conversations with other regional leaders to explore potential pathways forward. He noted that there is ongoing debate about how the partnership could complement the work of CJsCs, particularly in areas like energy and economic development, without duplicating efforts. DP expressed a willingness to work on this basis, provided there is financial support from both the UK and Welsh governments. However, without such an agreement, continuing would be difficult given the financial pressures on local authorities and additional demands on CJsCs, such as the requirement to develop strategic development plans. DP welcomed continued lobbying efforts to secure funding but stated that contributions beyond current levels would not be possible.

DB acknowledged the financial challenges faced by all authorities and the difficult position this creates. He expressed concern that, without proactive action, the North could dominate investment opportunities. To avoid this, he stressed the importance of taking control and fostering collaboration rather than competition, particularly among CJsCs. DB noted that the appearance of unity and collaboration is highly attractive to investors. He emphasised that while there will always be reasons not to act, presenting a strong, collaborative approach is essential to gaining support from both investors and government.

MT agreed with much of what had been discussed and reiterated South Gloucestershire's ongoing support for the organisation. However, she acknowledged the financial challenges the council is facing, making it difficult to contribute beyond current levels without a strong business case. MT highlighted the importance of leveraging the relationship with government and aligning with their regional review to advocate for the value of a pan-regional approach. She noted the significant potential of such an area and stressed the need to invest in mechanisms that can drive growth.

RD echoed John's comments, highlighting insights from the National Business Board network and the Bristol Business Board network about the importance of reducing dependence on central government funding. The challenges of last-minute budget confirmations and operating on a financial knife edge were noted as significant issues, with businesses advocating for greater financial stability and autonomy. RD praised the Western Gateway's collaboration with the business community, highlighting the impressive sponsorship achievements. This level of support demonstrates the willingness of businesses to collaborate and the strong interest in partnership opportunities across the region.

BP emphasised the value of the Western Gateway, noting that businesses are drawn to its collaborative approach, long-term vision, and scale. From an investor

	<p>perspective, scale is crucial for meaningful impacts, and the Western Gateway provides this. Ben stated that businesses are willing to contribute financially, as demonstrated by the strong sponsorships already secured. In fact, even more funding could have been pledged if there had been additional opportunities or capacity for involvement. BP underscored the importance of a transitional funding period, supported by both the UK and Welsh governments, to ensure continued operations. While open to exploring a different operational model, Ben affirmed that the Western Gateway's existence is essential and expressed a willingness to explore how to contribute to it financially.</p> <p>RFD emphasised the value of the Western Gateway, highlighting the strong collective voice it provides. He noted that the partnership is essential for creating opportunities, particularly for areas further west of Swansea. He pointed to the success of initiatives like the UKREiiF and the Convention, which attracted significant interest and private sector income. Robert stressed the importance of continuing to build on this momentum to create jobs, enhance regional capacity and drive economic growth. While acknowledging the financial hardships and budget constraints faced by local authorities, he called for continued collaboration in whatever form is feasible and would take this back to Swansea Council for consideration. He expressed a firm commitment to working together as part of the Western Gateway, stating that it would be a shame to let the progress and achievements of the partnership be lost.</p> <p>MAB emphasised the importance of continuing long-term collaboration on both sides of the border, highlighting the links and strong sense of identity within the region. She found the discussion encouraging and stressed the need to consolidate investment in the region and leverage funding that is not solely dependent on government support—an approach that aligns with what the government is keen to see. MAB acknowledged that the funding model and organisational structure may need to evolve, but maintaining cross-border collaboration, with support from the private sector, is essential for the region's future success.</p> <p>SWG summarised the key points expressed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Board are in agreement about the importance of maintaining the momentum the Western Gateway has built and the need to continue pan-national collaboration. • SWG acknowledged the significant financial pressures faced by local authorities and reiterated the need to approach both the Welsh and UK governments for a transitional funding settlement. • The Board agreed to form a smaller working group to develop a plan and explore options if government support cannot be secured. This plan will be brought back to the Board for consideration. <p>JW thanked the Board for their engagement and for recognizing the importance of collaboration. He assured the Board that he would convey this positivity to the Secretariat team.</p>	
5	Delivery of UKREiiF 2025	
(For full details please see Item 5 Delivery of UKREiiF 2025).		

	<p>At the last Board meeting it was agreed that the Secretariat would book an expanded Pavilion for UKREiiF 2025, given the success of the event and demand for space at last year’s event as well as the offer from Local Authorities to underwrite the cost of the event. As a result of the consultation on the future of PRPs, there is uncertainty about the means to deliver a full programme at the event in Leeds in May 2025. The Board was asked to consider whether to go ahead with the Western Gateway’s presence at UKREiiF, considering the payment already made for the Pavilion is unrecoverable.</p> <p>The Secretariat have reached out to economic development teams who have broadly supported the idea of returning to the event. If the event goes ahead, there will be further additional costs of delivering the event. Those costs are primarily in set-design, staging, AV, construction and transportation, plus catering and staff time. These costs will depend on sponsorship and scale but is likely to be £30,000+ (excluding Pavilion – already paid).</p> <p>The Board appetite for private/public sector sponsorship will need to be balanced against partnership control of sessions and agenda. The Secretariat remain confident that sponsorship is attractive as this is still a high-profile platform supported by high-profile public and private sector bodies.</p> <p>Several Board members emphasised the value of participation. MB highlighted the significant opportunities the pavilion offered last year and expressed confidence that local authorities would be willing to invest, even under challenging circumstances.</p> <p>RFD shared Swansea’s positive experiences from past events and noted that the event’s growing prominence underscores its value as a platform for showcasing the region’s projects and ambitions.</p> <p>MT noted that in the unfortunate event that the Western Gateway Partnership is not funded beyond March 2025, the Board should explore support from organisations like WECA. JW noted that the Secretariat had received a supportive approach from Invest Bristol & Bath.</p> <p>SWG emphasised the importance of the event as a platform to position the Western Gateway as a leading contender for investment among other regions and to highlight important projects such as the Severn Estuary Commission.</p> <p>JB indicated he has further meetings with economic development leads next week as well as meetings with potential sponsors.</p> <p>The Board agreed that the Secretariat should move forward with preparations for the event, with further discussions with partners to be conducted once there is greater clarity regarding the Western Gateway’s future.</p> <p>SWG thanked the Secretariat for their work in building momentum and driving this forward.</p>	
6	Chair’s reflections	

	<p>SWG thanked JW and the Secretariat team for their efforts in preparing the discussion papers and expressed gratitude to the Board for their openness and shared commitment to continuing this important work.</p> <p>She encouraged the Board to collaborate closely with JW and the team to ensure a unified message is presented to both the UK and Welsh governments, emphasizing that the next two weeks are critical for meeting the upcoming key deadline.</p> <p>While the Board expressed strong support for the Western Gateway, SWG acknowledged the challenging fiscal constraints faced by local authorities. She underscored the importance of securing continued funding from the UK government and, where possible, the Welsh government.</p>	
7	Partner updates	
	<p>Nick Hibberd is the new Chief Executive at Bristol City Council and will take up the post in January 2025.</p>	
8.0	AOB and next meeting	
	<p>Time and date of the next meeting: provisionally 27th January 2024 but to be confirmed. SWG expressed her thanks to the Secretariat team for their comprehensive preparations for the Board meeting and thanked the Board for their time and valuable contributions today.</p>	