

Report to the Council

Committee: Council

Date: 29 April 2021

Subject: Finance and Economic Development Portfolio Holder

Portfolio Holder: Councillor John Philip

Recommending:

That the report of the Finance and Economic Development Portfolio Holder be noted.

Covid Economic Development Programme: In September, the Council appointed independent business consultants Studio-3, to complete town centre appraisal work following on from work previously undertaken by directors as part of the Safer Spaces programme. This project has been completed with two reports on Waltham Abbey and Ongar presented to Cabinet and a further four draft reports have now been received from the consultant covering Loughton Broadway, Loughton High Road, Buckhurst Hill and Epping. These reports will be presented to cabinet in May with additional information gathered after the return to trading on April 12th. Officers are also now looking at whether a similar but condensed approach of producing town centre reports can be applied on a rolling programme to larger high streets/villages not currently included in the current programme, for example North Weald, Theydon Bois and Chigwell. As agreed by Cabinet in December the council has moved to recruit a new towns centre project manager post. This process is now complete with an appointment made at the end of March, and it is hoped the officer will come into post before the end of April.

The council has launched an additional platform to support online trading/Click and collect in the district. The 'Click It Local' programme was launched on 11th March 2021 and is now in operation. Officers are working with 'Click It Local' to expand the number of businesses locally taking part. In addition, officers have been in discussion with Maybe Tech and the Loyal Free app to explore the deployment and interoperability of these platforms in Epping Forest. In order to avoid confusion, it is anticipated that these platforms will be launched sequentially to increase and support take up.

Covid Business support grants: Officers continue to provide information, advice and guidance to businesses on the many government grants that are available to support the local economy. Existing grants such as EBAF have had further funds made available (£170k) and the government has announced new 'Restart grants'. Officers in Economic Development have so far processed over 100 grants from the EBAF scheme to a value of approximately £140,000 and the new campaign will be getting underway to support increased take up over the coming weeks. Since the beginning of the pandemic the amount of funding paid to local businesses has increased to over £42 million. This funding has played a critical role in the maintenance of businesses right across the district.

Civic Office accommodation: The marketing campaign for the second floor of the civic offices continues. There has been interest from a number of companies looking

to establish or grow their operation into the building. The council has received offers however none of those have as yet matched the council's commercial rental valuation. The second floor is now available for viewing and the agents have been programming viewings in April.

Business E-newsletter/Database: The council published the first edition of its new business e-newsletter 'Business Matters' on the 22nd of March. It reached over 2,300 business contacts and work is now underway to produce the April edition. This edition will again focus on critical funding information available to local businesses but will also carry information on the council's new approach to local procurement, investment and activity in town centres and support to reopening retail in the district. In order to promote sign up to the newsletter, an A5 leaflet was distributed in March to over 4300 ratepaying businesses in the district. The e-newsletter was also distributed via the members bulletin and the Federation of Small Businesses.

To sign up please follow this link: <http://eepurl.com/gib9nD> or email businessmatters@eppingforestdc.gov.uk for more details.

The March 2021 e-newsletter is available to view on the council's website: <https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/business/business-matters/>

Attracting Inward Investment: Officers have worked with the UK Innovation Corridor to produce an inward investment prospectus for the Innovation Core/5 districts in West Essex/East Hertfordshire between London and Cambridge. This document was launched at a special event in March at which the council's chief executive was a key speaker. Officers are now working on the production of an Epping Forest prospectus for inward investment to promote the area as a location for new businesses. Costings have been received from companies that specialise in this work and it is hoped to initiate development of the website by the end of April.

General Economic Briefing: Council officers continue to review available economic indicators assessing the health of the local economy. These focus on key areas such as unemployment, furlough, SEISS (Self-employment income support scheme). Latest unemployment figures for February 2021 show a slight increase in the unemployment count from 4,665 in the previous month to 4,955. In January 2020 before Covid the unemployment rate was 1,455. Latest figures on furlough in the district for February show a figure of 10,900 or 18% of the total working population. This is slightly down on January 2021 when 11,300 people or 19% of the total working population were furloughed. For SEISS in January 2021 70% of eligible individuals (9500) were claiming in the district so 6600 claims were made. This is up from December 2020, where 63% of eligible individuals or 6000 people were claiming.

Visitor Economy: The tourism website continues to attract a large volume of visitors, over the Easter week the site attracted almost 7000 users and, as in previous lockdowns, the majority of pages viewed concern outdoor activities, walks and managed green spaces such as Epping Forest, Lee Valley and our Countrycare sites. As the timetable for moving out of lockdown is seen to be on track, visitors are now searching travel and accommodation information and data analysis shows visitors from the north of the country, as far as Glasgow, are appearing more frequently in the stats. This is an indication of the 'Staycation' effect that we also saw last summer. Some open-air attractions are being to open again and list events for further into the year. As yet our major tourist attractions remain closed and our hospitality outlets are subject to the most stringent route back to normality. In order to provide an anchor for the District's Festival of Culture to move online, a new section was created on the website. As the festival comes to a close, this vacated section is being remodelled to create a new feature directly supporting and promoting the

district's high streets in line with the findings of the recent high street reports and visitor-related activities being coordinated by the new Town centre Project Manager.

Essex + Herts Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ): BDUK Local Full Fibre Network project – Delivery of the £1.7m DCMS funded Herts + Essex Ultrafast GPs broadband network has started to see the first sites built out and connected up to fibre to the premise (FTTP) connectivity. At the end of March the first 17 sites had been connected and, in collaboration with DCMS, Openreach, the comms providers and our health partners it is planned that the pace of delivery will now increase and see the bulk of the remaining sites built out over the course of April.

DIZ Digital Inclusion Project: A first meeting of the project steering group has taken place with arrangements for the ongoing steering and governance of the project being put in place. The project is being led by CVS Uttlesford, through WECAN, on behalf of the DIZ and they are currently in the process of recruiting a project manager to oversee delivery of the project.

Digital Support for the High Street: An initial EFDC review of the proposed CCTV network to support a pilot with Urban Observatory looking at using Epping High Street CCTV cameras to provide a measure of footfall that can inform the safe return of residents to shopping on the high street has been completed. Work is ongoing to understand how best to host the web platform to make this information publicly available and it is planned that a pilot project could commence in April / May.