



Epping Forest Economic Strategy “Nurturing Growth” Stakeholder Conference

13th November 2019 - Theydon Bois Village Hall



Contents

Executive Summary

Welcome from Our Chairman Cllr Richard Bassett

Setting the scene – Our District John Houston Epping Forest DC

Our Panel

Digital Mike Warr Digital Innovation Zone

Infrastructure David Sprunt Essex County Council

Meeting the skills and workforce challenge Phil Hall
Ian Tompkins New City College
West Essex CCG

Rural Nick Shuttleworth Rural Community Council of Essex

Supporting Entrepreneurs Adam Walker Crate

Tourism Del Goddard Vibrant Partnership

Town Centres Carol Byatt Epping Forest Chamber of Commerce

Q&A Chaired by Clare Morris Rethink Partners

Workshops

Closing remarks Alan Jefcoate FSB

Your notes

Executive summary

The stakeholder event on Wednesday 13th November 2019 provided a forum for a vibrant discussion on the issue's partners felt were critical to a prosperous future for the district. The attached report shows a wide range of issues and subjects that were raised. but a few key themes constantly came to the fore. These included infrastructure and transport, keeping the district on the move sustainably, the future importance of digital to our economy and the need to approach all these challenges in a more joined up way, involving local stakeholders in shaping economic policy and programmes.

Welcome from Our Chairman

Guests were welcomed to the event by the Chairman of Epping Forest District council, Cllr Richard Bassett.

The Chairman began by giving a brief insight into the local economy and highlighted the importance of having a range of business sectors in attendance. He then discussed the challenges that the local economy is facing and how events like these can help to identify key local priorities and set out how we can work together to ensure we can build prosperity for everyone to share.

Setting the scene - Our District

John Houston, from Epping Forest District Council, opened by talking about the 'Nurturing Growth' discussion paper. The aims of this paper is to paint a picture and vision of our local economy through looking at the trends and data that will shape success going forward. He then highlighted that central to success will be the districts ability to lever inward investment from both private and public organisations, and the need to include measurable actions in the document that would unlock this investment.

John then introduced the key speakers for the event, drawn from a variety of key local organisations and businesses, who would give their perspectives on the themes in Nurturing Growth.

At this point, it was reiterated that the day was put together to discuss and help confirm our key economic priorities and allow delegates views, to shape how we go forward together.



Our panel

A number of key priorities were identified from previous discussions and consultation and had been set out in Nurturing Growth. Partners from across the economy had been asked to present their views on our current performance and emerging priorities.

First up, was the Essex + Herts Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ) Programme Manager, **Mike Warr** who spoke about the future of **digital** and its importance to numerous sectors. These included health and social care, our high streets and how we all interact on a daily basis through technology and connectivity. The DIZ is working across West Essex and Eastern Hertfordshire to help future proof local economic performance in an age where digital impacts all sectors.

David Sprunt, from Essex County Council Highways then presented on what he saw as the key **infrastructure** challenges that needed to be addressed with infrastructure in the region. He covered the following topics; Highways, airport links, rail, tube and buses, identifying current and future investment and emerging concerns, particularly the recent announcement that the Central Line was reducing train frequency. He then considered the need to factor in climate change, which is recognised as a part of infrastructure impact which is now unavoidable. He concluded by talking about the future of infrastructure, in particular covering the use of autonomous vehicles.

Two partners gave different angles on '**meeting the skills challenge**'. **Phil Hall** (New City College) looked at the skills supply side, and **Ian Tompkins** of the CCG tackled the issues faced from a demand perspective.

Phil began by talking about the improvement journey since New City College took over the Epping Campus last year. It was central to their continued progress that the curriculum offered was based on the real needs of local businesses. Upskilling and training those within the district in order to meet the needs of local businesses and give students new opportunities.

Ian followed Phil by highlighting the issues faced by the healthcare sector, particularly the scale of current unfilled vacancies and the



ongoing competition from London to retain trained staff. This sector offered a great opportunity to 'grow our own skilled workforce' to meet our own needs and this link was not being made effectively at this moment.



Nick Shuttleworth from the Rural Community Council of Essex, spoke on the specific challenges facing our **Rural** communities, and the key opportunities that we have as a district. The need to secure investment for rural programmes was key he felt, as was infrastructure to enable them to be economically vibrant. It was also really important to enable the voice of local communities to be heard and help shape practical programmes.

We then gained insight on what it means to **Support entrepreneurs** from **Adam Walker** the founder of Crate. CRATE fostered a curated approach to business incubation based on conversions of shipping containers. Crate was founded in Epping Forest and has now expanded across London.

Adam spoke about the importance of curating innovative start up environments for small businesses, as well as a few of the challenges facing business start ups in our area. He applauded

Epping Forest for being an area where start ups are remarkably resilient compared to other areas also.

Del Goddard from Vibrant Partnerships, which manages Olympic venues and many other visitor attractions on behalf of Lee Valley Regional Park, then spoke about the visitor economy and it's worth to the area.

Tourism in Epping Forest was worth £233 million in 2018, and provided 8% of local employment with great potential to grow further.

Del commended the work of local partnership organisations in highlighting opportunities ahead and targeting the development of a cross border Tourism Zone which will seek to improve co-ordination of local attractions and pursue new investment and income opportunities.

Carol Byatt from the Epping Forest Chamber of Commerce concluded the panellists introductions focusing on **town centres**. She spoke about our current strong mix of independent and national chain stores on our high streets. Carol then went to talk about the pressures she knows our high streets are currently under particularly, competition from out of town retail offers, and the growth of online retailing, Carol concluded by challenging local partners to work together so we can keep our highstreets vibrant and resilient for the future.

The Q & A

After insights from the panellists, a Q&A session was hosted by Clare Morris, of RethinkPartners and former Chief Executive of West Essex CCG. This gave attendees the chance to pose questions to the panel.



Various questions were asked, linked to what was said during the panel introductions. This then set the tone for the workshops later on that morning.

After the Q and A, guests were able to network during the coffee break, as well as have a look at the various stalls of organisations supporting the event. These included stalls from the Epping Forest Chamber of Commerce, Epping Forest District Council Economic Development team and the Community, Culture and Wellbeing team, Epping Ongar Railway, Federation of Small Businesses, Haslers, Invest Essex, Rural Community Council of Essex and WYG, who were conducting a consultation on the St Johns Road development.

The workshops

Workshops were led by the panel speakers and attendees were asked three key questions around the themes that the panellists explored prior to the break.

- How we are currently performing?
- What are the challenges and opportunities?
- What is the best approach to tackle these?

Digital

This workshop felt that there are opportunities for all organisations to become more digitally enabled. The speed of take up was often linked to capacity and resources, for example big companies can take advantage of what digital technologies are in place, smaller firms and charities need more support.

It was felt that there are real issues and concerns around trust and cyber security. There was recognition that fast broadband connectivity in many areas in the district is good following local investment.

There was a growing understanding it was felt of the value digital brings to the local economy. For instance, for local businesses it gives the chance to create a platform for themselves through the digital marketing approach, allowing them to reach many new potential customers. The workshop then looked at what the challenges are, especially around the digital skills gap in the district, which might be related to the age profile of the district. The workshop felt that there is a need for community 'experts' to reduce this gap and support people to participate more in digital learning. The affordability of digital technologies was highlighted, meaning businesses may not have access to these technologies, as well as being unclear about how their use can improve business models.

A final challenge is getting people to understand what they can do with faster connectivity. What they can do 'today' as opposed to what they could do 'yesterday'. The workshop felt that the best approach to tackle these challenges is to upskill and educate businesses and residents, through digital inclusion networks. In order to make 'digital' more affordable it was agreed that the potential of collective broadband purchasing should also be pursued.

Infrastructure

The workshop felt that rural areas are greatly under resourced in terms of infrastructure. This is particularly due to poor public transport links and connectivity with neighbouring hamlets, towns and villages. It was felt that urban areas, on the other hand, are well connected with transport links and roads.

Participants focused on the reduction of trains on the central line to Epping by TFL and the negative impact this would have. In addition the workshop highlighted the lack of public transport in the north of the district. They also looked at the reality of being able to provide infrastructure for new housing development and the concerns that the policies in particular for connecting new settlements would not work in reality. The best approach to resolving these challenges, may be to look at integrating, developing and agreeing on an intergrated regional transport plan. This would involve getting different organisations to identify gaps in transport infrastructure

and looking at joint action to address them. It was added that any plans for major local infrastructure developments would need to include in the process the insights from digital infrastructure providers.

Meeting the skills and workforce challenge

The workshop felt there currently is a clear definition of the skills needed by employers to shape the offer of education provider's. The group flagged the need for better promotion of the local offer and awareness, also the importance of events like this, as well as job and careers fairs, to bridge this gap.

The workshop identified that people and employees increasingly want choice and flexibility. They want to adopt a kind of 'on demand' attitude to work; rather than sticking to the traditional 9-5. It was also recognised that there is a need for better preparedness for work, for example better

preparation and understanding on the state of peoples employability, skills and attitudes, including time keeping and reliability.

Connectivity and communication between employers and skills providers is key, to make people more aware of the opportunities and services they can access.



Rural

Many of the key issues around rural challenges had also been covered in other workshops for example, digital connectivity. It was felt by some participants that planning policy is limiting growth of companies in rural areas and therefore their ability to provide jobs and income.

Other challenges that were raised were around poor transport links, for example bus routes in rural areas which are not convenient and are infrequent. This has a critical impact on staff being able to access rural jobs sustainably.

This problem could be tackled to a degree by creating cycle to work and mini bus schemes. These schemes would have to be reviewed annually to make sure they are effective and offer value for money.

Supporting Entrepreneurs

The workshop felt that overall the district had a good story to tell on this issue. There has been a lot of private sector investment in the area, particularly on incubation space and business/office accommodation is quickly being taken up. CRATE was used as an example of a workspace which has supported the success of many different types of businesses from different sectors.

The challenges for entrepreneurs is the affordability for business start ups as well as deciding where it is best to be based. Another major aspect which is both a challenge and an opportunity is the growing night time economy. More and more people are purchasing products and services in the evening, meaning that changes to how businesses work will need to be looked at, in order to be more successful.

Challenges may be tackled best by creating environments to bring people together, as well as having the opportunity to influence planning policies, for example in encouraging and creating business incubation spaces.

Another solution would be to focus on high employment density land use, looking at the mismatch between employment targets, job creation and land use.



Tourism

The workshop confirmed that tourism, visitor and leisure sectors were crucial within the district, with Epping Forest having many historical points of interest for tourists. The workshop also noted that currently there is need to achieve active lifestyles, through activity groups, if we are to promote healthier lives. These connections need to be more effectively made.

One of the key challenges identified by participants is that there are little transport links between tourist attractions. To tackle this the idea of tourism buses taking people from attraction to attraction was brought up. This would enable people to visit multiple sights in a day for one set price and hold greater tourism spend within the districts different attractions.



The workshop also recognised that it is important to create facilities for affordable days out, that are promoted effectively with good marketing.

Town centres

The workshop began by agreeing that Town Centres are crucial for a thriving local economy. It was highlighted that Epping Town Council have tried revamping the market, but are struggling, it was felt, due to insufficient parking. Ongar High Street has also been struggling in the last few months due to footfall issues, and longstanding businesses closing, which is common across many of the highstreets in the district. A challenge that was highlighted is around the perceived attractiveness of many of our highstreets, as well as there being parking issues for some of them, and this needs to be addressed. The workshop felt that there needed to be a clear plan and suggested it would be a good idea for council incentives, to be put in place to encourage the diversification of the types of shops and services on high streets. This could diversify the town centres offer, maintain footfall and recognise the change in retail markets and their role.

Closing Remarks

At the end of the morning, closing remarks were given by Alan Jefcoate, from the Federation of Small Business, who began by thanking everyone for attending. He then spoke briefly on the importance of events like this, especially for small business owners, as it allows them to come together and discuss important topics with others and influence policy makers.

Your Notes



Nurturing Growth Discussion Paper

Version 2– October 2019

An updated discussion paper to support work on a new strategy to drive economic development in the District up to 2025

 **Epping Forest
District Council**
www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk