

Report to the Council

Committee: Council

Date: 25 February 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 work initially focussed on Waltham Abbey Town Centre and Ongar. Full reports which included detailed appraisals and recommendations were presented to and approved by Cabinet on 22nd December 2020 and 21st of January 2021. Reports on Loughton Broadway and Loughton High Street following the similar format will be presented for approval to Cabinet in March. The final two reports on Buckhurst Hill and Epping will be completed by the end of the financial year and then reported to Cabinet. In line with the decision to create a towns centre manager/project officer role officers are currently recruiting for that position.

Officers are currently working to contract and deliver online support to local businesses through the 'Click It local' and 'Maybe' platforms which are also being adopted by many neighbouring councils. These platforms focus on providing practical help to retailers and others for click and collect services and help with developing social media presence.

Covid Business support grants: Officers from across departments have continued to work closely to process and pay the myriad of grants that are available to local businesses from central government and others to support them through these difficult times. Economic officers in particular are supporting the EBAG program, providing grants from £500- £1500 for amendments for businesses to trade safely. Since the beginning of the pandemic council officers have supported the payment of over £31 million to local businesses.

Civic Office accommodation: The second floor of the civic office, which will be available to let from the private sector, should be completed within the next few weeks. A number of viewings have already taken place with potential tenants. A marketing campaign is being delivered via the commercial agents contracted by the council- Savills and Derrick Wade Waters. The marketing strategy will be reviewed at the end of February.

Business Database: In order to communicate directly with businesses electronically the council is updating and upgrading its business database. Approximately 3000 GDPR compliant email addresses for businesses have been acquired and work is ongoing to promote self-registration on the database with a target of 8000 businesses being set.

Business E-newsletter: The council is developing a new business e-newsletter 'Business Matters' which will be sent to registered businesses in the district highlighting key council services especially grant and funding sources. The first edition will be produced by the end of February.

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, car parking information, footfall data (where available). Latest unemployment figures for December 2020 show a slight increase in the unemployment count from 4,770 in the previous month to 4,810. This figure is lower than a high of 4,985 recorded in August 2020. In January 2020 before Covid the unemployment rate was 1,455. Latest reliable figures on furlough in the district for November show a figure of 9,600 or 16% of working population. This is higher than the previous month of October where 6,300 local people were furloughed. Figures on uptake from SEISS in December show how many potentially eligible businesses/individuals (9500) are claiming it and this is at 63% down on the previous months figure of 73%.

Visitor Economy: Despite the current restrictions, the tourism website continues to attract visitors looking for information and local places to exercise. The site has enjoyed around 200,000 visits during the pandemic. Currently the site is being used as the anchor for the district's Festival of Culture, which has had to refocus its offer online. Although only just launched, this accounts for just under a quarter of visitors and expected to grow as the festival progresses. Whilst it is unfortunate that the close of the festival is likely to coincide with the easing of lockdown, we will be using the area of the website vacated to add a new permanent feature directly promoting the district's high streets at the point that people are again allowed to leave their homes and a degree of socialising is possible. We also expect to see a recurrence of interest in our district as a destination for those looking at 'stayactions', which was a feature of last summer expected to expand significantly across the UK this year as foreign travel is perceived as restricted, complicated or unwise.

Essex + Herts Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ):

BDUK Local Full Fibre Network project – The first GP sites to be connected up to this new fibre broadband infrastructure are due to have their connectivity infrastructure fully built out in February 2021. The project will make 'gigabit capable' ultrafast broadband networks available to these GPs as well making the possibility of 'fibre on demand' a reality for over 45,000 premises across the DIZ. 20 GP surgeries in or on the edge of Epping Forest are due to receive this connection by March 2021

DIZ Digital Inclusion Project: As a result of close working with CVS and health sector partners to develop a bid for its ongoing digital inclusion project, the DIZ has secured £178k of funding from the NHS Charities Fund. This funding will see a two-year pilot project across West Essex address digital inclusion through access to equipment, skills training and, critically, connectivity. Voluntary Action Epping Forest is linked into this project through WECAN and the project will also dovetail with the council's digital buddy programme to support the delivery of digital skills training. In the initial stages of the project, focus will be on supporting BAME communities across west Essex as well as those living with mental health issues including the impacts of suicide.

Digital Support for the High Street: As part of its focus on how digital might support the recovery of the high street beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, the DIZ has directly linked up with Newcastle City Council and Urban Observatory, funded by MHCLG, to

explore the use of CCTV systems to produce footfall analysis of the high street. The project will look to use the footfall analysis to provide residents, through an online platform, with the information they need to make informed decisions about a safe return to shopping on the high street. It is planned that the pilot exercise will take place on Epping High Street early in 2021 and work is in progress to understand the technical requirements of the project.