

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-068-2020/21

Date of meeting: 11th March 2021



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Finance & Economic Development – Cllr. J Philip

Subject: Update on Business Database development

**Responsible Officer: John Houston (01992 564094).
Democratic Services: Adrian Hendry (01992 564246).**

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

Members are asked to note:

- 1) the progress in development of a corporate business database to assist the council to engage with and support local businesses; and**
- 2) Plans to develop an online, monthly economic newsletter, sent directly to local businesses, including information on grants and other support, new initiatives, surveys etc.**

Executive Summary:

In July last year members approved a series of measures to assist economic recovery in the district. The development of the database and new methods of communication are a key element underpinning this process.

There are in excess of 8,000 businesses in the Epping Forest District. 92% of these are categorised as micro (0-9 employees), with a further 3% defined as small. Epping Forest businesses have, like so many other businesses in the UK suffered severe disruption with the effects of COVID and need support and advice from the local authority. To assist the Council to effectively engage with local businesses, a database has therefore been purchased from an external company which includes contact and email addresses. A staged approach to further develop the database and Economic Development's capacity to engage with and support local businesses is set out in the report.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

To support the Council's economic recovery programme and underpin the Council's digital outreach to, and support of, businesses in Epping Forest District.

Other Options for Action:

To continue with the current corporate approach and direct mail.

Report:

Effective business engagement can play a hugely valuable role in helping to build future resilience in the economy. The planning for this work needs to start now and, with the first action to create intelligence and knowledge of the local business community and develop an effective tool to communicate with businesses. The engagement will enable the Council to:

- Inform of grants available.
- Update on COVID restrictions and other regulation.
- Inform of public sector procurement opportunities.
- Consult on strategies and council plans.
- Update on government initiatives such as skills and employment for example the Kick Start Programme and Apprenticeships.
- Provide a channel for Epping Forest Members and Corporate Team to communicate with the private sector.

Creating and maintaining an up to date and workable database would be crucial to enable effective communication and the database should include:

- Address and contact details complying to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)
- compliant email
- Business name
- Named contact
- Activity/sector
- Size

The Council already has a number of business contacts across various departments, particularly through the Non-Domestic Rates Team. However, these databases lack crucial email address information and key information around businesses size and sector. They also include Sole Trader contact information which presents data protection issues. Therefore, to make the new database more manageable and GDPR compliant, any extracted data should be restricted to limited companies only.

A staged approach to develop an effective communication tool when engaging with local businesses has been agreed.

Stage 1 – Purchase of database - December 2020

To assist the Council to effectively engage with local businesses, a database has been purchased from an external company which includes 7,844 businesses of which 2,256 have emails and 3,442 have telephone numbers. This provides a good starting point for developing a comprehensive contact list. The database was purchased in December and includes company size and company activity to enable a targeted approach.

Stage 2 – Merging with other council databases – February/March 2021

Where appropriate, other council department's databases will be incorporated into one comprehensive business database and details will be merged. Adding email addresses to complete the database is particularly important as the council's business databases currently lack this information in many cases.

The most effective way of communicating with businesses is by email and this is particularly important during the current closure of many businesses, who may not collect their post.

Stage 3 – Campaign to build and develop the database – February onwards

A key reason for having a database is to provide current and important information to local businesses from departments across the Council and this will be done through a monthly business e-Newsletter. The first edition of the 'Business Matters' e-Newsletter will be distributed in March 2021 linking with key government business announcements where appropriate. It will include current and relevant information on grants and regulations. Other council departments are encouraged to contribute to the content of the newsletter to enable a coordinated approach when engaging with local businesses. **(A draft version of the e-newsletter may be available to include as an appendix)**

A campaign will be undertaken to encourage businesses to sign up and provide an email address and a named contact person. Details of Sole Traders can also be added as and when permission has been obtained as per GDPR rules set out above. The campaign will include:

- Asking companies to provide email addresses and a named contact when applying for COVID grants.
- Promoting the sign up to the database when sending out Business Rates Billing letters.
- Setting up a dedicated email address for businesses to contact and provide their details.
- Promote the sign up on all communication to businesses and on the Council website.
- Sending a welcome letter from the Leader and Chief Executive to new businesses moving into the district.

Resource Implications:

The costs of the database and the monthly e-newsletters will be met from existing economic development resources.

Legal and Governance Implications:

The database will be established and maintained in line with all current regulations and guidelines.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

The effective communication with local businesses will result in improved awareness of COVID safety regulations and will provide an opportunity for other council departments such as Environmental Health to send out information of new regulations and initiatives.

Consultation Undertaken:

Consultation has been undertaken with other council departments and with other Essex Council's Economic Development departments.

Background Papers:

None

Risk Management:

The database establishment and monitoring will be included within the Economic Development Department's risk management procedure.