

Report to the Council

Committee: Council

Date: 29 July 2021

Subject: Finance, Qualis Client & Economic Development Portfolio

Portfolio Holder: Councillor John Philip

Recommending:

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

Covid Economic Development Programme: In September 2020, the Council appointed independent business consultants Studio 3 Ltd, to complete town centre appraisal work following on from work previously undertaken by directors as part of the Safer Spaces programme. This project was completed by the end of March with EFDC being in receipt of reports relating to the six town centres of Waltham Abbey, Ongar, The Broadway Loughton, High Road Loughton, Buckhurst Hill and Epping. The Waltham Abbey and Ongar reports had previously been accepted by Cabinet and the remaining four reports followed in obtaining Cabinet approval on 21 June 2021.

Recruitment for the recommended Town Centres Project Manager position was completed in early April with the candidate in post with effect from 26 April 2021. During the recruitment process, Highway Rangers commenced various “quick win” tasks in Waltham Abbey and Ongar. Now with the Town Centres Project Manager in post, work is beginning to establish Town Teams in each of the town centres and to set priorities for future works and achievements. The Town Centres Project Manager has already established good working relationships with Waltham Abbey, Ongar and The Broadway Loughton and is involved with numerous task and activities with each.

The Economic Development Team are continuing to develop relationships with local partners and expand the business database with details of the district’s businesses. They have launched a regular newsletter to keep businesses abreast of grants/funding availability and new initiatives and opportunities. Following the launch of ‘Click It Local’, the shop local/home delivery platform, work is now underway to establish and launch the award-winning loyalty app, ‘Loyal Free’ – it is expected that this will launch within the next month.

Epping Forest District Council has partnered with Best Growth Hub to provide a virtual support day for business in the district on Monday 12th July, with more days available if demand is there.

Covid Business support grants: Since the beginning of the pandemic officers have provided in excess of £45 million pounds to businesses through various support grants. Officers in the Economic Development team have processed over 180 applications to the Essex Business Adaptation Fund scheme (EBAF) paying out over a quarter of a million pounds. The extended closing date for applications is now the 30th of July and officers are awaiting announcements from ECC on follow up, similar business grant schemes. EFDC has requested that the level of maximum grant is raised from £1500

to £5000 to encourage greater application. Officers continue to use social media and other methods to promote the EBAF scheme.

The EBAF grant scheme has enabled businesses to make their businesses covid secure through, for example the purchasing of protective screens to aid food service. It has also enabled businesses to adapt, innovate and take their business services online through the purchasing of websites or new technology.

By top slicing funding from the Additional Restrictions Grant scheme the Economic Development team have created a new Economic resilience fund. This fund will be used to finance programmes like 'Click It local' and 'Loyal Free' supporting town centre regeneration.

Civic Office accommodation: The marketing campaign for the second floor of the civic offices continues. There has been significant interest from the private sector and officers are in detailed discussions and hope to report back to members in the very near future.

Business E-newsletter/Database: The council has now published four editions of its business e-newsletter 'Business Matters', which is emailed directly to over 2000 businesses in the district. Topics have focused on grant and funding opportunities, guidance for businesses upon reopening and the promotion of new council tools to support high street regeneration (Click It Local, Loyal Free). An intern has taken up a placement within the economic development team for three months to expand the business database. In May, High street ambassadors have been meeting face to face with local businesses providing 2000 'Supporting our High Street' leaflets to 2000 businesses to encourage them to sign up to the database. We would encourage all members to ensure that businesses in their areas have signed up for this.

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

Attracting Inward Investment: Following on from work 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, officers are working on producing an inward investment prospectus specifically for the district. Consultants Puttock Brown have been contracted to undertake this work, marketing and supporting the area to maintain strong inward investment. It is expected that this work will be completed by mid-August.

General Economic Briefing: Council officers continue to review available economic indicators assessing the health of the local economy as restrictions are relaxed. These focus on key areas such as unemployment, furlough and SEISS (Self-employment income support scheme). Since the last portfolio holder report in February 2021, the unemployment count has been steadily falling for three consecutive months. It has fallen from 4,955 to 4,465 as of May 2021. The highest unemployment count since the pandemic began last year was in August 2020. Unemployment that month reached 4,985. Latest figures on furlough in the district show the numbers of local people on furlough has also fallen for three consecutive months. In March 2021, the number furloughed was 10,200 or 17% of the total working population. This then fell to 8,400 (14% of the total working population) in April. Latest figures up to the end of May 2021 report that 6,400 (11% of the total working population) are furloughed. Since the pandemic began, furlough figures reached their highest levels in July 2020, when 19,300 residents were furloughed. For the fourth SEISS grant, as of July 2021 63% of eligible individuals (9500) claimed the support. So, 6000 claims were made.

Visitor Economy: We have received the tourism value report for the Epping Forest District during 2019. Although somewhat academic under the present circumstances, it provides an important benchmark to measure our future performance. In line with previous years, the value of tourism increased by 4% to £242,151,200 with the number of tourism-related jobs rising by 5% to 4,291 which represents over 9% of total jobs in the district. As lockdown measures ease, and we move into summer, interest in our district as a destination continues to increase. As expected, the new freedoms coupled with problematic foreign travel has boosted the staycation market beyond the demand seen last year. The tourism website has seen ample evidence of this with rising searches and page views for all aspects of accommodation but especially inns, self-catering and particularly camping. Overall the website is seeing visitor numbers significantly up on last year and we know that there is a huge demand for things to do across the district. Attractions have reopened sites and events with a ticketed entry system and have sold out all their places. We have recently seen Waltham Abbey, Epping and Fyfield run their town shows and in just one month the three events pages combined generated 3,000 pageviews.

Recognising the growing importance of the tourism sector to building economies, supporting hospitality and creating footfall for our town centres, our neighbouring authorities are investing time and resource into the visitor economy and we have revived the tourism cross-border group with an initial meeting to look at the emerging 'new normal' and how we can work together to take advantage of the new interest in our combined area as a credible national destination.

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 now seen all 26 sites in Hertfordshire built out and connected up to fibre to the premise (FTTP) connectivity, with 41 of the Essex sites also now built out and connected. A small number of Essex sites remain to be completed and it is planned that most of these will be completed before the end of July. This successful project will be publicised over the course of the next few months in parallel with the beginning of the benefits realisation phase of the project in conjunction with health partners, a number of whom have already expressed an interest in getting involved to ensure our communities and health economy fully realise the potential of this enhanced connectivity network.

DCMS Digital Connectivity Infrastructure Accelerator project – As a result of the Common Asset Register work previously undertaken by the DIZ, led and built by EFDC, the DIZ has been invited to participate in one of four DCMS co-development groups to help shape the project. The DIZ was one of only 12 -16 devolved, regional and local authorities invited to take part.

'Digital Skills Embracing the Transformation' Smart Place Seminar – The latest in the ongoing series of DIZ Smart Place Seminars was delivered via Zoom on 30th April. The event delivered presentations by the SELEP Digital Skills Partnership, Barclays Digital Eagles, Volker Wessels and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society. The event, which included a number of interactive workshops, saw attendees come together from education, industry, local and central government as well as community organisations to explore how the demand for digital skills has evolved and to identify critical gaps in provision.

DIZ Annual Progress Report – The 2020/21 Annual Progress Report by the DIZ was published in June and has been circulated to all DIZ partners. Highlighting the key successes and challenges from the last year, the report was presented to EFDC Cabinet on the 12th July and will shortly be uploaded to the DIZ website for full public access.

DIZ Advisory Board – Monthly DIZ Advisory Board meetings continue via Microsoft Teams and in recent months have seen hugely informative and interesting presentations being delivered by BDUK, Kao Park data centre and Connected Places Catapult.

Digital Inclusion Project: Following a recruitment campaign, a project manager has been appointed to drive this project forward over the next 24 months. Once in post, the DIZ Programme Manager will engage with the project manager to understand and help shape their priorities for the early stages of their work.