

## ***Report to the Council***

**Committee:** Council

**Date:** 28 October 2021

**Subject:** Finance, Qualis Client & Economic Development Portfolio Holder

**Portfolio Holder:** Councillor John Philip

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### **Recommending:**

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

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### **Covid Economic Development Programme & Business support grants**

#### Welcome Back Fund:

The Economic Development team are striving to deploy funding allocated by central Government by the end of March 2022. The Welcome Back Fund supports temporary programs to encourage the recovery of town centres following relaxations on Covid lockdown restrictions. A Deputy Town Centre Project Manager has been recruited to the end of March 2022 to administer and coordinate Welcome Back Fund projects, these include:

- Purchasing of footfall monitoring toolkit to build intelligence about the performance of local town centres.
- Distribution of planters in Waltham Abbey, Loughton High Road and Loughton Broadway to improve the appearance of town centres.
- Developing a Christmas shop local campaign, including purchasing of banners in the district to encourage residents to shop local during this critical period.

#### Economic Resilience Fund:

With top up funding accessed through the Additional Restrictions Grant scheme the economic development team are also supporting other programmes to help develop the local economy.

- In partnership with 'Loyal Free' the council on the 8<sup>th</sup> October is launching a free app which showcases vital area information for locals and visitors including exclusive deals and loyalty schemes, fun local events and interesting trails. This will run in tandem with Click It Local scheme, which is also being deployed in the District.
- In partnership with 'Best Growth Hub' the economic development team will be sponsoring a series of events across the district to provide support to local businesses.

#### **Business E-newsletter/Database:**

The Economic Development Team have released the latest October edition of the 'Business Matters' e-newsletter with topics focusing on the launch of the 'Loyal Free' app, the new Essex Business Adaptation Fund grant scheme and updates on projects relating to the Welcome Back Fund.

Plans are now being developed to look at ways of improving the reach of the business contact database.

### **Attracting Inward Investment:**

While the district remains vibrant economically, the council is anxious to continue to promote the area for business growth and relocation to other businesses, particularly in London. It is anticipated that a new inward investment website developed by the economic development team and external partners will be completed and launched in October.

### **General Economic Briefing;**

Council Officers continue to review available economic indicators assessing the health of the local economy now Covid restrictions have been relaxed. These focus on key areas such as unemployment, furlough and SEISS (Self-employment income support scheme). Since the last portfolio holder report in July 2021, the unemployment count has been steadily falling. It has fallen from 3,680 in July 2021 to 3,565 in August 2021. The highest unemployment count since the pandemic began last year was in August 2020. Unemployment that month reached 4,985 and unemployment this year has now fallen for six consecutive months. Latest figures on furlough are provisional but state that 4,800 local people or (8% of the total working population) in Epping Forest are furloughed. These statistics are only available up to the 31<sup>st</sup> of July, new figures are expected to be released in October. This is a fall from 5,600 local people furloughed or (10% of the total working population) to the end of June 2021. For the fourth SEISS grant, as of July 2021 63% of eligible individuals (9500) claimed the support. So, 6000 claims were made. For the fifth SEISS grant as of September 2021 28% of eligible individuals (9500) claimed the support. So, 2,700 claims were made.

### **Visitor Economy:**

Tourism continues to rebound nationally as the unprecedented demand of staycation has proved a financial lifeline, but supply problems have hampered delivery for the UK hospitality industry. As those that traditionally travel abroad, turn their attention to holidaying at home, fully booked destinations have seen growing interest to travel to other, less explored, parts of the country. This has included East Anglia, led by Norfolk, but felt throughout the region. Visit Essex has run campaigns to highlight the delights of 'hidden' Essex, attract visitors from the Capital and encourage local people to discover what is on their doorstep.

The Visit Epping website has provided clear evidence that the staycation effect has been felt in our district. Page hits have seen a significant increase where visitors are looking for general information about the district, specific travel information and, most tellingly, details of accommodation including camping and self-catering. The number of website visitors from across the UK has also increased with strong interest from the north of England and as far away as Scotland. The poor provision of accommodation in our district is restricting the economic advantage we can expect from overnight stayers but the increase in visitors is benefitting our hospitality industry and those attractions that have been able to reopen to capacity.

**Essex + Herts Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ): 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 is now complete with all 74 GP sites (48 in Essex including 20 in Epping Forest) connected.

DCMS Digital Connectivity Infrastructure Accelerator project – The DIZ has taken part in one of four DCMS co-development groups to help shape the Digital Connectivity Infrastructure Accelerator challenge and, following the formal launch of the programme in September, is exploring the potential to form a consortium to bid for one of the seven or eight pilot projects to be funded in 2022. Each pilot area will receive £5,000 of Government funding.

External Engagement: The DIZ Programme Manager and Programme Director were recently invited to speak at the Western Gateway 'Smart Region' event, sharing the DIZ experience to date and the benefits of a 'place-based' collaborative approach to digital. A Western Gateway white paper prepared by Commwise Group that references the DIZ can be downloaded here: <https://commwisegroup.co.uk/creating-a-smart-region/creating-a-smart-region-main-download/>.

The DIZ PM also took part in a panel discussion on 'The role of digital infrastructure in the delivery of critical public services' as part of the Connected Society stream at Connected Britain 2021 alongside Tech UK and JT Group Limited (Jersey Telecom). The DIZ PM is also attending the Connected Places Catapult Innovation Summit, with the DIZ exploring the potential to establish the area as a hub or place of innovation.