

Report to the Council

Committee: Council

Date: 8 February 2022

Subject: Finance, Qualis Client & Economic Development Portfolio Holder

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:

The economic development team have been working on various projects to support the local economy which has been delivered through external funding sources. These are the economic resilience fund (support accessed via the UK Government's Additional Restrictions Grant funding) and the Welcome Back Fund (support accessed through the EU and UK Governments). This funding support will end in March 2022.

This funding helped to support the following programmes in the run-up to Christmas 2021.

- Radio advertisement campaign encouraging residents to shop locally at Christmas.
- A hanging Banner campaign encouraging residents to shop locally at Christmas.
- Purchase of a footfall monitoring toolkit that can enable the council to measure and interpret footfall trends in its key town centres.
- Subsidised FSB business membership scheme to enable local small businesses to take advantage of tax, insurance advice and many other means of support.
- Contributions to town and parish councils for Christmas Light Displays and window competitions.
- Hiring the Epping Forest Brass Band for performances in the lead up to Christmas along Loughton High Road and Loughton Broadway.

Moving forward plans are being made for further use of this funding to carry out the

- Instalment of a parklet to be situated in the site of the old 'Moot Hall' in Waltham Abbey market square.
- Purchase and distribution of planters across various town centres in the district.
- A new investment prospectus website for the district will go live with its purpose being to attract new businesses and investment to the area.

To find out more about these above schemes and all the projects that the team have enacted since the beginning of 2021 with this funding, please speak to John Houston at jhouston@eppingforestdc.gov.uk or call 01992564094.

As part of town centre regeneration work, a new market's policy is being progressed.

Business E-Newsletter/Database:

The Economic Development Team are set to release the February edition of the 'Business

Matters' e-newsletter with topics focusing on, the increasing take-up of LoyalFree, Click It Local, the Omicron Hospitality and Leisure Grant (OHLG), and an overview of the Christmas trading period.

General Economic Briefing:

According to NOMIS, unemployment in Epping Forest District stood at 3,005 in December 2021. This means that as a proportion of the total working population, 3.7% are unemployed. This is slightly up from November 2021 when the number of those unemployed was counted as 2,970. Unemployment as a whole has been falling since the height of lockdown. In February 2021, unemployment reached a high of 4,915 local residents or 6.1 percent of the total working population. The rate in the district is now in line with that in the region.

Visitor Economy:

The District-wide shop local Christmas Campaign launched with double-sided high street banners at 67 locations and a radio and DAB campaign on Heart. For its duration, from 24th November to 24th December, the tourism website had 24,000 page views from 16,000 users. As well as attracting footfall to our town centres, the campaign highlighted festive events, typified by the 3,000 people who visited the page for the Epping Christmas Market. As is to be expected during January, website figures have diminished but remain at a healthy 3,000 weekly users making 5,500 page-views as people search for things to do, markets to visit and outdoor walks and pursuits. In support of our hospitality sector, towns and villages plus places to eat and drink are being promoted and page-views here are also encouraging.

The district's attractions are now making plans for opening and looking forward to a more stable situation although individual events are not yet showing signs of returning to pre-pandemic levels. Data presented by Visit Essex suggests that our county had a good Christmas and is currently faring better than nationally. There are also indications that the benefits we have seen from staycations during the pandemic, are set to continue as people express concerns around affordability, replacing those of regulation and uncertainty, when it comes to holidaying abroad. There are big events to capitalise on this year including the Queen's Jubilee. Essex County Council is looking to make this celebration a major county-wide event. Essex as a visitor destination is being advertised on Sky TV, launching in March, and additional marketing is promoting the area's food and drink offer. Marketing for Essex as a destination is targeting three audiences – Core (local and borders), Short Breaks (London, Herts and E Midlands) and Longer Stayers (Birmingham, Leeds and Merseyside). Web evidence and visitor data have shown interest in Essex as a holiday destination from these locations. The overall push is to widen our current success with day-trippers to the more lucrative overnight stayers.

Essex + Herts Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ):

Towards the end of 2021, the DIZ made a submission to the DCMS Digital Connectivity Infrastructure Accelerator, a project that will explore how public sector assets might be better utilised to support the expansion and densification of Mobile Network Operators' (MNOs) 5G connectivity networks. Following that submission, the DIZ has been invited to join the DCIA Early Adopters Group. This will provide practical support to the project and benefit from knowledge sharing and opportunities to pool resources and collaborate on shared solutions. In addition it will give access to evolving specifications for digital asset management

platforms and the supporting supplier ecosystem, including considerations for public sector procurement.

The DIZ High Street Special Interest Group, which supported all of the DIZ constituent local authority partners in their decisions to procure town centre footfall systems and has compiled a database of key town centre attributes to inform future workstreams, will be holding a strategic planning session in February to determine its future work programme and explore further opportunities for digital to support our high streets.

WECAN (West Essex Community Action Network) continues to deliver a number of key digital inclusion projects. In particular, Digital Share, which the DIZ helped WECAN to develop prior to securing NHS Charities funding has made great strides. This project which has built a digital platform to provide access to digital equipment, training and, crucially, connectivity has secured 2,000 Vodafone SIM cards that will provide essential mobile and data connectivity to the most digitally excluded groups and secured a large donation of Samsung Galaxy tablets from Essex CC. They continue to seek further donations to support the progress they are making via their website <https://digitalshare.org/>

Sustainability is a key theme for the DIZ work programme over the next year and plans have begun for a sustainability-themed Smart Place Seminar. With a working title of 'How Can Digital Help To Save The Planet?' the outline timing for the event is currently around Easter, avoiding the school holiday period. We will report further details as they are confirmed.

The DIZ produces a weekly weblinks newsletter capturing links to 'digital-related articles from the previous seven days. If any member wishes to be added to the distribution list for this please email Mike Warr, DIZ Programme Manager at mwarr@eppingforestdc.gov.uk