

# ***Report to the Council***

**Committee:** Cabinet

**Date:** 05 April 2022

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

**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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**Economic Development Programme:**

The Economic Development team have now initiated a significant number of projects, all of which are supported through Covid related 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 has helped to support the following programmes since the last portfolio report.

- Installation of a new parklet in Waltham Abbey's Market Square at the site of the old 'Moot Hall'. Initial public feedback on this new scheme has been positive.
- Supporting a new scheme with Colchester Business Enterprise Agency LTD for free virtual support for around 50 local businesses assisting them in transferring to a new carbon-neutral model of working.
- Generation of a new quarterly footfall monitoring report via the Huq toolkit which has been purchased. This will use key indicators and data to assess the health of our local town centres and will be presented to town councils.
- Extension of a hanging Banner campaign encouraging residents to shop locally.
- Extension of subsidised FSB business membership scheme to enable local small businesses to take advantage of tax, insurance and dept advice and many other means of support.
- An update of the Visit Epping Forest website has been commissioned.
- Subsidised membership purchased to Visit Essex for local businesses in the visitor economy, that have been particularly hard hit during the pandemic.
- A telephone survey has been commissioned to gain insight into the key issues facing local businesses and support needs going forward. Almost 300 responses have been received so far. In addition, an online survey will be available for all businesses to register their views.
- The purchase of additional planters to be distributed across various town centres in the district.
- The development of a new inward investment website to attract businesses to the area. The site will also be linked to a live property search function with up-to-date information on available premises in the area. The site will be launched over the next few weeks.
- One-off grants of £5,000 were made to active town centre partnerships to assist them in building their business membership and undertaking activities to promote their town centre.

- Grant made to the Epping Forest Chamber of Commerce to assist in it carrying out public engagement events and business-to-business activities in the district.
- The continued growth of the LoyalFree scheme with almost 100 businesses now participating.

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](mailto:jhouston@eppingforestdc.gov.uk) or call 01992 564094.

The Government have now released initial details of the new UK Shared Prosperity Fund which will provide investment to areas across the country. A number of key themes are highlighted for the development of an investment plan, these include skills, town centres, visitor economy etc. Further details are expected over the coming months, officers have already begun initial work on bid preparation.

For more information on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, please visit:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-pre-launch-guidance/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-pre-launch-guidance>

### **Business E-Newsletter:**

The Economic Development Team are set to release the March edition of the 'Business Matters' e-newsletter with topics focusing on, Ride London 2022 coming to Epping Forest, the well-received Waltham Abbey Parklet, FSB membership uptake, the Regus opening event, the Colbea deal, and the recent business survey. The monthly e-newsletter is distributed to over 2,000 businesses within the district.

### **General Economic Briefing:**

Unemployment has decreased month on month since February 2021, reflecting that the jobs market is now much healthier than during the pandemic. Unemployment in the district now stands at 2,895 or 3.6% of the total working population.

### **Visitor Economy:**

Whilst hospitality across the district continues to prosper as the last pandemic restrictions are lifted, the tourism sector is planning for its traditional season-opening at Easter. There is still caution around the strength of the return to normality as many visitors may still have concerns. Our larger attractions such as the Royal Gunpowder Mills, Copped Hall and, to a lesser extent, Epping Ongar Railway, have the task of re-engaging with their volunteers that are vital for both visitor-facing and behind-the-scenes roles. This, in part, is being demonstrated by the slow recovery of the programme of events being publicised at the moment. With the possibility of foreign travel opening up, the strength of the staycation legacy remains to be seen. However, concerns over inflation and hesitancy over restrictions still in place in a changing world may continue to make short breaks closer to home attractive.

Homegrown opportunities are also offered by the Women's International Road Cycle Racing and Ride London 100 events coming up at the end of May immediately followed by the Queen's Jubilee. Both these events will generate local activity with the International Women's Race putting the area, and particularly Epping Town, on the worldwide map and bringing team supporters, cycling enthusiasts and significant media coverage. We recognise the challenges this will bring to some local businesses, and we hope in future years to be able, with the greater notice, to do more to generate greater economic benefit. Details for the Sunday event are being released to the public with details for the Saturday event being promised for the end of March. As this is the first of at least five years of this event, and possibly ten, the economic

team will be assessing the impact and using year one as a learning curve to maximise help and advice with actual examples from year 2 onwards. The event will help with showcasing the district and it is hoped we will be able to further promote the district as a visitor destination, especially in Epping High Street on the Saturday and in central Ongar on Sunday where a major rest stop for the cyclists is being planned for the town's carparks.

The Queen's Jubilee beacon lighting and celebrations are being left very much to towns, parishes and community groups to organise with the council offering a light-touch approach to any requests for road closures etc. Indications are that local groups are canvassing for ideas and support for such events at the moment and will announce these once agreed and sanctioned. If any events in our district are open to a wider audience, they will be listed on the tourism website.

### **Essex + Herts Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ):**

The date of the next DIZ Smart Place Seminar has been confirmed as 13th May. This event, 'How Can Digital Help Save the Planet?', which will focus on issues around digital and sustainability, will feature a number of guest keynote speakers examining the emerging themes in this area and a series of workshops that will explore those themes and how they might apply to organisations from the public, private and third sectors. Both Microsoft and CGI have been confirmed as keynote speakers. Further details will be shared including an Eventbrite link to book a place for the event which will be delivered online.

The DIZ delivered its most recent contribution to the ongoing series of online events run by Digital Leaders. The DIZ Programme Manager, in conjunction with Clive Emmett at CVS Uttlesford, delivered a session on 'The Power of Genuine Collaboration - Achieving more together than working alone and had in excess of 170 attendees register to attend. A recording of the session is available and can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/679049976/936145c3ad>

The 'Ultrafast GPs' Local Full Fibre Network (LFFN) project, which delivered ultrafast fibre broadband connectivity to 74 GPs across East Hertfordshire and West Essex in 2021, saw the last of those GP sites migrate to its enhanced service in March. This final surgery, in Waltham Abbey, encapsulates why the project was delivered as it is now accessing download speeds in excess of 270 Mb/s compared with pre-project speeds of 15 Mb/s. Similar transformations have taken place across the other sites. Feedback from health partners has indicated that the new network is having a huge impact on the surgeries and, with a noticeable increase in the use of digital. The newly upgraded circuits, which are intended to bring increased resilience as well as capacity, have proved invaluable in supporting them through the pandemic.

The DIZ is keen to extend its reach on social media and has been increasingly active on Twitter and LinkedIn over recent weeks. Should members wish to keep up to date with news from the DIZ, as well as stories of interest from across the digital agenda, you can follow the DIZ social media streams as follows:

Twitter: @DizMatters <https://twitter.com/DizMatters>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/showcase/dizmatters/>