

Report to the Council

Committee: Council

Date: 28 July 2022

Subject: Finance Portfolio (Economic Development)

Portfolio Holder: Councillor John Philip

Recommending:

That the report of the Finance Portfolio Holder be noted.

Shared Prosperity Fund Update:

The UK Government has created a new funding stream (UK Shared Prosperity Fund) over the next three years from money it would previously have paid into the EU's Structural Funds. The UK Government has chosen to use this funding to further its Levelling Up agenda. Every Council will get an allocation to administer and Epping Forest District Council will receive £1 million in total phased over the next three financial years (2022/23, 2023/24, 2024/25). The core objective of the fund is to ensure 'by 2030, pride in place, such as people's satisfaction with their town centre and engagement in local culture and community, will have risen in every area of the UK, with the gap between the top-performing and other areas closing'.

Proposed interventions must tie in with three broad investment themes, defined by Government including, Community and Place, Supporting Local Business and People and Skills (spending in this area can only be made in Year 3). At the time of writing, officers are still working on the investment plan for the bid which must be submitted by the 1st of August 2022. Officers have engaged with three local MPs and Cabinet to get a steer on an approach for the fund. Extensive consultation has also been carried out with Essex County Council and neighbouring authorities to explore areas for joint working, and with local town/parish councils and business networking groups to understand their priorities for the fund. Internally meetings have been with officers around the council from housing and communities to understand how this fund can enhance and add value to existing council programmes. As a result of these conversations projects and interventions proposed are scoped around these key local themes:

- Supporting rural communities.
- Investment in deprived areas and communities.
- Establishing pathways to work.
- Business support.
- Education and digital skills.

Following submission, the UK Government will review the investment plan to ensure it is compliant, and if successful, the council can expect to receive funding by October 2022.

Economic Development Programme:

The Economic Development Team has been focused on ensuring the timely submission of the council's UK Shared Prosperity Fund. However, there are other wider ongoing programmes the team has completed since the last Portfolio Holder report or is currently delivering.

- A subsidised membership package to the FSB has so far seen the sign-up of 196 businesses in the district.
- Working with Colbea the council has launched a 'Low Carbon sustainability training' programme to support local businesses in improving their carbon footprint, whilst benefiting from potential cost savings.
- The Economic Development Team continues to support the shop local 'LoyalFree' app which it is seeking to continue to support via the Shared Prosperity Fund. The team has been working on a strategy to improve the take up of the app across the district. There are currently 121 businesses signed up to the app.
- Officers are finalising a report which details the feedback of businesses interviewed via a survey conducted earlier in the year (February/March 2022). This survey identified key challenges local businesses were facing as government support covering Covid19 restrictions was removed.
- A new inward investment website 'Invest Epping Forest' is being finalised. The purpose of the website will be to encourage businesses to relocate to the area, whilst also signposting local businesses to support provided in the area through the economic development team and other relevant agencies.

Business E-Newsletter/Database:

The council's monthly business e-newsletter 'Business Matters' has now been successfully running for over a year, as a fundamental mechanism for providing key information to local business inboxes on local grants, the latest financial support, training, investment opportunities, advice and guidance and the work of the District Council. The latest June edition has recently been published to 2102 business recipients.

General Economic Briefing:

Unemployment in the area was 2,425 as of May 2022. Unemployment has fallen every month this year so far, however it still remains significantly above pre pandemic rates.

Visitor Economy:

The tourism website continues to perform at levels approaching those pre-pandemic even though the most popular what's-on section has not regained the number of events previously seen across the district during the summer. During May, traditionally seen as the start of the 'holiday' season, the site had 6,833 users with 12,597 pages viewed. This was slightly up on the comparable 2019 figures. The most popular pages viewed show a continued interest in the staycation market with general district information, directions/parking, and accommodation searches maintaining the prominence they gained during the pandemic. This is in line with the growing interest in our area being reported by Visit Essex and may be fuelled in part by the marketing campaigns they are targeting at the midlands, Liverpool and north of England. Work is currently being carried out to upgrade the website to bring it in line with other tourism sites across the country and enable full features to be smartphone friendly. Data shows that smart devices are now the most popular way of accessing the site.

On the 27th of June, the first meeting of the Epping Forest Visitor Board was held since the beginning of Covid. This was a face-to-face event hosted by the Royal Gunpowder Mills. The general view of the areas and attractions represented was that the full offer to visitors was being resumed where possible but that lack of staff, in particular volunteers, was hampering a full return. Staffing issues have also been raised in other engagements with District businesses as well as being a major concern in the district's hospitality industry. The very real opportunities brought by the strengthening staycation market, driven by continued uncertainty and disruption around foreign travel and concerns over inflation, are acknowledged with revived interest in cross-border working to build and market an appealing and comprehensive holiday destination in our sub region.

Work underway during the pandemic, which projected longer-term benefits for the visitor and hospitality industry, included the town centre improvements, investment in footfall monitoring with Huq, the establishment of the LoyalFree app for traders, and free membership deals for local businesses to join the Federation of Small Businesses and Visit Essex. LoyalFree and the free membership schemes have been widely taken up by visitor-facing businesses. Continuing to maintain and build upon this level of support is also reflected in proposals for grant spending under the forthcoming Prosperity Fund.

Essex + Herts Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ):

The latest DIZ Smart Place Seminar 'How Can Digital Help Save the Planet?' took place on 13th May featuring guest speakers and presentations from Microsoft, CGI, Jacobs and Mobile UK, the industry body for the four main Mobile Network operators (MNOs). Over 80 individuals from local, national and international organisations registered to attend the event which looked at key issues around digital and sustainability including the value of data in addressing climate change, the future of working from home, how 5G connectivity can support efforts to reduce carbon emissions and how digital can drive out sustainable outcomes. There was also a hugely insightful Q&A session and a set of workshops to explore what collective efforts might be agreed to address climate change. The Executive Report from the event has now been published and distributed and can be downloaded from the DIZ website at <https://diz.org.uk/diz-resources/>

The DIZ has been working with a number of organisations to shape its approach to the emergence of 5G technology. With outline plans to deliver a further Smart Place Seminar later in the year on the subject of what 5G can do, the DIZ has developed a set of co-branded guidance documents that explore 5G's impact on various key issues. The guides cover subjects such as healthcare and the emergency services, climate change and the environment, our high streets and working from home. These are supplemented by a co-branded toolkit for local authorities and a briefing note for elected members and planning authorities which it is hoped will be launched at the seminar. The DIZ is also working with UK5G to explore how it can enhance its communications and messaging around 5G. This piece of work is due to complete by September and again, it is hoped that outputs from this can be tied into the seminar.

The DIZ is also exploring with the Connected Places Catapult (CPC) the delivery of a CPC Connections Café in September which will look to bring a number of key local large employers and businesses together with a range of local SMEs to explore how they can collaborate and work together in order to maximise benefit for the area. It will look, in particular at how this eco-system might develop better digital innovation and support efforts to address climate sustainability.

The DIZ has been recognised as a Finalist in the Public / Public Partnership category of the LGC Awards 2022 and in early-June the DIZ Programme Manager and a colleague from the NHS attended the final Judging Panel for the awards to present the case for DIZ to win the award. On 20th July the Awards Ceremony will take place in Central London where the category winners will be announced.

You can follow the DIZ on social media via Twitter:

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