

Report to the Council

Committee: Council

Date: 15 October 2024

Subject: Finance & Economic Development Portfolio Holder

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Holly Whitbread

Recommending:

That the report of the Finance and Economic Development Portfolio Holder be noted

Economic Development Programme:

The female entrepreneurs programme has seen a large uptake with 40 out of the 60 available spaces being booked and filled. The overall response from applicants to the programme has been extremely positive and with further marketing and promotional efforts, the initial target of all 60 spaces will be achieved over the course of the coming weeks and months. Other authorities, such as Harlow are now also looking at the possibility of running their own individual programme as a result of the success that has occurred in the Epping Forest programme.

The Discover app, supported by the district-wide banner campaign, is delivering information on places to eat, shop and visit, plus things to do across eight areas in the district. Quarter 2 figures show that usage numbers are healthy in comparison to app usage in areas of similar size and demographics, although people looking at our district from outside the coverage areas are greater than use within those areas. These numbers are primarily from London. 1258 businesses were engaged with the app this quarter, an increase over the previous quarter (1188). The Highlight pages and Things to Do continue to be the most popular pages.

The funded HGV Licences offer continues in conjunction with Tendring, Uttlesford, Harlow and Essex County Council. Currently, just over half the fund allocation is committed and Epping Forest is currently ahead of the other districts in regards to licences achieved plus people in training. We also have no candidates failing or withdrawn. The majority of our district's uptake has been by people already in work but looking to change careers or increase their earning potential. A new recruitment campaign is now taking place through JCP to generate more candidates.

The North Essex Economic Board partnered with Networking Essex to run a North Essex Business2Business event in Colchester. Stands were provided for each district authority plus two free stands for local SMEs to enable representation from smaller businesses. The Epping Forest District stand was sponsored and run by Qualis. Over 160 stands were sold and over 1000 people pre-booked to attend.

The current inward investment website is being remodelled to bring its content in line with changes since its creation and include a new navigation that differentiates between small businesses and start-ups, businesses 'growing-on' and corporates looking for development sites. The website will also contain key information on local infrastructure, levels of communication and liveability. Puttock Brown, who created the initial site and controls the content and domain name, has been contacted to help inform the next steps.

One of the projects that has provided much value from the UKSPF is the PRINCE2 project management offer. With the maximum take-up, this project has unlocked potentially new career paths for candidates and has proven to be a huge success in meeting the outcomes for the funding criteria. With such success and demand, an additional 4 spaces on the project management course were funded to enrol candidates who were unable to apply during the original window for applications. Exam outcomes are now being monitored up until the end of the funding period (March 2025).

At the latest officers meeting for the Innovation Core, discussions were centred on how the group can refine the Core's offer for future economic growth in each member region. Once the newly created offer has been decided, a new strategy for marketing and communication will be drafted and presented to the Executive Board at a later date in October.

Rural England Prosperity Fund

Rural England prosperity funding from the UK Government has been allocated. The £289,169 was allocated to the following organisations.

Epping Forest registered charity, Inclusive Brambly Hedge trail and path improvements at Connaught Water, Epping Forest.

Lamborne Parish Council to support the upgrade of the play area near Abridge Village Hall.

Grange Farm Trust to provide indoor space and toilet facilities at the community garden.

St Martins Church, Ongar to repair and improve the church rooms.

Hastingwood Village hall to repair the flooring of the village hall so that it may continue to serve the local community.

Sheering Parish Council to improve the accessibility of the village hall including the installation of a disabled toilet.

St Margarets Church to create a community gathering space to serve the local community in a rural area.

St Marys Church to extend the gallery areas and provide an accessible toilet to promote use and access of the grade 2 listed building.

Abridge Village Hall Trust to make the hall more energy efficient to solve heating issues and reduce the costs of running the hall.

Theydon Bois Parish Council to improve accessibility to St Marys Church in Theydon Bois.

North Wealth Parish Council to make improvements to Thornwood Village Hall to improve its energy efficiency and reduce overall running costs.

Ongar Town Council to make improvements to the nature reserve to promote the site and increase visitor numbers.

Monthly Business E-Newsletter:

The Economic Development Team has released the August edition of the 'Business Matters' e-newsletter to over 2,000 local businesses with topics focusing on the Federation of Small Businesses 50th anniversary business bootcamp, the Epping Forest Chamber of Commerce's annual local business forum, workshops on how to start your very own business and completely free business support from expert advisers at West Essex Business Support. The September edition has also recently been published and the October

edition is currently being developed and will be released at the end of the month. If you would like to receive a copy of the monthly e-newsletter, please contact Matteo Pesci at mpesci@eppingforestdc.gov.uk

Visitor Economy:

The summer season is now coming to an end and the tourism website visitor numbers have achieved the anticipated peak levels with the events page content constantly at 40 plus entries. Contact has been made with Nattergal, the people behind the major 206 hectare Harold's Park, in the centre of our district. Their rewilding model includes visitor interaction, events and pop-up camping. Contributions are being made to the Visit Essex Destination Management Plan, which includes strategic workshops to agree on the core priorities for tourism and their delivery in 2024-26.