



Epping Forest
District Council

Economic Briefing

**A newsletter update outlining work by the Economic Team
under the current circumstances**

Issue 1 – April 2020

Business Support

The Council has begun paying millions of pounds of Business Support Grant to eligible businesses. The Council has identified those businesses that will qualify and will not be asking for applications to be made before paying the grants. To date around £27m has been paid to businesses with more payments to come. The grants range between £10,000 to £25,000 to those in receipt of Small Business Rate Relief and eligible businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors. [Full details of the scheme can be found on the Council's website.](#)

Councillor Sam Kane, portfolio holder for customer services, said: "Recognising that small businesses in the district would be hard hit by the current crisis, we decided to proceed with the distribution of the grants without the need for individuals to formally apply. The team here at Epping Forest District Council has worked fantastically hard, identifying qualifying businesses and ensuring that the government funds get to those businesses as soon as possible."

As an understanding of the current crisis improves, projections of the measures needed to rebuild business and the likely impact to different sectors of society are starting to be modelled. The Resolution Foundation have produced a report on [The economic effects of coronavirus in the UK](#) and the IFS (The Institute for Fiscal Studies) has produced a report on the [workers most exposed by the shutdown](#) and a [briefing note on income protection for the self-employed and employees.](#)

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Economic Strategy approved by Cabinet

The Economic Strategy Nurturing Growth, which will be a key document in leading the area's economic recovery to the virus, was approved by Cabinet on April 15th. This included approval of

additional resources to support economic work and identified key priority areas for action. Councillor Bedford said:

“The Economic Strategy document, Nurturing Growth has been the subject of wide consultation, with input from members across the chamber. Thank you for those that took the time to engage. Although we have set out our aspirations for economic improvement in the document, we are conscious that the impact of Covid 19 means that we will need to initially focus our efforts on a recovery programme for the economy and our local businesses.

Thankfully, our district has performed strongly over the years, even through the last economic downturn, so we hope that Nurturing Growth will help us rebuild, by responding to recent changes in how businesses are operating and by investing in infrastructure to keep our place competitive. The priorities in the strategy reflect both our strengths and the challenges we face in common with many areas.

While this is the high-level strategy, in order to have a clear impact and drive activity we need to have shorter term delivery plans and responding to the economic impact of Covid 19 will be central to these. It is vitally important that we develop these plans in close consultation with our local businesses, both large and small and the establishment of a district Economic Board is therefore essential.

Investment in digital infrastructure will also be fundamental to enabling infrastructure to trade. The council already has an enviable reputation on this and we will be looking to expand our work collectively across west Essex and eastern Hertfordshire as part of our Digital Innovation Zone led by Councillor Lion.

On the flip side, the work of the High Street Task and Finish Panel will be key to shaping our response to the challenges our towns are facing from online retailing, the impact of coronavirus, the changing nature of shopping, and the need to evolve new models and visions for future investment. Officers across the council are working hard to get the message out to our businesses on the support that has been made available from central government, processing the funds that we are responsible for rapidly, but also reaching out to businesses to understand the impact locally. We have also enabled more staff resources for the economic team, by drawing support from other services to ensure we respond effectively through this crisis, but importantly, so that we have clear plans and ideas to work together in the recovery phase. However, all of us have a role in supporting and developing these responses, the strategy gives us a framework to guide our work, with partners, networks and investors within and outside our district”.

Getting the message out

The EFDC website is being constantly monitored and amended to ensure that most up to date support information is available for local businesses, from central government and other relevant bodies. This includes liaising with colleagues at Essex County Council to identify best practice and a consistent message to our businesses.

Information updates and requests for feedback around the Coronavirus impact have been sent out to key partners from local businesses, tourism, high streets etc. Additionally, meetings and conversations have taken place with Town Centre Partnerships, glasshouse businesses, the local Chamber of Commerce and Federation of Small Businesses. Businesses have also been contacted

with an appeal from local NHS colleagues for additional kit. Officers will continue this outreach approach over the coming weeks.

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Getting information back

Officers have been in contact with a large number of businesses. The overriding theme is businesses are very concerned about the impact of the shutdown and the challenging situation they will find themselves in when business resumes. Other issues raised include:

- Very concerned about cashflow and survival.
- Initial confusion around how small business grants are being distributed is being addressed as the grant programme is rolled out fully and signposting to advice and support has developed. There remains concern that some businesses are missing out due to cut-off points on grants placed by government.
- Some businesses are raising issues around delays in the processing of the emergency loans packages backed by the government. There is uncertainty from businesses here about which organisations are best placed to provide advice on this.
- Rental and Rate costs are a real concern for tenants of some key business parks in the area, where they pay a proportion of the rates in their rental cost. They ask how rates relief to their landlords will benefit them.
- The economic development team are exploring more structured approaches to surveying local businesses.

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Tourism

Attractions and venues in the district are now closed, and events have been cancelled or postponed. Some events are being relisted with end of year and 2021 dates.

Around 100 tourism partners have been written to and asked to provide feedback on their situation and guidance on any new measures that could be taken to support this sector which is worth approximately £240m to the local economy and has significant potential for growth post Covid19 with the predicted caution over foreign travel and fall in economic prosperity resulting in a rise in staycations and new appreciation of local destinations.

The tourism website visitor numbers have been halved from the expected 7,000 a week to around 3,500. Whilst the home page continues to be the most viewed page, the emphasis of other pages viewed is outdoor activity including Lee Valley Park, Epping Forest, Countrycare Walks and the Essex Way.

The website [homepage](#) and other relevant pages within the site are being updated to promote the latest Government advice and the recent “don’t travel” message was emphasised along with the new Green Spaces Guidelines. This is in line with the national instruction and in response to local concerns that people are driving to places such as Epping Forest and parking along roads outside the locked car parks.

A [new web section](#) for the ‘armchair tourist’ has been launched featuring links to online content about aspects of the district exploring its activities, nature and heritage without leaving their homes. Examples of the 150 current links include a film about the 1991 North Weald Air Show, a 1943 Pathé film about Epping, ghost hunting in the forest and various walks throughout the seasons within the district.

Councillor Richard Bassett, Chairman of the Epping Forest District Tourism and Visitor Board, said: “Under other circumstances, we would have been celebrating our expanding local tourism economy as part of English Tourism Week. However, whilst attractions and venues are closed, we continue to monitor and support our businesses, and the different ways they have been impacted by Coronavirus, and are working towards the point at which they can once again welcome visitors to enjoy the beauty and heritage of our district.

In the meanwhile, our tourism website at www.visiteppingforest.org, has added online content for the armchair tourist looking to walk our district or discover a wealth of history and heritage, whilst staying at home. This provides a fascinating insight into our past, a chance to relive special events and destinations and the opportunity to gain inspiration for things to see and do when life returns to normal”.

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Essex + Herts Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ)



LFFN – We are continuing to work through the final stages of preparation for the Department of Culture, Media and Science (DCMS) Checkpoint C Assurance Board for the £1.8m DIZ Local Full Fibre Network project (LFFN). This project will directly support and reinforce the delivery of healthcare in our communities in a way that maximises the benefits of digital connectivity for patients, clinical staff and healthcare providers.

Ultrafast Broadband Infrastructure – Within the current restrictions on outdoor working and group gatherings, work continues by Gigaclear to deliver and expand the fibre broadband infrastructure that the council has invested in. In the light of the ongoing Coronavirus challenges and the increasing need for residents and businesses to work, play and live from home and the connectivity and capacity demands this brings with it, the resilience and performance of the gigabit capable fibre broadband network infrastructure is proving itself to be a critical enabler. Some of our most rural residents and businesses are able to stay connected with their friends, family, networks and clients through online platforms without any issues associated with poor connectivity. The project will

deliver ultrafast gigabit full fibre broadband to almost 1,800 properties across the district that currently are without any superfast broadband connectivity, part-funded by EFDC, Essex CC and BDUK. In addition, the rollout will see Gigaclear deliver gigabit fibre broadband to a further almost 7,000 premises that may currently only have superfast connectivity (up to 30mb/s). This infrastructure build is in addition to the almost 4,000 premises that were connected to Gigaclear's gigabit fibre network in the previous phase, also part-funded by EFDC, Essex CC and BDUK.

What more can we do through digital? – The DIZ is keen to ensure it maximises the benefit of digital infrastructure, digital initiatives and digital applications for its residents and businesses. To this end, the DIZ is continually looking to identify and share best practice. A short survey has just been distributed to DIZ partners as the Coronavirus continues to impact on service delivery. The survey looks for examples of good practice in local digital applications as well as asking partners where they think digital could do more.

The DIZ continues to send out its weekly weblinks newsletter that highlights features, applications and events on digital topics of interest to its audience. At the current time the DIZ weblinks newsletter is also acting as a repository of best practice on digital responses to the Coronavirus challenge. Officers have also been in discussion with the Local Government Association (LGA) around the lessons to be learnt and challenges being met in delivery of services digitally during the current lockdown.

The DIZ has successfully held its first remote DIZ Advisory Board through Teams. Focused on discussions amongst partners on the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic as well as highlighting how individual partners have responded through digital the meeting brought together partners from local government, health, community and voluntary sectors and the private sector. The meeting proved to be an excellent pilot exercise with some of the strengths and limitations of remote meetings being experienced first-hand and learning that can be applied elsewhere to other mass-participation meetings. Given the importance of digital at the current time, the DIZ has decided to increase the frequency of its Advisory Board to monthly so that the wider partnership can continue to share examples of digital best practice and learn from each other.

Commenting on the role that digital communication was playing in the current crisis, Councillor Alan Lion said: "Innovation through digital has always been regarded as the key to our future whether working or playing or accessing goods and services. The coronavirus pandemic has, in many ways, brought that future into the present and we are increasingly seeing digital technology, applications and platforms being used to support that work today as well as planning for tomorrow. This is reflected in increasing press coverage and public awareness of the potential benefits of digital innovation.

The Digital Innovation Zone is exploring the wide variety of digital offers available and how they might support our partners in health, local government, community and voluntary services and the private sector. It is also utilising these platforms itself to ensure these conversations can continue at this challenging time and whilst everyone is remotely located and geographically spread. We will continue to seek out best practice and keep partners and anyone else that is interested informed through our weekly weblinks newsletter."

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Town Centres

Officers are producing an evidence pack that pulls together existing and new information relevant to High Streets in the district highlighting key findings, issues and recommendations. Although some work in this area had to stop due to disruption caused by Coronavirus, the team is currently looking at other ways to support local businesses and to move work forward.

The team is in a regular contact with Town Centre Partnerships to keep aware of the circumstances and issues impacting businesses in their respective areas. We are particularly interested to know the top three things that aren't currently being done, that could be done to support businesses across our district.

Once the UK lock-down is lifted, a short face to face survey, in high streets and town centres, will continue to capture the public view. An online survey will be published to help us to gain an understanding of how the District's towns are perceived and used and where we would be best focusing our efforts.

A Task & Finish Panel will continue to meet to support the forthcoming review of the future of local high streets in the Epping Forest District and review evidence of changing demands and opportunities. Town Centre Partnerships will be invited to attend and discuss issues, challenges and opportunities they face in their areas.

Officers are reviewing the approaches taken by other areas, and briefings by national bodies, into supporting high street businesses in the current situation and other initiatives by local bodies.

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Supporting the Council's Business Tenants

The Council's Estates and Asset Management Service actively manages the commercial properties owned by Epping Forest District Council which are currently occupied by over 350 tenants. They range from local businesses in the retail and food and beverage sector to companies specialising in industrial/distribution and leisure services. The portfolio is spread throughout the district with properties in Waltham Abbey, Loughton, Buckhurst Hill, Chigwell, North Weald and Ongar to name a few.

Since 23rd March 2020, the Estates Team has received a number of calls and emails from concerned portfolio tenants in relation to Coronavirus restrictions being imposed on their businesses and therefore being unable to trade. The main sectors affected are retail, food & beverage and industrial which account for a combined 80% of all calls. 32% of which came from concerned businesses on The Broadway, Debden alone.

The team is logging each and every enquiry and advising tenants that while their lease obligations remain in place, we are not actively chasing any rents which remain due for the time being. In addition, commercial tenants are being advised that up to date information is being published on the Council website. Tenants with business rates queries are also being provided with contact details for the relevant team as well to ascertain help available at this time.

Since Easter the number of calls and enquiries received has dropped due to grants being paid and more information being readily available. We anticipate this trend to continue throughout the following weeks with a further decline in numbers as more of our tenants receive funds.

The Estates team is working closely with colleagues in Economic Development to ensure that Epping Forest District Council understands fully the key issues affecting its commercial tenants, and a short survey is being prepared to discover what is working and what more can be done to deal with the unprecedented situation we are all experiencing.

For further information please contact:

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Operational

The economic team are now all home based and in constant contact with each other. There are three regular team meetings via video at 10am on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. If elected members, officers or business stakeholders have any item they wish to be considered in these meetings, please let us know. These meetings are also focused on the recent feedback from local businesses.

Peter Milward has recently joined the economic team to offer additional research and response capacity through the Coronavirus outbreak. Peter has worked in the Planning Department for a number of years and will be joining for an initial six-month period.

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If there is anything additional to the above, that you think we should be covering, please let us know, and we will address this in the next edition of this briefing.

Send your request and contact details to:

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