

BABERGH DISTRICT COUNCIL

TO: Council	REPORT NUMBER: CMU2
FROM: Councillor Michael Holt, Cabinet Member for Economy	DATE OF MEETING: 2 November 2021
OFFICER: Fiona Duhamel, Assistant Director, Economy	KEY DECISION REF NO. N/A

UPDATE FROM THE CABINET MEMBER FOR ECONOMY

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report provides an update on the work of the Economy Portfolio and an outline of future plans.
- 1.2 The areas within the scope of this portfolio include:
 - Developing a narrative for the District which supports place making, inward investment and inclusive growth.
 - Delivering against three themes of inclusive growth: Connected and Sustainable; Innovative and Creative; and Skilled and Successful.
 - Supporting the number of jobs, productivity and helping businesses to thrive and grow post covid.
 - Building relationships with businesses, stakeholders and funders including regional and national.
- 1.3 Over the last 19 months, a major focus of the work of this portfolio has been on supporting businesses through the Covid pandemic and with recovery.

2. RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 This information report is for noting only.

3. Key Activities Over the Past Six Months

3.1 Government Covid Grants

8475 have been grants paid out, worth £42,683,734 to 2477 individual businesses through a mix of mandatory and discretionary payments.

The only Government grant remaining is the Welcome Back Fund which has seen over £146k distributed to key towns and parishes to bring people back into town centres and high streets. This funding has supported over 30 events and activities such as Green Sundays on Sudbury Market Place, Love Explore digital trails to promote culture walking and the successful Innovate Local market stall pop up in Hadleigh.

3.2 Council Grants

In September 2021 the Council launched its own grant support scheme focussed on 4 strands: growth and increased productivity; enterprise and innovation; enhancement of high street premises; and environmental sustainability. The grants are part of the wider recovery programme to help our businesses to be more resilient, grow, innovate and embrace green technologies. The programme will run over 3 years with a total allocation of £50k per year, with grants ranging from £2,500 to £5000.

3.3 Other activities under regeneration, economic and recovery workstreams

Connected and Sustainable Outcomes: To be one of the best-connected places in the East of England and be a testbed for new innovation in clean growth industries.

Work continues to improve sustainable travel and last month the public consultation came to an end for cycling and walking route improvements with 1146 responses received. These will now be scored and assessed by a cross-party Action Group to lead to the creation of a new Walking and Cycling Infrastructure Plan for the District (LCWIP). This will mean that Babergh is well placed for future national funding bids to improve our walking and cycling infrastructure. Over the last 6 months we have helped to install new cycle parking in Sudbury and Hadleigh.

Work on sustainability projects continues with the Sudbury Solar car port scheme. The scheme now has planning consent and we have selected specialist contractors, Polysolar, to carry out the works to the car park site adjacent to the Kingfisher Leisure centre. The scheme, which will create a 40 bay solar car port, delivers a new sustainable power source (capable of powering up to 16.5% of the Centre's total electricity demand and offsetting 682 tonnes of carbon over 25 years), which combined with battery storage, will feed into the leisure centre leading to reduced energy costs. The scheme is 50% funded by Government funding through the Getting Building Fund programme and is one of the first of this kind nationally.

We continue with plans to create new workspace in Hadleigh, with detailed design work shortly to commence and work to secure a retail occupier for the local food store unit on the site. The study we completed in 2019 which identified a need for more workspace, particularly smaller "grow on" spaces, has just been updated to reflect current market conditions and the findings have been fed into the feasibility work on this project. The scheme will construct ten flexible light industrial (B1c) units for generating a positive return on investment from either a rental income or capital receipt for any disposals.

We secured sponsorship of over £10,000, keynote speakers and a free venue from the Coop for our first ever Local Energy Showcase event which took place on 21/22 October. The event which saw over 200 people attend over the 2 days brought together leaders in local energy and sustainability with businesses and communities from the district to help support and promote increased use of local energy in our places. The feedback from the event and stronger connections made with businesses will be used to create a better understanding of employment, growth and skills needs for the sector.

We have recently completed a 2-day public engagement exercise in Belle Vue Park to show plans to open up the park entrance, create new toilets and a café and a new masterplan for the park itself. The feedback from this engagement, which also saw the plans fully available online and in a vacant shop in Borehamgate, will help us to improve the proposals in order to further enhance the park and its connectivity to the wider town.

Together with Suffolk County Council we have submitted a £6.363m Levelling Up Fund bid for Sudbury to improve the town's connectivity through on street and improved bus route services, junction improvements to reduce congestion and sought external funding support to bring forward the Hamilton Road Quarter regeneration scheme, which has already had high level master planning undertaken. We should hear about the bid around the time of the Autumn Statement. Although the district is in a lower dependency tier, as set by Government, we submitted a robust and well evidenced bid. The work we are doing on a masterplan for the Hamilton Road Quarter will lead to delivery of more homes and jobs in the heart of the town centre.

Innovative and Creative Outcomes: We will become a growing area for Innovation, Enterprise and Creativity in the East

We have continued to focus on a programme of innovation to bring forward a range of initiatives to support businesses and economic growth during and post covid. These include the Virtual High Street, an online platform developed and delivered in partnership with a local entrepreneur and Sudbury Town Council. The platform has been hugely successful at providing many businesses with a shop window to enable them to carry on trading even during the lockdowns. Over 70% of businesses had no online presence before the Virtual High Street and, using external funding, we are now able to also offer free digital skills training sessions for all of these businesses. To date we have over 180 businesses on the Virtual High Street in Hadleigh and Sudbury and are looking to see how we can extend it more widely across the district.

We held the very first Innovation Awards in November 2020 and due to Covid had to switch to an online event which had over 130 attendees. This meant that all of the sponsors supporting the event were able to provide a free range of services to award winners as "prizes". These ranged from mentoring, to free work clothing, to a day at a product testing lab. One year on we will shortly be producing a set of case studies from the event with a focus on how businesses have benefited from their awards.

We have also developed a Business Innovation Network with over 1300 businesses listed and a new Innovation Board which spans both Babergh and Mid Suffolk and has a mix of local authorities and fast growth innovative businesses working together on a range of initiatives. These include developing a funding bid for a Knowledge Transfer Lite programme for small businesses in partnership with the University of Essex and we await the outcome of this bid.

Last month, working alongside the developer and owner of the site together with Suffolk County Council, we were able to commission a study into how we can develop plans for a new screen and creative hub in Brantham across that brownfield site. This is a key employment site for the District which could deliver hundreds of jobs when it comes forward for development.

Work on our town centres programmes continues in Sudbury and Hadleigh with a range of shared projects and initiatives coming forward. These include St. Peter's redevelopment, which secured funding from a range of national and local partners including Babergh and the Sudbury Creative Wayfinding project, which we are working on with the Town Council. In Sudbury we have also established a Cultural Group which brings together a number of cultural leaders in the town to work collaboratively.

Successful and Skilled : We will raise levels of aspiration and ambition in our districts and recognise and celebrate our success

We continue to promote aspiration and development of higher level skills in our district and have been working with a range of partners including schools and the Local Cultural Education Partnership to explore new ways to inspire our communities.

The Innovate Local market programme seeks to offer free space to "try" a new business alongside a business support programme. This has led to currently 5 different businesses having received support in Hadleigh Market. 4 more businesses are on the waiting list.

We have been working with Innovation Labs to develop a "pop up" innovation space in a vacant unit in Borehamgate, providing a blend of affordable workspace, mentoring and business support in the heart of Sudbury Town Centre. The Innovation Labs in Stowmarket have already supported a number of entrepreneurs and start up businesses based in Babergh and we hope a new site in Sudbury can lead to further growth. We hope this will be up and running by Christmas.

Following the Careeriosity skills festival in Stowmarket which was also open to all young people in Babergh, plans are already underway for a similar event in our key venues across Babergh. The event which will be held over a week in the Easter holidays seeks to promote a range of new career options alongside skills advice from many industry experts, for example, in film, music and technology.

The Welcome Back Fund has been used to support projects across both districts with funding given to over 30 events which saw 5670 total participants, 1340 of those were children under 12. The funding has led to 6 guided walks which were part of Heritage Open Day activity in September. These were themed as 'Weaving / Wool Town Walks' as part of Heritage Open Days and in spite of Covid the walks still went ahead under Welcome Back Funding by hosting all activity outdoors so it was more COVID secure. In addition 6 new staff have been employed to help town centres and the visitor economy recover from Covid, this includes support for public realm and town cleaning and for the AONB.

4. Future Key Activities

- 4.1 Officers will continue to progress all of the above to the next stage of delivery. We will continue to develop a 'bid ready' set of pipeline schemes which will help to secure future investment, new jobs, delivery of strategic priorities and build momentum and credibility into the place programmes.

- 4.2 Business as usual work is now getting back to pre covid levels as we engage with partners such as the Growth Hub to support our businesses and provide economic development comments for planning applications. However, we have now developed the Economy Covid Recovery Plan which sets out service actions over the coming months and years to support and build resilience in our local companies and help them to look to the future.
- 4.3 We are continuing to work with developers to ensure land for employment uses is delivered. The recent success of GCB investing in the Avent site in Glemsford was delivered in partnership between the District Council and the Local Enterprise Partnership and our work with Ipswich Borough Council in Sproughton has led to most of that site now being developed. We are continuing to work with the developers on Chilton Wood in Sudbury in respect of new employment space, are looking at how we can support the employment allocation site in Hadleigh to come forward and are keen post covid to explore our ambitions for more space along the A12.
- 4.4 We are growing the profile of Babergh through enhancing existing partnerships e.g. the Local Enterprise Partnership and building new ones e.g. with Government Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy(BEIS), UK Power Networks (UKPN), University of Suffolk and we have also been successful at securing large and small pots of funding to support the Council's ambition. These include funding for decarbonisation of Council assets, funding to support Innovate Local and the Virtual High Street (circa £150k) The success of these bids means that we can make existing funding go further and deliver more for the District. Currently we have over £6.8m funding bids into government to support our priorities.
- 4.5 Following the success of the Innovation Awards in 2020 we are already planning the next awards in 2022.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 Covid 19 has been devastating for our businesses and communities and has meant 80% of key staff in the team have had to be diverted into direct response work over the last 18 months. In spite of this, it can still be seen that good progress has been achieved across the three key economy themes and the focus now moves towards recovery and stimulating new growth in the District.
- 5.2 The service has recently completed a comprehensive economic evidence base which will lead to the development of a new Economic Strategy that continues to build upon the narrative for Babergh of inclusive and innovative growth. Developing closer links between our communities and the places they live and work is vital at addressing some of the inequalities which exist in the District. We will need to continue to expand our partnership working and collaboration not just at a local scale but also regional and national.