



Growth and Development Scrutiny Group

Wednesday, 21 September 2022

Covid-19 Business Recovery Update

Report of the Director – Development and Economic Growth

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1. This report is intended to provide an update to the Group on the work being done to support businesses to recover from the impacts of Covid 19. This follows a report to Growth and Development Scrutiny Group in October 2021 as well as a number of reports which went to Cabinet throughout the pandemic and a report to Corporate Overview Group in February 2022.
- 1.2. The report provides some data looking at the impact of Covid 19 on businesses, an update on work done since the last report, and future plans.

2. Recommendation

It is RECOMMENDED that the Growth and Development Scrutiny Group reviews the proposed future activity and identifies any additional areas of focus for the team's work.

3. Reasons for Recommendation

- 3.1. Rushcliffe Borough Council delivered a wide range of support throughout the pandemic to local businesses as detailed in this report and supporting presentation to be provided to the Group.
- 3.2. It is important that Councillors have the opportunity to review the proposed future plans so they are aware of what is being delivered in the area and can support as required. This scrutiny provides an opportunity for Councillors to make additional suggestions for areas of focus for the Economic Growth Team over the coming months.

4. Supporting Information

Data

- 4.1. Unemployment claims have maintained a steady decline since the significant surges in March and April 2020. They are currently at 1,410 in Rushcliffe, equivalent to a 38.4% reduction on same period last year (March 2022 compared to March 2021). The employment rate for Rushcliffe is 80.9% (employment rate is the ratio of employed residents to all residents aged 16 – 64).

- 4.2. D2N2 LEP have done an analysis of labour market demand¹ in Rushcliffe. This shows there were 800 unique jobs posted between January and July 2022, predominantly in sales, IT and telecommunications professionals and functional managers/directors. The data also predicts a 23% growth in jobs between 2021 and 2031.
- 4.3. Business closures are tracked to monitor potential adverse effects of the pandemic on our business base, this information is only available at a county level. This shows there were 666 businesses which closed in March 2022 across Nottinghamshire. This is down on the previous month (744) and over the last 12 months there have been spikes of 817 in September 2021 and the lowest was 513 in August 2021. However, these spikes coincide with temporary suspension of company strike-offs throughout the pandemic and so this fluctuation is likely due to irregular reporting to, and processing by, Companies House.
- 4.4. During the pandemic, the Economic Growth Team monitored the vacancy rates in our main town and village centres across the Borough. The majority of Rushcliffe's town centres have very few or no empty units, with only a couple in West Bridgford, Bingham and Ruddington. There are a number of office units to let located in town centres, including those above retail units, particularly in the Gordon Road/Tudor Square areas of West Bridgford.

Progress update

- 4.5. In February 2022, Charlotte Gault joined the team as the new Business Support and Communications Officer. This is a replacement to the previous intern roles which have been in the team. Charlotte's focus is on working with our businesses and continuing some of the work started during the pandemic with the additional engagement with high street businesses. A lot of work has been done already, particularly focussed on Rushcliffe Business Partnership, the development of West Bridgford Way and working closely with the RBC events team to better engage businesses. This includes for the Queen's Jubilee and Tour of Britain when local businesses were showcased and involved in the events.
- 4.6. At the Growth and Development Scrutiny meeting in October 2021, Councillors heard about plans for the coming months to support local businesses. The following list gives an update on those actions and more detail will be provided at the meeting:
 - The appointment of a temporary town centre consultant who was in place from September 2021 to June 2022
 - Enhanced and additional events in West Bridgford and some town/village centres - a number of additional events were held over the summer and autumn of 2021 in West Bridgford and some of the towns and villages in the Borough.

¹ Data provided by EMSI based on official sources and proprietary job posting analytics

- Improvements to the visual appearance of town centres including additional planters in West Bridgford and seasonal lighting in Bingham
- Promotion of job vacancies on Council social media for local hospitality and other high street businesses struggling to recruit – we had some take up on this but the issue of recruitment, particularly in the hospitality sector, remains a challenge across the country
- Ongoing communications campaigns including the promotion of the Shop Local Shop Safe messages.
- Exploring opportunities to increase the digital promotion of our high streets – some areas have expressed an interest in this and we are continuing to work with them. Improvements have been made to the established Bridgford Way platform, which will help shape and inform ideas for other areas.
- Returning to in person networking for Rushcliffe Business Partnership in West Bridgford and Ruddington – this is happening, and numbers of attendees are steadily increasing.
- Continue to build relationships with local high street businesses – retail forums have been established in some areas. These have had mixed success but are doing well in Bingham and West Bridgford with other areas preferring a more informal communication e.g. WhatsApp groups.
- The Rushcliffe Big Business Carbon Club has been established and has met several times. The aim is to encourage our large businesses to act as champions and support their supply chains and SMEs to deliver a green economic recovery.

- 4.7. Some of the above activity has been delivered using the Council's allocation of £212,000 of Welcome Back Funding from the European Regional Development Fund in order to support the safe reopening of our town centres. This was allocated in two instalments, first in June 2020 and again in April 2021. The deadline for spending this funding was the end of March 2022. In May 2020, the Borough Council allocated £10,000 to each of the six larger towns/villages in the Borough (Bingham, Cotgrave, East Leake, Keyworth, Radcliffe on Trent and Ruddington) to spend in their area. In total £196,000 of this £212,000 was spent over the period, all claims for funding have been submitted and final payments have been made.
- 4.8. The Economic Growth Team are now working hard to maintain and build on the relationships established with high street businesses during the pandemic via the retail forums, growth boards, email and in person.
- 4.9. The team work closely with external agencies to signpost businesses to the right support as required. This includes D2N2 Growth Hub who are a one stop shop for business support. In 2020 and 2021 they supported 424 businesses in Rushcliffe ranging from one to one business support advice to attendance at webinars on topics such as financial resilience.
- 4.10. There is an extensive amount of business support available from various organisations, including East Midlands Chamber, Notts Business Ventures and the universities covering various topics including financial advice. Much of this support is at risk, however, with the removal of European Structural

Investment Fund (ESIF). This is being replaced by UK Shared Prosperity Funding (UKSPF) and a report was presented to Cabinet in June 2022 on this. With Rushcliffe's allocation of UKSPF it is important that we are tailoring activity to meet the needs of our businesses, whilst ensuring the continuation of a generic offer for all.

- 4.11. One key area of business support is advice for businesses on low carbon. As well as the Big Business Carbon Club, the Council works closely with business support advisors to promote their offer to businesses. The Growth Hub Advisors have recently been given some training, so they are better able to do an initial assessment of a business's needs for low carbon support and signpost them to the right support. This also ensures that this is something they more actively promote to businesses. Much of the existing support is currently being delivered by the universities using ERDF and so we are working to identify the areas of this support which are most valuable to our businesses and what we want to continue into the future.

UK Shared Prosperity Funding

- 4.12. A report is coming to Growth and Development Scrutiny Committee in January 2023 on UKSPF, but as this has been a focus for the team over the last few months, it is felt to be useful to provide an overview of the funding and work done so far, with more detail to follow in January.
- 4.13. The UK Shared Prosperity Fund is part of UK government's Levelling Up agenda. It provides £2.6 billion of funding for local investment by March 2025, with all areas of the UK receiving an allocation from the Fund via a funding formula rather than a competition. UKSPF replaces the ESIF. The Fund's interventions will be planned and delivered by councils and mayoral authorities across England, Scotland and Wales – 'lead local authorities', working closely with local partners.
- 4.14. The primary goal of the UKSPF is to build pride in place and increase life chances across the UK. This aligns with the Levelling Up White Paper mission, particularly: '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'.
- 4.15. The fund is split into three investment priorities and each has a list of interventions sitting underneath it that areas can choose to allocate funding to. The three investment priorities are:
- Communities and place
 - Supporting local business
 - People and skills
- 4.16. The Fund will focus on communities and place and local business interventions in 2022/23 and 2023/24, alongside support for people through the Multiply adult numeracy programme (County Council led). UKSPF investment to support people and skills will follow from 2024-25. The

Government is encouraging areas to work with neighboring authorities, particularly on their plans for supporting local businesses and people and skills.

- 4.17. Rushcliffe Borough Council's allocation is £2,571,462 for three years (2022/23 to 2024/25) with all spend to be complete by March 2025. The Government has allocated the funding across the three years as follows:
- 2022/23 - £312,071
 - 2023/24 - £624,141
 - 2024/25 - £1,635,250.
- 4.18. The allocation is a mix of capital and revenue, and Government has set a minimum capital level each year. The Council submitted an investment plan to set out allocations of funding across the three years against the interventions, this is not the detail of the specific projects yet, it is a high level plan which can be changed if required.

Proposed future activity

- 4.19. There are five key areas of focus for the team over the coming months to ensure ongoing support for local businesses:
- UK Shared Prosperity Funding – as set out, the allocation of UKSPF will be a key area of work for the team. A more detailed update on this will be presented to the Growth and Development Scrutiny Group in January 2023. As this is such a fundamental part of the team's work, however, it is right that an overview of progress to date will be provided at the September meeting.
 - Rushcliffe Business Partnership – the Partnership has new members on the steering group, and this is driving some new ideas and an appetite to do more. This includes re-introducing the annual business showcase event which it is hoped will be held early in 2023.
 - Business Support – it was a condition of the funding secured for Chapel Lane offices that business support advice would be provided. A Business Support Advisor has, therefore, been appointed to provide this support to those businesses in the new offices as well as other businesses in the Borough.
 - High street support – ongoing support for retail forums and the informal networks established between businesses. This includes further development of West Bridgford Way initiative and exploring this model in other areas of the Borough.
 - Continued support for the Growth Boards and the actions which emerge from them, including West Bridgford Central Avenue accessibility study and Bingham long stay car parking.

5. Risks and Uncertainties

- 5.1. The Borough's businesses have fared well in response to the impact of Covid 19, this is particularly apparent in the Borough's town centres and high streets which still remain vibrant. We cannot be complacent, however, and it is important that we maintain the support that has been provided and continue to work closely with our business community to ensure we are responding to their needs.

6. Implications

6.1. Financial Implications

- Planned activity will be delivered by the Council's Economic Growth Team and any need for funding will be met through the Strategic Growth Board (£100,000 funding already in budget and some allocated) and the UK Shared Prosperity Funding as discussed in paragraph 4.17.
- The Business Support Advisor (for Chapel Lane project) has been appointed using funding secured for the development of the offices at Chapel Lane (European Regional Development Funding Sustainable Urban Development Funding). This requires match funding from the Borough Council of £18,300 and again this is included in the budget for the Chapel Lane project.

6.2. Legal Implications

There are no legal implications associated with this report.

6.3. Equalities Implications

There are no equalities implications associated with this report. All support is available for all businesses in the Borough.

6.4. Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 Implications

There are no crime and disorder implications associated with this report.

7. Link to Corporate Priorities

Quality of Life	The offer in our towns and villages is important to maintain and improve the quality of life of our residents. It is therefore important that the Borough Council does what it can to protect and enhance that.
Efficient Services	
Sustainable Growth	The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on businesses in the Borough and the support provided and planned aims to mitigate the impact of Covid-19.
The Environment	Supporting a green economic recovery is a key element in the Council's recovery plan as well as our partners including Nottinghamshire County Council and D2N2 LEP.

8. Recommendations

It is RECOMMENDED that the Growth and Development Scrutiny Group reviews the proposed future activity and identifies additional areas of focus for the team.

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Background papers available for Inspection:	
List of appendices:	