

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF PLANNING, ECONOMY AND REGENERATION

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT SERVICE UPDATE

Cabinet Member(s): Cllr Graeme Barnell

Responsible Officer: Mrs Jenny Clifford, Head of Planning, Economy and Regeneration

Reason for Report: To update members on progress with key Economic Development Service Priorities.

RECOMMENDATION: That the report be noted

Relationship to Corporate Plan: The work of the Growth, Economy and Delivery team supports the corporate objectives for the economy:

- Bringing new businesses into the District
- Business development and growth
- Improving and regenerating our town centres
- Growing the tourism sector

Financial Implications: There are no additional financial implications arising from the report.

Legal Implications: There are no legal implications arising from the report, other than the provision of legal support to the projects.

Risk Assessment: There are no additional risks arising from the report other than those inherent in the projects themselves, and these are detailed in the individual project business cases.

Equality Impact Assessment: None anticipated

1.0 Introduction

1.1 This report provides an update for members on the progress of key projects currently being undertaken by the Growth, Economy and Delivery team (GED team) to further the objectives of the Economic Strategy. The Economic Strategy outlines four overall objectives:

Increasing Wages

- Creating opportunities for higher waged jobs

Upskilling

- Making sure residents have the skills to benefit from new employment opportunities

Delivering a Growth Agenda

- Creating the conditions for sustained and sustainable growth
- Moving Forward on Strategic Housing Sites & Employment Space

- Supporting Business Growth and Inward Investment
Increasing Productivity

- Attracting higher skilled, higher waged jobs
- Focus on the Knowledge Economy – High Tech Industries, Innovation and Green Energy

These objectives are grouped under the themes of Employment and Skills; Place; Infrastructure; High Tech, Innovation and Green Energy; and Agriculture, Food and Drink.

2.0 Employment and Skills

2.1 Business Enquiries

Mid Devon is home to a number of significant and successful business parks and industrial estates. However, most of our existing sites are built out, or currently in development, and there is therefore limited space currently available in which to house growing businesses and those looking to locate into the area.

Demand for business space is high, and is greatly outstripping the supply of industrial and other commercial buildings. This is true across all business sectors with the exception of retail which is struggling nationally. It should be noted however that Mid Devon's town centres have lower vacancy rates (proportions of vacant business premises) than the national average.

In the last month, the Growth, Economy and Delivery team received eight new business enquiries, including one inward investment opportunities from outside of the UK. These recent enquiries generally relate to business growth, where we have found, or are finding suitable premises for a business, and are now supporting them to get onto site.

When reporting business enquiries, it is important to recognise that live enquiries are usually treated as commercially sensitive, and that we will only be able to report on investments after they have concluded.

2.2 Business Growth and Investment Packages

An important objective for the economy service is to support indigenous business growth and increase inward investment. Working with land owners, commercial agents, business support organisations and other bodies, we hope to provide businesses with the support and advice they need to find appropriate premises and sites for expansion, and link them with specialist support as appropriate.

The team are actively looking at a number of different work streams to see how we can provide this support more effectively. This includes:

- Developing a commercial property database, which will give us a better understanding of the current stock of commercial property and employment development sites;
- Building relationships with landowners and commercial agents

- Networking with business support agencies and providing better signposting
- Improving communication to businesses so they have the information they need
- Exploring opportunities for financial assistance to businesses through available tax reliefs, loans and grants.
- Looking for opportunities to draw down funding to provide direct business support services

We expect to have a core offer of support in place by September this year.

2.3 Mid Devon Business Awards

We are developing the first Mid Devon Business Awards with Reach PLC. The awards will provide an opportunity to celebrate and recognise our business community and showcase what Mid Devon has to offer. We have such a range of business activity in Mid Devon and we hope this will be reflected in the awards. Over 90% of Mid Devon's businesses are small to medium in size. This in part demonstrates the diversity of the businesses currently trading in the District. It is intended that winning or being nominated for a prestigious Best Business Award will help individual businesses to stand out from the crowd and encourage other businesses to get involved. We plan to use the event (and the process leading up the event) as a vehicle to engage with local businesses and raise awareness that MDDC is able to support and advice businesses regarding start-up, expansion or relocation to the area. A launch event will be arranged to announce the categories in the next few months, the provisional date for the awards ceremony is Thursday 17 October 2019.

3.0 **Place**

3.1 Future High Streets Fund

In March this year the team submitted an expression of interest to the Government's Future High Streets Fund to support regeneration plans for Tiverton town centre. We expect to hear the outcome of this bid in early summer this year. Successful expressions of interest will be invited to work up full bids by September. There will be a second call for bids in the summer of 2020.

We are also waiting for the announcement of the detailed criteria for Historic England's Historic High Streets Fund, previously announced by the Government. The intention is to put in a bid to support regeneration in Cullompton town centre based on previous discussions with Historic England concerning setting up a 'Partnership Scheme in Conservation Areas' for Cullompton.

3.2 Masterplanning

The team are currently progressing two town centre master-planning processes.

Tiverton Town Centre Regeneration and Delivery Plan: A draft Masterplan and Investment Programme has been provided by the consultant. Officers have reviewed the document and returned comments. Production of the masterplan is on-going. Officers anticipate the document being presented to Cabinet 25 July 2019.

Cullompton Town Centre Masterplan: An Invitation to Tender was issued on 17 May 2019 via the Homes England ProContract portal. It invites Expressions of Interest for a masterplan that will contribute towards the regeneration of Cullompton in a well-designed, high quality and sustainable manner. Expressions of Interest have been requested by 14 June 2019.

3.3 Shopfront Schemes

The team currently administers shopfront enhancement schemes in Tiverton and Cullompton. These provide small grants to business owners to support minor repairs, redecoration and restoration of shopfronts in the town centre conservation areas. The schemes are part funded through Section 106 contributions, with a £15,000 commitment by the Council. This will allow schemes to be re-established in all three towns.

3.4 Support for Town Centre initiatives:

Members of the GED team help support local initiatives in each of the three market towns by liaising with and supporting the various town centre bodies. Relevant items of interest include:

- Crediton Chamber of Commerce is launching a 'Totally Locally' campaign to promote local independent businesses. The campaign has received a lot of national publicity (<https://totallylocally.org/stuff/>) and will help boost Crediton's thriving independent sector.
- CredFest 2019 will be running from Saturday 1 June to Sunday 23 June. Organised by Crediton Town Team, CredFest19 features a wide range of community events to celebrate the local community. THE GED team has supported the town team by helping them access funding for the events. Details at: <http://credfest.co.uk/>
- Crediton Community Bookshop has recently received funding from Devon County Council to establish a Work Hub in the former storage building at the back of the community bookshop. Building work is in progress and the Work Hub is expected to open later this year.
- For the fourth year running Cullompton Town Team have delivered Cullompton SpringFest, a food, craft and music festival across the main venues in the town. It was very successful, increasing the footfall from previous years. Our support for this project has been securing funding for the event to take place which covers the advertising, demonstration, entertainment and equipment costs. Our support for Cullompton Festivals (organised by the Town Team – SpringFest and Autumn Fruits Festival) comes under the place agenda by supporting community-led initiatives to make town centres vibrant and attractive.
- The Tiverton Town Centre Partnership was established in September 2018 and meets 4 times a year. Membership is open to all

stakeholders in the town and has an adopted constitution. The chair is from the private sector and the vice chair from the public sector. Both the District Council and Town council are members of the partnership. The partnership is very much in its infancy but is developing, the council helping to facilitate its objectives. Membership is from across the town and does include businesses such as the

- Tiverton Hotel, Almshouse trust, Knightshayes etc. It is also a consultative body for issues which may affect business within and around the Tiverton Town Centre. The clerical support is provided by the District Council.

3.4 Destination Website

In partnership with the Tourist Information Service (TIS) and Tiverton Museum we secured LEADER funding for a Destination website – Visit Mid Devon. The project will create a central website for the promotion of leisure related activities to attract visitors to Mid Devon and inform residents of the range of local activities and attractions available to them. The website will be managed by the TIS and allow them to coordinate marketing efforts and maintain up to date information for Mid Devon in the future.

The site is divided into four areas, Tiverton and the Exe Valley, Crediton and the Creedy Valley, Cullompton and the Culm Valley and Bampton and the Exmoor Fringe. The website will have interactive maps which will promote our walking and cycling routes, places to eat, accommodation, tourist attractions, farmer's markets and shopping in each area. The website will allow visitors to create their own itinerary by designing a 'to do' list of activities such as walking routes that are appropriate to their needs, encouraging them to spend more time in the area.

So far 40 businesses have signed up to the website for a listing. The website is due to go live in August 2019. The TIC will be driving traffic to the site through social media campaigns and competitions. They are producing a guide to complement the website which will be distributed throughout the SW and M5 corridor. The team's role has been to help secure funding and support the development of the website for the TIS to take forward as part of their business model. This will also help the TIS to become more self-sufficient.

4.0 **Infrastructure**

4.1 Town Centre Wi-fi

The town centre Wi-Fi project is looking to bring high quality wireless internet services to the three major town centres across Mid Devon; Tiverton, Crediton and Cullompton. Money is being raised through Section 106 contributions and funding bids to try to get systems installed.

The Council is exploring what added value services a Wi-Fi system could bring, including soft landing pages for businesses (pages that pop-up when

people connect to the Wi-Fi network) and footfall counters to monitor the flow of people in our town centres.

At present, a budget has been created through Section 106 agreement for Tiverton to have a Wi-Fi system installed. Meetings are scheduled to take place with the business community to discuss what they would like to see a system achieve for them and to discuss how they could engage with a local network.

The other towns still require funding, but we are exploring a number of opportunities to secure money to bring schemes forward.

5.0 Hi Tech, Innovation and Green Energy

5.1 Incubation Space

The team is investigating opportunities to set up business incubator units within the District to support business start-ups particularly in the specific sectors of Hi-Tech, Innovation and Green Energy. We are currently developing an outline business case to provide evidence of the scheme's viability. This project will be the subject of a further report to the committee once the initial planning has been concluded.

5.2 Hydro Energy Project

The Hydro Energy Project is a joint initiative between the Hydro Mills Group Ltd and MDDC, looking to refurbish and redevelop key riparian sites for the generation of hydro-electricity and heating. The project has been in development for 2 years, with 3 sites being brought forward for an initial phase, and ambitions to develop further sites for hydro energy schemes in the future. Flockmill and Thorverton are privately owned, while Mid Devon is pursuing an opportunity at Tiverton Weir.

Flockmill is the smaller of the schemes, and is being taken forward for a hydro-heating system, which will enable a converted barn unit to produce agricultural produce which is ordinarily difficult to cultivate in the UK.

Thorverton is the largest of the schemes, with the potential to generate a large amount of hydro-electricity which could power the entire mill site, which is likely to be converted into a dozen or so commercial units. It is also the most expensive of the 3 schemes, requiring the replacement of a weir which washed away in the 1990s and significant refurbishment work to the premises.

Tiverton Weir is a medium sized scheme, which has the potential to generate electricity for use at Phoenix House. The current proposal, combined with our existing solar electric system at Phoenix House, would effectively make us the first local authority in the UK to be non-grid dependent (though we would not look to lose our grid connection).

The project has already worked with a number of organisations in its development, including South West Water, Western Power, and the University of Exeter. Towards the end of December 2018, MDDC submitted our applications to the Environment Agency for the necessary permissions to be able to implement a scheme at Tiverton Weir. In parallel with this process, the landowners of Flockmill and Thorverton, have been working to obtain the permissions for their own sites.

By demonstrating the viability of different types of schemes at different types of sites, the Hydro Mills Group are hoping to influence government support for small scale hydro projects and to develop a workable business model.

6.0 Conclusion

For further information on any of the above projects please contact John Bodley Scott, in the first instance, as detailed below.

Contact for more Information: John Bodley Scott, Economic Development Team
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Circulation of the Report: Cabinet Member
Leadership Team

List of Background Papers: None