

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TASK GROUP UPDATE

Executive Summary

The Economic Development Task Group met on 23 March 2022. Set out below is the report from the Chairman of the task group.

Economic Development Action Plan Report

Soon after the beginning of the pandemic, a Framework for Recovery was published by the Council (July 2020) to assist businesses through the Covid crisis and into a period of recovery.

The publication of the Council's Economic Development Action Plan (EDAP) in September 2021 (Executive Committee) recognised that businesses were now in a position of post-pandemic recovery. The Action Plan is an interim measure to take the Council to the end of 2023, when an updated Economic Development Strategy will be adopted.

The action plan complements several of the Council's key strategies already in place, including the Core Strategy, the Economic Development Strategy for Woking 2017-2022, and the 2021-2022 Corporate Plan.

The action plan addresses key issues arising from the pandemic, and informs the forthcoming Woking Town Centre Masterplan, Five-Year Corporate Plan, and the Digital Strategy.

EDAP list of Priorities

- Priority 1 Focus on business
- Priority 2 Build on our business advantages and skilled people
- Priority 3 Future proofing the town and village centres
- Priority 4 Making our place the place to be
- Priority 5 Destination Woking

Business Liaison Priorities

Priority 1 – Focus on business – has been the focus during 2021/22. The actions are designed to help sustain and grow Woking's businesses.

The Council's Corporate Leadership Team has given Property Services approval to employ a Commercialisation Manager to support the Council's estate sales activity and liaising directly with Business Liaison on inward investment opportunities. Two business surveys had been run, one in October and February. One key finding was that it appeared that there was less of a 'crisis' and more of a 'recovery'. A focus going forward would be the International Trade Club to support businesses with exports and imports in the post-Brexit environment. With regard to Business Intelligence it was noted that there were 62 new businesses in the Borough, creating 120 jobs which did not include the Hilton. Work on areas such as engaging with Higher and Further Education would be taking place in the coming months.

Regarding *Priority 2 - Build on our business advantages and skilled people*, it was noted that the DWP and the Woking Hospitality Alliance project were key to supporting the hospitality sector and that jobs boards were gaining momentum, with trends on JSA claimants and the unemployment rate moving in a positive direction.

Work with the apprenticeship hub was highlighted as it had included working with local and county-wide partners to support businesses understanding how to utilise apprenticeships. In addition, work was ongoing with the University of Surrey and Brooklands College to gain more involvement with a range of departments.

Priority 3 - Future proofing the town and village centres - has involved Business Liaison Team officers in surveying the business community directly, identifying areas of need, such as staff shortages in the hospitality industry, which has prompted officers to engage with restaurant and pub owners / managers to discuss the current challenges they face and how the Council can support them through initiatives like the Woking Hospitality Alliance. Future proofing was linked to the town masterplan and in the short-term an effort had been made to temporarily fill some empty retail units in Victoria Place with cultural displays, prior to them becoming with retail stores.

As part of *Priority 4 - Making our place the place to be* - it was stated that there was a focus on investing in green spaces and highlighted that the electric parking scheme was due to begin in the next weeks.

Priority 5 – Destination Woking – was noted to be scheduled to begin in April 2022, with an implementation start date of September 2022.

Recommendations

The Committee is requested to:

RESOLVE that the report be noted.

The Committee has the authority to determine the recommendation(s) set out above.

Background Papers: None.

Reporting Person: Councillor Dale Roberts, Chairman of the Task Group
Email: cllrdaledale.roberts@woking.gov.uk
Councillor Ayesha Azad, Chairman of the O&S Committee
Email: cllraysheha.azad@woking.gov.uk

Contact Person: Councillor Dale Roberts
Email: cllrdaledale.roberts@woking.gov.uk

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Dale Roberts
Email: cllrdaledale.roberts@woking.gov.uk

Shadow Portfolio Holder: Councillor Kevin Davis
Email: cllrkevin.davis@woking.gov.uk

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