

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY UPDATE REPORT

Cabinet – 14 December 2023

Report of: Detlev Munster – Strategic Head of Property and Commercial

Status: For Consideration

Also considered by: Improvement & Innovation Advisory Committee – 5 December 2023

Key Decision: No

Executive Summary: The report provides an annual review of the Economic Development Strategy following its first year of delivery. Good progress is highlighted in each of the focus areas and overall the strategy has benefited from availability of external funding to boost achievements to date.

Portfolio Holder: Cllr. Julia Thornton

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Recommendation to Improvement and Innovation

To note progress with delivery of the Economic Development Strategy.

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Reason for recommendation:

In approving the Economic Development Strategy in 2022, Cabinet requested that progress updates are submitted annually with its implementation. Good progress has been made with the first year of delivery of the Economic Development Strategy 2022-27 which remains on track to achieve expected outcomes before the end of the strategy's period.

Introduction and Background

- 1 The Economic Development Strategy (EDS) 2022-27 was approved by Cabinet on 7th July 2022, with delivery commencing in Q3 2022. The strategy provides a framework for delivery of economic development activity and notes the need to have flexibility to adapt to changes in the wider environment and embrace new opportunities and challenges as they arise.
- 2 The EDS reflects the promises within the Council plan at the time of development which were to;
 - Build on the District's thriving economy through the regeneration of our market towns, and by enhancing both the visitor and rural economies
 - Protect the economy of the District by preserving and making better use of existing employment sites and by redeveloping previously used land
 - Support new and existing businesses through our "Team around the Business" approach, combining excellent customer service and supporting local employers to promote mental and physical well-being at work.
- 3 The new Council plan reaffirms the commitment to deliver to the Economic Development Strategy, and also to; continue to support businesses to come to the District and grow, to deliver regeneration and to ensure that Sevenoaks District remains a special place to live, work and enjoy.
- 4 The EDS vision statement is: 'for Sevenoaks District to have a dynamic growing and inclusive economy for our businesses, communities and visitors that is kind to the environment, contributes to the health and well-being of all our residents and supports our commitment to working towards achieving Net Zero carbon emissions by the Council by 2030'
- 5 Since adoption of the EDS there has been much change both in the wider economic environment but also in the availability of funding to support activity. Significantly the announcement of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund was made in April 2022 and at the time of adoption of the strategy the investment plan for this funding was being finalised and submitted to Government. Approval of the Council's UKSPF Investment Plan was received in December 2022. A further announcement was then made regarding the Rural England Prosperity Fund, which provided additional funding and the requirement for an addendum to be submitted in November 2022, which was approved by Government in April 2023.
- 6 The approach was therefore taken to design the UKSPF investment plan alongside the EDS to ensure complementarity of much of the activity. This has proved to be a prudent approach providing significant funding to develop new initiatives, however this funding availability has necessitated initial focus on achievement of UKSPF investment plan priorities. The commitment to deliver the EDS within the 5 year period remains, but the initial focus has been on delivery of those objectives and activities which work alongside UKSPF interventions to benefit from the additional resources this brings. As a result some key areas of the strategy have not been progressed during the first year, but this does not mean

that they will not be in future years. The Council has focussed on delivering those activities it has received funding for and which are time critical.

7 The EDS sets out 5 strategic priorities:

- Environmental Sustainability
- Skills resilience and job opportunities,
- Business resilience and growth,
- Infrastructure first
- Partnership delivery.

These provide a contextual framework. Proposed activities are broken down within the delivery plan into 4 key focus areas against which the monitoring of activity takes place.

Economic Overview

8 The Economic Development Team is reliant on the receipt of data from third party organisation such as ONS, Statista and the Kent Research Unit. Economic and socio-economic data is received and reviewed on a regular basis. This data is not replicated here, but data sets used can be found in the Background Documents section of the report. The Council is currently investigating how best to synthesise this data for future reports. In addition, the Council is also commissioning a Sector Skills Report, which will provide a better understanding of economic trends and sectors that the Council should be supporting, the findings of this research will be shared on completion.

EDS Monitoring

- 9 During the initial phase of delivery of the Economic Development Strategy our focus has been on aligning activity to the UKSPF investment plan, forming partnerships, and procuring/commissioning activities. During this phase we have also recruited additional externally funded staff to deliver the UKSPF and REPF activities. In particular, a UKSPF project officer commenced work in April 2023, the West Kent Rural Officer started in May 2023, and the Town Centres Project Officer commenced in June 2023
- 10 Although Government had set up the programme in 2022, reporting and administrative structures and systems had not yet been finalised, and the team has had to implement interim systems which are still being adapted by Government. This has required staff to continuously learn new systems and procedures.
- 11 A monitoring summary is provided in Appendix B. This indicates that 86% of the actions are rated as Green or Amber, with 9% Blue (not yet started) and 5% Red. Those Blue or Red indicate a mixture of changing external influences or activity which is planned to happen towards the end of the strategy delivery term. As this is reporting on one year's progress towards a five year strategy we would not be expecting all ratings to be green at this stage.

- 12 Blue and Red activities are reflective of those activities which do not fall within the UKSPF priorities. Consequently, work on these will commence at a later and may depend on funding availability.

Key Achievements to date

- 13 This section provides a summary of key achievements under each of the EDS focus areas.

14 **Focus area 1: Business and Enterprise**

- Local Leadership Partnership in place with the Federation of Small Business indicating commitment to provide support for the small businesses.
- West Kent Business support scheme procured and launched – programme delivered by Smarter Society has engaged over 100 Sevenoaks based businesses and a micro grants scheme was launched.
- Business directory created and populated on More Sevenoaks website with over 150 businesses featuring already.
- West Kent Partnership rebranding to Invest West Kent commenced with re-branding and a renewed focus on inward investment.
- Meeting Point Co-working hub in Swanley opened in July 2023.
- In June 2023, a stand was set-up at the Sevenoaks Business Show and a presentation was delivered to delegates.
- A stand was set up to engage with delegates at the national Completely Retail Show in September 2023.
- Regularly attendance and hosting of Chamber of Commerce and other business networking events to promote business and enterprise activity.

15 **Focus area 2: Visitor Economy and Rural Economy**

- Digital tourism report recently completed to provide detail on the variety of communication channels being used.
- Tourism website (Visit Sevenoaks) and social media channels are updated regularly with fresh content and short articles.
- Marketing activities being undertaken in collaboration with Visit Kent to boost tourism to the District.
- Darent Valley Community Rail Partnership produced a compendium of 17 walking trails within the Darent Valley.
- New Tourism leaflet for the District produced and distributed.
- Several tourism information kiosks refreshed at key locations within the District.
- Promotion of Sevenoaks at the Visit Kent Travel Trade Show in February 2023 and at the West Kent Business Event in March 2023.
- West Kent Rural Grants Scheme was launched in June.

16 **Focus area 3: Town Centres**

- UKSPF capital funding scheme for Public realm improvements was launched in July 2023. Funding has been offered to all Town and Parish Council's to ensure activities meet local needs.
- Attended Completely Retail Expo in Sept 2023 to promote our market towns.

- Town Centre Project Officer regularly visits Town Centres liaising with businesses and Town Councils to collate data and to also provide business support and information.
- A Town Centre Strategy has been developed jointly between planning policy and Economic development to form part of the evidence base for emerging local plan with continued close working on delivery of Town centre regeneration and activity.

17 **Focus area 4: Skills and**

- A regular programme of jobs fairs delivered by West Kent in partnership with DWP continues.
- A programme of activity run by West Kent Housing Association including Job Fairs in Swanley and Jobs Hubs in both Swanley and Sevenoaks was supported.
- The West Kent Partnership, together with the DWP and People+, has delivered an inclusive employment event at which employers were able to engage with a number of support options to enable them to employ people with disabilities.
- Broomhill Bank supported interns started for the 23/24 academic year with three students joining SDC for eight hours per week.
- SDC provided a significant amount of work experience with well-conceived placements.
- Assisted local businesses in shaping new apprenticeship opportunities, an example being Aqualisa Ltd in Westerham.
- Relationship established with Biggin Hill Airport with the objectives of: arranging work experience placements for local schools, generating links with a proposed technical college and associated apprenticeships, providing job boards for local residents.
- Conversations are ongoing with the North Kent College Group to ensure that we communicate with each other around sector skills needs and how to meet them.
- Watching brief being held over TEP activities to ensure they maintain the same quality of service as previously provided by WKP.

Key Next Steps

- 18 It is important to note that the EDS has no additional budget allocation, other than those activities that can be funded using UKSPF and REPF grant funding. The Council is therefore limited in the activities it can deliver. The Council therefore seeks to be resourceful by investigating funding opportunities and working collaboratively with other organisations. There is therefore a significant emphasis of partnership working and where possible to add value to existing activities. The flexibility within the delivery plan to adapt has allowed for aims to be achieved with limited Council resource, the approach therefore presents an efficient delivery of an ambitious programme.
- 19 The focus for the next year will be on delivering the remaining UKSPF and REPF programme. This includes further rounds of business support, micro grants, green business grants, West Kent Rural grants and cultural development grants as well

as key research into sector skills and the commencement of the People and Skills themed projects. These activities directly contribute to the achievement of many of the EDS' objectives. Opportunities for partnership working and external funding availability will have a significant influence on how the remainder of the EDS is delivered.

Other Options Considered and/or Rejected

- 20 Given the changing economic development context, changing market conditions and changing government policies, as well as the need to focus on the UKSPF and REPF funding requirements, delivery against the EDS could have been paused whilst focus remained on Government funding. However, this approach would not be appropriate given the commitment made to deliver a 5 year strategy. The additional external funding available has increased ability to deliver and brought forward key areas of activity, and is complementary to the EDS. It should also be noted that UKSPF/REPF funding is available only until March 2025 and therefore the EDS provides the longer-term framework for Economic Development activity required for the future.

Key Implications

Financial

- 21 The introduction of the UKSPF and the REPF programmes have provided key financial support for key actions within the EDS. Activities within the EDS have therefore been prioritised to reflect funding availability.
- 22 Resources allocated to deliver the EDS have been maximised through externally funded staff who support the core team on delivery.
- 23 It should be noted that delivery of the EDS in future years is subject to external funding being available.

Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement.

- 24 There are no significant legal implications associated with this report, which seeks to provide monitoring of activity to date.
- 25 A key risk to the delivery of the EDS remains the availability of future funding.

Equality Assessment

- 26 The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

Net Zero Implications

- 27 The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the council's ambition to be Net Zero by 2030. There is no perceived impact regarding either an increase or decrease in carbon emissions in the district or supporting the resilience of the natural environment. It is important to note that

net zero implications were considered at the point of strategy adoption. Implications are considered as part of project inception criteria for new activities.

Conclusions

- 28 Good progress has been made in the first year of the Economic Development Strategy's delivery. The strategy remains relevant given our economic landscape and is on track to deliver within the 5-year strategy period but is dependent on future funding availability. The EDS continues to retain relevance to key focus to both the previous and the new Council plan. The principles and objectives in the EDS are both robust and flexible to allow new opportunities to be embraced and to adapt to changing contexts and resource availability. This is evident in the way the UKSPF Investment Plan was aligned to deliver against the EDS' priorities and objectives.

Appendices

Appendix A – EDS Delivery Plan monitoring year 1

Background Papers

Economic Development Strategy 2022- 27

https://www.sevenoaks.gov.uk/downloads/download/2/economic_development_strategy

Background statistical research

- Kent County Council, Kent and Medway Economic Dashboard
- ONS, UK Business Counts Inter Departmental Business Register
- Kent County Council Analytics Bulletin – UK Business Count (2022)
- Kent County Council District profiles
- Kent Analytics Statistical bulletin, Business Demography
- Kent Analytics Statistical bulletin, Tourism industries in Kent (April 2023)
- Kent Analytics Statistical bulletin, Creative Industries in Kent (March 2023)
- Kent County Council Statistical bulletin, The Knowledge Economy (April 2023)
- Visit Kent Cambridge Economic Model 2021
- ONS area profile – Sevenoaks
- Knight Frank, A Retail Renaissance 2023

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