

Councillor Cllr Neil Reeve, Portfolio Holder for the Economy, Investment and Corporate Strategy

Report to Full Council: 21 March 2022

This report reflects the highlights of the Portfolio from May 2019 to April 2023

Economic Development

During the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated lockdowns, together with teams from the Finance Department a total of over £35million of Government and County Grants were distributed to businesses and organizations. In some cases, UDC was given more than other Authorities, since we demonstrated that we distributed these so efficiently. This process had the significant by-product of letting us know our businesses much better.

The first Economic Development Recovery Plan 2021-2024 was approved by Full Council on 8 December 2020. The Plan identifies the national, regional, county and local initiatives that were currently active or planned to address the impact of the global pandemic. It identified local gaps and proposed local solutions.

This Plan specifically coordinates economic development activities with those required for the Climate Change agenda and the emerging Local Plan, and the actions needed to reflect that ambition. It is aimed at both businesses and individual residents. Over three years £1.0 million has been budgeted.

The Economic Development Plan covers five work themes:

1. Business Engagement and Support
2. Information, Advice and Guidance
3. Skills and Training
4. Creating Jobs / Inward Investment
5. Creating a 'Greener' Local Economy.

For each theme, current activities, planned activities, additional activities and the required resources are identified, with SMART targets.

One of the earlier highlight activities was the support of the 'Click-it Local – Uttlesford' scheme of delivery of local independent 'high street' retailers to home delivery. This helped multiple retailers (and residents) during the initial lockdowns. It was subsequently wound-up following the end of lockdowns.

The 2023/2024 (third year) of the Economic Development Recovery Plan 2021-2024 was presented to the Scrutiny Committee on 2 March 2023. Together with the year two progress report. Highlights include:

- The Economic Development Team is now at its establishment size of 5 staff (including one for Car Parking). Two new staff started work in January 2023. The establishment was one staff member at the start of this Administration.
- An application to the £1 million UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), endorsed by Cabinet and our MP) was submitted on 1 August 2022, and was approved by Government in January 2023. Applications closed on 14 Feb 2023 for projects for the first tranche (year 1) of £109,000 to be allocated by 31 March 2023. Applications for year 2 (2023/2024) will open shortly. A Local

Partnership Panel has been established and held its first meeting. This Panel will oversee the Fund.

- An application for the £813,000 Rural England Community Fund was submitted to Government on 30 November 2022. This is further to the UKSPF and reflects the particularly rural nature of Uttlesford. Once approved (anticipated in late March 2023), this fund will supplement the aims of the UKSPF and is planned to be overseen by the same Panel.
- Work continues on the consideration of conclusions of the 2021 Cambridge University Judge Business School Management Studies Tripos Project, for which 4 students worked for 4 weeks on the research question 'What does the Green Economy mean for Uttlesford?'. One achieved result is encouragement of a local business using hemp as an alternative to concrete and other green-house gas emitting materials.
- The winners of the Uttlesford Business Awards were announced at 3 award ceremonies between 27 Feb and 6 March 2023.
- A series of grants have been launched. These are designed to support our local independent businesses in every sector, by stimulating innovation; economic growth; creating new jobs; increasing productivity; and enhancing the visual appearance of retail shopping areas.
- Held a Business Support Day in Saffron Walden in September 2022.
- A successful jobs fair was held at Stansted Airport on 7 February 2023. Hundreds of people attended.
- Delivered a tourism marketing campaign to promote the Discover Uttlesford website and the DiscoverUttlesford app.
- Launched an enhanced visit Essex membership package to local tourism sector businesses.
- Produced the Business Support Guide, Business Start-up Guide and business support leaflet to accompany Council Tax bills.
- Delivery of the Digital Boost week, with an associated grant scheme.
- Produced Business e-newsletters to over 2,000 people, monthly advertising in local newspapers and social media activity to promote initiatives.
- Relunched the Business Development Business Rates Relief Policy.
- During 2022/2023 the Economic Development Team had access to the North Essex Economic Board (NEEB) procured business support services, funded through a top slice of one of the Government's Covid-19 business support grants, the Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG).
- Work continued in the award-winning Essex/Herts Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ) looking for solutions to digital connectivity issues and opportunities.

- The lack of commercial premises and land including incubator units and start-up space is restricting the ability of local businesses to grow. The availability of land and premises is key to the achievement of economic growth in the district. It is hoped that this will be addressed in the emerging Local Plan.

- The 'Northside' business development site (North of Stansted Airport) was approved by Planning Committee on 25 January 2023. This is the largest business development in the region and will deliver many thousand jobs.

Bottom line: A great deal has been achieved, and there is much still left to do.

Investment

UDC has developed its investment portfolio with the objective of creating additional independent 'revenue income' to supplement the Council Tax Revenue, to fund Council services and actions. Prior to May 2019 the only element in the portfolio was Chesterford Research Park. By End December 2022 it was valued at £269 million, with a diverse portfolio both in business sector and geography across the UK, in 7 investments. This is designed to mitigate risk.

The leasing arrangements are long term (15 to 30 years), with a chosen mix of short to long term borrowing designed to minimize the cost of borrowing and spread the associated borrowing risks.

In the current year, the net income to the Council of approximately £8million is forecast to be slightly larger than that from Council Tax. This quantum will fluctuate annually depending on the annual cost of borrowing, which is determined by market conditions.

A cross-party Investment Board, reporting to the Cabinet, was created to advise in the management of the process and provide governance. This has included independent specialists.

A five-year rolling Commercial Strategy has been approved annually, as has an Ethical Investment Policy. Quarterly portfolio reviews are published.

UDC has also purchased the previous 'Banana Facility' at Little Canfield. This is to provide three functions for the future.

- a) The depot for the waste collection vehicles, facilities for their cleaning and maintenance, and facilities for the associated staff. This replaces previous facilities in Dunmow and Saffron Walden.
- b) Provision of offices and meeting space for Council staff, members and public, including civic space.
- c) Rental income from the letting of surplus warehouse space.

Bottom line: This investment portfolio has placed UDC in a much stronger position than the majority of Local Authorities and should generate net revenue for many years to come.

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Corporate Strategy

The Administration for the term May 2019 to May 2023, prepared its first Corporate Plan 2020-2024 based on the incoming manifesto. This has been updated annually, with the main themes remaining substantially unaltered. The most recent Corporate Plan 2023-2027 was adopted by Council at its meeting on 21 February 2023.

Our Vision is : Making Uttlesford the best place to live, work and play.

The main themes are:

- Putting residents first

- Active place-maker for our towns and villages
- Progressive custodian
- Champion for our district.

Each year a Corporate Plan Delivery Plan is prepared to detail the individual line items in the plan. These plans in turn form the basis of the 'Service Plans' of teams and staff in the Council.

These plans form the basis of driving the annual balanced Medium Term Financial Strategy (MFTS) and budget.

Quarterly progress reports were prepared and published for transparency of progress against the Corporate Plan.

Personal highlights from progress against the Corporate Plan have been:

- Putting the finances in order, through the actions of the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MFTS) and Investment Portfolio.
- Climate Change actions. The Declaration of a Climate and Ecological Emergency, and subsequent Strategies and Plans.
- The Economic Development Recovery Plan, including the associated Covid-19 pandemic response.
- The support to three main new sports facilities.
- The development work towards the emerging Local Plan, which although not yet out for public consultation, is underpinned by very solid preparatory work.
- The generally efficient provision of the main statutory services.
- The excellent work of the Council's Officers and Staff, against the backdrop of particularly difficult times.