

STROUD DISTRICT COUNCIL
STRATEGY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE
THURSDAY, 23 NOVEMBER 2023

Report Title	Economic Development Priority Update & Market Towns Vitality Funding			
Purpose of Report	To update the Committee on economic development initiatives and seek support for the principle of additional market town vitality funding in 2024/25.			
Decision(s)	<p>The Committee RESOLVES to:</p> <p>1) Note the progress being made on the economic development priorities established in the Council Plan.</p> <p>2) Support the development of proposals for a Market Town Vitality Fund, to be presented to this committee in February 2024.</p>			
Consultation and Feedback	Consultation with Strategic Leadership Team, Council Leader and Alliance Leaders has taken place. Initial consultation has also taken place at the Market Towns Forum, comprising representatives from SDC, the Chamber of Commerce and Town Councils.			
Report Author	Amy Beckett, Senior Economic Development Specialist Email: amy.beckett@stroud.gov.uk			
Options	The Committee could choose not to support the proposed additional market towns funding. This is not advised, given the ongoing challenges facing our high streets.			
Background Papers	None.			
Appendices	None			
Implications (further details at the end of the report)	Financial	Legal	Equality	Environmental
	No	No	No	No

1. Introduction / Background

- 1.1 The Council Pan sets out a number of economic development priorities, designed to support create a thriving and resilient local economy. The Economic Development priorities within the Council Plan have seen good progress to date. This report sets out progress made against the priorities to support local businesses and support skills and training.
- 1.2 The report also outlines the ambitions to design and launch funding to support Market Town Vitality.

2. Council Plan Priorities Updates

- 2.1 Support for Local Business:

ER1.5 – Consultation on how SDC can improve business services

To date the current activities have taken place:

- Funding the continuation of Stroud District Growth Hub via the UK Shared Prosperity Funding to ensure businesses have access, but limited to support for start up support, support to take steps to become net zero and reduce their carbon footprints, support to access different funding opportunities.
- Working in partnership with Stroud District Growth Hub to deliver outreach business support and support for social enterprise businesses in the District.
- Streamlined the information available to businesses through the website, updating information available, updating links and removing out of date information.
- Inline with the planned updates for Stroud Council's website in February 2024, engagement with businesses is scheduled to take place, ensuring information available is accessible, relevant and informative.

ER1.2 – Digital and online support

- Funded via the Welcome Back Funding, businesses across the district, particularly the Market Towns had access to funded support to understand:
 - How to utilise social media platforms to convert visitors to paying customers.
 - Understand how to market themselves via social media and their website.
 - Access to training and webinars to understand best methods to engage a wider audience and convert to customer. *This support timeline has now come to an end. Over 500 businesses accessed the support.*
- Signposting to fully funded schedule of events, online and in person, via the Growth Hub including: creating an online marketing plan, strategy for social media, create video content to drive more website traffic and increase sales through your website.
 - *Excellent attendance at events, with waiting lists for popular events*
- Working alongside the areas DMO (Destination Management Organisation), Cotswold Tourism, to promote the DMO website for our Visitor Economy businesses to be registered on, reiving support via and additional marketing of their organisations.
- Creation and responsibility of a location focussed social media account, @Discover_Stroud_District which highlights attractions, events, the walking app, Discover Stroud District and other Council and partner projects to an online audience.
 - *The page currently has 740 followers with a reach of an additional 890 accounts on average per month.*
 - *Analytics have taken place that show a correlation between new walks being uploaded to the Discover Stroud District app and social media page and an increase on footfall to the nearest towns. IE, Nailsworth nature trail saw +4 users and +913 visitors. Last year's mince pie trail saw an increase of +9 users and +3,800 visitors to the closest market town the next week. Other events such as Christmas light switch on, school holidays will impact on footfall increases.*

ER1.3 – Shop local campaign

- Funded shop local campaigns with Reopening High Streets and Welcome Back Funding to promote the market towns and encouraging improved footfall into these locations. The Shop Local campaigns were shared via local newspaper, SNJ.
- Development of Market Town's marketing content. Marketing videos were developed for Wotton-under-Edge, Stroud, Nailsworth, Stonehouse and Dursley.
- Working in partnership with stakeholder including the Parish and Town Council's, the Chamber of Trade and Stroud Tourism Partnership group to support new and existing

campaigns to encourage increased footfall into the market town locations. This includes promoting campaigns via social media.

ER1.4 – Grow the visitor economy

Since the recruitment of a Tourism Officer, Stroud District Council have supported the visitor economy in a number of ways, including:

- Following the 'de Bois Review: an independent review of DMO's in England, we have worked in partnership with the DMO, Cotswold Tourism.
 - *This led to successfully applying for LVEP (Local Visitor Economy Partnership) status.*
- Through the creation of the Cotswold Plus LVEP area, Stroud District support to lead on working groups, Sustainable Transport and Sustainable Business Practices and Biodiversity Action Plans.
 - *Once actions of working groups are agreed, they will be shared; proposed actions include working with partners such as Sustrans and Sports England.*
- Managing calls for content for Visit England and Visit Britain. Collating data from the visitor economy and town and parish councils.
 - *Responding to quarterly calls for national promotion*
- Currently reviewing and updating how filming permissions in the district are managed. Consulting regional partners, ensuring pricing of locational filming is inline with other areas in the region. Developing a portfolio of locations to share to Creative England with the aim to boost the district film offer and increase the awareness of the district as a viable location for production companies.
- Creation and continued development of the place making app, Discover Stroud District, with the aim to encourage walking in the area, promotion of local businesses, a healthy lifestyle, sustainable tourism and use of modern technology to promote the area.
 - *As of 1st November 2023, the app had over 2170 unique users.*
- Working in partnership with the district Walking and Cycling Fund to carry out upgrades on the app, including an events diary section and treasure hunts to encourage a more diverse demographic to use the app, offer a more interactive experience and encourage increase walking and cycling across the district.
 - *Anticipated to increase users of the App and engage with a new cohort or young families and Nesters, the 24–44-year-old market.*
- Working alongside Gloucestershire Community and Rail Partnership and Slimbridge WWT to develop and promote the creation of a trail shuttle bus from Cam and Dursley Train station.
 - *The trial service received an average of 44 passengers per weekend, and a total of 393 passengers between 20th May 2023 and 31st July 2023.*

ER4 - Champion local businesses of all types and sizes that lead on environmental and social good practice and support them to grow, keeping wealth in the district, strengthening local supply chains and offering rewarding local jobs.

- Following the launch of our web-based investment prospectus - *The Natural Place*, the economic development team are developing further measures to engage local businesses in communicating and promoting the benefits of locating and growing a business within Stroud District, including a regular newsletter and an ambassador programme.
- As well as promoting the district as a business destination, the ambassador programme may also offer support and work with businesses to promote wider initiatives, such as:

- Becoming a Living wage employer;
- Improving carbon neutrality of their business;
- Signing up to be a Disability confident employer;
- Offering secure and flexible work opportunities;
- Providing mental health first aiders and wellbeing ambassadors;
- Considering opportunities to upskills and develop employee's skillset to encourage retention.

2.2 Skills and Training:

ER4.4 – Work with partners to support the development of skills and training for all ages, including the unemployed, young people and apprentices, and across key sectors including the low carbon sector and visitor economy.

- Through the UK Shared Prosperity Funding, the district is supporting the Multiply programme, created to support improve the number of adults achieving maths qualifications and improve labour market outcomes.
- Through the UK Shared Prosperity Funding, the district is supporting GCC deliver the employment and skills project, which seeks to support residents who are economically inactive back into the workplace through one to one and workshop support provision.
- The economic development team currently on the steering group for the Restart scheme and National Career Service provision in Gloucestershire. The steering group is a partnership with training providers, neighbouring Local Authorities and the Department for Work and Pensions whose priorities are to support those furthest from the labour market, out of work residents and residents looking to improve their skills levels. This meeting happens quarterly.
- Working in partnership with further education provision such as South Gloucestershire and Stroud College to promote course aimed at businesses to improve the skills of their employees in our priority sectors, such as green courses run from Berkeley site and customers services courses from the Stroud campus.

3. MARKET TOWN VITALITY FUNDING PROPOSAL

- 3.1 With the ongoing transition of high streets nationally from retail to experience destinations, there is the need to support our district's Market Towns. Combined with the growing concern as businesses leave the high streets due to factors such as inflation, high energy costs, wider cost of living pressures, and the continued growth of online retail provision, it is important to continue developing our work with our town and parish council partners and other key stakeholders, to ensure that we are doing all we can to promote thriving market towns for our residents, businesses and visitors.
- 3.2 National data identifies that high street closures peaked in 2022 and figures for 2023 are expected to be similar, with retail, restaurants, department stores, bank branches and coffee shops shutting for good.
- 3.3 Our Council Plan outlines our commitment to support high street businesses in the area, to deliver local incentives to increase footfall, and to grow a sustainable visitor economy, including the night-time economy. Similarly, the Economic Development Strategy prioritises boosting our market towns and rural vitality. To deliver against these priorities, and to respond to the challenge of empty shops given the decline of retail in many places,

we are proposing to introduce a Market Town Vitality Fund aimed at supporting the vitality of our market towns during the ongoing challenging economic climate.

- 3.4 The Committee is asked to support further engagement with our Market Towns and other partners about their priorities for high streets in Stroud district, to help shape the design and operation of the funding. The scale of funding will not be confirmed until we have received confirmation of the Local Government funding settlement, which is expected in late December 2023. Detailed proposals about the fund will also be subject to review by our Finance Team and One Legal to ensure compliance with all statutory provisions and a further report will be presented to this Committee with the budget in February 2024.

4. Implications

4.1 Financial Implications

There are no financial implications arising from this decision. The funding of the Market Town vitality fund will be considered in the report in February 2024.

Andrew Cummings, Strategic Director of Resources
Tel: 01453 754115 Email: andrew.cummings@stroud.gov.uk

4.2 Legal Implications

There are no legal implications associated with the decisions in this report. However, early engagement of One Legal in relation to the development of the Market Town Vitality Fund is essential.

Claire Hughes, Corporate Director and Monitoring Officer
Email: claire.hughes@stroud.gov.uk

4.3 Equality Implications

There are no specific changes to service delivery proposed within this decision.

4.4 Environmental Implications

There are no particular environmental implications arising from this report.