

Item 4 refers

4. Leader's Report for Council on 27th September 2021

Economic Growth and Recovery

Since we last met in late June there has been a great deal of activity by the Council in developing and rolling out funding to support our local economy and help it recover from the impact of the various shutdowns and restrictions brought about by the pandemic.

On the 16th September, I was delighted to attend the delayed Leicestershire Live Business Awards 2020/21 at the Maher Centre in Leicester, along with the HDC Chairman, Cllr Bilbie, and members of the Economic Development team to witness one of our local SMEs, Armourgeddon, near Husbands Bosworth, be awarded the AXA Health Family Business of the Year award. A superb achievement and one which they can be immensely proud of, as we all should be. A number of other local businesses were shortlisted finalists in other categories.

It is testament to the resilience of our local business community that the number of jobs available in the local economy is around 3,200, although the number of people on furlough in July was 2,400; however in the most recent (August) data release, the out-of-work claimant count had fallen to 1,355, so there is still some way to go until we are back to where we were pre-March 2020. On top of this, we have seen significant investment and jobs growth over the summer. With the finalisation of Poundland into the HDC owned shop unit at the Commons car park, to the major investment by four international logistics companies at Magna Park, creating 1,600 new jobs, there have been a stream of announcements and commitments made locally to invest and boost employment opportunities.

As was reported at Cabinet on 6th September, HDC has handed out over £5.1million in approximately 1,500 grants to local businesses via the various schemes permitted by government, and over the summer we launched our latest recovery funds via the £900k Additional Restrictions Grants (ARG). Our intention is for this funding to act as a catalyst to boost recovery, growth, and innovation for local businesses with or without commercial premises, through the four new schemes. ARG will continue to support businesses that are severely impacted by the extended restrictions, (including businesses listed in the Government guidance), businesses that have not received any Covid-19 grants, and businesses that remain closed, although the hope is that the main emphasis will be to encourage businesses to look to the future and 'build back better', in an innovative, greener, and more digitally connected manner. Feedback is encouraging; businesses have embraced this in the spirit it was intended and the ARG process is now leveraging additional business investment to match the grants awarded.

In addition to that, we have at short notice developed a scheme to support retraining of individuals to become HGV/LGV drivers to help address the long-term shortfall in such drivers, especially important given the significance of the logistics sector within the Harborough local economy. Already several people have been supported in this way.

Part of this recovery plan over the summer has included a series of events based around Market Harborough and, to a lesser extent, Lutterworth to help bring shopper and visitors back into our town centres.

These have included on 8th September, the official visit of their Royal Highnesses the Earl and Countess of Wessex to start the celebration of the 800th anniversary of the Tuesday Market Charter, now the successful Market Harborough Indoor Market in St Mary's Place. This was a fantastic informal visit, enabling the Royal couple to pay thanks to many of our market traders who have been crucial in helping support our local communities during the pandemic. This was hugely enjoyed by all those who were present and coincided with the launch of the People's Gallery exhibition of old photos through the ages in the Market Hall and St Mary's Place, as well as the historic Market Trail around the town centre. They also visited The Symington Building and the Harborough Museum and an official plaque to commemorate their visit was unveiled and will be permanently installed at the Market Hall in due course.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to pay sincere thanks to our Market and Events Manager, Sairah Butt who is leaving the Council after 7 years to pursue other opportunities. On your behalf, I wish her every success.

Greener and Cleaner

Having made significant progress over the years in reducing the usage of CO2 by the Council itself, and across the wider district, Harborough District Council will shortly embark on another step to reducing greenhouse gases via the collective buying power used in energy auctions, to embrace the opportunity for buying solar power installations via the ichooser auction process.

In July, we announced that some of the least energy-efficient homes in the Harborough district are set to benefit from a new initiative after funding was secured.

Harborough District Council has identified around 70 properties in Harborough district that can be retrofitted, as part of a Green Homes Grant, to be much more energy efficient, and will be working with the Platform Housing Group, after receiving Local Authority Delivery (LAD) scheme from the Government totalling nearly £480,000. Harborough district has many older less efficient homes that can be cold and costly to heat. This is particularly the case in villages where there is no connection to gas. As well as solar panels for hot water, homes will be insulated, and windows and doors upgraded if necessary. Houses are set to benefit in Lubenham, Walcote, Walton by Kimcote, Swinford, Husbands Bosworth, Market Harborough, Tilton on the Hill and Great Easton.

On September 15th, yet another eco-criminal discovered that fly-tipping rubbish in the Harborough district doesn't pay, when they were fined by Leicester Magistrates around £4,500 (which included costs) as a result of the ongoing work by our award-winning environmental services team. Our 'Tip-Off' campaign has resulted in a significant reduction in fly-tipping in the district over the past two-years, bucking the national trend. The commitment that our team displays in tracking down such people is commendable – although it would be simpler and cheaper for all of us, if people didn't fly-tip in the first place.

Then there is Big Green Week which has just finished, hosted by HDC on The Square in Market Harborough. Loads of really interesting stands and voluntary groups showing how we can all make individual adjustments to what we do and how we do things in order to make our world cleaner and greener.

And there are many, many more initiatives that I could list here that Harborough DC is working away at with partners to improve our places.

Levelling Up and Local Government changes

Finally, congratulations to Harborough MP Neil O'Brien on his appointment as the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the renamed Dept for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (LUHC), under the new Secretary of State, Rt Hon Michael Gove MP. As a member of the District Council's Network Executive Management Board and as a newly appointed member of the LGA Resources Board, I'm looking forward to continuing to press the case for fair funding for districts, giving us the powers to get the job done and improve the access to infrastructure funding for rural areas like Harborough. In his 15th July speech about levelling up, the Prime Minister announced that they are looking at devo deals based on county areas, without requiring local government reorganisation as a pre-requisite. I can inform Council that discussions have taken place with other neighbouring councils about such matters, as well as Mr O'Brien before he became a junior minister. I've no doubt we shall hear more about such matters over the coming weeks and months.

Thanks

Cllr Phil King
Leader
Harborough District Council
27th September 2021