

Thurrock Business Board

Minutes

Wednesday 25 November 2020

3pm to 5pm

Meeting venue

Microsoft Teams – virtual meeting

Attendees: Perry Glading (PG) (Chair), Andy Vickers (AV), Angela O'Donoghue (AO), BJ Chong(BJ), Brett Smallcombe (BS), Andrew Brittain (AB), Fraser Massey (FM), Dorian P Hayes (DH), Rebecca Horne (RH), Ian Anderson (IA), Howard Oldstein (HO), Ian Lewis (IL), Lucy Harris (LH) Louise Ince (LI), Lyn Carpenter (LC), Mark Coxshall (MC), Emma McCulloch (EM), Andrew Millard (AM), Solveiga Spokaite (SS) (Ikea Lakeside), Stephen Taylor (ST), Wesley Mercer (WM), Karen Wheeler (KW)

Apologies: Neil Woodbridge

Item No.	Subject	Action
1.	Welcome and Introduction	
	Members of the Board were welcomed by PG.	
2.	Notes of the last meeting and actions arising	
	PG: asked if there were any outstanding actions from the last minutes EM: all actions were completed except the last one "stronger together" which will go into the Business Buzz asap.	
3.	Thurrock Business Community Views: response to COVID-19	
	PG – asked members to update the Board about current trading conditions and response to COVID LH: we have retained all our staff. Two were on part time furlough, we are now down to one on part time furlough. Most work is with the property sector. Things are progressing really well at the moment. Trying to support where we can for people that are going through difficult situations. Brexit has not had much of an effect on us.	

	<p>PG: good start and very encouraging to hear. Have you felt more productive working from home?</p> <p>LH: No, because in our business if you run a creative company, brainstorming, checking over each other's shoulders for progress and ideas is an important part of the process. It's not the same working from home. The normal every day work yes, but creative work has to be more of a collaboration.</p> <p>LC: There are advantages working from home but you do miss people contact, finding ways to stay connected with staff is important. A quick update on the covid position: it's not clear where we will end up in the tier system. We're not sure until tomorrow but we are committed to put this into business buzz and let people know what the tier will mean for the businesses in Thurrock. We're as prepared as we can be as an organisation. We've written to Government to ask to be in tier one because we know how it affects businesses if we are in tier three. We could potentially be in tier two but it will be disheartening if we end up in tier 3 because we know we've worked hard.</p> <p>MC: Numbers of patients at Queen's Hospital is a serious issue because it covers Ockendon. The NHS doesn't work on Local Authority boundaries. There is a risk around tier three because we have a problem with number of patients at Queens's hospital.</p> <p>AO: It's chaotic but staying open. Students are loving coming into college because they get to interact with their friends and they get a bit of sanity due to all that's going on right now. We bid for a kick start scheme but we haven't heard from any of the colleges for the scheme as yet.</p> <p>IL: mentioned that Southend has been approved but that's the employment scheme not the gateway scheme.</p> <p>AO: we have a lot of unemployed ex students who are putting pressure on us to get started.</p>	
	<p>IL: Responded with an action to investigate the hold-up is with the Kickstart scheme approval.</p>	<p>Ian Lewis: To let AO know about Kickstart scheme</p>
	<p>IA: inevitably for us because of the work we do we are always planning for the next steps. We are speaking with developers. Number of sites ready to be promoted but we're waiting to make progress. The Brentwood Local Plan is progressing well and there is lots of potential there.</p>	

	<p>HO: 27 units operational, 15 units are essential businesses and have been trading through the second national restrictions. A one way system is in place. We're all ready and prepared to be opened. We will be open for Christmas hours. New lakeside winter wonderland will be open next week. Main thing for us is the safety of people over the next few weeks.</p> <p>FM: briefly introduced himself as the operations director of an IT provider. Most of our customers are in Thurrock. Lots of small to medium enterprises had staff on furlough. Trading quite well to keep people online. Brexit has not really affected us personally but more admin changes have been made. We have some real work done in the technology sector to get everyone working in the Thurrock area. Hybrid work has picked up as well.</p>	
	<p>WM: everything has been moving on really well. Commercial developers wanting to buy everything that's moved. Local plans are suffering, a lot of places are going to suffer because of a lack of supply. Housing developers want to buy more in Thurrock but there's nothing to buy.</p>	<p>AM: to pick up conversation with Westley about supply of land</p>
	<p>SS: brief introduction from Ikea Lakeside, Marketing Manager Solveiga Spokaite. We've managed to retain all our jobs, click and collect is quite busy in lakeside and people in Thurrock are still heavily invested in buying due to working from home. We plan to open on 2nd December but with all safety measures put in place. Brexit has had some impact on us because we are an international company but we have tried to be prepared as much as possible.</p> <p>DH: brief introduction from university of Essex. The first update is that Rob has moved from Acting Director to Director of Enterprise in the University. Most teaching has been delivered virtually. Testing has been done on campus. At the moment we have 15 positives cases on campus. Currently plans are that term will end on 18th December, allowing students to return home for Christmas. There's considerable risk and uncertainty about the finances of the university, in terms of working with external non-academic partners and we are making progress which will continue. Our equity investment programme which is up and running in Colchester with the innovation centre has been maintained.</p> <p>PG: Asked DH how has the overseas market affected the university?</p>	

DH: Replied that our financial health is heavily relied on by students. We remain a potential partner for European projects. It's too soon to call how Brexit will affect it.

AB: since we are early years education Brexit hasn't affected us. Staff have been maintained however we have had to use Furlough over this period. There is anxiousness with families, because it is a worrying time. Covid has an impact, we had one 2 year old who tested positive. The impact of Covid affects our staff who have children in the school as well. Sometimes the challenge is when we lose our staff due to all the children being sent home. The sector is strong in early years but is difficult when we lose staff to having symptoms.

BS: For the Business referral network, largely businesses are doing okay. We completed a survey with our businesses and where they are and most appear to be managing well. For LG networks still business as usual for us, with broadband, working from home and flexible working. We are still finding business the same and changes have been made from temporary staff being made permanent. As a result of flexible working we were able to employ an Operations Manager who lives in Coventry. We now have sales people recruited for spring. In terms of Covid it hasn't had a negative impact on us and Brexit almost zero impact on us.

AV: Gave a brief introduction of his role at Barclays bank. Since our last meeting there has been changes to the loans available. Businesses in Thurrock especially smaller businesses are holding their own. The low interest rate environment is expected to continue for some time which is a help for small businesses with a high level of debt. The pitch with various small businesses is different because many of them are struggling and many don't see an easy way out to replace what has been lost over of six months

The sentiment for businesses based in the south is better than the sentiment for businesses based in the north so we can be thankful for that. In terms of the bank itself normally we write a 12 month plan to see what we're going to do throughout 2021, this time we're looking at the first three months in recognition that it's going to be a difficult year. We have additional staff in our business support unit which looks after clients that are in financial difficulty with a view to turn the business around and help them.

Overall my summary would be that if the vaccine comes and delivers what it's supposed to do then gradually clients will get back to normal. Albeit the hospitality and leisure sector particularly around pubs and restaurants are going to take


	<p>quite a long time to recover simply because these businesses have lost a huge amount of income. With social distance measures in places many restaurants just aren't viable to operate successfully with a sit down table service. Some are managing to provide a take away service which generally can make a profit simply because you're not needing the waiting staff and you're generally sending it via Deliveroo.</p> <p>PG: Query to AV there is always a valuable update from yourself and businesses are always waiting for you to come on to talk. No doubt Thurrock Council are very interested to know - where do you see business failure risk in those that you deal with in Thurrock compared to 12 months ago.</p> <p>AV: I guess if I look at the clients in Thurrock itself I would say 12 months ago, I would have probably had one business that I thought potentially may not survive 12 months, simply because there was a high level of debt and there were many factors at play. That particular business has benefited from the situation in terms of furlough and it's actually in a stronger business than it was 12 months ago. A couple of businesses that won't mind me using them as a case study; one is Thurrock Garden Centre in South Ockendon was closed for 7 weeks, and 7 weeks of turnover is quite a critical time of year for them. But after reopening they were busy as there aren't many places we could go; fortunately they managed to recoup their lost sales. All in all the business has turned round. In the second lockdown they were still able to open apart from the cafe; so now they are doing okay. There are plus sides because the businesses in Thurrock are in a reasonable position.</p> <p>PG: it's amazing a lot of people say that about Thurrock, how resilient the businesses are. Another thing you picked up on is the European trade side of it. What we do know about the ports is that there is a significant amount of over stocking going on from various receivers in the UK at the moment ahead of 1st January. We will hear a bit more on agenda point 6. So everybody is getting ready in a different way for 1st January. PG thanked AV for the update.</p> <p>LI: from a design point of view everything has actually been going really well compared to the last time. We've not had any new business come in but we've actually had older clients that we've been doing work for coming back so that's been really good and looking positive. With regards to the network group small businesses are really suffering but we have still been having weekly meetings. In Lockdown number 2 it has been even more important for us to hold weekly meetings.</p>	
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	<p>Small businesses are not applying for loans because there's uncertainty and they don't know if they will be around for the next 10 years to pay back the loan. It's been a tough couple of weeks and I've been leaving them with positive quotes and messages after each meeting and they've all said the meetings have been very beneficial for them. Mentally as well as to try and help their business. It's really hard but we've all been trying to support each other. Some of the small businesses have even been doing stuff for free just to try and keep the momentum going. They're offering free consultations or a freebie just to try and keep their presence in the community and to keep in the eye of everybody. They're riding that wave and hoping to come out positive.</p> <p>PG: thanked LI, I think everybody on the call has recognised the great work you do with these smaller businesses. I think when you take into stock there are 6 and half thousand businesses across Thurrock and a lot of them are very small businesses and our attention to that is most important. I would suggest listen carefully to what AB has to say shortly. Because that may well give you an interesting steer as to how you can help these businesses and I'm sure AB and his colleagues will help wherever they can so thanks for that LI.</p>	
<p>4</p>	<p>COVID</p> <p>AB: gave a brief introduction, he is responsible for the revenues and benefits service in Thurrock Council. That incorporates council tax, business rates, benefits and accounts payable, accounts receivable etc. His team have been responsible for managing the grants available to businesses through the COVID pandemic. He provided an overview of what's happened to date and some detail on the current and potential new support available. Which as you will see will be dependant very much on what happens in respect of the alert levels.</p> <p>Key points from the presentation were: First slide is quick summary of the previous Government grants. As a final tally when the government closed the schemes we had issued grants worth over £22,000,000 to businesses in Thurrock. When looking at average processing times it shows we were successful in getting money into accounts on average within 48 working hours of receiving the full application.</p> <p>For the first round of discretionary grants we were issued with funding of £1,200,000. The application process ran for a total</p>	

<p>of 4 weeks. We received 250 applications of which there were 149 eligible with an average grant paid of over £8,000 to each.</p> <p>AB then outlined the key features of the current schemes. There are five schemes in total. The first three listed relate to local restrictions which may come into play after we exit the national restrictions. The final two being relevant now.</p> <p>The first is a local restrictions grant, this will come into effect if we enter a high or very high local alert level after national lockdown. It applies to businesses that are not required to close by law but have been severely impacted by local restrictions imposed. The government intend the main target for this to be within the hospitality accommodation and leisure sector. It will be determined by the number of businesses registered for business rates in this sector and government anticipates that local authorities will adhere to the rules they set out. Providing awards based on rateable value up to a maximum of £2,100 per 28 day period.</p> <p>Second scheme is local restrictions grant will apply if we enter a very high alert level and will be available to support businesses forced to close by law and only applies to businesses registered for business rates with awards defined by rateable value up to £1,500 per fortnight.</p> <p>The third scheme that may come into play applies to all local alert levels and provides support to businesses who have not been allowed to reopen at all since the first lockdown such as night clubs etc.</p> <p>Fourth, schemes that are currently in play with the current national restrictions. This is similar to grant number 2 and provides support to businesses registered for business rates who have been forced to close by law. Awards operate a fixed criteria depending on size ranging from £1,000 to £3,000 for the four week period.</p> <p>Last but not least, the additional restrictions grant which the government has provided. Funding can be used for the next financial year. This is a discretionary scheme and the Council has been given a one off grant.</p> <p>In terms of payments for the current live grant schemes - the web applications process went live on 16th November with promotional communications to support. We have seen a steady take up and have paid nearly 200 claims of over 300k to date. On average applications are being turned around in 48 hours and we are making faster payments for money paid into accounts as soon as possible.</p>	
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	<p>PG: thanked AB for the presentation</p> <p>LI: Most of the grants are for businesses registered for business rates. A lot of the businesses are sole traders so they are not registered for business rates. Is there any other grants registered for sole traders?</p> <p>AB: just to confirm the discretionary scheme I spoke about the additional restrictions grant has broad eligibility including sole traders and those that operate for properties that are not registered for business rates. Being ineligible for a grant before does not mean people cannot apply now. If you have questions relating to particular business circumstances then please do contact me separately after the meeting.</p> <p>PG: any other questions.</p> <p>MC: It's simple and easy to apply but we are aware a number of businesses didn't apply for what they are entitled to receive in the first round. Businesses need to be encouraged to apply for funding that they are entitled to.</p> <p>PG: thanked MC. Bearing in mind the latest grants had only recently become available he was encouraged by the numbers who have applied. PG asked the members of the board to encourage their contacts to apply and also asked everyone to engage with the Business Buzz that Thurrock Council puts out to make sure messages about grants programmes and other support gets out as widely as possible.</p> <div data-bbox="389 1335 443 1397" data-label="Image"> </div> <p data-bbox="325 1402 513 1453">Business Covid Support. TBB.pptx</p>	
<p>5</p>	<p>Backing Thurrock</p> <p>MC introduced the strategy and explained how this is an important part of the plans for recovery and a return to growth in the medium and longer term.</p> <p>The last Economic Development Strategy was written five years ago and was due for a refresh but COVID has made that even more important. The draft strategy is out for consultation now and he encouraged all businesses to have their say.</p> <p>The Council can't deliver a recovery on its own. It is down to the businesses in the borough – and the Board – to drive growth. This Board is a critical and important part to deliver</p>	

	<p>the economic recovery. What we want to hear is what the businesses round the table think they can do to help deliver economic revival.</p> <p>The other aspect of this is the Local Plan which should tie in nicely with the Economic Development Strategy</p> <p>PG: ST do you want to add anything at this stage? You've circulated this document to the businesses. What do you want from this board coming back to you within the next few weeks?</p>	
	<p>ST: this particular part of the strategy is about setting the scene and context. Setting out immediate actions and the approach that we want to take going forward. We want to take a collaborative approach with the business community and other public institutions. We really welcome any feedback on the strategy that has been circulated. In addition to that it will be really helpful to understand from all businesses around the table, if there are any particular challenges that we should address in the next year or 18 months together.</p> <p>One thing that comes to my mind is jobs and local recruitment - what can we do collectively to try and help our local people find work. Is there anything we can do together to try to help ensure our local communities have access to the jobs in the area.</p>	ALL: send feedback to ST on strategy
	<p>PG: thanked ST for the update.</p> <p>MC raised Broadband connectivity as another area where the Council and the business community can work together to bring about change.</p>	
	<p>Another matter raised was project pipeline and businesses were encouraged to identify projects that they would want to put forward for Government support should grants or funding be made available. The Council needs to build up its own pipeline but there need to be business led proposals coming forward as well.</p>	ALL: If you have projects for Thurrock to advise ST
	<p>HO:advised about engaging more with the community with projects at lakeside.</p>	
6	EU exit and business preparations	
	<p>KW: 37 days to go to until the UK leaves the EU. The Government have published a number of tools to help businesses understand the changes that are going to happen and how they will impact the business community. Business buzz has just been sent out with all the links to the help available.</p>	

	 FW Business Buzz - EU Transition Specia	
7.	Updates AM updated on Freeports and explained that applications need to be submitted early next year. IL: updated on approach across South Essex including recruitment of a freelancer to work with EDMs to take forward a number of initiatives including creating an inward investment function for south Essex.	
8.	AOB PG: Thanked everybody for their time and effort this year, it means a lot for Thurrock for the support you all show and look forward to working with you all next year.	
9.	CLOSE	

Date of Next meeting

Wed 27 January 2pm. Teams meeting