

Committee: Scrutiny Committee

Date: 11 November
2025

Title: Economic Development - mid year report

**Report
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Summary

1. In January 2025 Cabinet adopted the Economic Development Plan 2025-29.
2. This report provides members with an update on the activity and initiatives being delivered by the Economic Development Team during 2025/26.
3. In 2024/25 members approved a service investment of £10,000 per year to support additional initiatives to engage with the business community.
4. This report also provides members with an update on the Government schemes set up as part of the previous government's Levelling up agenda which are administered by the Economic Development Team
 - UK Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF)
 - Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF)

Recommendations

5. The Scrutiny Committee is requested to note the contents of this report.

Financial Implications

6. These are included in the body of this report and the associated appendix.

Background Papers

7. [Economic Development Plan 2025-29](#)
[Cabinet report on UKSPF and REPF spend](#)

Impact

- 8.

Communication/Consultation	CMT and ICB.
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	In addition regular meetings with external business support providers are held
Community Safety	N/A
Equalities	N/A
Health and Safety	N/A
Human Rights/Legal Implications	Any awards of funding provided to individual businesses and organisations are issued in line with the Subsidy Regulations
Sustainability	All initiatives and grant schemes are considered in the context of being able to support local businesses and organisations in becoming 'greener' and reducing their carbon footprint where possible.
Ward-specific impacts	N/A
Workforce/Workplace	N/A

Situation

8. As part of the budget setting process for 2024/25 a total service investment of £10,000 per year was allocated by members to support initiatives to pro-actively engage with the business community. A summary of spend to date is attached as Appendix A.
9. The Economic Development Team, which consists of two officers, continues to actively engage with local businesses and organisations, offering support and networking opportunities. The officers are participating members of a number of partnership groups across Essex and also manage the Council's car parking operations.
10. The Economic Development Plan 2025-29 identified 9 priority areas that will positively impact sustainable economic growth. The service plan for the Economic Development team aims to support these priorities and actions taken to date in support of each priority area are set out below.

I. Supporting Town Centre economies

11. Our two town centres are continuing to be resilient in the face of challenging economic conditions.

Car park data shows an increase in the number of transactions for drivers parking in town centre car parks.

12. Officers have been assisting Saffron Walden Business Improvement District (SWBID) navigate a transition period with new directors and manager.
13. Officers have also engaged with businesses in Great Dunmow, attended meetings of the Great Dunmow Town Team and supported the development of the Makers at the Maltings Markets.

II. Rural business: Villages and open countryside

14. Understanding the needs of businesses operating in our rural district has been a key workstream this year. Work has begun with a focus on our pubs which play an important role in rural communities where they straddle a space between a private business and a community asset. Not only are pubs significant cultural and heritage assets but they also offer job opportunities to people, particularly young people, in rural areas.

This is set against a back drop of rising food bills, high energy bills, escalating costs of maintenance (most rural pubs are Grade II listed buildings), rising staffing costs, difficulty recruiting chefs in rural areas where house prices are high, high taxation on alcohol and a general movement towards less drinking (particularly acute in rural pubs where people have to drive).

The 'Campaign for Uttlesford's Rural Pubs' includes the following actions:

- a) The pub network - events were originally set up to report back to landlords/owners about the issues they have told us about and to give them an opportunity to find out more about what we, as a district council, can do to help them. The network has continued as people have found value in talking to businesses in similar circumstances to themselves. Work is just starting on how to develop the network to keep engaging with this sector.

The programme developed was a result of listening to what pub owners and landlords told us about the difficulties they face and we put together a package of funding opportunities, utilising some of this year's allocation of the UK Government's Shared Prosperity Fund and Rural England Prosperity Fund. Grant schemes focused on diversification, energy efficiency and new community initiatives.

- b) Difficulties with getting new customers and a lack of digital skills were highlighted by landlords/owners so funded marketing options also form part of the programme. Pubs can apply for a one page website alongside assistance to update Google Business listings, some of which had not been updated since the pandemic, and help with social media marketing. Local businesses, We Create Better and JJD Social were procured to run the support programme and have become a key part of the pub network.
- c) Pubs are also being helped with marketing to draw in new customers by receiving a funded membership of Visit Essex.
- d) Tying in with our 'Campaign for Uttlesford Pubs' Saffron Walden Museum is creating a 'pub corner' highlighting some of the historic aspects of pub life in the district.

15. Officers are supporting an ECC initiative: Rural Connections – Unearthing the rural potential for businesses in Essex which takes place in November 2025. This is being promoted to our businesses and UDC officers will attend the event. Officers have helped shape the content which features discussion on diversification, technology innovations and skills development.

III. Small business growth support

16. Signposting is a key role of the Economic Development team. The business website is updated regularly with news, events and information small business owners or people thinking about starting a business will find useful. An e-newsletter is distributed fortnightly to over 2,500 recipients and the annual Business Support Guide is distributed with business rates bills.
17. Business Bitesize, an online mid-morning support session, was trialled this for a year. Momentum was slowly building and good feedback was received however, this has halted temporarily due to losing a key member of staff.
18. Coffee and Connections was a new series of breakfast events developed to replace the more formal Uttlesford Business Breakfast event. Two were held in May and July but are currently also on hold due to staff changes.
19. Work has already begun on the Uttlesford Business Awards which are being launched in November 2025. The event is scheduled to take place at Saffron Hall in February 2026. London Stansted Airport remain the main sponsor of the event.
20. The Council is sponsoring the London Stansted Meet the Buyers Event on 27 November 2025, one of the largest procurement events in the East of England. The event enables local firms to pitch their products and services directly to carefully selected senior buyers with multi-million pound buying requirements. Officers will be attending the event to engage with local businesses.
21. The NEEB sponsored business expo was held in September in Colchester. Three Uttlesford businesses had stands at the event which was attended by nearly 800 people.
22. Officers have worked closely with ECC's Ambitious Essex Growth Hub and are helping to shape service delivery as ECC. Engagement figures in Uttlesford are traditionally low for ECC business support services. In the first 6 months of the new growth hub 17 Uttlesford based businesses have used the service.

IV. Promotion of entrepreneurship and business start-up support

23. The Uttlesford Business Start up guide has been updated for 2025-26 to ensure content is correct and relevant.
24. UDC officers led on the NEEB Young Entrepreneurs Programme which aims to help young people understand their skillset and consider starting a business as a side hustle to support their studies or as an alternative to university. Officers attended schools across the district talking about starting a business and developing skillsets. There have been two projects in this programme:

- The Earniversity Fast Track Challenge – a 6 week programme designed for young people ages 13-19. Participants will learn how to turn their ideas into income, mastering modern skills like reselling, freelancing, and content creation, all while building confidence and financial literacy. Cohort 1 took place in May/June. There were 39 completions across North Essex with 2 living in Uttlesford. Cohort 2 is scheduled for October 2025 and at the time of writing there were 15 sign ups from Uttlesford.
- Officers also led on the NEEB Young Traders programme opening up opportunities for young people to trial products and services in real world conditions.

Four of these Uttlesford young traders went on to represent Essex in the regional finals of the National Market Trader Federation Young Traders Competition in Bury St Edmunds in August.

25. The Ambitious Women in Essex, run in collaboration with ECC, held its forth annual panel discussion event at Saffron Walden Town Hall in September to support budding female entrepreneurs. The 45 attendees were able to ask questions of a panel of successful female business owners about the challenges and highlights of running their own business.

V. Business sustainability and the green agenda

26. Officers have worked alongside colleagues in the Climate Change team to support the Community Bike Day in Saffron Walden and develop the Saffron Walden Community Cycling and Walking Map to tie in with the promotion of the visitor economy and support for rural hospitality and visitor economy businesses.
27. The Zero Carbon Business Grant launched as part of our project to support rural pubs and hospitality, funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund was co-created with officers from the Climate Change team.
28. Officers have also worked with ECC to promote their Great Start programme helping businesses transition to net zero and the Green Entrepreneurs Programme

VI. Tourism and the visitor economy

29. Tourism and the Discover Uttlesford initiative remains a priority for our work as the visitor economy is a key sector for the economy and many businesses are SME's. Visitors to the area spend money in our town centres, eat at our pubs and hospitality outlets and enjoy our cultural and heritage offer.

The Discover Uttlesford website has had a minor restructure with additional content added. The new content matches the trend towards curated itineraries giving people ideas of how to spend a day or weekend in the district.

30. Website usage is down on previous years. This reflects the fact advertising, especially social media sponsored posts, has now come to an end due to budget constraints. It may also reflect a more industry wide trend that is seeing people use AI to find things to do in an area.

Website views:

- 1.4.23 - 30.09.23 18,000 users
- 1.4.24 - 30.09.24 15,000 users
- 1.4.25 – 30.09.25 9,900 users

Social media reach is still being maintained with 2,556 followers on Facebook and 1,926 on Instagram.

31. Engagement with visitor economy businesses is strong and officers have built good relationships with this sector through the Discover Uttlesford initiative.

32. Officers continue to work with the third party place app developers, also called Discover Uttlesford, to ensure content is kept up to date. Over the summer months visitors to the Uttlesford pages regularly exceeded 5,000 views per week with the majority of these viewers coming from people in the London area.

VII. Skills and apprenticeships

33. Officers continue to engage with skills delivery partners to ensure residents and businesses benefit from funded programmes.

34. Officers engaged with local schools as part of the NEEB Young Entrepreneurs programme. The workshops delivered included discussion about how to identify skill sets.

VIII. Strategic level inward investment

35. The emerging local plan identifies two main sites for commercial development:

- Chesterford Research Park
- Northside, London Stansted Airport

No further large sites will be made available and the focus will be in attracting SME's to the district, urban infill and rural diversification projects centred on conversion of redundant agricultural buildings

36. The majority of our inward investment work is in partnership with other stakeholders:

- The Council is a member of the UK Innovation Corridor promoting the district as part of a pioneering region with science and tech at its heart.
- Officers have helped shape ECC's Extraordinary Essex website promoting the county as a place to invest.
<https://www.extraordinaryessex.co.uk/invest/sector-strengths/>
- The NEEB inward investment platform is under development which officers have fed into. This is due for launch early in 2026.

IX. Digital connectivity

37. The UKSPF funded WECAN Digital Inclusion Programme is in its third year of operation in the district. The programme targets older, often rurally isolated residents, however, sessions are increasingly attracting a more diverse range of people, including younger residents and those facing a variety of challenges linked to digital exclusion..

In the first 4 months of delivery 39 residents have benefited from the scheme during 145 sessions.

Case study:

AB, a 52-year-old former builder, was involved in a serious road traffic accident two years ago which resulted in a significant back injury. This injury forced him to give up his lifelong career in the building trade, a transition that has been emotionally and psychologically challenging. He reported experiencing low mood and a sense of isolation, particularly from losing the daily interaction with workmates and peers.

Through one-to-one digital support sessions, AB received tailored guidance on how to use a tablet, navigate the internet, and manage essential tasks online. His confidence gradually improved, and he successfully learned how to:

- *Surf the internet independently*
- *Order prescriptions using the NHS App*
- *Engage with online platforms to explore volunteering opportunities*

While AB initially attended the sessions for practical support with digital forms, his engagement has led to broader, positive outcomes. His improved digital confidence opened new avenues for social connection and purpose. He now actively searches for volunteering opportunities in Essex and has recently contacted the Essex Shed Network, where he is preparing to start as a volunteer, sharing his building expertise with others.

38. UDC are members of the Digital Innovation Zone (the DIZ) with Economic Development officers leading on this partnership. Presentations at the bi-monthly forums have included Microsoft presenting their online learning platforms; the Arts Council England presenting its data platform to help inform place making strategy and funding bids; presentations on tech enabled care and how digital twins can enable sustainable management of buildings. Sessions are regularly attended by over 30 separate organisations.
39. The DIZ has also procured a mobile connectivity mapping platform. This tool will enable us to better understand the coverage of mobile connectivity across the DIZ area, identify 'not spots' and areas of concern, and visualise patterns that can inform future planning. The data generated will support proactive engagement with infrastructure providers, help shape community conversations on connectivity, and provide evidence to inform the planning process for future infrastructure deployment. This data-led approach reflects the DIZ's commitment to use insight to drive action and ensure investment in digital infrastructure is targeted where it is needed most.

UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF)

38. The Government set up a number of funded schemes as part of their levelling up agenda. The Council received funds to deliver two schemes UKSPF and REPF. The funds are ring fenced and subject to specific criteria and we are required to report back to Government regularly. Under the terms of the funding agreement any unspent funds will need to be paid back to Government.

39. This is the final year of the UKSPF. The fund was set up to provide support within the district under three key investment priorities.

- a. Community and Place
- b. Supporting Local Business
- c. People and Skills.

40. Uttlesford was allocated £327,146 to be spent in the financial year 2025/26. The spend profile was approved by Cabinet in March 2025.

41. The REPF is an addendum of the UKSPF, and the Council has been allocated a further £244,010 for the financial year 2025/26. The REPF can only be spent on capital projects and works and must only be used for projects not funded by other DEFRA schemes. The initiatives for the REPF are to support Rural Businesses and Communities

- Investment in micro and small enterprises in rural areas
- The development and promotion (both trade and consumer) of the visitor economy
- Investment in capacity building and infrastructure support for local civil society and community groups

42. The focus for this year's UKSPF has been about building strong and resilient communities:

- a. Community Development Grant Scheme – a small seed funding grant scheme to develop initiatives to bring people together to reduce isolation and promote wellbeing and to set up or develop community businesses
- b. Cultural and Heritage Development – working with Cultural Engine CIC supporting cultural and heritage organisations survive and thrive. The project is also supporting town and parish councils to develop their approach to supporting culture, heritage and tourism outcomes in preparation for local government reform.
- c. Digital Inclusion Programme – delivered by WECAN this is the continuation of a successful project that has been running in the area for several years now helping people, particularly older residents, get online, dispel fears about using the internet and able to access services

- d. Zero Carbon Business Grant Scheme – small grants to help pubs and hospitality businesses reduce their carbon emissions.
43. The REPF funding has been allocated to a grant scheme for local business and Communities with the following priorities:
- a. Visitor Economy and Hospitality Fund
 - b. Rural Food Production Fund
 - c. Rural Communities and Tourism Fund
44. A spend profile for UKSPF and REPF is attached as Appendix B. Please note that grants are paid in arrears and final amounts paid may be different to those reported here.

Risk Analysis

45.

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating actions
Growth Plan funds are not spent in full or in accordance with members requests	1 – schemes and initiatives have been identified	1 – minimal as any funds not used will be reallocated to other initiatives	The spending plan is monitored and shared with the lead member and presented to Scrutiny twice a year. Advertising and promotion of initiatives
UKSPF and REPF funds not awarded and reclaimed by Government	1 – this is an application process to local businesses, charities and voluntary organisations and receive high volume of applications	2 – minimal financial impact to the council directly, but our district would miss out on funding	High engagement with local businesses and organisations, advertising and promotion of schemes

1 = Little or no risk or impact

2 = Some risk or impact – action may be necessary.

3 = Significant risk or impact – action required

4 = Near certainty of risk occurring, catastrophic effect or failure of project.