

Committee:	Cabinet	Date: Tuesday, 9 June 2026
Title:	Economic Development end of year report 2025_26	
Portfolio Holder:	Cllr Neil Hargreaves	
Report Author:	Sarah Lewin, Economic Development Manager	Key decision: No

Summary

1. In January 2025, Cabinet adopted the Economic Development Plan 2025–29, setting out the Council’s priorities for supporting sustainable economic growth, resilient communities and inclusive opportunity across the district.
2. This report provides an end-of-year update on activity delivered during 2025/26 by the Economic Development Team against those priorities. Delivery has taken place within the context of a small team, significant external funding programmes and a challenging national economic environment.
3. In 2024/25 members approved a service investment of £10,000 per year to support additional initiatives to proactively 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. Cabinet is requested to note the contents of this report and provide any feedback.

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 Cabinet Member In addition regular meetings with external business support providers are held
Community Safety	N/A
Equalities	All activity is considered in terms of it being inclusive, accessible, and beneficial to all, in line with its duties under the Equality Act 2010.
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

- 9. 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 is attached as Appendix A. The full budget was not expended in-year due to a short period of reduced delivery capacity arising from a change of staff.
- 10. The Economic Development Team, which consists of two officers, champions young entrepreneurs, female founders, and green business practices, while enhancing tourism, through the Discover Uttlesford initiative. With strong partnerships, skills programmes in local schools, inward investment promotion, and digital inclusion programmes, we are building a thriving local economy that is future-ready and community-focused.

11. The officers are participating members of a number of partnership groups across Essex and neighbouring authorities and also manage the Council's car parking operations .

12. 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

13. Outputs at a Glance

3% vacancy rate in Saffron Walden	9% vacancy rate in Great Dunmow
Increase in car park transactions	Ongoing engagement with town centre business groups
Support for local markets and makers	Business crime engagement delivered

14. Uttlesford's two principal town centres play a vital role in supporting local employment, services and community life. Against a backdrop of challenging economic conditions nationally, maintaining town centre vitality and confidence remains a key priority for the Economic Development Team.

15. Reflecting national trends where vacancy rates peaked around 2019 and remain elevated, Great Dunmow's town centre vacancy rate has stabilised at 9%, a level very similar to its 2019 position, while Saffron Walden continues to significantly outperform both national and local benchmarks with a vacancy rate of 3%.

16. Activity:

- Ongoing monitoring of car park usage as a town centre performance indicator
- Direct engagement with town centre business groups and individual traders
- Officer support to Saffron Walden Business Improvement District (SWBID) during a period of organisational transition
- Partnership work with Essex Police Business Crime Team and Community Safety Partnership

- Officer support for ECC's High Street support programme.

17. Outcomes:

- Sustained resilience of both town centres despite national trends
- Vacancy rate in Saffron Walden remains below the national average
- Increased footfall indicators, evidenced through car park transaction data
- Improved business awareness of crime prevention and reporting
- Support for development of Makers at the Maltings Markets, promoting independent traders and makers
- One Dunmow High Street hospitality business selected for enhanced support with the Ambitious Essex Growth Hub

II. Rural business: Villages and open countryside

18. Outputs at a Glance

49% of district pubs engaged	£148,469 grant funding awarded
15 pubs supported with energy efficiency measures	10 pubs received fully funded websites
15 pubs supported with social media management	Active rural pub network established

19. Understanding the needs of businesses operating in our rural district has been a key workstream this year. Work focused on our pubs which are a critical part of Uttlesford's village economy, providing employment, social value and community space. However, they face a unique combination of challenges including rising energy costs – particularly in older/Grade II listed buildings, high alcohol duty, recruitment difficulties, digital marketing pressures and changing customer behaviour.

20. The 'Campaign for Uttlesford's Rural Pubs' was a targeted initiative to sustain the vital economic, social, and cultural role of pubs across the district drawing on insights from local publicans gathered through an engagement exercise. 49% of the district's pubs have engaged with the programme.

21. Activity

- Engagement exercise with local publicans and landlords
- Establishment of a rural pub network
- Targeted grant schemes (diversification, energy efficiency, community initiatives)
- Funded digital marketing and promotion support

22. Outputs:

- Engagement with 49% of all pubs in the district
- £148,469 awarded to pubs through UKSPF and REPF funding
- 10 new websites delivered
- 15 social media management packages delivered
- Visit Essex memberships funded for participating pubs
- Saffron Walden Museum partnership resulting in a new “pub corner” exhibition celebrating local pub heritage
- Programme featured on BBC News and BBC Radio Essex, increasing awareness and take-up

23. Outcomes

- Improved digital visibility and ability to attract new customers
- 11 pubs supported to be more energy efficient
- 5 pubs supported to diversify their offer
- Enhanced peer support and informal mentoring between publicans
- Increased resilience of pubs as community hubs
- Strengthened relationships between the Council and rural businesses
- The pub network has continued beyond initial engagement sessions, demonstrating sustained value to participants

24. Officers also supported an ECC initiative: Rural Connections – Unearthing the rural potential for businesses in Essex in November 2025. This was promoted to our businesses and UDC officers attended the event. Officers helped shape the content of the event which featured discussion on diversification, technology innovations and skills development.

III. Small business growth support

25. Outputs at a Glance

2,500+ businesses reached via fortnightly e-newsletter	270 Business Award nominations
17,000 public votes in the People's Choice Award	Support Guide issued to all business rates payers
36 Uttlesford businesses supported by Ambitious Essex Growth Hub	3 Uttlesford businesses exhibited at regional business expo

26. Uttlesford's economy is characterised by a high proportion of micro and small businesses operating across urban and rural locations. The Council's role focuses on providing accessible information, creating opportunities for connection and recognition, and ensuring local businesses can access wider regional and national support offer.

27. Activity

- Regular business communications and signposting
- Delivery of business events and networking opportunities
- Coordination of the Uttlesford Business Awards
- Partnership working with Essex County Council, NEEB and Ambitious Essex Growth Hub

28. Outputs

- 2,500+ recipients reached through the fortnightly business e-newsletter
- Annual Business Support Guide updated and distributed with business rates bills
- Uttlesford Business Awards delivered at Saffron Hall (February 2026)
 - 270 nominations across 12 categories
 - 17,000 public votes for People's Choice Award
 - 100+ local businesses shortlisted
- 36 Uttlesford businesses supported through the new Ambitious Essex Growth Hub
- Sponsorship and attendance at the London Stansted Meet the Buyers event
- 3 Uttlesford businesses showcased at the NEEB Business Expo (800 attendees)

29. Outcomes

- Increased visibility and recognition for local businesses
- Improved awareness of external support and procurement opportunities
- Strengthened relationships between local businesses and the Council. Officers are frequently used as a gateway into wider council services such as planning and licencing

30. Business Events and Engagement

Uttlesford Business Awards

- Major annual celebration of local enterprise generating strong engagement and goodwill
- Delivered with London Stansted Airport as headline sponsor
- Hospitality students from Stansted Airport College/Harlow College supported event delivery
- Showcased breadth of the local economy, from start-ups and sole traders to established employers

Networking and learning

- *Business Bitesize* online sessions trialled for one year
- Positive feedback received
- Programme paused following loss of a key staff member
- *Coffee & Connections* trialled as an informal alternative to traditional breakfast events. Engagement was limited, informing a revised approach for 2026/27

IV. Promotion of entrepreneurship and business start-up support

31. Outputs at a Glance

20 young people supported through the NEEB young entrepreneurs programme	Schools engagement delivered across the district, including a skills development workshop
Young Traders programme delivered	4 Uttlesford traders represented Essex in regional finals

45 attendees at the Ambitious Women in Essex Start-up September panel event

Uttlesford Business Start-up guide updated

32. Supporting entrepreneurship and business start-ups contributes to a resilient, adaptable local economy by encouraging enterprise as a career option, developing transferable skills, and widening participation in business creation. Activity in 2025/26 focused particularly on young people and female founders, addressing gaps in awareness, confidence and access to role models.

33. Activity

- Update and promotion of the Uttlesford Business Start-Up Guide
- Delivery of the NEEB Young Entrepreneurs Programme
- Participation in schools-based enterprise education
- Delivery of the NEEB Young Traders Programme
- Support for Ambitious Women in Essex panel event

34. Outputs

- 146 young people supported across North Essex through NEEB's Young Entrepreneurs programmes

Braintree	Chelmsford	Colchester	Epping Forest	Tendring	Maldon	Uttlesford
34	89	55	16	17	8	20

- Young Traders Programme delivered, enabling real-world trading experience. 4 Uttlesford traders progressed to represent Essex in regional finals
- Ambitious Women in Essex event delivered at Saffron Walden Town Hall. 45 attendees engaged with a panel of local female entrepreneurs.
- Skills workshops held in 3 local schools

35. Outcomes

- Students considering alternatives to traditional employment or university routes
- Improved confidence, financial literacy and enterprise skills among participants

- Early trading experience gained in real-world settings
- Stronger local networks for women considering or developing a business

36. These activities contribute positively to addressing youth unemployment by equipping our young people with the skills, confidence and exposure needed to access or create employment opportunities. By promoting entrepreneurship as a viable career, the programme arguably broadens options for young people who may not suit traditional academic or employment routes

37. Overall, the team has sought to support reductions in youth unemployment by increasing our young peoples' work-readiness and employability skills, encouraging self-employment and business creation, and developing local networks for our young entrepreneurs.

V. Business sustainability and the green agenda

38. Outputs at a Glance

£100,000 Zero Carbon Business Grant delivered	15 Pubs and Hospitality businesses funded to be more energy efficient
Community Cycling & Walking Map developed	Community Bike Day supported

39. Supporting businesses to reduce their environmental impact is central to achieving sustainable economic growth. Many Uttlesford businesses, particularly rural pubs and hospitality venues, operate from older or listed buildings and face higher energy costs. Targeted support can reduce operating costs, cut emissions and improve long-term resilience.

40. Activity

- Joint delivery of sustainability initiatives with the Climate Change team
- Design and launch of the Zero Carbon Business Grant Scheme (UKSPF funded)
- Promotion of sustainable transport through cycling and walking initiatives
- Signposting businesses to county-wide net zero support programmes

41. Outputs

- £100,000 Zero Carbon Business Grant awarded

- 15 pubs and hospitality businesses supported to improve energy efficiency
- Community Bike Day delivered in Saffron Walden
- Saffron Walden Community Cycling and Walking Map developed and promoted

42. Outcomes

- Reduced energy consumption and operating costs for participating businesses
- Improved awareness of net zero support and sustainability opportunities
- Stronger collaboration between economic development and climate change services
- Increased visibility of active travel routes supporting the visitor economy

VI. Tourism and the visitor economy

43. Outputs at a Glance

£199.6m visitor economy value	10% of district employment supported
15,900 Discover Uttlesford website users	261,000+ Discover Uttlesford social media views
5,000+ weekly views on the Discover Uttlesford App	Strong engagement with visitor economy SMEs

44. Tourism is a key sector for Uttlesford’s economy, supporting employment, sustaining town centres, and underpinning rural hospitality and cultural assets. The Discover Uttlesford initiative provides coordinated promotion of the district as a visitor destination, focusing on smaller businesses, heritage, culture and the rural economy.

45. The visitor economy contributes £199.6m in value to the local economy and represents 10% of all employment.

46. Activity

- Delivery of the Discover Uttlesford destination management initiative
- Minor restructure of the Discover Uttlesford website to include curated itineraries
- Ongoing content management via social media channels

- Partnership working with visitor economy businesses and place-based app developers

47. Outputs

- Reduced website traffic reflects cessation of paid advertising and wider shifts towards AI-assisted and app-based trip planning

Website users:

- 36,000 (2023/24)
- 25,000 (2024/25)
- 15,900 (Apr–Sep 2025)

- In contrast, organic social media engagement continues to grow year-on-year

Social media reach during 2025/26:

- Facebook: 148,000+ views
- Instagram: 113,000+ views

48. Outcomes

- Continued promotion of Uttlesford as a visitor destination
- Increased reliance on social media and app-based discovery over traditional websites
- Uttlesford pages on the Discover App regularly exceeded 5,000 views per week over summer increasing the exposure of rural hospitality and cultural venues to London-based visitors
- Strong ongoing relationships with visitor economy SMEs
- Regular engagement with hospitality, cultural, heritage and rural tourism businesses

VII. Skills and apprenticeships

49. Outputs at a glance:

Engagement with key skills delivery partners	Schools-based engagement delivered
Employer perspectives fed into regional discussions	Signposting to funded skills programmes

50. Access to appropriate skills and talent underpins business growth, productivity and local economic resilience. While the Council is not a direct provider of skills or apprenticeship delivery, the Economic Development Team plays an important enabling role by connecting businesses, education providers and delivery partners, and ensuring local perspectives inform county- and regional-level activity.

51. Activity

- Engagement with skills delivery partners across Essex and North Essex
- Participation in schools-based activity through the NEEB Young Entrepreneurs Programme
- Promotion and signposting of funded skills and employability programmes
- Informal engagement with employers to understand skills needs and recruitment challenges

52. Outputs

- Skills-focused workshops delivered in three local schools as part of enterprise education
- Early skills awareness embedded within young entrepreneur programmes
- Businesses and residents signposted to relevant county-wide skills and apprenticeship support
- Officer engagement contributing Uttlesford perspectives into partnership discussions

53. Outcomes

- Increased awareness among young people of transferable skills and career pathways
- Improved understanding of local employer skills needs
- Stronger links between economic development activity and skills delivery partners
- Reinforcement of enterprise as a route to skills development as well as employment

VIII. Strategic level inward investment

54. Outputs at a Glance

2 strategic employment locations identified in the Local Plan	Active membership of UK Innovation Corridor
Input provided to the ECC Extraordinary Essex inward investment website	Input provided to NEEB inward investment brochure

55. Strategic-level inward investment activity focuses on long-term place promotion and preparedness, rather than direct business attraction. The emerging Local Plan identifies limited strategic employment land, and future growth is expected to be driven by SMEs, urban infill and rural diversification, particularly through the re-use of redundant agricultural buildings.

56. Activity

- Engagement with regional and sub-regional inward investment partnerships
- Promotion of Uttlesford as part of wider science, technology and innovation corridors
- Input into strategic marketing materials promoting the district and wider Essex economy
- Alignment of economic development input with planning and infrastructure considerations

57. Outputs

- Active participation in the UK Innovation Corridor at Leader/Senior Officer level, promoting the district as part of a science and technology-led region
- Officer input into Essex County Council's Extraordinary Essex inward investment website
- Contributions to the NEEB inward investment brochure, ensuring Uttlesford representation

58. Outcomes

- Increased visibility of Uttlesford within regional inward investment narratives

IX. Digital connectivity

59. Outputs at a Glance

173 residents supported via 465 digital skills sessions	26 devices provided and 8,480GB mobile data issued to residents
Mobile connectivity survey delivered identifying 'not spots'	30+ organisations engaged in knowledge share through DIZ forum

60. Digital access and capability are essential to modern living, enabling residents to access healthcare, employment, public services and social connections. Digital exclusion disproportionately affects older people, vulnerable residents and those living in rural areas. Addressing these inequalities supports inclusion, wellbeing and independence.

61. Activity

- Delivery of the UKSPF-funded WECAN Digital Inclusion Programme
 - Digital skills training via community hubs, home visits and referrals
 - Provision of devices and mobile data for residents without access
- Partnership delivery of the Digital Innovation Zone (DIZ)
- Participation in the DIZ procured mobile connectivity mapping platform to identify coverage gaps

62. Outputs

- 173 residents supported through tailored digital inclusion interventions
- 465 digital skills sessions delivered during 2025/26
- 26 devices distributed to residents alongside 8,480GB of mobile data
- Bi-monthly DIZ forums attended by 30+ organisations
- Identification of mobile coverage gaps across rural areas

63. Outcomes

- Older and vulnerable residents supported to access online healthcare, services and utilities
- Reduced social isolation for digitally excluded residents
- Increased confidence and independence in using digital tools
- Strengthened multi-agency collaboration around digital innovation
- Mobile infrastructure provider is now working with Great Tilty Parish Council to explore options to improve rural connectivity.

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

38. The UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) and the Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF) were established by the previous Government as part of the Levelling Up agenda. Uttlesford District Council was allocated funding to deliver locally targeted initiatives aligned to Government investment priorities.

39. Funding is ring-fenced, subject to specific criteria, and requires regular reporting to Government. All funding must be spent by September 2026. Any unspent funding is required to be returned. Delivery of both funds is managed by the Economic Development Team.

40. UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF)

- Total allocation: £327,146
- Investment priorities:
 - Communities and Place
 - Supporting Local Business
 - People and Skills

41. Activity

- Delivery of a portfolio of locally designed programmes aligned to UKSPF priorities
- Competitive grant processes for businesses, communities and voluntary organisations
- Ongoing monitoring of spend and outputs in line with Cabinet-approved profiles

42. Outputs

- Community Development Grant Scheme
 - Seed funding for projects reducing isolation and promoting wellbeing
 - Support for community businesses and local initiatives
- Cultural and Heritage Development Programme
 - Delivered in partnership with Cultural Engine CIC
 - Support to cultural and heritage organisations and town/parish councils
- Digital Inclusion Programme

- Delivered by WECAN, supporting residents to access online services
- Zero Carbon Business Grant Scheme
 - Small grants supporting pubs and hospitality businesses to reduce emissions

43. Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF)

- Allocation: £244,010 (2025/26)
- Capital funding only
- Must not duplicate other DEFRA funding
- Focus on rural businesses and communities

44. Activity

- Design and launch of a capital grant scheme for rural businesses and communities
- Targeted promotion of funding opportunities
- Assessment and award of grants in line with DEFRA criteria

45. Outputs

- REPF funding allocated across three priority areas:
 - Visitor Economy and Hospitality Fund
 - Rural Food Production Fund
 - Rural Communities and Tourism Fund
- Grants support capital investment in:
 - Rural business growth and diversification
 - Visitor economy infrastructure
 - Community and tourism facilities

46. Outcomes

- Capital investment supporting long-term viability of rural enterprises
- Improved infrastructure and facilities supporting the rural visitor economy
- Strengthened community assets in rural areas

47. A spend profile for UKSPF and REPF spend profile and grant awards is attached as Appendix B. Grant values shown are approved allocations. Final payments may differ as grants are paid in arrears.

Risk Analysis

48.

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.