

CABINET STATEMENT
CABINET MEMBER FOR ECONOMY – COUNCILLOR PRETTY

2021 has begun with another Lockdown with further grants being offered by Central Government and administered by our Borough teams. Details of the available grants are all listed on the Business page of the Eastleigh Borough website. As at the time of writing we have, since November 2020, approved grants of over £5million. This is addition to the £18million paid earlier in 2020. These I am sure will have assisted in helping local businesses survive this difficult period. This is ongoing and is all due to the tremendous efforts of our staff in processing applications

With the restrictions on travel our airport has been extremely badly affected with a very reduced number of flights and temporary closure at weekends. The importance of the airport for the future recovery of Eastleigh and the Solent area cannot be underestimated. It is not simply the airport but the supply chains and the businesses that regard an airport as being needed in their activities.

The Solent LEP has submitted a bid to create a Freeport centred on the Solent area and the airport has been proposed as a Tax Hub as part of that submission. If the bid is successful this would have many outcomes including stamp duty land tax relief, enhanced building and structure allowances, enhanced capital allowances, rate relief on NI contributions and business rate relief. All of which could benefit development of the Riverside and North East land of the airport

Following the easing of the restrictions imposed by the first Lockdown in 2020 we saw the adoption of temporary pedestrianisation of Market Street and High Street to enable social distancing to be maintained. Residents in Eastleigh Town and other local centres were, and will possibly remain, nervous about venturing out again to shop for some while. Therefore, the temporary TRO has been extended until December to allow the restrictions to remain to encourage footfall back to the Town Centre. The restrictions could be eased should circumstance allow.

To further help recovery, we invited applications for pavement licenses to enable cafe, bars, and restaurants to place tables and chairs on the pavement to encourage customers to those premises. There were fewer applications than we had hoped but with Spring and warmer weather on the horizon it would be good to see more to take advantage of the street closures.

During the pandemic many shops and retailers have increased their on-line shopping sales offering which, linked with click & collect, have enabled them to continue trading through the lockdown period. It is anticipated that this trend is likely to continue and may well result in further closures on the high street.

This may possibly lead to a long-term trend to change the character of high street with fewer shops but more recreation and social activities creating a sense of place and well-being rather than simply a destination. We need to be aware of what the market may require and plan for this change with, perhaps, greater residential numbers in the Town Centre to take advantage of the opportunities that might arise from change.

Eastleigh has been awarded a grant under the Reopening High Streets Safely Scheme to analyze and assess the principal shopping areas in the Borough. We now have a small team gathering information on what Eastleigh town and the other local centres may need and how they may move forward. This will enable us to look at what needs to be considered when re-opening the high streets. In Eastleigh Town Centre we can also take advantage of the knowledge that the BID has in respect of their levy payers.

However, we must not forget the needs of business generally and to try and increase this we are setting up the Eastleigh Gift Card scheme. This is a simple scheme to encourage residents to give gift cards that can be exchanged at participating retailers in the Borough to increase sales in the Borough and will go live once we have enough business subscribers.

A decision was made to allow Wessex House to remain open during this lockdown. Many of the businesses based there have been taking advantage of the opportunity to work under the tight controls in place. Our manager has continued to market the Centre via virtual and physical tours and has secured several new licensees to replace those that have downsized or left.

There has been interest from a contractor to adapt Hampshire House as an additional business centre, which lends further weight to market information suggesting that there is, and will be, a growing demand for this type of office space in town centres.

The pandemic has caused many businesses to suffer but using the opportunities we now have we must work towards a vibrant but different town centres in the future.

Although most businesses have suffered because of the pandemic the travel and hospitality industry has been hit very hard. The restrictions on the hospitality sector has been severe although many pubs, and restaurants have adapted and created "takeaway" services.

Current indications are that the youth of our society are most likely to be hardest hit by the downturn in the economy therefore we continue work with other Districts to secure funding for Youth Hubs to encourage additional training. Eastleigh is acting as lead partner in this application and we are hopeful of a successful bid.

In December we arranged and commissioned, in partnership with several other Councils, a "Pop Up" business school which was free and open to residents to register and receive guidance in the best practice to be adopted when setting up in business. The feedback so far has been positive, but we are awaiting final results.

Three schools in our Borough have completed the Primary Engineer training which is aimed at making sure our children have the best guidance for their futures. The Pontoon scheme is approaching its end but has helped numbers of women to improve their skills to enable them to return to the workplace.

When lockdown eventually eases it would be good if we all support our local businesses again by shopping local wherever possible. They are important both to our economy but also to the health and well-being of our community.

Although no longer part of my portfolio I would like to refer to the Environmental Health Team who have been working hard to help new and established businesses deal with enquiries regarding Covid-19 and other matters relating to health and hygiene.