
St Albans City & District Council Business Summit 2021

17 November 2021

Online via Microsoft Teams

REPORT

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Acknowledgements

St Albans City and District Council wish to thank all partners and attendees of the Business Summit 2021 for their attendance and participation at this event.

Summary of Event

St Albans City and District Business Summit brought together nearly 50 local businesses and organisations to facilitate discussion on economic challenges currently facing St Albans District, and to identify opportunities to address them. The event sought to inform the Council's economic development plans and raise awareness on business initiatives that aim to foster greater socio-economic prosperity and resilience across Hertfordshire.

Topics focused on skill shortages, the climate change emergency, and green business grants.

information imparted to businesses included guidance on sustainable business models, further education (FE) initiatives, business grants and support organisations for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and upcoming relevant events.

Councillor Chris White, Leader of St Albans City & District Council, chaired the summit.

1. Update from St Albans City & District Council

Presentation: The Council's Work in the Local Economy

By: Councillor Robert Donald, Chair, and Councillor Mandy McNeill, Vice-Chair, St Albans City and District Council Regeneration and Business Committee.

Cllr McNeill provided the latest economic snapshot for St Albans:

ECONOMIC UPDATE

- The local economy is bouncing back despite the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- St Albans District retail unit vacancy rate is 3.7%: St Albans footfall is up over 50% compared to 2020: 2.9% of the District population are claiming Out-of-Work benefits.
- Supply chain issues, skill shortages in hospitality, care and HGV industries, and rising fuel costs are recorded.

WORKING WITH PARTNERS

- St Albans City & District Council coordinates the Employment and Skills Partnership. Two partners have been running the Government's Kickstart Scheme and to date 68 young people locally has been recruited into Kickstart roles with 98 roles remaining available in retail, hospitality and administration.
- The Council is a stakeholder on the St Albans Visitor Partnership. St Albans Business Improvement District (BID) is leading on the Destination Management Plan for the District, to leverage District marketing and promotion.

COVID-19 BUSINESS GRANTS

- St Albans City & District Council has distributed over £51 million in non-repayable business support grants. In the past year, the Council has paid:
 - £11.8 million in mandatory grants
 - £6.4 million in Restart Grants (retail, hospitality, leisure businesses)
- Additional Restriction Grants (ARG) funding will see a third round in December 2021

EVENTS

- In-person events have been held as restrictions have eased. For example, St Albans "Festival" had the highest ever turn out (15,000 people)

Cllr Donald presented the City Centre Opportunity Site (CCOS) South and CCOS North:

- CCOS South will have 6,000 square metres of flexible commercial space with 60 private market units and 33 social rented units. Completion is due October 2022.
- A focus group which includes St Albans Civic Society, St Albans BID and others has worked to shape the vision and principles of CCOS North over the past 6 months. The focus group report will be presented to the November Regeneration & Business Committee to obtain approval for the next phase.
- A public architectural design competition for CCOS North will be announced after 23 November 2021.
- More information about St Albans City and District Council's CCOS South and North can be found here: <https://www.stalbans.gov.uk/major-projects-and-redevelopments>

Cllr Donald also discussed the visitor economy:

- A downward trend for the pull of retail and shopping to cities and towns has been recorded across England even before COVID-19. St Albans City & District Council has identified the following priorities to attract visitors and boost St Albans economy:
 - (a) Greening St Albans City centre and the Civic Centre area. The goal is to create a park area in the centre which is environmentally attractive and useful. It would integrate the existing rose garden.
 - (b) Leveraging St Albans cultural offer. Potentially refurbishing or replacing the Alban Arena. An independent consultant has been appointed to conduct regional and national research to produce a report which will help inform the decision-making process with regards to the size of the cultural building and theatre.

Q&A

Q: If the Alban Arena is replaced, will it have the same facilities and size?

- Cllr Donald noted that the use and facilities of the Alban Arena will be similar. The sizing of the Arena is yet to be decided.

Q: Many companies struggle to measure their energy consumption due to a lack of transparency from landlords to disclose such. Will CCOS landlords be able to provide detailed energy information of properties?

- Cllr Donald noted eagerness to take this issue onboard for CCOS planning and encouraged individuals with knowledge in this area to reach out to the relevant working groups (CCOS North and Culture working groups, as well as the smaller CCOS North and Culture Focus Group) to support awareness raising on the matter.

Q: Will the new Alban Arena host a cinema complex?

- Cllr Donald noted that while this was not currently part of any plans, it could be considered.

2. Addressing Local Skill Shortages

Presentation: Hertfordshire Skills & Employment Strategy

By: Norman Jennings, Operations Director, Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP)

Norman Jennings discussed local economic development priorities Hertfordshire LEP is one of 38 LEPs across the United Kingdom set up by the Government to support county-level economic growth through countywide partnerships with key stakeholders.

- The Hertfordshire Skills and Employment Strategy 2021-2024 focuses on:
 - a) Young people: Unlocking emerging talent by supporting young people (16-24-year-olds) transition from education to employment
 - b) Adults: Working towards lifelong learning and full employment
 - c) Employers: Skills to grow small and medium-size businesses (MSMEs)
 - d) Sectors: Harnessing opportunities and developing the skills of the future
 - e) Places: Making the most of internal and external geographies
- The Strategy identifies the following priorities to foster economic growth in St Albans:
 - a) Develop a St Albans local evidence base
 - b) Understand St Albans District skills and employment requirements, and develop a local St Albans District Strategy using the Hertfordshire Skills and Employment Strategy as template
 - c) Align with recovery plans and agree on local action plan and targets

Hertfordshire LEP Skills Advisory Panel (SAP) Local Skills Report provides insight into local skills.

Find out more at <https://www.hertfordshirelep.com/skills/>.

Presentation: Local skill shortages and the work Oaklands College is doing

By: David Alder, Director of Marketing and Admissions, Oaklands College

David Alder provided an introduction to the Further Education (FE) sector and discussed the work currently undertaken by Oaklands College:

- FE, a £6.4 billion sector, supports 1.7 million learners in England and 35% of businesses train their staff through FE. Oaklands College supports over 7,500 learners with students from more than 50 countries.
- Oaklands College A Strategy for Excellence 2022-2027 prioritises:

- a) Building on strengths, such as Centres of Excellence (for example sports academies, engineering, green technologies).
- b) £62 million investment to transform the St Albans campus, working closely with all partners, including St Albans City and District Council, to implement plans successfully.
- c) Partnering with businesses.
- St Albans fares relatively well compared to other districts with regards to skill shortages, but macro-regional challenges include:
 - Current levels of unemployment and productivity.
 - Inequality.
 - Net export of highly skilled residents (20.7% commute to London).
 - Need to re-skill due to post-pandemic impact on jobs.
- The visitor economy is highly important. Other key industries for economic growth are:
 - Agricultural, green, and digital technology (for example, no gas boiler installation from 2025).
 - Artificial intelligence (AI), data science, machine learning.
 - Life sciences, low carbon industries, creative sectors.
- Unlocking emerging talent to create jobs and grow in the mentioned industries is crucial.

Q&A

Q: What plans are there in place to continue providing relevant skills [in the area of sustainability] for employers in the district?

- Norman Jennings explained that carbon neutrality is a cross-cutting theme in the Hertfordshire Skills & Employment Strategy 2022-2024. He recommended developing county-partnerships as well as a specific sustainability and low-carbon strategy for Hertfordshire.
- The latter should identify the specific support needed by local businesses, notably to help SMEs make more sustainably informed business choices.
- Norman Jennings also noted the importance of preparing SMEs to seize low carbon opportunities brought by the low carbon sector, such as harnessing green skills. Teaching young people and reskilling adults in these matters will encourage net-zero for businesses and residents alike.

Q: How does Oaklands College expect it might be affected by the Government removal of funding for most BTEC courses?

- David Alder noted that these questions are being addressed but are still up for consultation.

Q: Do the specialisms of Oaklands College attract students from across the county and country?

- David Alder explained that Oaklands College was keen to work more on destination marketing and welcomed discussions on this with partners following the Business Summit. The College enrolls around 10,000 students and has around 3,000 visitors at open days 3-4 times per year.

3. The Climate Change Emergency and Green Business Grants

Presentation: Climate Change and Sustainability

By: Matthew Partridge, Hertfordshire Growth Board, Lead on Climate Change

Matthew Partridge discussed the work of the Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership (HCCSP):

- HCCSP aims to accelerate progress on climate change targets across Hertfordshire by identifying the environmental and sustainability work programmes, policies, and strategies currently in place across districts and boroughs, and thereafter facilitating collaboration on these between stakeholders.
- District-level progress on climate change targets requires substantial support and funding from national and county levels to help District Councils achieve targets.
- Having Council leaders from across Hertfordshire as part of HCCSP has helped HCCSP deliver at pace over the past 18 months.
- HCCSP Action Plans have been prepared and approved for transport, biodiversity, carbon reduction, and water. Action Plans will be implemented through the following:
 - Transport: Active travel; decarbonisation; infrastructure.
 - Biodiversity: Baseline (quantifying levels of biodiversity across Hertfordshire); completing the Green Spaces Audit in 202; mapping.
 - Carbon: Emission reduction; renewables.
 - Water: Consumption; sustainable drainage systems; lead local flood authority.
- HCCSP seeks to develop their communications and hold more events across the East of England to engage more efficiently with people and businesses and gather support.

Presentation: Net Zero – Advice, Support, Grant Funding

By: Liza Armstrong, Head of Service, Hertfordshire Growth Hub

Liza Armstrong discussed the work of the Hertfordshire Growth Hub:

- Hertfordshire Growth Hub is a public-private sector partnership led by and delivered on behalf of Hertfordshire LEP. It brings together local, regional, and national partners and experts to provide business support and advice for all types of businesses.
- Services include, among others, staff training, specialist low-carbon advice, and grant funding from Low Carbon Workspaces and Eastern New Energy programmes.
- Sustainable business opportunities have increased and improved significantly in Hertfordshire. These were reported for the following:
 - a) bottom line
 - b) reputation with suppliers, customers, employees
 - c) contract retention and tender successes
- Ensuring entrepreneurs and businesses understand the business-case for sustainability, such as the many business opportunities related to implementing greener business models, is critical to advance on Net Zero targets.
- Hertfordshire Growth Hub has a grant finder tool on their website for a wide variety of sectors and types of funding, including green grants. Register to access at: www.hertsgrowthhub.com.

Q&A

Q: Has there been any studies or research on the percentage of SMEs taking some form of Net Zero action?

- Liza Armstrong explained that Hertfordshire Growth Hub had undertaken some research on the type of support businesses need. Reference was also made to a study undertaken by Hertfordshire County Council which was likely to become available to access by the public soon.
- An attendee shared in the Chat Box that the Federation of Small Business (FSB) has regional level data available in their latest FSB Net Zero Report which can be viewed on the FSB website at <https://www.fsb.org.uk/resource-report/accelerating-progress.html>.

4. Close and Other Discussions

Councillor Chris White thanked all speakers and attendees for their participation and closed the Business Summit.

An attendee shared the SME carbon footprint calculator developed by the Carbon Trust in the Chat Box, which companies can use to calculate their carbon footprint: <https://www.carbontrust.com/resources/sme-carbon-footprint-calculator>

Liza Armstrong of Hertfordshire Growth Hub advised participants of upcoming events. Full details can be found at <https://www.hertsgrowthhub.com/events>.

5. Feedback

The Business Summit 2021 Survey was sent to all participating businesses. The survey seeks to understand the concerns of District businesses. Responses will help to inform and shape St Albans Council & District Economic Development Plan.

To access and fill out the Business Summit 2021 Survey, please go to https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/Business_Summit_Survey.

Responses to date indicate the following themes:

- Skills shortages; cost inflation; the climate emergency; funding problems.

For more information or to find out about any future business-related events, please contact: Economicdevelopment@stalbans.gov.uk