

**ACTION NOTE OF THE ‘CONNECTED ECONOMY GROUP’ (CEG)**

**Friday 17 April 2020, 1100-1215 hrs, by Skype**

**Members participating:**

Cllr J McMillan, East Lothian Council (JMM) (Chair)

Cllr J Findlay, East Lothian Council (JF)

Cllr P McLennan, East Lothian Council (PML)

Keith Barbour, Mid- and East Lothian Chamber of Commerce (KB)

Garry Clark, Federation of Small Businesses (GC)

Douglas Proudfoot, East Lothian Council (DP)

Jim Lamond, East Lothian Council (JL)

Neil Craik-Collins, East Lothian Council (NCC) (for L Brown)

Nick Croft, The Edinburgh College (NC)

Gill Jardine, Department for Works and Pensions (GJ)

**In attendance:**

Susan Smith, East Lothian Council (SS)

Paolo Vestri, East Lothian Council (PV)

**Apologies:**

Elaine Morrison/Frank Beattie, Scottish Enterprise

Phil Ford, Skills Development Scotland

1. **Setting the Scene**

DP explained that the Chair and members had asked for this meeting to be convened to bring all up-to-speed with the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis and response with particular focus on the business community. He added that JL will be leading on recovery supported by DP and the economy is of course very important. The Scottish Government has announced a number of interventions and collaboration in the delivery of these has been key. Communication with communities, business and geographic, and with elected members is of paramount importance. All Information is centralised on the council website and supplemented by media statements. East Lothian Council is well-placed in processing grant payments. JL echoed DP’s comments and referred to the small Non-Domestic Rates team tasked with delivery. National pledges are not necessarily realised – for example, no application form-free process. As of 16 April, 456 applications had been approved to the value of £5.4m. PV is the lead for all elected member queries.

1. **Partner update/business support**

PML commented that a number of businesses do not meet eligibility criteria and are falling ‘through the cracks’ with more clarity on the newly-announced scheme required from the Scottish Government. JMM drew attention to the East Lothian Investments’ Business Interruption Loan – 16 applications received to date with a quick turnround. JMM will be attending the Business Gateway Board meeting on 20 April.

KB said that Scottish Chambers are lobbying around such gaps and comments are passed to the Cabinet Secretary. It was agreed that KB co-ordinate details of gaps in business support **(ACTION: All to Chamber mailbox,** Lisa@thebusinesspartnership.org.uk**).**

GC is aware of a number of East Lothian queries and also of those from the other five local authorities in his area. The FSB supports businesses during the crisis through lobbying, webinars, advice, online networking.

PML commented that banks have not been particularly helpful and GC added that the FSB has been working with the British Business Bank and Scottish Financial Enterprise. With regard to the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan, of the 40 banks, only six are offering CBIL-compatible overdrafts.

JMM said that, together with Cllr Imrie of Midlothian Council, he has written to Fergus Ewing about European rural funding being redirected to support rural businesses. Also, with counterparts from Midlothian and Scottish Borders Councils, he has been in touch with MSP’s about key issues.

GJ introduced herself from DWP and provided an update. The challenge for the agency has been to process 1.4m Universal Credit claims for key workers via a fully digital service and commended Scotland for delivering successfully.

NCC reminded all that East Lothian Works, in partnership with SDS, Economic Development and others, delivers youth interventions to those most at risk and employability to adults. He referred to the SDS draft framework document **(ACTION: SS to circulate).**

NC said that the Edinburgh College with 16,000 further education students has to ensure compliance with SQA and 26 other awarding bodies. Also, the College has to continue to recruit and accept new applications – 6500 offers have been accepted. The Flexible Workforce Fund is an opportunity.

1. **Early thoughts on recovery**

With regard to recovery, DP and JL have had preliminary meetings and drew attention to the National Recovery Group. There have been a number of City Deal-related discussions.

1. **Q&A/AOB**

PML suggested that key sectors may require their own distinct recovery plans and JMM drew attention to the Economic Development Strategy. DP suggested that group membership may have to be reviewed – for example, representation from retail businesses – as well as the frequency of meetings. Also of note are the strategic interventions for longer-term economic growth.

Another Skype meeting was suggested for three weeks hence.