

Business Resilience Forum (Moray)

Thursday 03 September 2020 (Skype Call)

Action Points

Attendees:

- Clare Lock (Moray Business Women)
- Craig Robertson (Business Gateway Moray)
- David Groundwater (Federation of Small Businesses)
- Fraser Grieve (Scotch Whisky Association)
- Jim Grant (Moray Council)
- Lynne Ross (Department for Work and Pensions)
- Michael O'Donnell (Moray Council)
- Nina Crocombe (Skills Development Scotland)
- Richard Lochhead MSP
- Sarah Medcraf (Moray Chamber of Commerce)
- Scott McKnockiter (Highlands and Islands Enterprise)
- Stuart Black (Highlands and Islands Enterprise)

Apologies:

- Douglas Ross MP
- Fiona Robb (Highlands and Islands Enterprise)
- Gemma Cruickshank (Elgin Business Improvement District)
- Graham Leadbitter (Leader of the Council)
- Jane Cumming (Scottish Council for Development and Industry)
- Kerry Williams (Highlands and Islands Enterprise)
- Laurie Piper (Moray Speyside Tourism)
- Stephen Sheridan (Skills Development Scotland)

1. Stuart Black opened the meeting and the minute of the previous meeting was agreed.

2. Public Sector Update:

Moray Council: Work is still underway on the recovery strategy for the Moray Economic Partnership (MEP), specifically the employability and skills element, and lots of initiatives are happening nationally with the Kick Start Scheme and Youth Guarantee programme.

Highlands and Islands Enterprise: New Digital Enablement Grant scheme is being launched by HIE, this is a pilot programme running until March 2021, and plans are in place to roll out a national programme in partnership with Business Gateway. Funding of up to £25k, at 75% of eligible project costs, application process administered by HIE Business Account Managers, and funding can be used for a variety of uses to improve digital capability and e-commerce functionality.

The Hotel Recovery Programme is open for expressions of interest via Find Business Support website, and initial registration closes on Wednesday 09 September 2020. Banking providers backed by the British Business Bank are not accepting new applications for CBILS and Bounce Back loans from the end of September 2020, and businesses are encouraged to submit applications now, if they have plans to source debt finance.

Business Gateway: Additional funding up to 5k is available for Business Gateway Clients who have accessed the Digital Boost programme. Business Gateway are also looking to offer wider access to the grant scheme, to assist early stage businesses with new digital capability development, however the initial role out will be through a targeted approach to those clients who have received support through Digital Boost.

The COVID-19 survive and thrive one to one specialist advice programme is in the process of being developed and will offer one to one sessions for businesses to access expert consultancy support in areas such as; finance, idea generation, business planning and COVID-19 adaption.

Business Gateway are in the process of procuring a series of business support webinars, these business start-up webinars will focus on digitisation and business planning, and are scheduled to commence in October 2021, they will be advertised widely on social media channels.

Department of Work and Pensions: The Kick Start scheme is now live and all details are available on the UK Government webpage, the scheme will support and create six-month job placement for 16/24 year olds, and covers 100% of the national minimum wage and employer contribution costs, there is an online application for employers with a minimum of 30 vacancies.

DWP are awaiting details about how to apply if business has under 30 vacancies, it is recognised that the current application process is challenging for companies in Moray, who are not expected to recruit this number of vacancies at one time. There will be minimal businesses in Moray who require to recruit over 30 posts initially and in one tranche, DWP have asked for clarification on this matter and have expressed concerns to the relevant authorities.

Skills Development Scotland: SDS advised that the initial Youth Guarantee scheme communications contained a lot of useful information, and details are still emerging, information is starting to flow through to employability groups and Developing the Young Workforce. The scheme is considered positive for the commitment to guarantee to every young person aged between 16/24 in Scotland the opportunity, based on their own personal circumstances and ambitions, of going to university or college, an apprenticeship programme, training, fair employment including work experience, or participating in a formal volunteering programme.

No new updates or activities in regard to PACE since the Business Resilience Forum last met, however PACE activities are constantly ongoing with discussions with individual employees on changes to contract of employment terms and conditions. The Transition Training Fund has historically been made available to assist employees affected by the downturn in the Oil and Gas sector, the scheme is now being offered to support employees in other business sectors to retrain and upskill.

3. Private Sector Update

Federation of Small Businesses: FSB raised concerns for businesses who have adapted premises to be COVID-19 safe to meet obligations for social distancing, and if these adaptations could attract or increase higher business rates and commercial property rental costs. Concerns were also raised on the potential of further redundancies and financial pressures on businesses due to the furlough scheme reducing and coming to an end.

FSB have documented the lessons learned and experiences gained from the recent local lockdown in the West of Scotland, with most problems arising from communication issues, these experiences will be shared with the business community, public sector partners, and the Scottish Government.

A webinar is taking place on Tuesday 08 September, and is open to all, with registration details available on the events page of the FSB website. Scotland's National Clinical Director Jason Leitch will talk about COVID-19 and the implications for small businesses.

Moray Chamber of Commerce: Moray Chamber expressed concerns over the furlough scheme reduction, future end date, and the impact on potential jobs losses in the coming months. Concern was also raised about potential financial implications for COVID-19 adaptations for business rate payers.

Scottish Chambers of Commerce are discussing options nationally to ease pressures on businesses who have to quarantine staff, and potential measures such as self-isolation for a week, then taking a paid COVID-19 test, to lessen the impact of self-isolation measures.

Moray Chamber advised that they felt it was important to get employees back in to offices safely, as many local retailers, cafes and restaurants, particularly in the town centres, rely on the footfall of office workers, and could be significantly affected in terms of potential reductions to revenues in the coming months.

The tourism application to allow patrons to check into tourist/visitor attractions, restaurants and hotels has 66 businesses signed up, and so far over 10,000 customers have used the application to assist businesses to track who is using their facility and support contact tracing efforts if required. The application is being rolled out across a number of other regions in Scotland. Moray Speyside Tourism has signed up to this platform for a year and it is being offered free of charge for businesses to use. Moray Chamber are unsure of longer-term options for applications to assist contact tracing and have engaged with Scottish Government to consider longer term solutions.

The Connect You scheme is now live, offering up to half a day of specialist advice with experts in law and accountancy. Moray Chamber intend to work with their PR provider to attract additional interest in the scheme from local businesses.

Moray Chamber have signed up for a virtual stand at the Highland Spotlight Business Exhibition 2020 on Tuesday 22 September, and are also planning to contact partner organisations to commence discussions on options for holding a similar event in Moray next year, with a different format to the historic Moray Business Week programme of events, which were successfully run for a number of years.

Moray Business Women: The ask the expert event was cancelled in August, due to lack of demand. Lots of positive news from Moray Business Women, with two retail businesses reporting recent increases in turnover levels, a number of their members have been highly commended in the recent Highland Business Awards, and members are reporting an increase of new local clients with consumer habits changing and local shopping becoming more popular. The Moray Business Women virtual awards event is being launched on Thursday 17 September.

Scotch Whisky Association: Discussed how traditional international tourists have been replaced by locals and domestic tourists, and how the spend pattern within visitor attractions is quite different from typical international visitors. The Health and Safety Executive has inspected a number of facilities and commended social distancing measures in the sector. In particular, Whisky visitor attractions have provided a robust approach to operating safely through enhanced social distancing measures.

Whisky experts are down 30% in the first half of the year and are expected to cause a lasting issue going forward. 10% of employees in the Whisky sector are employed in tourism and visitor attractions, there is a real desire to see the return of international visitors, as historically every two out of three visitors to a distillery are from out with the UK.

Richard Lochhead MSP: Commented on the streams of activity coming from the recently published Programme for Government, and how these are relevant to Moray, such as how low carbon sectors can ensure the higher proportion of older housing stock can become more sustainable and energy efficient. This would create jobs to assist efforts to lower carbon emissions in housing. Need to grasp the opportunities to benefit Moray which are provided through the Youth Guarantee scheme, along with the digital capability support mechanisms being delivered by Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Business Gateway.

Concerns were raised about the end of the furlough scheme and the potential for a second wave of COVID-19 in the winter months. The Scottish Government are looking closely at local outbreaks, such as the recent local outbreak in Grantown on Spey, and are examining the source of these outbreaks, as it may be possible for the businesses affected to remain operational.

Plans are being discussed for a permanent COVID-19 testing facility in Moray, to test and provide results quicker, which will reduce the need to travel long distances to test centres and also reduce the time employees need to stay off work when self-isolating.

4. AOB

A discussion was held on local clusters of COVID-19 outbreaks and the potential impact to the regional economy. The Moray Council Environmental Health team have provided proactive guidance to a range of businesses in Moray. Businesses must, test, trace and protect and comply with Scottish Government public health guidance.

Stuart Black proposed the group reconvene as planned on Thursday 10 September 2020.

Date and time of next meeting:

Thursday 10 September - 2.00pm - 3.00pm