

DATA LABEL: PUBLIC



**ECONOMY, COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT AND WEALTH BUILDING POLICY  
DEVELOPMENT AND SCRUTINY PANEL**

**BUSINESS SUPPORT UPDATE**

**REPORT BY HEAD OF PLANNING, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & REGENERATION**

**A.** To inform the panel on the performance of Business Gateway in the 6 months to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2023 and the support provided to local businesses across West Lothian.

**B. RECOMMENDATION**

To note the updates on the range of impacts made by the Business Gateway team, launch of the Invest website, progress of the Jobs Task Force, and closer working with the university sector.

**C. SUMMARY OF IMPLICATIONS**

<b>I Council Values</b>	Focusing on our customers' needs; being honest, open and accountable; providing equality of opportunities; developing employees; making best use of our resources; working in partnership.
<b>II Policy and Legal (including Strategic Environmental Assessment, Equality Issues, Health or Risk Assessment)</b>	The report does not raise any Strategic Environmental Assessment, equality or health issues.
<b>III Implications for Scheme of Delegations to Officers</b>	None.
<b>IV Impact on performance and performance Indicators</b>	Good performance against key indicators as the team engages on hybrid basis to support clients.
<b>V Relevance to Single Outcome Agreement</b>	<p>Outcome 2 - We are better educated and have access to increased and better quality learning and employment opportunities.</p> <p>Outcome 3 - Our economy is diverse and dynamic, and West Lothian is an attractive place for doing business.</p> <p>Outcome 4 - We live in resilient, cohesive and</p>

safe communities.

<b>VI</b>	<b>Resources - (Financial, Staffing and Property)</b>	Additional resources have been made available to support new job creation, upskilling and retraining across sectors.
<b>VII</b>	<b>Consideration at PDSP</b>	Update of latest report 6 June 2023.
<b>VIII</b>	<b>Other consultations</b>	Economic Recovery Group, Jobs Task Force and Economic Partnership Forum.

## **D. TERMS OF REPORT**

This report focuses on the diverse and complementary areas of work by the Business Gateway team within the Economic Development Service.

### **D1 Scrutinise the work of Business Gateway**

The Business Gateway team is part of the Economic Development service. Business Gateway provides confidential and impartial support to residents looking to start-up in business, local firms, new and existing 3<sup>rd</sup> sector organisations and our major employers. All engagement with Business Gateway is client-led. Support is provided to individual clients and business owners/decision makers.

Business Gateway supports a diverse portfolio of existing and new start enterprises in West Lothian. Support is tailored to the needs of individual organisations. The support includes advice on areas such as business planning, raising finance, grant and loan applications, premises, community benefit leases, asset transfers, income generation, governance and sustainability. In addition, social enterprises are signposted to the wider network of support programs available both locally and nationally. Business Gateway also works closely with the West Lothian Social Enterprise Network to ensure network members receive the business support they need.

The team's key outcomes include helping residents to start their own business, enabling local firms to grow in a sustainable and inclusive manner and providing a single point of contact for our strategic employers.

The vision and commitment of local people to start their own business, especially in such challenging economic circumstances is commendable. Across West Lothian, the Business Gateway team supported 113 new start firms in the 6 months from April to September. These businesses created 131 new jobs. The main business sectors are personal, professional and local services. Around 20% of all early stage firms go on to take premises, employ staff and grow the scale of the business. New starts are worth over £16.1 Million to the local economy every year.

The Business Gateway team also includes advisers who deal with existing, growing and relocating firms to West Lothian. The advisers provided direct support to 305 local firms in the first six months of the financial year. This included 33 social enterprises. Our priority sectors include Life Sciences, Manufacturing, Engineering, Construction and enabling technologies.

While navigating a path through macro-economic challenges including fears of recession, weaker value of sterling, inflation and interest rate pressures, West Lothian firms engaged with us around a range of business-change projects. These

included larger premises, new markets, recruiting/training, working capital, Research & Development, export regulation, digital marketing and carbon reduction projects.

Council's Business Gateway advisers support firms across West Lothian who have combined annual sales in excess of £1.86 Billion per annum. While these businesses employ over 12,000 staff, this represents 15% of total jobs in West Lothian. However, the supported firms account for 40% of the annual gross value add (GVA) of the West Lothian economy.

## **D2 Joining-up the labour market**

The jobs market in West Lothian is buoyant with unemployment below 3%, similar to the pre-pandemic historic low. And a record-high level of job vacancies. Firms across West Lothian in all sectors are reporting unfilled vacancies. This pattern is repeated across much of Scotland and the UK.

Education colleagues continue to develop closer links with some of our best local businesses. This is part of strategic working to raise awareness among schools, pupils and parents/carers of the range of career options available across vocational and academic disciplines.

In addition, progress is being made to strengthen business links with West Lothian College and nearby Universities, particularly Edinburgh Napier and Heriot-Watt. In terms of Further Education, there is investment in teaching low-carbon construction skills. For Higher Education, we are raising awareness of the "earn while you learn" Graduate Apprenticeship pathway.

Employability colleagues led on a Jobs Fair in early September. Attended by 20 firms and over 100 residents. The event hosted in Bathgate saw job seekers and also residents looking to change job. This aligns with our support for firms to invest in training and upskilling of new and existing employees.

## **D3 Invest In West Lothian website**

As part of Council's long-term commitment to retain and attract the best businesses, and to grow our value-added sectors, a commercially-focused website, [Why West Lothian? - Invest in West Lothian](#) is being further improved to highlight the range of support available for our local firms and residents.

The website promotes West Lothian as an inward/mobile investment destination. Highlighting the area as an economic hub for science, technology and higher-value industries. Our key inward investment partner is Scottish Enterprise (SE). We have built close and productive links with SE over the years. Their ongoing strategic investment in key firms continues to help strengthen the West Lothian economy through increasing the competitiveness of strategic local employers, more employment opportunities at better levels of pay and more stable supply chain opportunities.

We monitor a range of key web metrics and can advise that:

- More than 6,500 users visited the Invest website in the past six months, with an increasing number of monthly users.
- 5 new high-quality case studies have been uploaded, highlighting businesses which have benefited from funding and growth support. Social media posts about these case studies have also performed well.
- We have added the new "Support for Individuals" section to the site. This increases our offering by highlighting the support available to local

residents.

- The Invest LinkedIn page is performing really well. We have had a total of 33,505 impressions on our posts with an average engagement rate of 10%, and we have gained 255 new followers.

#### **D4 Monitoring the Jobs Task Force (JTF)**

The West Lothian Jobs Task Force (JTF) brings together key partners to support the development and inclusive growth of the West Lothian economy. This collaborative working is a key element in achieving its priority outcomes of new jobs, enhanced skills and more life chances.

As noted above, West Lothian's labour market faces severe challenges from historically low unemployment and widespread skills shortages. The financial resources provided to the JTF enable us to encourage local firms with job grants in return for at least fair wages, and so divert some residents from economic inactivity. Support also enables firms to address skills shortages by supporting their investment in training/upskilling. JTF retains its core focus of supporting higher-value jobs.

Since its launch in June 2018, the JTF has supported projects with a value of over £8.23 million. This targeted support has created 460 new jobs.

Complementary to the longer-term work of the JTF is time-limited funding provided by the Scottish Government. We have awarded over £905,000 since April 2022 which includes £194,800 in financial year 2023/24. This scheme is known as the Local Authority Economic Recovery Fund (LACER) There are a number of key themes including but not limited to:

- Supporting new start-up businesses with ambition to scale-up quickly;
- Helping firms with vacancies and productivity challenges to retrain and upskill staff;
- Creating opportunities for graduate intake roles which have a focus on low-carbon, cyber security and engineering; and
- Project grants to support capital investment.
- Supporting key economic sector including construction with the creation of a construction forum.

In addition, we continue to support higher-value new jobs paying starting salaries of circa £30,000+. Local firms in key sectors can apply for £7,500 per new job. This will help create a further 500 new jobs and safeguard 1,750 jobs in the medium-term.

In addition to this targeted support, the Business Gateway team has made a successful start to their part of the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF). 12 firms have been awarded over £84,000 to assist with capacity building and low carbon projects.

#### **D5 West Lothian Manufacturing Group (WLMG)**

Economic Development continues to build closer ways of effective working with a range of key local manufacturers through the formation of WLMG. This builds on already strong links with many of these businesses.

The first meeting of WLMG was hosted by Mitsubishi Electric at their Livingston HQ. 11 other firms attended representing sectors including food & drink, engineering,

printing and silicon wafer production. The firms who attended directly employ more than 4,500 staff across West Lothian. The meeting provided firms with the opportunity to discuss common issues around labour supply and skills requirements. Examples of good practice were shared.

It is intended that the Group will meet two-to-three times per year. The format of an action-led discussion followed by a factory tour was well received.

## **E. CONCLUSION**

The Business Gateway team continues to deliver value-added services to clients, businesses and communities. Customer feedback is consistently positive. Performance is good and the team remains highly motivated to deliver quality business support in challenging economic circumstances.

## **F. BACKGROUND REFERENCES**

None

Appendices/Attachments:

Contact Person: Jim Henderson, Business Development Manager. Tel 07881 777 674

[jim.henderson@westlothian.gov.uk](mailto:jim.henderson@westlothian.gov.uk)

**Craig McCorriston**  
**Head of Planning, Economic Development & Regeneration**

14<sup>th</sup> November 2023