

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL
ECONOMIC REGENERATION ADVISORY BOARD

02 September 2020

Report of the Chief Executive

Part 1- Public

Matters for Information

1 EAST MALLING RESEARCH STATION – RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Following on from previous reports to the Board, this report gives an update on the Growing Kent & Medway ‘Strength in Places’ Fund bid and the Local Growth Fund 3b (LGF3b) bid, both of which have implications for the future development of the East Malling Research Station site.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 The East Malling Research Station has a history dating back to 1913 when it was established by the fruit growing sector to address the many challenges faced by growers. Over the years, the research team at East Malling has introduced wide-ranging advances that have had a huge impact on the way that produce is grown and supplied to the consumer.

1.1.2 In 2016, after a number of years of losses, the East Malling Research Station was rescued in a take-over by the National Institute of Agricultural Botany (NIAB) to form NIAB EMR. Following the take-over, the Research Station has found itself on a much more stable footing, but it is evident that in order to maintain the world-class research that takes place on the site, investment in the facilities is much needed. As such, NIAB EMR, with the support of strategic partners like the Borough Council, has focussed strongly on promoting the economic benefits of the sector to the regional and national economy, and to lobby and bid for government investment to ensure the future success of horticultural research on the site.

1.2 Strength in Places Fund

1.2.1 The UK Government announced the Strength in Places Fund in the Industrial Strategy White Paper (2017). The White Paper highlighted the important role science, research, innovation and skills provision play in driving productivity and economic growth throughout the regions and nations of the UK. The UK Research and Innovation’s (UKRI) Strength in Places Fund therefore forms a key part of the activity undertaken that will be contributing to the UK Government’s target to reach 2.4% of GDP investment in R&D by 2027, and 3% in the longer term.

- 1.2.2 In March 2019, 24 projects - from pharmaceuticals to aerospace, and transport to the creative economy – were shortlisted following a highly competitive bidding process and received early-stage funding of £50,000 to develop full-stage bids that could lead to significant economic growth in places across the country. These bids were submitted to the UKRI in September 2019.
- 1.2.3 One of the 24 bids submitted was ‘Growing Kent and Medway’ – a consortium bid led by NIAB EMR (and including Universities and key businesses in the horticultural sector), which is focused on the region’s advanced horticultural production, fresh produce packaging, food and drink processing industries and the enabling technologies that drive innovation and growth.
- 1.2.4 In June 2020, it was finally announced that the ‘Growing Kent and Medway’ bid had been successful in securing £18 million of Strength in Places funding as part of a £33 million initiative. In total, there were only 7 successful bids in the UK and only 3 in England, illustrating the importance of the horticultural sector to Kent and Medway and demonstrating the strength of the bid.
- 1.2.5 This initiative will see the following developments:

Inclusive innovation-led growth:

- a) Investment in enterprise support and small-scale R&D funding at hard-to-reach and under-served groups
- b) Grant funding programme to deliver community engagement

Investment in flagship infrastructure:

- a) Food Innovation Lab and Maker Space – University of Greenwich, Chatham
- b) Green Tech Hub for Advanced Horticulture – NIAB EMR, East Malling
- c) Industrial Biotechnology Hub for Sustainable Food and Drink – University of Kent, Canterbury

Investment in industry-led collaborative R&D:

- a) £1.5m for small scale innovation and prototyping projects
- b) £3m for large-scale collaborative R&D projects
- c) £0.5m for technology showcase demonstrator projects
- d) Innovation Growth Managers

Enterprise Support:

- a) 1-2-1 mentor support (up to 12 hours)
- b) Accelerator programme for plant-based food businesses

Workforce for 2030:

- a) Sector Skills Audit and Strategy
- b) Skills road-map for professionalization of the sector in the region
- c) Pilot Skills Hub

- 1.2.6 The Green Tech Hub will build upon the infrastructure set out in 1.3.2 and provide approximately 3,000 square metres of commercially-relevant space for research and development, testing and demonstration of 'Agritech' innovations (such as robotics, sensors and artificial intelligence) in horticultural production.

1.3 Local Growth Fund

- 1.3.1 Having initially been unsuccessful in applying to the Local Growth Fund Round 3 (LGF3) in 2016 for the creation of new greenhouses and energy centre, a further opportunity for NIAB EMR arose with the establishment of a Round 3b (LGF3b) in September 2018, which was set up in order to allocate any underspend in the Round 3 programme.
- 1.3.2 An Expression of Interest was subsequently submitted requesting £1.7m for new greenhouses and energy centre, which was assessed as being a strong bid by consultants acting on behalf of the Kent & Medway Economic Partnership (KMEP). However, in the initial ranking of projects, NIAB EMR's proposal fell some way down the list. As a result of strong lobbying from the Borough Council and other KMEP Board Members, the NIAB EMR proposals were put on a reserve list of projects that would be funded if further underspend arose from LGF3 funded projects. In preparation, NIAB EMR, with the support of the Borough Council and others produced a Full Business Case.
- 1.3.3 In April 2020, NIAB EMR were invited by the KMEP Board to submit their Full Business Case. On 03 July 2020, this Business Case was considered by South East LEP Accountability Board and awarded £1.7m of LGF3b funding.
- 1.3.4 With the funding now awarded, progress is now being made to move towards commencing construction on site by the end of March 2021.

1.4 Legal Implications

- 1.4.1 None

1.5 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

- 1.5.1 None

1.6 Risk Assessment

1.7 Equality Impact Assessment

Background papers:

None

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