

Classification: Public

Key Decision: No

Gravesham Borough Council

Report to: Strategic Environment Cabinet Committee

Date: 22 June 2020

Reporting officer: Assistant Director (Communities)
Senior Economic Development Officer (Communities)

Subject: COVID-19 Business Support Response

Purpose and summary of report:

This briefing report summarises recent activity relating to the council's response to Covid-19, focused on the support given to the local business community including grant assistance.

Recommendations:

1. To note the contents of the report.
2. To make the Committee's views known on how best to build on the positive engagement with businesses during this difficult time.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Since national measures were introduced in mid-March, to restrict the spread of coronavirus, the Government and councils have implemented a number of business support measures in response to a major contraction in business activity and the local employment which depends on this.
- 1.2 Our local activity has been a combination of dispensing grant funds to businesses, promoting local and national support available and maintaining contact with the local business community through regular communications. Local business intelligence and feedback has also been provided to central government.
- 1.3 These activities are set out briefly in this report and form a basis from which to develop two-way engagement and support, as the council develops its recovery response.

2. Business Grants

- 2.1 At the end of March, Gravesham launched the Small Business Grant and Retail, Hospitality and Leisure grant schemes in line with government guidance. These schemes provided grants to businesses occupying commercial properties, which had either been specifically required to close or had suffered an immediate negative trading impact from measures relating to 'lockdown'.

- 2.2 Valued at £10,000 or £25,000 respectively, by the end of May the council had successfully dispensed more than 1,100 grants through the above schemes, valued at a total of £13.6m. This performance placed Gravesham 5th in the country for the proportion of grants paid out in a timely fashion.
- 2.3 Subsequently, the government has launched a 'top up' grant scheme called the Local Authority Discretionary Grant Fund which is designed to ensure that financial support is extended to those businesses (and charities) which did not receive support through the original grant schemes above but fulfil similar criteria.
- 2.4 Officers had volunteered local intelligence regarding the type of businesses which were not eligible for support in earlier schemes of financial assistance (the self-employed and occupiers of shared or sub-divided workspace for example), to both BEIS and also through contacts within business representative organisations that had helped to make the case for a 'top up' grant scheme directly to Government. This being the case, the launch of the new discretionary grant scheme was particularly welcome.
- 2.5 A total grant pot of £716,000 has been allocated to Gravesham by central government and based upon the detailed government guidance provided; a local discretionary grant scheme has been designed and went live for applications on Friday 05 June. The deadline for receipt of business and charity applications is Friday 19 June.
- 2.6 Grant awards will be fixed within a range of £2,000 to £10,000 it is anticipated and a full policy and application form has been published at:
www.gravesham.gov.uk/business
- 2.7 Officers have worked flexibly across the Business Rates, Finance, Communications and Economic Development teams in order to promote the various grant schemes and process individual claims. Audit staff have made reminder phone calls to eligible businesses and the Safer Place Officers have helped distribute flyers to individual business premises to encourage take-up if eligible.

3. COVID-19 Business Support Zone and Business Intelligence

- 3.1 The Government has put in place a broad range of financial and other assistance to businesses, since the advent of COVID-19. These are summarised at <https://www.gravesham.gov.uk/home/business/covid-19-guidance-for-businesses/overview> and have been regularly updated by the economic development team.
- 3.2 The web pages also include details of local business support available, sources of online video and webinar content and also links to other public, private and third sector support to businesses and the not-for-profit sector.
- 3.3 Local intelligence has been gathered through individual conversations and an early business survey promoted to Gravesham Business Network members and a new social media channel. Future surveys will test sentiment as the country moves towards recovery.
- 3.4 58 responses were received in total, by early April. 97.5% reported a negative impact on their business, with only two respondents not having seen a reduction in current and expected future revenues.

- 3.5 Other key findings include 57% reporting a temporary closure of their business. The majority had already (or intended to) furlough staff and even at this early stage, many were concerned about how they would balance reducing staff overheads, with pivoting to new ways of generating replacement income streams.
- 3.6 Responses to the survey were drawn from a broad geographical and sector distribution, which is representative of the Borough's rural and urban areas. As well as retail and hospitality businesses which were most obviously affected by 'lockdown' provisions, responses were received from event management, engineering, freight, professional services, estate agency, tech and health & beauty businesses.

4. Business Communication

- 4.1 Periodic newsletters for Gravesham Business Network members and a new social media account ([Gravesham For Business @GraveshamForBiz](#)) have been used to provide regular communication with local businesses and third sector organisations. These communications have also supplemented and cross-referenced the activities of the Council's corporate communications, tourism and town centre management teams.
- 4.2 Content has included notifications about Government and other sources of financial and business support, a webinar to assist businesses to start trading online and generally sharing information and opportunities from a wide range of sources including business representative organisations, sector bodies and the South East Local Enterprise Partnership. Promoting local networks and collaboration has also been a key theme.

5. Kent and Medway Growth Hub

- 5.1 The Council has contributed, in partnership with all other Kent Local Authorities, to the financing of a dedicated Business Support Helpline service established by the Kent and Medway Growth Hub, which is managed by the Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce. This has provided a dedicated telephone advice service (as well an online chat option) for business owners, since the early days of restrictions being put in place.
- 5.2 The Hub has handled thousands of customer contacts, ranging from specific technical queries relating to Government business support measures through to general assistance required by business owners, many of whom have been faced with unprecedented trading conditions in an exceptionally uncertain environment.
- 5.3 Regular communication and responsive information-sharing with the Hub, has assisted business applications to the grant schemes administered by the Council.
- 5.4 Weekly activity reports have been provided and the most recent of these is included as Appendix 2 by way of example.

6. Direct Assistance

- 6.1 Two of the Borough's largest employers have approached the Council, regarding specific support to assist their business' response to the coronavirus outbreak.
- 6.2 This support has consisted of officers undertaking a funding application to provide English language skills training in support of crucial recruitment activity; as well as utilising the Council's networks of contacts, to assist a local employer that has

taken on new staff to deliver a major contract to manufacture medical-grade Personal Protection Equipment (PPE).

7. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 7.1 Anyone wishing to inspect background papers should, in the first place, be directed to Committee and Electoral Services who will make the necessary arrangements.

IMPLICATIONS	APPENDIX 1
Legal	Advice on technical wording has been provided, especially in relation to State Aid guidance impacting grant awards.
Finance and Value for Money	<p>A total of £13.6m has been dispensed through grants to just over 1100 local businesses. The administration of this very substantial grant programme was organised by a cross-departmental officer group which developed a digital form (for eligibility checking), supporting promotional campaign and new internal systems for rapidly assessing and paying grants.</p> <p>This was a significant project which required resources to be drawn from across the organisation, at a time which also coincided with the normal annual cycle of distributing business rate bills and adjusting these for the wide range of additional reliefs, which were announced by the Government as part of national business support measures.</p>
Risk Assessment	No implications
Data Protection Impact Assessment	<p><i>A data protection impact assessment (DPIA) should be carried out at the start of any major project involving the use of personal data or if you are making a significant change to an existing process.</i></p> <p>a. Does the project/change being recommended through this paper involve the processing of personal data or special category data or criminal offence data? A definition of each type of data can be found on the Information Commissioner's Office website via the above links.</p> <p>b. If yes to question a, have you completed and attached a DPIA including Data Protection Officer advice?</p> <p>c. If no to question b, please seek advice from your nominated DPIA assessor or the Information Governance Team at gdpr@medway.gov.uk.</p>
Equality Impact Assessment	<p>a. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper have potential to cause adverse impact or discriminate against different groups in the community? If yes, please explain answer. No</p> <p>b. Does the decision being made or recommended through this paper make a positive contribution to promoting equality? If yes, please explain answer. Not applicable. Report is for information only</p> <p><i>In submitting this report, the Chief Officer doing so is confirming that they have given due regard to the equality impacts of the decision being considered, as noted in the table above</i></p>
Corporate Plan	#2 Place. Provision of direct financial assistance to businesses as part of a local response to COVID-19 has had an immediate impact upon the survival rate of businesses operating within the Borough and indirectly will have contributed to sustaining the incomes of local people. While in the short term, the ability to remain trading has been the primary concern of many enterprises, by acting quickly to dispense the overwhelming majority of funds, the focus remains on supporting the

	vitality of local businesses and going beyond this, in seeking to provide a digital platform for sources of business and third sector support, as well as a responsive communications approach which has sought to engage the issues relevant to the local business community.
Crime and Disorder	No implications.
Digital and website implications	Developing a whole new suite of inter-linked web pages has required a dedicated staff resource throughout the period, to adapt content in response to a regular flow of new and varied schemes launched by Government. This has incorporated additional functionality including web forms, promotional banners and an altered structure for the web site as a whole, which has reflected a cross-departmental response in creating a COVID-19 Business and Community Support Zone.
Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults	No implications.