

**Classification:** Public

**Key Decision:** No

## **Gravesham Borough Council**

**Report to:** Strategic Environment Cabinet Committee

**Date:** 15 February 2022

**Reporting officer:** Assistant Director, Communities  
Service Manager, Town Centre & Cultural Services

**Subject:** Welcome Back Fund

### **Purpose and summary of report:**

To update Committee Members on the Welcome Back Fund (WBF) and associated actions

### **Recommendations:**

Committee are asked to note the content of this report, and feed in any suggestions regarding areas of spend for further consideration

## **1. Background**

- 1.1 In April 2021, the Government launched an extension to the Reopening of High Streets Successfully Fund (RHSS) with a second grant, The Welcome Back Fund (WBF). Both funds were for £94k and focussed on supporting the reopening and recovery of town centres and neighbourhood High Streets.
- 1.2 The Welcome Back Fund is designed to support five key areas. These are:
  - i. The development of a Town Centre Recovery Action Plan
  - ii. Communications and public information activity
  - iii. Business-facing awareness raising
  - iv. Temporary public realm changes
  - v. Support to promote a safe public environment for local area visitor economy.
- 1.3 The ways in which the fund can be used include:
  - Boosting the look and feel of High Streets and Neighbourhood shopping centres to make them welcoming
  - Running publicity campaigns and preparing to hold events to boost footfall and encourage people back into the area, thereby supporting local businesses.
  - Installing and refreshing signage and floor markings to encourage social distancing and safety.

- Improving green spaces on high streets and town centres by planting flowers or removing graffiti
- 1.4 The fund can only be used for new, temporary, activity. It cannot be used to cover any activity already in place and does not cover capital expenditure, permanent changes or grants to businesses.
  - 1.5 Proposed expenditure must be approved in advance by The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), to ensure it meets the scope of the fund.
  - 1.6 The funding is from the European Regional Development Fund, therefore strict EU procurement requirements must be followed to enable expenditure to be reclaimed in arrears.
  - 1.7 All activity and related expenditure must be completed and defrayed by 31 March 2022.

## **2. Activities delivered or planned through the funding**

### **2.1 Town Centre Recovery Action Plan**

- 2.1.1 During Summer 2021, Gravesham Borough Council engaged The Retail Group to draw up a Town Centre Recovery Plan – a specific requirement of the funding. The work involved an engagement exercise with businesses across the town centre and two outlying Neighbourhood High Streets (for comparative purposes) as well as a range of stakeholders, including Members. The engagement was designed to gather views around what town centres and businesses needed to assist them to recover.
- 2.1.2 The findings were included in a final report (attached at Appendix II), which set out recommendations for short, medium and longer term actions. These can broadly be combined into 6 main themes:
  - Vision setting and place shaping – developing the longer term vision for the town centre
  - Branding & Communications – from wayfinding to promoting activities and opportunities in the town centre
  - Business engagement – from supporting businesses to adapt their model, to considering “meanwhile use” of vacant premises or reviewing the physical appearance of their premises
  - Data & benchmarking – Understanding the gaps in the market, how interventions are affecting vacancy rates and footfall
  - Events – using activities and events to create a reason for people to come to the town, increasing dwell time and potentially spend
  - Street scene & infrastructure – improving the look and feel of the town centre environment and improving physical facilities such as seating

2.1.3 Using the above information, a further list of proposed expenditure for how the Welcome Back Fund could be utilised was submitted to DLUHC for approval. These include:

## 2.2 Communications and public information

2.2.1 The Communications Team developed a series of public information campaigns to reflect the changing restrictions and encourage safe shopping conditions, including social distancing and mask wearing. The work also included the development of business packs, which were distributed ahead of each re-opening and provided information about legislation changes, risk assessments and public information messages.

2.2.2 The campaigns and communication have included a mixed-media approach such as social and printed media, posters, billboards, banners, window and vehicle vinyls.

2.2.3 As restrictions continue to change and we start to move towards further relaxation of measures, the communications team have developed a new campaign which focusses on welcoming people back to the area and promoting safe, local shopping. The team are currently working with the street scene team to distribute and position boards and covers in local shopping areas across the Borough

## 2.3 Business facing awareness raising activities

2.3.1 Retail specialists were engaged to work with businesses within the town centre and across 17 neighbourhood High Street areas to understand what type of support they required to adapt and recover post covid.

2.3.2 Over 300 businesses were contacted and as a result of this work, a series of free workshops has been developed and will run throughout February, focusing on four key themes:

- Attracting more customers
- Increasing customer spend
- Delivering effective promotions and online sales
- Planning for growth

2.3.3 As well as the workshops, businesses could also sign up for more in-depth support through a one to one session with an advisor who can discuss issues specific to that business.

2.3.4 The types of businesses who have engaged in this support include electrical retailers, florists, hair & beauty, barbers, food retailers, wedding services, laundry services, pubs and cafés

## 2.4 Covid Information Officers

2.4.1 The Welcome Back Fund supported the recruitment of temporary Covid Information Officers as lock-downs lifted.

2.4.2 The officers helped to distribute key information to businesses and acted as a point of contact for questions or issues arising as town centres re-opened. They also welcomed customers back into the town and helped monitor social-distancing and temporary queuing systems.

## 2.5 Public Realm improvements

- 2.5.1 The Welcome Back Fund allows for works that brighten up the area, providing they are of a temporary nature. This can include cleaning services such as jet washing, graffiti removal and repainting.
- 2.5.2 A Procurement has recently taken place to engage a specialist contractor to undertake this work, focusing initially on the town centre, but moving to outlying areas as time and funds permit. The Street Scene team are currently concluding a review of all neighbourhood shopping areas across the Borough and drawing up a defects list to enable works to be prioritised.
- 2.5.3 In addition, new planting schemes are permissible from the fund and quotations are currently being sought for a planting scheme around the area of St Andrews Gardens

## 2.6 Events and activities

- 2.6.1 The Welcome Back Fund can be used to deliver a series of events and activities that are designed to draw shoppers and tourists back to the area and to drive footfall into the town centre.
- 2.6.2 The fund supported delivery of some Christmas events and a programme has been developed for further activity until the end of March 2021.
- 2.6.3 In addition, a new tourism app - an interactive augmented reality experience – is being developed which takes tourists on a walk through the past. Using technology, the user can get a sense of how historic sites would have looked in the past or can get a sense of interacting with key spaces, for example hearing the ‘hustle & bustle’ of the historic market or seeing how the Blockhouse used to look.

## 2.7 Town Centre Dressing

- 2.7.1 Temporary town centre dressing themes to improve the vibrancy of the High Street and make spaces attractive is also permissible under the fund. Costs associated with dressings such as bunting and flags to help improve the look of the area or to enhance messaging such as the Shop Safe, Shop Local campaign can be covered from within the fund and the Town Centre Manager is currently developing a programme for this.

## **3 Financials**

- 3.2 The Council was awarded £94k from both the Welcome Back Fund and Reopening of High Streets Successfully fund to be directed towards eligible activities that respond to the medium term impact of Covid on local economies up to 31 March 2021.
- 3.3 As set out above, there are strict requirements around what the funding can cover and how services and activities must be procured, with all activity needing to be complete and funds defrayed by 31 March 2021 in order to reclaim.
- 3.4 Assuming that all activities set out above are delivered by 31 March 2021, the fund will be spent in full, with a small surplus of around £8k.

### **3. Recommendation**

- 3.1 Members are asked to note the content of the report and feed in any suggestions regarding areas of planned spend for further consideration.

### **4. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 4.1 Further information relating to the Welcome Back Fund can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/welcome-back-fund>

IMPLICATIONS	APPENDIX 1
<b>Legal</b>	The Council is bound by an agreement to direct the expenditure of this grant to specific activities aimed at supporting the re-opening of local town centres and High Streets
<b>Finance and Value for Money</b>	The Welcome Back Fund is an additional grant funding allocation and linked to the Reopening High Streets Safely fund.
<b>Risk Assessment</b>	Town Centres and High Streets up and down the Country are facing significant challenges. This grant funding aims to support the safe and effective re-opening of local economies and help rebuild sustainable centres and support businesses to recover. The fund is bound by strict conditions around use and EU procurement. A failure to fully comply to those requirements could result in expenditure not being successfully recovered by the Council.
<b>Data Protection Impact Assessment</b>	<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 <a href="#">personal data</a> or <a href="#">special category data</a> or <a href="#">criminal offence data</a>? A definition of each type of data can be found on the Information Commissioner’s Office website via the above links. N/A</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 <a href="mailto:gdpr@medway.gov.uk">gdpr@medway.gov.uk</a>.</p>
<b>Equality Impact Assessment</b>	<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 The actions from this work will support the local business sector and town centre recovery</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. N/A</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>
<b>Corporate Plan</b>	Objective # 2 Place
<b>Crime and Disorder</b>	The Town Centre Recovery Action plan included stakeholder engagement, specifically looking at issues such as perception of crime and disorder, improving the look and feel of the town centre to improve the experience and ‘feel’ of users.

	This information supports the awareness of how people view the safety of their town centres and high streets.
<b>Digital and website implications</b>	None
<b>Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults</b>	As with Crime and Disorder, this work seeks to engage with a wide range of stakeholders to understand their views and perceptions. This information may highlight concerns or improvements that could have a direct impact on safeguarding and therefore can be fed into work of the appropriate teams to consider.