

Report to Cabinet

Subject: Establish a budget for the Welcome Back Fund project and agree an action plan

Date: 5 August 2021

Author: Head of Regeneration and Welfare

Wards Affected: Ernehale – with the potential to impact all wards

Purpose:

To seek approval in accordance with the Council's Financial Regulations for an addition to the revenue budget for the "Welcome Back Fund" Project, which is grant funded through the recently announced ERDF fund.

To seek approval for the implementation of the Welcome Back Fund project across the Borough's town and local centres and obtain the delegations as outlined in the recommendations to enable the project to be delivered.

Key Decision

This is not a key decision.

Recommendation(s)

THAT:

- 1) Cabinet approves by virement the establishment of a budget of £105,200 for the Welcome Back Fund project, which is fully grant funded from the ERDF fund.
- 2) Cabinet delegate authority to the Head of Regeneration and Welfare in consultation with the portfolio holder for Growth and Regeneration to implement the associated action plan subject to any necessary approvals or consents being obtained to enable implementation.

1 Background

Context

- 1.1 In response to Covid19, the Council has its own reset strategy (which fits in with the wider Nottinghamshire Local Resilience Forum recovery strategy). As part of the reset strategy, there are five work streams which are grouped into three overarching aspects as follows:

- Businesses
- Residents and Communities
- The Council – split into
 - i) Frontline services
 - ii) Support Services
 - iii) Finance

As part of the business section, an Economic Bounce-Back Plan has been prepared, in which delivering the 'Re-opening the high street safely action plan' was one of the key interventions identified to support the Borough's economy and to restore public confidence in the high street.

- 1.2 As per the announcement on 20 March 2021, Councils across England are to share in an extra £56m of funding to support the safe reopening of high streets and other commercial areas as the Reopening High Streets Safely Fund (RHSSF) has been expanded to be known as the Welcome Back Fund (WBF). The original funding was £50m (Gedling received £105,213) and this has been doubled across the country, with an extra £6m set aside for coastal authorities. This means Gedling has received a further allocation of £105,213, making £210,426 in total.

Re-opening the high street – original funding awarded

- 1.3 The RHSSF allowed local authorities to put in place measures to establish a safe trading environment for businesses and customers, particularly in high streets, through measures that extend to the end of March 2021 (subsequently extended to June 2021 and now further extended with the introduction of the Welcome Back Fund). The RHSSF focused on the following themes:

- Support to develop action plans for safe reopening (where temporary changes to the public realm are being proposed the respective local authority should work in partnership with public sector landowners);
- Communications and public information (online and digital; media and press activities; and print and publications such as posters and leafleting campaigns);
- Business facing awareness raising activities (e.g. the local authority

may want to communicate to retail businesses on how to make temporary adjustments to their business premises and good practice for social distancing);

- Temporary public realm changes to manage reopening safely. (These changes can help improve consumer confidence and increase, safely, the number of active consumers).

1.4 A series of interventions were identified as part of the approved action plan under the RHSSF:

- Communications and marketing of the high streets:
 - Develop and implement local branding & identity for our towns and local centres;
 - Design and launch phased 'Keep it Local' campaign;
 - Develop and deliver a programme of low level key events / activities to support businesses across towns and local centres;
 - Communicate and promote delivery of interventions by cross-functional teams.
- Business support:
 - independents, existing retailers;
 - business advisors posts;
 - Information officer (support post);
 - EG&R ongoing business support & review of economic indicators.
- Social distancing measures and temporary public realm improvements:
 - Review & implement meaningful social distancing measures and floor markings, where appropriate;.
 - Plan and re-order external spaces & activities e.g. pop-up market stalls;
 - Review access and control of use of key external spaces e.g. amendments to the Traffic Regulation Order for Front Street, Arnold.

Welcome Back Funding – new funding awarded

- 1.5 Funding has been allocated to Gedling, however a grant allocation form needs to be approved with the government department to agree what the funds will be spent on. Once this is agreed, the Council will then enter into a grant agreement. The funds are to be claimed in arrears on a quarterly basis. Any underspend from the RHSSF will be carried forward into this project.
- 1.6 As the RHSSF was previously criticised for being prescriptive on what activities were and were not eligible, there have been some changes for the

Welcome Back Fund. This extends the scope of the eligible spend to include:

- Supporting and promoting a safe public environment for visitor economy, such as improving green space and seating areas to encourage people back to town centres;
- Allow for plans responding to medium term impact of Covid 19 including trialling new ideas especially related to the High Street;
- Publicity campaigns and marketing activity for street food markets to support local businesses.

1.7 The Welcome Back Fund cannot fund:

- Activities that are not additional, so cannot replace funding;
- Capital projects, it is revenue only;
- Grants to businesses.

1.8 The Fund focuses on implementing measures to support our business communities to enable a safer trading environment in public places across our towns and local centres. However, other commercial areas not within the above centres may be eligible for improvement measures but the primary focus of the grant is on public shared spaces that are at the heart of our towns and local centres. The Fund is intended to help address the short to medium term issues of reopening the local economies. It can also be used to support temporary changes to the public realm, but those changes should not be anticipated to last beyond 12 months.

Work done to date

1.9 The Council has assembled a corporate working group (“re-opening high street safely working group”) made up of officers from Economic Growth & Regeneration, PASC, Communications and Marketing team and Environmental Health to work together to ensure that the high streets were re-opened safely and that this is closely monitored.

1.10 As part of this work, there have been a number of events/visits to businesses over the various lock downs and “reopening” of the high street. This included:

- **June 2020** – reopening after the first lock down, where officers visited each open business, the EGR officers/neighbourhood wardens reviewed the pedestrian areas and potential pinch points, PASC undertook a “deep clean” in each local centre, environment health officers were available to provide advice and guidance and the police were engaged with. This helped to establish the action plan for the use of the RHSSF (see Appendix A for more details).

- **July 2020 – March 2021** - support has been offered to over 600 local businesses across nine town and local centres. The type and delivery of support has varied in line with lockdown and social contact restrictions. Ways of communicating with businesses has taken many guises from virtual groups or 1-2-1 mentoring sessions, face to face discussions (when permitted with PPE), production and dissemination of written guidance, emails, social media and telephone calls.
- **April/May 2021** – reopening after the third lockdown, at stages 2 and 3 under the government four stage roadmap. All businesses were revisited but with a particular emphasis on indoor hospitality. Whilst visiting businesses, officers checked if an official Covid-19 poster was displayed, if risk assessments has been undertaken to take into account ventilation and whether there was adequate information and guidance displayed for social distancing and mask wearing. A flyer was also provided that detailed links of where to find the latest guidance and contact details for further help. Hospitality venues were also required to display a valid QR code for customers to scan as part of track and trace procedures or have an alternative such as a diary of customers visiting the premises with contact details, should an outbreak of Covid-19 occur. See Appendix B for more information.
- **June 2021** – originally tied into stage 4 of the roadmap, but was used as an opportunity to engage with the businesses again. This identified a number of specific issues with businesses for the retail business advisor to follow up separately.

1.11 A review of the RHSSF has been undertaken to determine the allocation of funds, how they have been spent and any problems that has occurred. From this work, it is clear that there were a number of small spend items which took longer to deliver than originally envisaged, but they did have high impact. This learning will be considered as part of allocating the Welcome Back Fund.

2 **Proposal**

2.1 The re-opening high street safely/welcome back fund working group have identified a number of key priorities for the additional funding. This includes:

- To support businesses with their continued safe reopening;
- To ensure that the funding provides support for Arnold Town Centre and local/village centres, arterial routes, commercial and neighbourhood retail areas;
- A phased intervention to reflect / monitor the easing of Covid19 restrictions over a period of time;
- To maximise the value by working with local businesses, business organisations, parish councils and trusted partners.

2.2 This group has prepared an action plan to support the funding request to ERDF and this is shown in Appendix C. Within this action plan, the main projects include:

- Admin - £4k
- Communications and public information
 - Communications support - £15k
 - “Quality scheme” for businesses to be accredited for being Covid secure - £5k
- Business facing awareness, support and safety advice – retail business advisor - £15k
- Footfall counters - £5k
- Support and promote a safe public environment
 - Temporary public realm - £50k (various measures across the centres, including revenue works to Arnold, Carlton Square and Netherfield)
 - Bespoke activities within the town centre - £10k

2.3 Approval is being sought to establish a budget of £105,200 for the delivery of the Welcome Back project to be fully funded through ERDF funding (subject to a successful application). This will be merged with the outstanding amount from the RHSSF.

2.4 Once approved, the final delivery plan will be implemented. Members are therefore asked to give the Head of Regeneration and Welfare, in consultation with the portfolio holder for Growth and Regeneration, authority to implement the action plan at Appendix C, subject to any necessary approvals and consents being obtained. Should more extensive changes be required, officers will return to Cabinet with a revised scheme for approval.

3 Alternative Options

3.1 Not to set up the budget, but then the allocation of ERDF funding cannot be spent and the required interventions to re-open our high streets safely will be not be delivered.

4 Financial Implications

4.1 The total cost of the project is capped at the maximum allocation for ERDF of £105,200. In order to progress the project some expenditure will need to be incurred which will be at risk until the grant agreement is in place. This is not expected be any more than one third of the total grant allocation. If the grant agreement is not approved this element of expenditure will be met from existing budgets.

- 4.2 The breakdown and budget for the action plan will be reviewed by the re-opening high streets safely/welcome back working group to ensure spend is distributed to the areas of most need.

5 Legal Implications

- 5.1 If the Council is successful in its funding proposal to ERDF, the Council will need to enter into a grant agreement to claim the money spent back in arrears. The legal service team will review the proposed work programme to ensure that this meets with the funder's requirements (to limit the potential of not being able to claim the money back).
- 5.2 Whilst Cabinet is asked to delegate implementation of the plan to the Head of Regeneration and Welfare in consultation with the portfolio holder for Growth and Regeneration, some of the measures forming part of the action plan will require further legal advice and separate approvals where appropriate, for example in relation to procurement/contract advice.

6 Equalities Implications

- 6.1 An Equality Impact Assessment will be prepared to support this delivery plan at the appropriate time, as there are some proposed actions which may have implications that need to be carefully considered. This will be done as part of the finalisation of the action plan.

7 Carbon Reduction/Environmental Sustainability Implications

- 7.1 This will be considered as part of the identification of the actions and how these will be delivered. Wherever possible, we would like to support low carbon and more environmental friendly measures, including reducing the reliance on car travel and creating additional soft landscaping in the town/local centres.

8 Appendices

Appendix A: June 2020 consultation report

Appendix B: April/May 2021 consultation report

Appendix C: Welcome Back Funding – Gedling's action plan

9 Background Papers

None

10 Reasons for Recommendations

- 10.1 This will ensure that the town/local centres in the Borough are safe places for people to visit and spend their time/money in.
- 10.2 This allows for the swift delivery of the action plan and to allow minor amendments to the scheme where required.

Statutory Officer approval

Approved by: Tina Adams

Date: 23 July 2021

On behalf of the Chief Financial Officer

Approved by: Fran Whyley

Date: 22 July 2021

On behalf of the Monitoring Officer