

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL
ECONOMIC REGENERATION ADVISORY BOARD

04 September 2019

Report of the Chief Executive

Part 1- Public

Matters for Recommendation to Cabinet - Non-Key Decision (Decision may be taken by the Cabinet Member)

1 BUSINESS RATES RETENTION PILOT SCHEMES

Following on from a report to the last advisory board, this report provides further update on the Business Rates Retention Pilot Schemes and seeks endorsement to progress with a shopfront improvement scheme for local centres and parades (subject to KCC agreement).

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Since the last report to the board in June, further work has been undertaken to progress agreed initiatives under the Business Rates Retention Pilot, to carry out further analysis into the potential for a local centres and parades shopfront improvement grant scheme, subject to agreement with Kent County Council.

1.2 Business Rates Retention Pilot Initiatives

1.2.1 The following initiatives are currently part of the Business Rates Retention Pilot Scheme:

- Town and District Commercial Frontages Grant Scheme (to be delivered during 2019/20).
- Tonbridge Town Centre Initiatives – including pop-up shop initiative (2018/19), contribution towards Christmas activities (2019/20).
- Malling Centres Promotion through Visit Kent (2019/20).
- Business Accommodation Grant Scheme (2020/21).

1.2.2 The Town and District Commercial Frontages Grant Scheme is the furthest advanced and information on this initiative is provided in section 1.3.

1.2.3 Under the Tonbridge Town Centre initiatives scheme, as reported in the previous report, the pop-up shop initiative was delivered at the end of 2018, and forged excellent connections with students at West Kent College and Oakley School. In

addition, a contribution has also been made towards the Christmas lights for 2019 to ensure improved coverage along Quarry Hill.

- 1.2.4 Visit Kent have provided a proposal regarding the establishment of a microsite to help promote the Malling Centres, which would fit underneath the current Visit Kent website. This website would be relatively simple in nature, including sections on attractions ('See and Do'), accommodation and restaurants ('Stay and Eat'), events ('What's On'), as well as transport and travel information ('Getting Here'). Given the ongoing maintenance costs, and the resource required to update the events section in particular, officers will be meeting up with colleagues at Sevenoaks District Council later this month to get an idea of the level of resource required.

1.3 Town and District Centres Commercial Frontages Scheme

- 1.3.1 The Town and District Centres Commercial Frontages Grant Scheme was launched at the end of March 2019, with 350 letters sent out to eligible premises in 10 settlements across the borough – Tonbridge, West Malling, Snodland, Borough Green, Larkfield, Kings Hill, East Peckham, Hadlow, Aylesford and Wrotham.
- 1.3.2 As of August 2019, 108 businesses had responded to the letter to ask for the guidance notes and application form. Of these, 15 applications have been approved – 6 from Tonbridge, 4 from West Malling, 2 from Larkfield, and 1 from Borough Green, Kings Hill, and Hadlow – amounting to just over £40,000 of grant funding contributions towards shopfront improvements. These improvements have included re-rendering and painting, new signage, and the refurbishment of (or introduction of new) awnings.
- 1.3.3 Three further applications are currently going through the necessary internal checks for improvement works.
- 1.3.4 The Borough Council is working closely with Kent Rural Retailers (a branch of Action with Communities in Rural Kent) to help businesses that take up the offer with pulling together their applications and the required associated paperwork, and also, where requested, providing general business support and advice. **Through this service, and through correspondence with the Economic Regeneration Team, it is expected that at least a further 5 applications will be submitted in the next few months.**
- 1.3.5 Given the level of interest to date and the pipeline of projects coming forward, it is proposed that the Borough Council look to officially close this programme to new applications by the **end of December 2019**. This will have the benefit of ensuring new bids are submitted in a timely manner, and will also free up officer time thereafter to focus on other priorities.

1.4 Proposed Local Centres and Parades Improvements Scheme

1.4.1 At the last advisory board meeting, it was agreed to undertake initial scoping work on a local centres improvement scheme, which would entail:

- High level audit of frontages within local centres and parades – identifying whether there is any need for intervention.
- Discussions with a small sample survey of local independent businesses to ascertain the level of interest.
- Producing an outline framework for the programme – including eligibility criteria and levels of grant funding.

1.4.2 **High Level Audit:** 46 businesses in our local centres and parades have been identified in the following locations:

- Burham
- Derwent Road, Tonbridge
- Eccles
- Greenacres, Aylesford
- Hildenborough
- Martin Hardie Way, Tonbridge
- Northwood Road, Tonbridge
- Oxley Shaw, Leybourne
- Plaxtol
- Twisden Road, East Malling
- York Parade, Tonbridge
- Woodlands, Ditton
- Wouldham

1.4.3 In some of these locations, there are just one or two outlets (such as Eccles, Burham, Wouldham or Plaxtol), whereas in others there are as many as 15 (York Parade). If the proposed scheme were to be available to independent businesses only, then the total number of eligible businesses would be 36, as some of the larger local centres accommodate a high number of multinational retailers.

1.4.4 A quick survey of these shops found that the condition of the frontages was as follows:

Good	Fair	Poor
5 (14%)	22 (61%)	9 (25%)

1.4.5 **Discussions with a small sample survey of local independent businesses:** As one might expect, there has been a relatively strong level of interest in the scheme amongst a sample of independent businesses located within our local centres and

parades. Indeed, a number of these businesses had come across information about the Town and District Centres scheme and made enquiries:

“We are a local well established unisex hairdressing salon of which I have recently become a 50% partner and we are looking to make improvements both internally and externally at the property. Based on Twisden Road, East Malling I would be very interested in further information to explore whether our location fits your criteria and if so, more details about the process of applying” (Twisden Road, East Malling)

“Any news on whether my proposed shop front improvements would come within your budget for shop front improvements in Tonbridge?” (Northwood Road, Tonbridge)

“We would be very interested in the shopfront improvement scheme to help make our unit more presentable” (Derwent Road, Tonbridge)

1.4.6 Whilst it is not guaranteed that this initial interest will translate into completed projects (as stated in 1.3.2, there were well over 100 initial expressions of interest, that have so far translated into 15 approved applications), there is sufficient interest to suggest a scheme could have a good level of take up.

1.4.7 **Outline Framework for the Programme:** There are key lessons that can be learnt from the Town and District Centres that will help in creating this initiative. They are:

- That the average grant given out has been in the region of £3,000, with only one applicant being awarded the maximum £5,000. It is there proposed that the maximum grant be reduced to £3,500.
- The majority of grants offered have been at a 50% intervention level in order to ensure a strong commitment from the tenant or property owner to the improvement works. It is therefore proposed that the maximum intervention level is set at 50%.

1.4.8 In addition, it is proposed that the locations set out under 1.4.2 will be treated as ‘priority areas’ for the fund.

1.4.9 In terms of eligible works, it is proposed that the same eligible works are retained as the Town and District Centres scheme, but with the addition of measures (both internally and externally) that reduce the carbon footprint of the applicant’s business. This would predominantly focus on a move to energy efficiency measures (heating and lighting). The reason for this additional criteria is to support the Borough Council’s aspiration to be carbon neutral by 2030.

1.5 Legal Implications

1.5.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report.

1.6 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

- 1.6.1 Subject to the agreement of KCC, these initiatives would be funded through the Business Rates Retention Pilot Scheme.

1.7 Risk Assessment

- 1.7.1 Not applicable.

1.8 Equality Impact Assessment

- 1.8.1 The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

1.9 Recommendations

- 1.9.1 That the contents of this report **BE NOTED**.
- 1.9.2 That the proposal to close the Town and District Centres Commercial Frontages Scheme to new applications by the end of December 2019 **BE APPROVED**.
- 1.9.3 That permission to deliver a Local Centres and Parades Improvement Scheme **BE APPROVED** with a view to launching this initiative before the end of December 2019.

The Cabinet Member for Economic Regeneration and the Chief Executive confirm that the proposals contained in the recommendation(s), if approved, will fall within the Council's Budget and Policy Framework.

contact: Jeremy Whittaker,
Economic Regeneration
Manager

Julie Beilby
Chief Executive