

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL
ECONOMIC REGENERATION ADVISORY BOARD

18 May 2021

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 UPDATE ON THE BOROUGH ECONOMIC RECOVERY STRATEGY ACTION PLAN

To provide an overview of the progress made in delivering the Borough Economic Recovery Strategy Action Plan 2021-2023 since its adoption, and to recommend small amendments to the action plan.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 At the Economic Regeneration Advisory Board in November 2020, the Borough Economic Recovery Strategy and Action Plan (Report ERG 20/14) were approved. Since this time, and despite the additional work required in managing our response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Borough Council has made some good progress in addressing some of the priority actions set out in the strategy.

1.1.2 As such, this report provides the Board with information on progress regarding the actions set out in the Borough Economic Recovery Strategy, covering the following 'five channels':

- Communications, Confidence and Trust
- Open for Business
- Supporting Business
- People
- Investment

1.2 Progress to Date

1.2.1 Progress on delivering the Action Plan is set out in Appendix 1. This illustrates that overall good progress has been made across a wide range of initiatives.

1.2.2 By using a RAG analysis of the actions set out in the Strategy, one can see that there are a small number of projects that have a 'red' status. The main reason for this is that the strategy is still very much in its infancy, and that resources over the past year have been very much focussed on the direct Covid-19 pandemic

response. As the situation moves from direct grant support to businesses towards support through wider initiatives, these actions will be picked up and progressed.

1.2.3 In addition, some actions have progressed more slowly than originally envisaged (and flagged as 'amber'), almost entirely due to the restrictions that have been in place and the focus on supporting businesses directly. These include:

- Business Networking Events – there have been some virtual gatherings with business but purely on an information sharing basis. However, it is envisaged that a programme of networking events will be re-established during the latter part of 2021.
- West Kent Retail Support Programme – due to retail closures because of restrictions this was put on hold. However, this will be picked up again during 2021.
- Work with Tourism Partners and Key Attractions to promote the borough as a visitor destination – this is picking up again now with tourism attractions opening in April and May 2021 and promotional activity on Visit Kent media channels has increased.
- Virtual Events to support people back to work or new training opportunities – some limited activity to date, but both virtual and face-to-face events will be implemented as the jobs market opens up.

1.2.4 There have, however, also been several achievements recently, including:

- Between November 2020 and April 2021, over 4,300 grant payments were made to support local businesses through the Covid-19 restrictions, amounting to over £11m. This is in addition to the significant grant funding that was distributed to businesses during March to October 2020.
- The high usage rate for the Covid-19 Recovery Helpline, which has seen over 1,300 business enquiries from T&M based businesses.
- The launch of the Restart Grants Schemes in April 2021 aimed at supporting businesses as the restrictions are released.
- The continued success of the Shopfront Improvement Schemes – over 30 independent retailers have now benefited from these schemes.
- The adoption of the Local Development Order for the Innovation Park Medway site.
- The commencement on site of works to implement several key developments that will support economic growth, including Panattoni Park Aylesford, Vantage Point in Snodland and new facilities at the East Malling Research Station and the completion of Tonbridge Trade Park.

1.3 Minor Suggested Amendments

1.3.1 In order to reflect the work of the Economic Regeneration team more accurately it is proposed that the following minor amendments be made to the Action Plan:

- Replace ‘Investigate use of technology to replace business networking events’ with ‘Deliver a programme of business networking events (including both virtual and face-to-face)’ to reflect that whilst the use of technology is an important tool in communication, it is best used as one option rather than the only option when fostering relationships with local businesses.
- Replace ‘Virtual events to support people back into work and new training opportunities (Jobs Fairs, Skills Events and Webinars) with ‘Deliver both virtual and face-to-face events to support people back into work and new training opportunities’. Again, for the reasons set out above but also because most of the recruitment and training is done online nowadays, and face-to-face events do give people a different medium through which to find out about job and career opportunities.
- Include reference to the ‘Welcome Back Fund’ – this fund did not exist at the time of collating the Action Plan, but given the emphasis on supporting our High Streets, it would seem key to include an action that sets out to “Deliver High Street support through the Welcome Back Fund”.

1.4 Legal Implications

1.4.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report.

1.5 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

1.5.1 There are no financial and value for money considerations arising directly from this report.

1.6 Risk Assessment

1.6.1 Not Applicable.

1.7 Equality Impact Assessment

1.7.1 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.

1.8 Recommendations

1.8.1 That the contents of this report **BE NOTED**.

1.8.2 That permission to carry out minor amendments to the action plan, as set out in 1.3.1 **BE APPROVED** so that it can more accurately reflect the future activities of the Council.

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.

Background papers:

Nil

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