

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 SHOPFRONT IMPROVEMENTS SCHEME

Over the past couple of years, the Borough Council has been running Shopfront Improvement Schemes to support our local independent businesses and help improve the look and feel of our town and local centres. This report provides an update on these schemes and sets out proposed next steps.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 In recognition of the challenges facing High Streets, not only in the Borough but across the Country as a whole, the Borough Council has implemented a wide range of initiatives to ensure that our centres remain attractive places to visit and enjoy. One of these initiatives has been the establishment of shopfront improvement schemes, firstly supporting our 'Town and District Centres', and then our 'Local Centres and Parades'.

1.1.2 The 'Town and District Centres' scheme closed in December 2019, however the 'Local Centres and Parades' scheme remains open, having been significantly disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

1.2 Town and District Shopfront Improvement Scheme

1.2.1 In November 2018, a report was considered by this advisory board on the potential for delivering a shopfront improvement scheme in our town and district centres. Having been agreed, the scheme was launched in March 2019 and had the following criteria:

- Grants of up to £5,000 per shop unit were available
- Eligible works were solely external improvements to the shop unit (internal works were ineligible)
- This scheme focussed on – Tonbridge Centre, West Malling, Snodland, Borough Green, Larkfield, Hadlow, Kings Hill, East Peckham, Aylesford and Wrotham.

- 1.2.2 In addition to support from the Economic Regeneration Team, hands-on help and advice was also available for prospective applicants through Kent Rural Retailers, a branch of Action with Communities in Rural Kent, who were able to provide expert advice on a wide range of issues, including store layout and displays, marketing and promotion as well as practical help with filling in the application forms.
- 1.2.3 In September 2019, the advisory board agreed to close the scheme to new applications at the end of December 2019. By this time, 23 applications had been received, of which 22 were approved for grant support (with each successful applicant having an initial 12 months to implement their schemes, which in a number of cases was extended in order to allow for disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic).
- 1.2.4 The total amount of grant funding allocated to these 22 schemes was £62,031.94. This grant funding has been at least matched by contributions from the applicants themselves. Further information on the programme is set out in Table 1 below:

Location	Number of Schemes	Value of Grants	Number of Schemes Completed	Spend to Date
Tonbridge	10	£25,822.90	9	£24,789.90
West Malling	6	£20,759.04	4	£14,984.04
Larkfield	3	£10,000.00	1	£5,000.00
Borough Green	1	£1,700.00	1	£1,700.00
Kings Hill	1	£1,750.00	1	£1,750.00
Hadlow	1	£2,000.00	1	£2,000.00
Total	22	£62,031.94	17	£50,223.94

- 1.2.5 Unfortunately, despite initial interest from businesses in all eligible areas, no completed applications were ultimately received from businesses in Snodland, East Peckham, Aylesford or Wrotham.
- 1.2.6 Whilst 17 schemes have now been completed, and a further 2 (in West Malling) are currently in progress, there are unfortunately 3 schemes which will not go ahead, predominantly due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

1.3 Local Centres and Parades Scheme

- 1.3.1 The Local Centres and Parades scheme was agreed by the advisory board in September 2019 and launched the same month. Lessons were learnt from the Town and District Shopfront Improvement Scheme and applied to this new scheme. The changes included:

- A reduction in the grant limit down to £3,500 per shop unit

- Eligible expenditure was extended to energy efficiency measures (both internal and external) in order to encourage such improvements to commercial properties in our borough.

1.3.2 To date, there have been 9 applications, amounting to a grant value of £22,326.00. Further information is provided in Table 2:

Location	Number of Schemes	Value of Grants	Number of Schemes Completed	Spend to Date
East Malling	3	£9,226.00	2	£5,726.00
Tonbridge Local Centres	4	£9,149.00	2	£4,640.00
Oxley Shaw	1	£2,587.50	1	£2,587.50
Wouldham	1	£1,363.50	0	0
Total	9	£22,326.00	5	£12,953.50

1.3.3 To date, no applications have been received from businesses in Burham, Eccles, Greenacres (Aylesford), Hildenborough, Plaxtol, Watringbury, and Ditton.

1.3.4 As illustrated in Table 2, five schemes have now been completed, although again the number of new application submissions and progress with existing projects has been impacted heavily by the Covid-19 crisis.

1.3.5 Before lockdown in March 2020, 5 applications had been submitted and approved. However, for much of the remainder of 2020 there were understandably no new applications as independent businesses struggled with the Covid-19 restrictions. At the end of 2020 and into 2021, 4 applications have been submitted and a number of enquiries have come in from other potential applicants. As such, it does seem like businesses are interested in the scheme now many of them are back and running. However, it is feared that with everything that has happened over recent months, many potential applicants will have forgotten about the scheme. As such a focus on promoting the scheme in the coming months and setting a deadline for applications of 30 September 2021 would help to increase take up.

1.3.6 As a contingency measure, it would also be useful to provisionally set aside a small additional sum of Business Rates Retention Pilot funding, of around £20,000, in case there is a high level of demand for the scheme once the deadline for applications is extended.

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 £100,000 was set aside from the Business Rates Retention Pilot reserve to cover the cost of these schemes. To date £84,357.94 of grants have been allocated, of which £63,177.44 has been spent. An additional £1,500 has been spent on advice and support through the Kent Rural Retailer Programme.

1.6 Risk Assessment

1.6.1 The application process has been designed to minimise risk. Applications are shared with colleagues in a number of departments (Business Rates, Licensing, Planning, Building Control and Environmental Health) before being considered by the panel, and payments are only made once receipted invoices and photographic evidence of works have been provided

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 an additional promotional exercise to encourage take-up **BE UNDERTAKEN** in May/June 2021.

1.8.2 That an extension to the Local Centres and Parades Scheme until 30 September 2021 **BE AGREED** for new applications considering the complications related to Covid-19 restrictions.

1.8.3 That, subject to a high level of demand, an additional £20,000 **BE PROVISIONALLY ALLOCATED** from the Business Rates Retention Pilot reserve to the Local Centres and Parades scheme.

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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