

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL
ECONOMIC REGENERATION ADVISORY BOARD

01 September 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 ANALYSIS

Since March 2019, the Borough Council has been delivering a Shopfront Improvement Scheme to help support local independent retailers. With the current scheme coming to an end on 30 September 2021, this report provides a brief update on the scheme and sets out proposals for an analysis of the scheme to identify lessons learnt and to gain an appreciation of its economic impact.

1.1 Background

- 1.1.1 Over the course of the past couple of years, the Borough Council has allocated over £87,000 of funding to local independent retailers through the Business Rates Retention Pilot. The scheme, which comprised the 'Town and District Centres' scheme (March-December 2019) and the 'Local Centres and Parades Scheme' (March 2020-September 2021) has so far funded 25 shopfront improvement projects (34 if Mill Yard in West Malling is classed as 10 businesses rather than 1 collective). A further 2 projects are currently in train, and 5 have been awarded funding, but subsequently been aborted either because the business was forced to close due to the impact of Covid-19 or because the business felt they could no longer provide match-funding for their project.
- 1.1.2 At the last ERAB it was agreed to extend the 'Local Centres and Parades Scheme' until 30 September 2021. Since then, the Borough Council has gone back out to eligible businesses to notify them of this extension, and has received a moderate level of interest resulting in 2 additional applications being approved at the time of writing this report.
- 1.1.3 Now that the overall scheme is nearing an end, it is appropriate to give consideration to analysing the scheme – whether there are any lessons that can be learnt from its delivery, and to ascertain the economic impact it has had for local businesses.

1.2 Proposed Analysis of the Shopfront Improvements Scheme

1.2.1 It is proposed that there are essentially three areas that the analysis focuses on: a) the process of applying for a shopfront improvement grant; b) support and advice during the delivery of the shopfront projects; c) the overall economic impact of the scheme.

1.2.2 In order to gain a full understanding of the **application process**, it is proposed that the following questions could be asked:

1. How did you find out about the scheme?
2. Did you find the application form difficult to fill in? If so, which section in particular did you find difficult?
3. Did you need any support from the Council in order to fill in your application? If so, was the support provided helpful?
4. Did you receive a decision on your application in a timely manner?
5. Is there anything else you would like to say about the application process?

1.2.3 To gain an appreciation of applicants views regarding the **delivery of the project**, the following questions could be asked:

6. Were you given sufficient time to deliver your project?
7. Did you require help from the Council to deliver your project? If so, was help provided in a timely manner?
8. Was the process of claiming your grant clear?
9. Did you receive your grant shortly after submitting your evidence of completion?
10. Is there anything else you would like to say about the delivery of your project?

1.2.4 In assessing the **impact of the scheme as a whole**, it is proposed that the following be asked:

11. Have you received any comments about your new shopfront/energy efficiency measures? If so, what has been said?
12. Has the delivery of your project influenced any of the following:
 - a) Number of customers in your shop
 - b) Turnover generated
 - c) Any cost savings made by the business? If so, please explain.
13. Are there any other impacts that your business has experienced as a result of being part of this scheme?

1.2.5 It is proposed that a short survey (containing the above questions) is sent to participants to gain their views about the scheme, and that this is supplemented by 5 or 6 short interviews to gain a few case studies that provide a more in-depth understanding of how the scheme has been received.

1.3 Next Steps

- 1.3.1 It is proposed that once the overall scheme has completed on 30 September 2021, that this analysis work is undertaken, and that a report be brought to the next possible advisory board meeting.
- 1.3.2 With just over £87,000 currently having been allocated through this scheme (and potentially more by the time this report is published), one of the questions to consider following the analysis will be whether the scheme is closed down, or whether any remaining funding is used to open up a final round for applications (possibly covering both 'Town and District' and 'Local Centres and Parades' areas).

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, with an additional £20,000 provisionally allocated at the May 2021 advisory board meeting should it be required. At the time of writing this report, just over £87,000 has been allocated and £71,000 spent on shopfront grants. An additional £1,500 has been spent on advice and support for applicants through the Kent Rural Retailer Programme.

1.6 Risk Assessment

- 1.6.1 The application process for the scheme 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.
- 1.6.2 There is a negligible level of risk associated with the analysis work.

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 report **BE NOTED**.
- 1.8.2 That the proposed approach to analysing the Shopfront Improvement Scheme as set out in section 1.2 **BE AGREED**.

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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