

**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 BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT**

**Having engaged with and supported thousands of local businesses over the past 18 months through the distribution of Covid-19 business grants, this report puts forward a proposal to use this relationship with the business community to develop new networking events and engagement activity that gives further support in strengthening the resilience of the local economy.**

**1.1 Background**

- 1.1.1 By the very nature of the work it undertakes, the Economic Regeneration team has always had a close working relationship with local businesses, be it working with independent retailers on projects in town centres, supporting start-up businesses with help and advice or helping established businesses find premises to expand or downsize into.
- 1.1.2 However, over the past 18 months the sheer number of businesses that the Economic Regeneration team has worked with in providing grant support or directing to other financial support packages and advice has been considerably greater.
- 1.1.3 As we gradually move towards a recovery, there is an opportunity to use these connections and relationships to create and offer new networking events and engagement activity that will provide further support to our businesses.
- 1.1.4 Having foreseen this potential opportunity, the Economic Regeneration team has already secured the permission of a large number of businesses that have applied to the various rounds of the Additional Restrictions Grant fund to use their contact details for further information on grants and business support activities. This has helped to increase our database from 590 business contacts to just over 950. With further rounds of grant funding, it is expected this figure could ultimately be close to 2000 business contacts.

## 1.2 Potential Business Engagement Activity

1.2.1 In terms of business engagement activity, it is proposed that there are three key strands that could be considered – networking events, an e-bulletin (supplemented by social media), and a Tonbridge and Malling Business Awards. This section sets out how each of these could operate:

1.2.2 **Networking Events** – are a good way of meeting businesses face-to-face to discuss local issues and opportunities, and to help share information and advice. From experience of running previous business events in the borough, the following are considerations:

- a) **Times of the Day:** generally, events are best attended during early morning ('breakfast meetings') or early evening (just after a normal working day). However, it is clear that those with care responsibilities often find these times more difficult to manage. As such, it is probably best to mix things up a little bit over time to ensure different potential attendees have a chance to benefit from the events.
- b) **Times of the Week:** historically, events have usually been best attended during mid-week (Tuesday-Thursday), and this is still the case to a great extent. However, as working patterns change and people work less in a less rigid, structured way, this may be changing to a small degree.
- c) **Venue:** with limited budget for venues, the Council will need to work in partnership with local businesses and organisations from across the borough to access venues.
- d) **Length of Event:** it is proposed that events should not be more than 2 hours in length, ideally shorter.
- e) **Topics:** whilst it helps to keep the events relatively informal, it is also helpful to provide a degree of simple structure to networking events. As such, having a short presentation on a specific topic, followed by a 'question and answer' session and networking works well. There are a wide range of potential topics that could be considered, including business mentoring/support; business finance and grants; energy efficiency/carbon reduction; and recruitment/staff retention.

1.2.3 **Refreshed Email Bulletin** – whilst an email bulletin was distributed on a regular basis during the height of the pandemic, to help notify businesses of new grant opportunities, advice and support services and broader good news stories in the local economy, the distribution list did start to decrease as many individual circumstances changed, and people changed roles and organisations. With an updated database of business contacts, there is great potential in using the bulletin to help get information to a wide range of businesses in the borough. It is proposed that a quarterly bulletin be programmed in, with further bulletins being distributed if messaging needs to be shared quicker.

It is also proposed that amendments are made to the style of the bulletin to align it with the new TMBC website.

1.2.4 **Business Awards** – in 2019, the Council did support a ‘Tonbridge Business Awards’ event in partnership with Tonbridge School and Tonbridge Old Fire Station. In recent months, a few businesses have enquired as to whether these awards will be running again in the future. There may be a possibility to run an awards event for 2022 either for businesses across the borough, or potentially across West Kent.

### 1.3 Next Steps

1.3.1 Should Members be supportive of the three proposed measures, then it is suggested that:

- a) A programme of networking events be created for the remainder of 2021/22.
- b) Work on refreshing the bulletin and building up the database be continued with a view to commencing the quarterly bulleting again in October 2021.
- c) Further research be undertaken to look into opportunities for delivering an awards event during 2022.

### 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 A sum of £10,000 has been set aside from the Business Rates Retention Pilot to use towards ‘Economic Events and Initiatives’. The costs incurred in delivering these activities will be met through this budget.

### 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 report **BE NOTED**.

1.8.2 That the next steps as set out in section 1.3 **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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