

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL
ECONOMIC REGENERATION ADVISORY BOARD

16 February 2022

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 SCHEMES – ANALYSIS AND NEXT STEPS

At the Board meeting in November 2021, a report set out an overview of the recently completed shopfront schemes and a proposal to undertake an analysis of these schemes to help identify lessons learnt, gain an appreciation of their economic impact and to set out potential improvements that could be made to potential future initiatives. This report sets out the findings from this analysis and next steps.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 The consecutive shopfront schemes that ran from 2019-21 were at the centre of the Council's approach to supporting independent retailers and regenerating our local high streets and parades, and have been funded through the Business Rates Retention Pilot reserve. The grant award of the initial Commercial Frontages Scheme (CFS) covered 'up to 80%' of eligible costs but was limited to 50% in the follow-up Local Centres and Parades Scheme (LCPS) to support a greater number of projects with the remaining funding. This was reflected in the high uptake of the scheme in spite of the pandemic. Similarly, during the first scheme proposals primarily focused on renovations to facades but was extended to more energy efficient and sustainable projects during the course of the LCPS when the parameters of eligible works expanded to fully cover these aspects as well.

1.1.2 Both these schemes have been well received by the recipients and local communities, but it is important that they are reviewed to ensure that future initiatives provide a more targeted, sustainable, and beneficial offer.

1.1.3 Feedback from both CFS and LCPS recipients form the basis of this analysis work.

1.2 Approach to the Analysis

1.2.1 As set out in the November 2021 report and the preceding local economic updates, we were able to gauge an anecdotal overview of the scheme, which was overwhelmingly positive, with awardees informing us of the positive impact in the

community and how they would not have been able to finance the renovations without Council support.

- 1.2.2 On the back of this limited information, surveys were emailed to businesses that had received a grant and a number were interviewed to discuss the impact of the scheme and areas for improvement. The response rate for this exercise was just over 40%

1.3 Key Findings:

- 1.3.1 Overall, the feedback received demonstrated the success of the schemes on our local high streets and parades and provided useful pointers for potential future initiatives of this kind.
- 1.3.2 Table 1 sets out some of the headline statistics from the survey, showing good awardee satisfaction with the application process.

Table1: Headline figures from the shopfront scheme survey

Question	Yes	No
Did you find the application difficult to fill in? If so, did the Council provide helpful support?	2 (14%)	12 (86%)
Did you receive a decision on your application in a timely manner?	14 (100%)	0 (0%)
Did you require help from the Council to deliver your project? If so, was help provided in a timely manner?	7 (50%)	7 (50%)
Was the process of claiming your grant clear?	13 (93%)	1 (7%)
Did you receive your grant shortly after submitting your evidence of completion?	13 (93%)	1* (7%)

*One shopfront project is awaiting retrospective planning permission.

- 1.3.3 Whilst there was very high satisfaction with the scheme, it is worth noting that this was conditional on the intervention of the Economic Regeneration team to support the applicants in seeing their projects through to completion. Thus, while the application process was said to have been fairly straightforward, the next phase towards completion required significant Council oversight and support.
- 1.3.4 Some of the questions on the survey were more qualitative in nature and highlighted the following:
- While 9 businesses heard about the scheme through direct contact from the Council, a further 3 applicants heard about it through contacts who had applied to the scheme already (word of mouth).
 - 6 of respondents were grateful for the Council's flexibility in accommodating their delays (mostly resulting from covid-19 restrictions) and exceptional circumstances.
 - 75% of businesses saw increased trade after completion.

- 50% have subsequently saved on running costs as a result of the funded works
- As has been highlighted 5 grant recipients noted the overwhelmingly positive feedback they've received about their new shopfronts from customers and local residents.
- Other applicants welcomed the increased safety, energy efficiency and accessibility of their premises.

1.3.5 The survey welcomed responders to suggest ways of improving the scheme in light of potential follow-up initiatives. One key suggestion was that a number of applicants would have preferred an even more streamlined application process, with a number of respondents struggling to provide the three quotes required as companies invariably didn't respond to their request for quotes. Given the level of grant offered, flexibility could be given on this matter – such as accepting a couple of quotes – although it is important that value for money is demonstrated on any project.

1.3.6 The second point raised was that a number of applicants were unaware of the planning regulations relating to their project or how to apply for planning permission. The necessity of obtaining planning permission was highlighted throughout the application process, with both the guidance notes and Grant Offer Letter stressing the importance of speaking to the Economic Regeneration team and the Planning Department before delivering their project. However, at least a couple of applicants were required to apply last minute or retrospectively (with support from the Council) as they simply did not believe they needed permission.

1.4 Next Steps:

1.4.1 The overall conclusion from this analysis work is that the shopfront schemes were both well received and well managed in their delivery.

1.4.2 However, there are a number of ways we could improve a potential future initiative of this kind based on the feedback we received:

- We could undertake a greater amount of promotion highlighting such an initiative. Most applicants heard about the scheme through us, so it follows that if we promoted the scheme more extensively, we might have received more applications. There is a great opportunity to highlight successful projects in our local communities to drive demand for a follow up initiative.
- Whilst most grant recipients praised the straightforwardness of the application process, they did struggle to obtain 3 quotes. As such, we could decide to relax the requirement to two quotes in a future initiative of this kind.
- There was confusion from some applicants over the need for local planning and building consents, as it appears that some applicants did not read the policy or terms set out on the application form. In future initiatives of this kind, we should attempt to be even more explicit in reminding applicants to check before proceeding with their projects.
- The scheme was open for about 18 months during the pandemic. This predictably impacted on project delivery and the funding that applicants were able to provide towards projects. Whilst we'll definitely maintain flexibility, we

should be able to streamline and shorten the process towards completion in future schemes as we move away from the period of covid restrictions.

- 10 LCPS grants were awarded to applicants who had a sustainability focus to their project. Given the Council's climate and economic commitments, sustainability should be at the heart of any future initiative of this kind.

1.4.3 At the time of writing this report, all but three projects have been fully completed. Once completed, a total of £88,871 will have been distributed in grants. The total budget allocated towards the schemes amounts to 'up to £120,000' following approval by the Board in May 2021 to provisionally allocate an additional £20,000 on top of the original budget of £100,000. As such, there is still a budget of up to £31,000 that could be allocated towards a further round of shopfront improvement grants.

1.4.4 Given the positive feedback and the small remaining budget it is proposed that this scheme be re-opened. However, the criteria for the next round should incorporate the improvements set out in paragraph 1.4.2, and also reflect the findings of the town centre analysis work, which is currently be undertaken, and will be reported to the next Board meeting in May 2022.

1.5 Legal Implications

1.5.1 The matters raised in this report are considered to be routine, uncontroversial or not legally complex and a legal opinion has not been sought on these proposals.

1.6 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

1.6.1 Up to £31,000 remains allocated in the Business Rates Retention Pilot Reserve for the Shopfront Improvement Scheme.

1.7 Risk Assessment

1.7.1 There is a negligible level of risk associated with the analysis work.

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 report **BE NOTED**.

1.9.2 That the key findings of the analysis as set out in 1.3 **BE ENDORSED**.

1.9.3 That a further round of the Shopfront Improvement Scheme, reflecting the findings of the scheme analysis and town centre analysis work, **BE AGREED**, with detailed scheme criteria being presented at the next board meeting in May 2022.

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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