

To:	Vivian Branson, Cabinet Member for Economic Regeneration
From:	Jeremy Whittaker, Strategic Economic Regeneration Manager
Director:	Julie Beilby, Chief Executive

BRIEFING NOTE: EXECUTIVE - NON-KEY DECISION

WEST KENT BUSINESS SUPPORT PROGRAMME

Summary of Issue:

In the Tonbridge & Malling UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) Investment Plan it was highlighted that in recent years the level of business support on offer has reduced considerably, yet at the same time, with increased levels of flexible working, West Kent is becoming an ever more attractive location to start and run a business . Generic support is still available through the Kent & Medway Growth Hub, however, there is very little intensive support on offer for small and start-up businesses. Indeed, whilst the West Kent Partnership has provided a business advice service in the past, this was relatively small-scale and closed in 2021.

The delivery of a new West Kent Business Support Programme would look to provide a much-needed service that meets the needs of small and start-up businesses in the local area.

Recommendation:

That the report **BE NOTED**.

That, subject to the UKSPF Investment Plan being approved by Government, the proposed approach to the West Kent Business Support Programme as set out in this report **BE AGREED**.

1 Background

1.1 In anticipation of the approval of the Tonbridge & Malling UK Shared Prosperity Fund Investment Plan by Government, the Economic Regeneration team are pulling together a number of initiatives that support the local economy. Some of these initiatives will be delivered in partnership with West Kent authorities, in order to:

- address shared issues, especially relating to business survival rates, skills and employability.
 - ensure a consistent approach across West Kent
 - maximise the efficient use of resources in delivering the scheme.
- 1.2 One such scheme is the delivery of a West Kent Business Support Programme. Each of the three local authorities will be using £54,500 of UKSPF funding to create this programme, which will run up until March 2025.
- 1.3 The programme will be led by Sevenoaks DC as the Accountable Body for the West Kent Partnership, with all three authorities closely involved in the oversight of the programme. Business advisers will be commissioned to deliver the advice and support.

2 Main Issues

- 2.1 As set out in the UKSPF Investment Plan, the commissioning of the West Kent Business Support Programme will focus its energies on existing small businesses and new start-ups in the West Kent area, and specifically:
- Provide ‘one-to-one’ and ‘one-to-many’ advice and support – ideally with a dedicated small team of advisers for the West Kent area.
 - Deliver a programme of training courses that businesses across West Kent can access.
 - Deliver a West Kent Annual Procurement Event and an Annual Conference.
 - Support a minimum of 60 West Kent businesses with 8-hours of mentoring and start-up advice, and enables these businesses to access micro-grants (funding held by the West Kent Partnership) to help with increasing their resilience and sustainability.
- 2.2 In addition, it is expected that some of the funding allocated to the programme will be used on marketing and promotion. In doing so, it will meet the requirements of the UKSPF branding guidelines and promote the role of the 3 West Kent authorities. Marketing of the programme is particularly important given that experience from previous initiatives has illustrated that there have been some pockets of low take up of available business support and funding in the past.
- 2.3 In delivering the programme it will be essential that there is an even distribution of support across the West Kent area, ensuring that Sevenoaks District, Tunbridge Wells Borough and Tonbridge & Malling Borough each see equal benefit to their areas. Regular updates on the programme will be provided to ensure this.
- 2.4 The following are also important considerations:
- That innovative approaches to business support are encouraged as the West Kent Partnership is particularly interested in trying new approaches to helping local businesses rather than repeating previous endeavours.

- That the support offer covers information that will assist businesses in limiting or reducing business carbon emissions in order to tie in with our carbon net zero aspirations.
- That the Kent and Medway Growth Hub does provide generic advice and that where appropriate, efforts should be made to make sure that the support provided through this programme complements, and adds value to the Growth Hub.

2.5 £54,500 of the borough council's UKSPF Investment Plan has been allocated towards this project, and as such the total budget across the three local authorities stands at £163,500 of UKSPF funding for the period up to March 2025:

- £13,500 has been allocated for 2022/23 (£4,500 being provided by each of the three local authority's UKSPF programmes), and it is expected that this will be spent on setting up the programme, marketing and promotion and initial support.
- £60,000 has been allocated for 2023/24 (£20,000 being provided by each of the three local authority's UKSPF programmes) and it is expected that this will be spent on the delivery of the programme and marketing and promotion.
- £60,000 has been allocated for 2024/25 (£20,000 being provided by each of the three local authority's UKSPF programmes) and it is expected that this will be spent on the delivery of the programme and marketing and promotion.
- In addition, a total pot of £30,000 (£10,000 being provided by each of the three local authority's UKSPF programmes) has been allocated towards micro-grants (£500) split evenly across 2023/2024 and 2024/25 (£15,000 per annum).

2.6 The council has been informed that we should have approval for our Investment Plans from 'October 2022 onwards'. However, given the need to get this project up and running during 2022/23, work is being undertaken ahead of this approval in order to put us in a good position to start delivering it as quickly as possible once approval has been secured.

2.7 As the Accountable Body for the West Kent Partnership, Sevenoaks District Council will lead on the tender process for this programme shortly. However, ahead of undertaking this tender process, the agreement of the Cabinet Member for Economic Regeneration regarding the proposed contents of the programme is sought.

3 Legal Advice

3.1 The matters set out in this briefing note are considered routine or uncontroversial and a legal opinion has not been sought.

4 Financial and Value for Money implications

4.1 As set out in section 2, £54,500 of UKSPF funding has been allocated towards this programme in the Tonbridge and Malling Investment Plan. This is split as follows over three years:

- 2022/23 - £4,500
- 2023/24 - £25,000
- 2024/25 - £25,000

4.2 There is no requirement for the borough council to provide any match-funding for this particular programme.

5 Risk Assessment

5.1 There are some relatively low-level risks associated with this particular programme, including:

- That the tender proves to be unattractive to the market, or companies do not have capacity, and as such there are no submissions made. **Mitigation:** every effort has been made to make this a viable programme using experience of previous delivery. In the event of no submissions, minor amendments to the tender documents would need to be made and a new tender process would have to be undertaken.
- That the commissioned organisation does not deliver the required outputs and outcomes to schedule. **Mitigation:** the contract will be closely monitored with regular update meetings to ensure that the programme remains on track.
- That changes to the economy impact on the ability of the scheme to deliver as expected. **Mitigation:** discussions would need to be had with DLUHC in order to amend the expected outputs and outcomes in order for them to realistically represent the economic climate.

6 Public Sector Equality Duty

6.1 In commissioning this scheme, the Accountable Body will ensure that the programme has due regard to the need to achieve the objectives set out under s149 of the Equality Act 2021.

7 Consideration by Overview and Scrutiny

7.1 We do not consider that this matter needs to be considered by O&S/SSC before a decision is made.

7.2 It is not a key decision as the spend is less than £100,000 and the effects on communities living or working in the area are unlikely to be significant. The funding for the scheme is part of the UKSPF Investment Plan, the submission of which was approved by Cabinet in July 2022. The decision does not cut across 2 or more portfolios nor does it propose a new or amended strategy. We are therefore of the view that this decision can be taken by the Cabinet Member.

8 Communications

- 8.1 As this programme is specifically geared towards supporting the local business community it will be important to ensure that efforts are made to ensure there is a good level of awareness about it. Some of this will be undertaken through the West Kent Partnership, but it will be essential to ensure we get the message out locally (predominantly through social media channels and our website) to encourage Tonbridge and Malling businesses to access the support they need.
- 8.2 All Members will be provided with information about the programme so that they are able to answer any questions from local residents, and also so that they can share with businesses in their wards.

9 Conclusion

- 9.1 This programme represents an opportunity to provide additional support to local small and start-up businesses, and it is therefore requested of the Cabinet Member for Economic Regeneration to support the recommendations highlighted above.

10 Annexes

- 10.1 None