

Report of	Meeting	Date
Director of Planning and Development (Introduced by Cabinet Member (Planning, Business Support and Regeneration))	Cabinet	Wednesday, 13 th October 2021

Is this report confidential?	No
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Is this decision key?	No
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Business Recovery Post COVID Member Working Group Update

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of the report is to summarise the activity and actions of the Business Recovery Member Working Group following their final meeting in August 2021.

Recommendations to Cabinet

2. That Cabinet note the contents of the report and congratulate the Group on their work over the past 18 months.
3. That Cabinet support the recommendations arising from the Group which will be the subject of future discussions and reports for key decisions.

Reasons for recommendations

4. The Group has met regularly during the COVID Pandemic and has served an extremely useful vehicle to shape business support. Given that we are emerging from the pandemic now it is felt that the group's business is done but could be reconvened should the need arise in the future.

Other options considered and rejected

5. The only other option is to continue with the Group but it is felt it has had a large impact during the pandemic and has set plans in motion for the period beyond. Given this it was felt by the Group to have a final meeting in August but clearly the Group could reconvene if needed.

Corporate priorities

6. The report relates to the following corporate priorities: (please bold all those applicable):

An exemplary council	Thriving communities
A fair local economy that works for everyone	Good homes, green spaces, healthy places

Background to the report

7. Following the COVID19 pandemic, the lockdown, and the major impacts on the economy a dedicated response to the business community was required. South Ribble Council were charged by central Government to deliver grants to small businesses and those in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors. More recently South Ribble have been delivering discretionary grants.
8. Alongside the delivery of grants the Council has also provided a dedicated enquiry line and email for businesses to seek advice from.
9. Given the impact on the economy it was decided that a Member Working Group should be formed to assist and advise officers and the Cabinet in supporting the local economy and shaping the recovery phase.
10. The Member Working Group first met on 10th June 2020 and has met 19 times until August 2021.
11. The Member Working Group was set up with the following Members:
- Cllr. J Flannery (Chair)
 - Cllr. W. Adams
 - Cllr. D. Howarth
 - Cllr. P. Smith
12. Additionally, the Member Working Group has been serviced by the Director of Planning and Development, and representatives from the Investment and Skills, Finance, and Revenues and Benefits teams.
13. The first report of the Working Group was considered by Cabinet in August 2020 which identified what the group had achieved in its first few months and areas to focus on moving forward.

Business Grants

14. A key focus for the group has been the delivery of the COVID Business Grants. The key achievements as at the close of the grants schemes (excluding ARG3) is as follows:
- £34.9 million of grants awarded to local businesses
 - 7,053 individual grant payments made to 2,056 businesses
 - 19 different grant streams managed and delivered

15. At each meeting the Group was provided with an overview of where the various grant streams were up to and any emerging issues.. The Group particularly focused their work on the discretionary grants where the criteria were looser and the Council had the authority to award grants differently to the set criteria for small businesses and those in the retail, hospitality and leisure sector.
16. In terms of the discretionary grants the Member Working Group heard about particular anonymised business circumstances and provided views on these so that Officers consider them as part of any grant approval process. The Group were also very keen to ensure payments have been issued quickly whilst recognising that a robust and fair process needs to be maintained.
17. The grant delivery met all the Government requirements and importantly we distributed all funding awarded to us. This has meant the Council has received an additional £706,699 of funding through the ARG3 programme. The Business Recovery Group have considered how best this funding could be used and have recommended to the Leader that the funding should be matched with the £150,000 identified in the Council's budget to deliver the following:
 - Summer Grant for Market Traders
 - Recruitment/ Training/ Re-Training Grants (for unfunded training)
 - Sector Skills / Recruitment Support e.g. Hospitality & Care Sectors
 - Bringing Empty Premises back into use
 - Reconfiguring workplaces to be Covid Secure / Resilient (not capital)
 - Start-up Grant – Home Based
 - Start-up Grant – in premises
 - Late ARG applicants on hardship grounds (loss of income) – home based
 - Late ARG applicants on hardship grounds (loss of income) – in premises
 - Contingency Fund for previous grants verified after payment cut-off
 - Mental Health Support to Business Owners

Business Engagement

18. One key area that the group was keen to explore is hearing views from local businesses. A range of businesses and organisations were invited to attend the group to share experiences and issues. The Group were encouraged that the feedback was that the economy of South Ribble has not been as impacted as much as some other areas but there was a clear recognition that the economic impacts may well not yet be seen. The Group were also encouraged that the views held by the Council were in sync with the business community.
19. The key issue that has come out very strongly from the businesses is the impact on mental health from the crisis and the consequences for a healthy workforce. This was identified by businesses who spoke at the meetings but also other businesses who have contacted the Councillors separately and also in day to day support provided Officers. This is an area the Group would particularly like the Cabinet to focus on in the future.
20. The Group has also received reports on wider responses at the Lancashire County level such as the Lancashire Recovery Plan and the role of the Lancashire Economic Partnership. Furthermore they have discussed with Officers options for where the business support needs to be focused beyond COVID.

Recommendations to Cabinet

21. Key issues that the Group would like Cabinet to focus on in the future are as follows:

- Providing support for mental health within the business community for employers and employees
- Massive strides forward have been made with micro businesses which we didn't know existed therefore those relationships need to be kept, developed, and supported
- A Business Forum or event to be held as soon as possible to engage with the micro and SME businesses with a view to shaping our support in the future
- Business hubs would provide a useful vehicle for businesses to network and establish connections. Schemes such as The Business and Skills element of the Leyland Town Deal are an example of how this can happen. There is an opportunity to deliver hubs in other parts of the South Ribble
- That an economic strategy and action plan be developed to maintain momentum
- That the Member Working Group pause their work for now but to be on standby to meet as and when the need arises

Climate change and air quality

22. The work noted in this report does not impact the climate change and sustainability targets of the Council's Green Agenda and all environmental considerations are in place.

Equality and diversity

23. The Business Grants have been open to all eligible businesses. Where Businesses have had difficulties for instance in terms of format of forms the team have adapted and assisted businesses to complete their applications so that no business is unfairly treated.

Risk

24. All the grant processes have been developed in conjunction with Audit colleagues with all risks minimised. Set anti fraud checks on business and applicants have been undertaken for every application made.

Comments of the Statutory Finance Officer

25. As outlined in the report the Council received additional funding of £706k to implement the third round of ARG, this must be spent by the end of March 2022. In 2020/21 the Council set aside £150k of reserves to further supplement the support outlined in this paper.

Comments of the Monitoring Officer

26. There are no legal implications arising from this report. Any future decisions to be made in this context will follow due process.

Background documents

COVID Business Grants Guidance

Appendices

None

Report Author:	Email:	Telephone:	Date:
Jonathan Noad, Director of Planning and Development	Jonathan.noad@southribble.gov.uk	01772 625625	29 th September 2021