

CABINET

DATE OF MEETING: 7 OCTOBER 2020

TITLE OF REPORT: WELCOME BACK FUND

Report of: Joint Chief Executive

Cabinet Member: Leader of the Council

I PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report provides an update on the Welcome Back Fund application to provide a district-wide e-commerce platform, which was investigated by a Cabinet working party following Cabinet's request in July 2021.
- 1.2 This report also provides an update of existing applications and informs Cabinet of a further application for funding from Yateley Town Council to the Government's Welcome Back Fund.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That Cabinet
 - Endorses with the Cabinet Working Group recommendation that the application for a district-wide e-commerce platform does not progress to the next stage of the Welcome Back Fund process (see para 4.6); and
 - Approves the Yateley Town Council applications to progress to the next stage of the Welcome Back Fund process (For reference, the next stage is to submit a detailed Action Plan and Service Level Agreement for consideration by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). If the application is approved by DLUHC, then the proposed scheme(s) can then commence.)

3 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The Government's Welcome Back Fund has provided councils across England a share of £56 million from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) to support the safe return to high streets and help build back better from the pandemic.
- 3.2 Businesses benefit from high volumes of customers, by ensuring safe public spaces there should be an increase in customers. The Welcome Back Fund helps Councils boost tourism by improving green spaces and provide increased outdoor seating areas, markets and food stall pop-ups – providing people safer options to reunite with friends and relatives.
- 3.3 The funding can be used by Councils to:

- Boost the look and feel of their high streets by investing in street planting, parks, green spaces and seating areas to make high streets as beautiful and welcoming as possible
- Run publicity campaigns and prepare to hold events like street markets and festivals to support local businesses
- Install signage and floor markings to encourage social distancing and safety
- Improve high streets and town centres by planting flowers or removing graffiti

3.4 The fund cannot be used to support:

- Activity that provides no additionality. This funding needs to create additional activity and should not be replacing the income for already committed expenditure.
- Capital expenditure – This is a revenue funding project intended to help local authorities address the longer-term impact of Covid-19 on local economies. This can include activities that last as long as restrictive measures are in place as well as activities that help future proof high streets. Permanent changes are not permitted. The cost of purchasing items should be reasonable and demonstrate value for money and not result in ‘assets’ or ‘major assets’.
- Grants to businesses – Funding cannot provide direct financial support to businesses to make adaptations to premises, purchase PPE, purchase goods or equipment or off set wages or other operating costs.

It should also be noted that support for privately owned spaces is not within scope of the Welcome Back Fund.

3.5 Parish and Town Councils, Business Improvement District (BID) or other relevant stakeholders have been given the opportunity to identify projects, which would meet the Welcome Bank fund criteria listed above. Suggested projects should focus on the centres within the district with shops and a clear public realm, such as in Fleet, Hook, Hartley Wintney, Yateley, Blackwater and Odiham. Proposals from any parishes which meet the Governments requirements are welcomed.

3.6 Hart District Council was allocated **£86,003** from the Welcome Back Fund.

3.7 In July, Cabinet approved the following applications to progress to the next stage of the Welcome Back Fund process:

	Applicant	Proposal	Cost
1	Fleet BID with the backing of Fleet Town Council	The temporary installation of up to three parklets on wider pavement sections of Fleet Road.	£15-16,000 each Total cost requested up to £57,600 including VAT

2-3	Odiham Parish Council	- Production of a two-sided leaflet promoting local businesses - Creation of picnic areas - Hiring 10 picnic benches from June to September, the provision of bins, bin emptying and associated wayfinding signage and promotion	£1,908 £3,898.80
		Maximum Total (excluding VAT)	£63,406.80

3.8 Cabinet also agreed to set up a small working party to investigate an application (Application 4) to create a district-wide retail e-commerce platform, with a potential cost of between **£12-30,000 (excluding VAT)**.

4 UPDATE ON THE DISTRICT-WIDE E-COMMERCE PLATFORM

4.1 On 1 July 2021, Cabinet agreed to support the principle of submitting a bid as outlined in Application Four (Online Ecommerce Platform). Cabinet required greater clarification as to the details of the option proposed (there was a wide range) and also an assessment of the current and future financial implications that may arise from the investment.

4.2 Cabinet therefore agreed to set up a small working group to identify the details of the ecommerce platform before reporting back to Cabinet with a recommendation to proceed and a full project plan. The report back to Cabinet required the life-time costs of the project to be identified.

4.3 The working group agreed to undertake a survey of local businesses to understand the potential interest in an e-commerce platform before progressing with a full project and cost plan. The survey ran from 16 August to 24 September 2021.

4.4 The survey was promoted through the Council's fortnightly business newsletter, which has a reach of around 400 local businesses. The survey was also promoted on the Council's website, the Hart of Business website and through social media as well as referenced in Parish Link newsletters. Details of the survey were also shared directly with key stakeholders such as the Parish/Town Councils and the BID.

4.5 Notwithstanding the wide level of publicity for the survey, over the almost six weeks of the consultation, only 39 businesses completed the survey. The results were as follows:

Question 1: Would you register your business to be part of an online shopping and ordering platform similar to the examples provided above?

Responses:	Yes	25 businesses	(6%)
	No	14 businesses	(36%)

Question 2: If the platform proved to be a success, would you contribute towards the ongoing cost in future?

Responses:	Very likely	6 businesses	(15%)
	Likely	13 businesses	(33%)
	Neither likely nor unlikely	11 businesses	(28%)
	Unlikely	1 business	(3%)
	Very unlikely	8 businesses	(21%)

Question 3: What is the size of your business?

Responses:	Microenterprise (1-9)	33 businesses	(85%)
	Small enterprise (10-49)	4 businesses	(10%)
	Medium-sized enterprise (50-249)	1 business	(2.5%)
	Large enterprise (250+)	1 business	(2.5%)

4.6 The working group considered the results collected. Give the relatively low interest in the e-commerce platform by local businesses and the likely whole-life cost of the project taking into account estimated contributions from local businesses, the Working Group recommendation to Cabinet is that the application for a district-wide e-commerce platform does not progress to the next stage of the Welcome Back Fund process.

4.7 The remaining funds, without the e-commerce platform, are **£22,596**.

5 APPLICATIONS TO THE WELCOME BACK FUND

5.1 In addition to the above scheme, the Council has received five applications to the Welcome Back Fund from Yateley Town Council:

	Proposal	Cost (excluding VAT)
1	Large Lit Christmas Character	£2,400
2	Picnic Tables	£2,994
3	Wildflower Turf	£5,221
4	Heavy-Duty Gazebo for community events	£1,215.95
5	Larger capacity dual litter/recycling bins	£3,265
	Combined total cost of the above applications	£15,095.95

5.2 Please find a copy of Yateley's applications attached at **Appendix 1**.

5.3 Yateley Town Council consider that the five proposals will contribute to encouraging more economic participation and safe socialisation, specifically by:

- Attracting more people to visit the many shops, pubs, restaurants, markets and service-based retailers;

- Providing safe, outdoor gathering opportunities to reassure the community;
- Capitalising on the continuing 'stay at home' trend by improving the town's green spaces; and
- Making Yateley town a welcoming place to visit.

APPLICATION 1: LARGE LIT CHRISTMAS CHARACTER

- 5.4 The first application proposes the display of a large illuminated Christmas character, which would *"bring some Christmas cheer to the people of Yateley and to give people another reason to visit."* The super-sized Christmas character would be located on Church End Green, outside the Dog & Partridge pub and would be promoted as a 'safe selfie' outdoor destination, to generate interest and social media engagement. The character would also feature in the Yateley & District Lions' Christmas Fair to promote the event.
- 5.5 The Town Council proposes to link with local businesses to encourage them to use the Christmas character as part of their festive promotional activity.
- 5.6 Three quotes have been sort for the Christmas Character, which range between £2,400 to £3,948.
- 5.7 In terms of monitoring and evaluating the scheme, three surveys are proposed before and/or after installation:
- Local businesses, to measure the impact on footfall;
 - A Facebook poll; and
 - During the Lion's Christmas Market, to evaluate if the promotion of the Christmas character as a selfie destination influenced their decision to visit
- 5.8 Social media will also been monitored to record public opinion.

APPLICATION 2: PICNIC TABLES

- 5.9 The second application proposes the installation of six wheelchair accessible picnic tables, made from recycled plastic, on Yateley Green and the Darby Green Playing Fields. The aim of the picnic tables is to improve Yateley's local greenspaces, and encourage *"people to meet friends and family safely outside, during the time when COVID-19 still presents a risk"*.
- 5.10 The picnic tables will be in locations where sports and events regularly take place and enable the Town Council to develop the weekly markets into more of a food court style offering, which could attract more people to visit and buy from local businesses, both those trading at the market and from other retailers within Yateley.
- 5.11 Three quotes have been sort for the picnic tables, which range between £2,994 to £3,803.64.

5.12 In terms of monitoring and evaluating the scheme, three counts are proposed before and/or after installation:

- Number of visitors to the parks;
- Number of visitors using the benches;
- Number of visitors at the twice weekly markets held on Yateley Green

5.13 A Facebook survey will also been undertaken to determine if the picnic benches are encouraging greater use of the outdoor space.

APPLICATION 3: WILDFLOWER TURF

5.14 The third application proposes two wildflower areas to make Yateley's greenspaces more welcoming. These would be located:

- On the highway verge by Stillwell Close, Yateley (near the main group of retailers) and
- On part of the Darby Green Playing Fields, Darby Green.

5.15 The Town Council has undertaken previous wildflower projects in the area and would like to extend the project to two additional areas. In their application, the Town Council states that *"Wildflowers not only support biodiversity but also generate a huge feel-good factor in the community, making our town an attractive and welcoming place to visit. By placing wildflowers outside shops, we believe it will encourage people to walk further into the town to visit these businesses."*

5.16 Three quotes have been sort for the wildflower turf, which range between £5,221 to £7,957.50.

5.17 In terms of monitoring and evaluating the scheme, two surveys are proposed before and/or after installation:

- Local residents and
- Local businesses, to measure the impact on footfall;

5.18 It is also proposed to keep a comments box/e-survey card with local businesses to capture comments from customers.

APPLICATION 4: HEAVY-DUTY GAZEBO FOR COMMUNITY EVENTS

5.19 The fourth application proposes the purchase of two heavy-duty gazebos (3x6m) to create a covered focal point for event demonstrations, public participation activities, live music and other community events to enhance the quality and appeal of the event.

5.20 Next year, the Town Council are planning their first large scale outdoor event, the Feel Good Festival. The festival is designed to promote physical and mental wellbeing, with a range of sports activities, healthy food

demonstrations, talks and local organisation/business stalls. In their application, the Town Council state

“we feel this event is needed more than ever now, to bring people back together during the COVID recovery and to promote the concept of healthy lifestyles, which is part of the Council’s corporate vision. Having the use of two large gazebos will enable us to create a focal point for workshops run by local businesses, demos, talks and music. This would have the double benefit of sharing information with the community and inspiring people to find a new hobby or community group to join, in a safe and COVID secure outdoor environment. The scale of the event is likely to bring many people to the town, who will find out about the services offered locally to improve their health and wellbeing.”

- 5.21 The gazebos will also be used for other community events organised by the Council.
- 5.22 Three quotes have been sort for the gazebos, which range between £1,215.95 to £1,272.16.
- 5.23 In terms of monitoring and evaluating the scheme, the number of visitors to the gazebos and how many people sign up for the demonstrations will be measured. Feedback will also be sort from event suppliers regarding usefulness of the gazebos for their organised workshop or demonstration.

APPLICATION 5: LARGER CAPACITY DUAL LITTER/RECYCLING BINS

- 5.24 The fifth application proposes five large capacity dual litter/recycling bins. The new bins would be placed around the main retail areas of Yateley Green and Darby Green Playing Fields with the picnic tables, Tindal Green and Frogmore Green. Because this is potentially a longer term asset for the area, specific clarification will be sought from Central Government before submitting the claim for approval.
- 5.25 With more people staying at home, the Town Council have seen an increase in the amount of litter generated from local convenience shops and food retailers, which are often taken away and enjoyed in the town’s open spaces. Larger capacity bins, with a separate mixed recycling unit, are now required to keep up with the volume of litter. These new bins will help keep Yateley’s retail and green spaces tidy and appealing for visitors and residents alike.
- 5.26 Three quotes have been sought for the bins, which range between £3,265 to £3,833.65.
- 5.27 In terms of monitoring and evaluating the scheme, the application proposes the following:
 - To monitor litter levels before and after the bins have been installed;
 - To track litter complaints received before and after installation; and

- To use SurveyMonkey cards in key shops close to the installation sites to request feedback on litter levels.

6 NEXT STEPS

- 6.1 Subject to the decision of Cabinet, Hart District Council will work with the successful applicant(s) to submit a detailed Action Plan and Service Level Agreement for consideration by DLUHC. If the application(s) are approved by DLUHC, then the proposed scheme(s) can commence.
- 6.2 Funding has been requested for the Fleet Christmas Festivities Event from the Town Council; Hart District Council will review funding criteria and determine if additionality can be granted and therefore funding from the Welcome Back passed over.

7 FINANCIAL AND RESOURCING IMPACT

- 7.1 Funding has been provided by Central Government. Hart District Council must provide officer support, which is not identified as part of the Service Planning Process but does form part of our Recovery Activity. We do not anticipate, at present, the need for an increased revenue budget.

8 LEGAL AND EQUALITIES IMPACT

- 8.1 Applicants will need to adhere to the rules of the Welcome Back Fund which are available on the Government's website:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/welcome-back-fund>
- 8.2 Equalities impact assessments may need to be carried out for any successful scheme.

9 ACTION

- 9.1 Subject to the decision by Cabinet, Officers will administrate the fund on behalf of the applicants.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Yateley Town Council's applications

Appendix 2: Supporting quotes