

# RIBBLE VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

## REPORT TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

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meeting date: THURSDAY, 17 JUNE 2021

title: WELCOME BACK FUND

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### 1 PURPOSE

1.1 To consider suggestions for utilising the recently announced Welcome Back Fund.

1.2 Relevance to the Council's ambitions and priorities:

- Community Ambitions – To sustain a strong and prosperous Ribble Valley and to help make people's lives safer and healthier.
- Corporate Objectives – To work with our partners to ensure that the infrastructure in the Ribble Valley is improved. To promote stronger, more confident, and more active communities throughout the borough

### 2 BACKGROUND

2.1 In May 2020, the Government announced a new £50 million Reopening High Street Safely fund to enable councils to support their local high streets get safely back to business. This Fund was introduced to prepare for the reopening of non-essential retail. The fund was aimed at Council's introducing a range of safety measures in a move to kick-start local economies, get people back to work and customers back to the shops. The intention was to enable high streets to reopen safely and to ensure that customers felt safe when returning to the high streets.

2.2 Ribble Valley were awarded a grant of £53,771 from the fund and quickly began preparing plans to enable our high streets to reopen safely and to enable the measures to be put into place before non-essential retail re-opened on 15<sup>th</sup> June.

2.3 The following activities were undertaken as part of the fund:

- Developed Action Plans.
- Creation of a marketing campaign.
- Signs and pavement markings, to raise awareness of the need to social distance.
- Localised temporary road closures/one-way systems to allow for extra space for pedestrians and socially distanced queuing at shops.
- Increased pedestrian and cycle access in some town centres, through adjustments to traffic restrictions.
- Temporary suspension of some parking spaces and laybys, where extra space for widening footpaths to help pedestrians respect social distancing rules could be provided.
- Engagement with local businesses including the provision of business guidance advice documentation.
- Production of guidance document for Queue Management and Social Distancing Advice Note.
- Shoppers Survey.
- Production of banners and bollard covers to advise customers the high streets were now re-open and of social distancing measures.

2.4 Members may recall that the measures put in place, in particular the road adjustments, were received with mixed feelings. The changes implemented were continually reviewed, including engagement with key stakeholders, and a shoppers' survey was undertaken in July to gauge public opinion of the changes. Following consideration of the responses received to the survey and the fact that the Government introduced the mandatory requirement to wear face coverings in shops in July, a decision was made to remove the temporary road adjustments and keep the high streets under review.

2.5 Since last summer, the borough has been placed in different tier levels in respect of Covid-19 restrictions and then a further national lockdown period with non-essential shops and restaurants required to close again. As the borough once again moves out of national lockdown restrictions and businesses begin to re-open, the Government recently announced the Welcome Back Fund.

### 3 WELCOME BACK FUND (WBF)

3.1 In March 2021 the Communities Secretary, Robert Jenrick, announced a new £56 million Welcome Back Fund to help councils boost tourism, improve green spaces, and provide more outdoor seating areas, markets and food stall pop-ups. The intention of the fund is to support a safe and successful reopening of the high streets. The associated guidance was released in April.

3.2 Ribble Valley have been awarded £53,771 funding through the Welcome Back Fund, however this can be combined with any underspend from the Reopening High Street Safely Fund (RHSSF). Considering the spend already defrayed against the RHSSF activities, set out above, Ribble Valley have a total allocation of £82,084. Member approval is sought in respect of defraying this fund.

### 4 PROPOSALS

4.1 The original RHSSF included four eligible strands in respect of utilising the fund as follows:

- Support to develop an action plan for how the local authority may begin to safely reopen their local economies.
- Communications and public information activity to ensure that reopening of local economies can be managed successfully and safely.
- Business-facing awareness raising activities to ensure that reopening of local economies can be managed successfully and safely.
- Temporary public realm changes to ensure that reopening of local economies can be managed successfully and safely.

4.2 Part of the fund spent to date was defrayed against each of the four strands listed above.

4.3 The WBF includes two new strands of activity which the fund can be used for as follows:

- Support to promote a safe public environment for a local area's visitor economy.
- Support local authorities to develop plans for responding to the medium-term impact of Covid-19 including trialling new ideas particularly where these relate to the High Street.

4.4 It is proposed to concentrate spend of the additional WBF and the remainder of the RHSSF on these two strands. The three main retail areas, Whalley, Clitheroe and

Longridge, have few vacant units and most of the businesses have reopened following the easing of national restrictions. As such it seems appropriate to focus on responding to any medium-term impacts of Covid-19 by creation of an action plan for the three retail areas.

4.5 Member authority is sought to utilise the funding as follows:

- Appoint consultants to develop longer term strategic action plans for the three retail areas which will include engagement with stakeholders to understand any emerging issues and to explore options for pilot projects within the retail areas.
- Design and erect banners, bunting etc to make the retail areas more visually attractive and promote the areas – this would include advertisement material.
- Purchase temporary gazebos/seating – potentially linked to the pilot projects to be explored by the consultants.
- Procure services of a local artist to beautify high streets possibly linked to themes, such as Christmas decoration, within the high street.

4.6 This fund is wholly revenue funding. Any item purchased (gazebos/seating, for example) will only be eligible if it considered to be revenue and are temporary (ie moveable). Items can be purchased up to the value of £1,000. Beyond this they would be classed as an asset which is outside the remits of the fund.

## 5 DELIVERY PARTNERS

5.1 There is an expectation in the fund that local authorities in receipt of funding are expected to engage with local businesses, business organisations, lower tier authorities (such as town and parish councils) and other relevant stakeholders as part of the development of Welcome Back Fund plans. The best mechanism by which to do this is determined by the Local Authority. Longridge Town Council, Whalley Parish Council and Clitheroe Town Council have already been advised of the above proposals for utilising the funding. Further engagement will be undertaken when the Grant Fund Agreement is put in place in advance of engagement by the consultants.

5.2 The WBF introduces the ability for the Local Authority, in receipt of the funding, to identify other organisations (such as a town/parish council) as the most appropriate provider for any eligible activity. If this were the case such activity would be delivered through a Delivery Partner arrangement. To become a Delivery Partner the identified partner (eg town/parish council) would be required to enter into a service level agreement (SLA) with us as the principal Local Authority and be named within the Local Authority's Grant Funding Agreement.

5.3 The delivery partner would be expected to demonstrate compliance with all ERDF funding rules concerning procurement, publicity, defrayal, state aid and record keeping and would be required to retain evidence of this in the same way as the principal Local Authority. The ERDF funding rules are very detailed and include:

- the collection and submission of substantial supporting evidence when submitting a claim;
- specific branding requirements;
- detailed procurement requirements; and
- potential state aid implications.

5.4 Anything which is non-compliant will result in the funding, which will have already been defrayed (any money spent is claimed back following defrayal within the next claim period), being denied. Additionally, Ribble Valley Borough Council, as the

grant recipients would still be the accountable body for the fund and will need to ensure that the Delivery Partner has the appropriate systems in place and evidence to support financial claims for reimbursement of funding from MHCLG.

5.5 In the case of the proposals listed above, the ideas and feedback on local priorities and the delivery impact of activities will be fully explored by the consultants and discussed with not only the relevant lower tier authorities but the relevant chambers of trade, business groups etc. On this basis, concentrating use of the fund on plans to deal with the medium to long term impacts of Covid-19, it is considered that the same outcomes can be delivered with Ribble Valley Borough Council solely being responsible for defraying the funding.

## 6 RISK ASSESSMENT

6.1 The approval of this report may have the following implications:

- Technical, Environmental and Legal – In accordance with the ERDF Procedure Rules the areas of activity will either be subject to formal tender or requests for at least three quotes.
- Political – None.
- Reputation – developing plans for the medium to long term impact of COVID19 on our local economies is considered to be a benefit to the Borough as a whole.
- Equality & Diversity – None.

## 7 RECOMMENDED THAT COMMITTEE

7.1 Agree to the suggested areas of activity set out within paragraphs 4.5 and 4.6.

7.2 Agree that Ribble Valley Borough Council shall solely be responsible for the defrayal of the funding although there will be engagement with the relevant parish/town councils and stakeholders throughout the lifetime of the funding (the funding runs until the end of March 2022).



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