

RIBBLE VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

meeting date: THURSDAY, 9 SEPTEMBER 2021
title: COVID-19 ECONOMIC IMPACTS UPDATE
submitted by: NICOLA HOPKINS – DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & PLANNING
principal author: MARK WALECZEK – PLANNING POLICY ASSISTANT

1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 To assess the ongoing impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on the economy of the Ribble Valley.
- 1.2 Relevance to the Council's ambitions and priorities:
- Council Ambitions – To secure and maintain a sustainable economic base for the borough.
 - Community Objectives – To promote a thriving, diverse and balanced local economy.
 - Corporate Priorities – Delivery of services to all.
 - Other considerations – None.

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Ribble Valley Core Strategy outlines a commitment to promoting sustainable development of the local economy and recognises the importance of this aim in contributing to a strong and prosperous borough. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic the authority has sought to maintain an awareness of local impacts, and this report serves to update the data regarding the economic position of the borough as reported to this committee on 25 March 2021 (Item 1079).

3 INFORMATION

- 3.1 In the previous report received by this committee titled 'COVID-19 Economic Impacts', it is noted that the landscape of the pandemic is constantly changing and therefore regular monitoring is key to mitigating impacts early. Since that report, the vaccine program has managed to fully vaccinate over 73% of the adult population, with over 88% receiving at least one dose. This combined with a reduction in recorded cases has allowed for a reopening of the economy within every sector.
- 3.2 On 12th April a relaxation of restrictions allowed for the re-opening of outdoor hospitality, non-essential retail, and gyms as part of Step 2 of the roadmap out of lockdown. Step 3 taken on 17th May enabled indoor hospitality, leisure, and education to resume with distancing and testing procedures in place, before all Coronavirus restrictions were removed on 19th July 2021. This has allowed for businesses to fully reopen with confidence that they will have a sustained period of trading under circumstances which are something closer to normal.

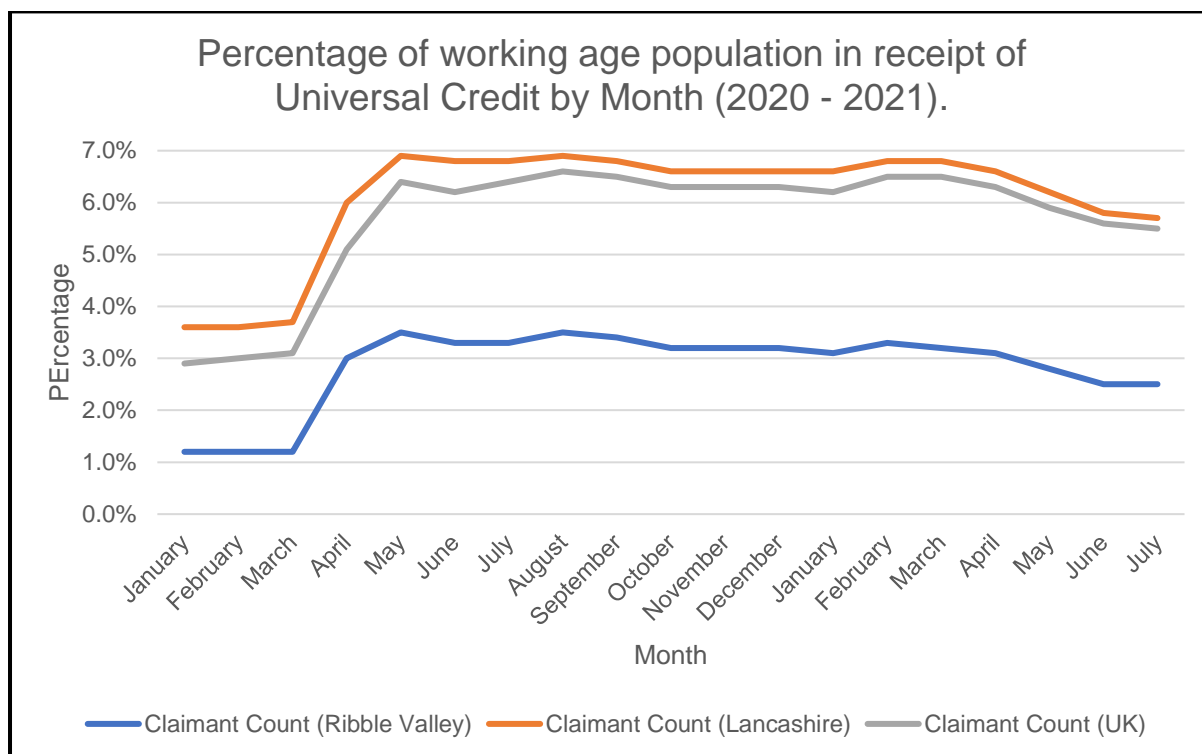
Unemployment

- 3.3 Before the outbreak of COVID-19 the percentage of those unemployed within the authority was stable at an average of 1.1% in 2019 and 0.8% in 2018. The severe restrictions at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak contributed to an immediate rise in unemployment, however, Graph 1 opposite shows that a recovery is ongoing. This figure fell continuously between February and June, currently standing at 2.5%

within the Ribble Valley. This is the lowest level of unemployment since the pandemic began and over the past two months has stabilised.

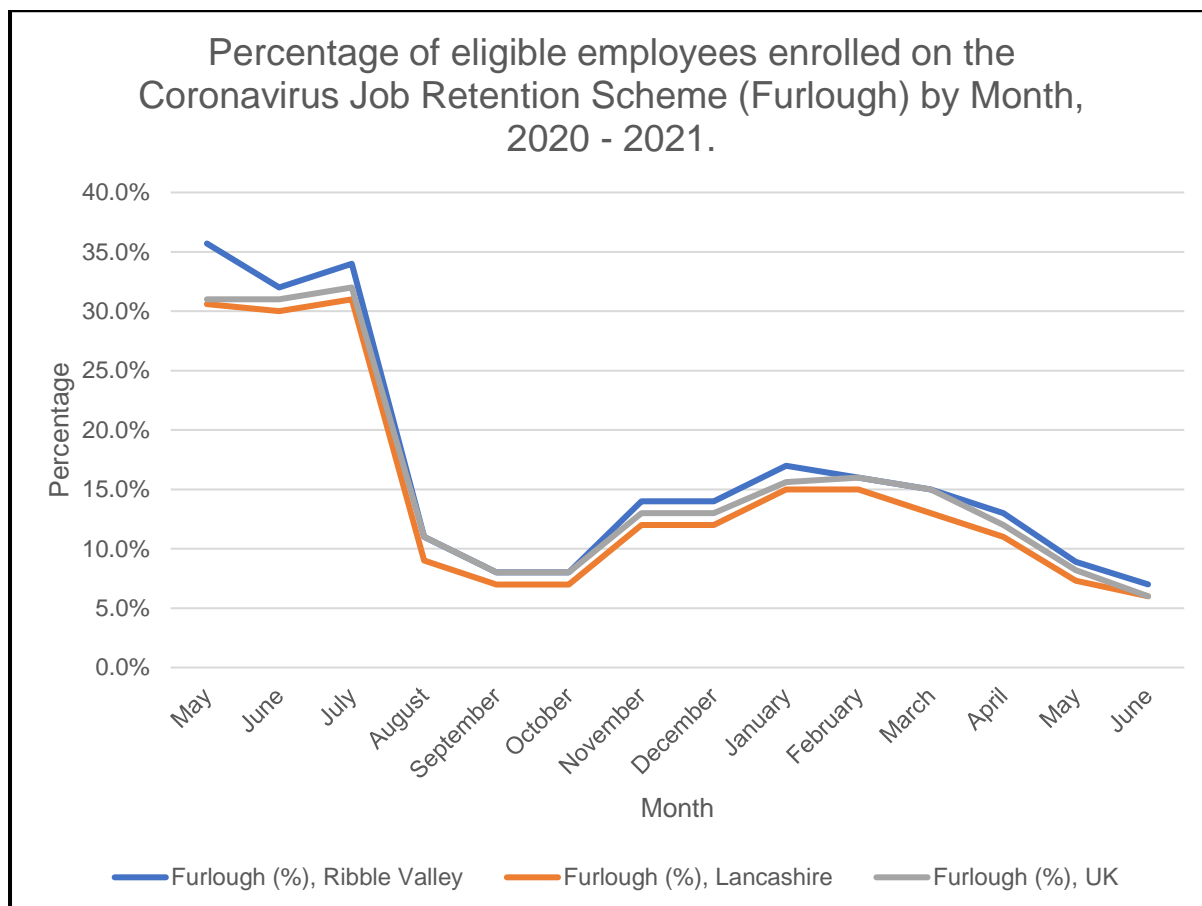
- 3.4 A comparison with unemployment rates across Lancashire and the UK show that this fall in the figures for Ribble Valley is part of a national trend, and there is no indication that the Ribble Valley is experiencing trends different to those which are being experienced on a national scale.

Graph 1: Graph showing Universal Credit receipts in the Ribble Valley, Lancashire and UK. Data taken from ONS - Claimant Count by unitary and local authority dataset.



Furlough

- 3.5 The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (furlough scheme) was introduced in April 2020 to help businesses continue to keep their workforce in employment by contributing 80% of monthly wages per employee. Graph 2 on the following page displays the level of uptake in furlough within the Ribble Valley, shown as a percentage of eligible employees. At the height of the pandemic in May just over 35% of all employees eligible were enrolled on the scheme within the borough.
- 3.6 A comparison with Lancashire and the UK again shows little difference in the level of uptake across the year. Despite this, the proportion of furloughed employees in the Ribble Valley has been above or at best level with regional and national averages every month since introduction.
- 3.7 The most recent publication from HMRC for June 2021 shows that the percentage of employees still enrolled on the furlough scheme stands at 7%, equating to 1900 people within the Ribble Valley. This is less than half of the figure recorded for March (4200). This trend shows that the level of furlough is falling and may continue to fall in the coming months, especially as all restrictions have now been removed.
- 3.8 From 1 July 2021 the level of government grant awarded through the furlough scheme was reduced, therefore further monitoring must assess the implication of employers being asked to contribute more towards the cost of paying their furloughed employees.



Graph 2: Graph showing furlough uptake in the Ribble Valley, Lancashire and UK. Data taken from Gov.uk 'HMRC (COVID-19) Statistics', 2021.

3.9 The Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS) has also continued to provide financial support to individual traders who have suffered a significant reduction in trading profits due to reduced business activity throughout the pandemic. A total of £22.6 Million has been paid out to sole traders through the scheme, an increase of £4.6 Million on the figure last reported to this committee in March.

High Street

3.10 Appendix A shows the results of vacant shop surveys undertaken throughout the COVID-19 pandemic for the main shopping centres of Whalley, Longridge and Clitheroe.

3.11 From May 2020 to August 2021 there has been no increase in the number of vacant premises recorded at any one time within Clitheroe and Longridge centres. The most recent survey undertaken in August 2021 presents a positive outlook, with 9 vacancies in Clitheroe and no vacancies in Longridge (though some premises are in use but to let). This is a fall of 1 and 4 respectively, showing that vacant premises are becoming occupied at a steady rate and remain in significant demand.

3.12 In Whalley just one vacant unit is recorded, with one other unit becoming occupied since the last survey. The remaining vacancy within Whalley is long-term, but nevertheless the survey findings represent a positive outlook for all three centres as the recovery from the pandemic continues.

3.13 In conjunction with the relaxation of Coronavirus restrictions, the council has sought to track the extent to which the public have returned to the high street through the monitoring of footfall across the main settlements of Whalley, Longridge and Clitheroe. Graphs showing the outcome of this data collection can be seen in Appendix B.

- 3.14 The data gathered by the authority suggests that broadly there has been a positive reaction to the removal of Covid-19 restrictions and footfall has increased steadily in all three service centres since May 2020. This is continuing to trend upwards, however, regular monitoring will be necessary to determine any long-term effects on the way people interact with the high street.
- 3.15 As part of this monitoring, a full Town Centre Health Check is being undertaken by the authority for the three main service centres of Clitheroe, Longridge and Whalley. This will provide a further analysis into the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic as well as adding to the growing evidence base relating to Ribble Valley's service centres which will contribute to the new Local Plan.

4 **CONCLUSION**

- 4.1 Note the findings of the report.



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BACKGROUND PAPERS

None.

For further information please ask for Mark Waleczek, extension 4581.

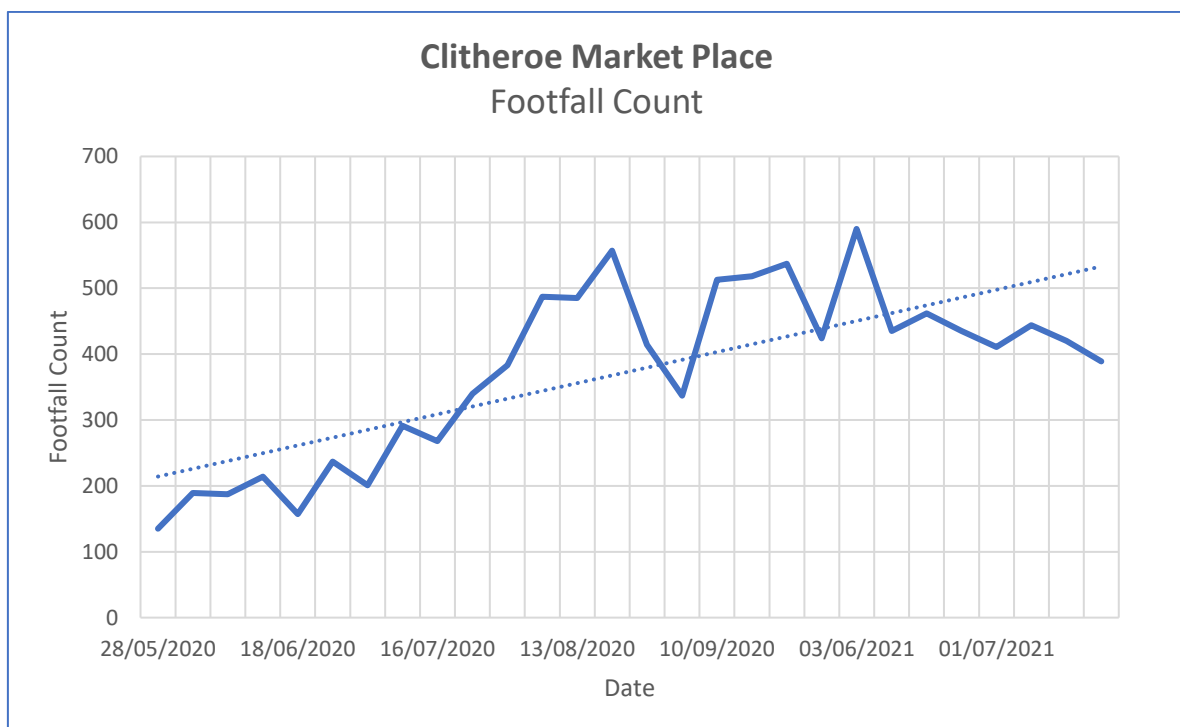
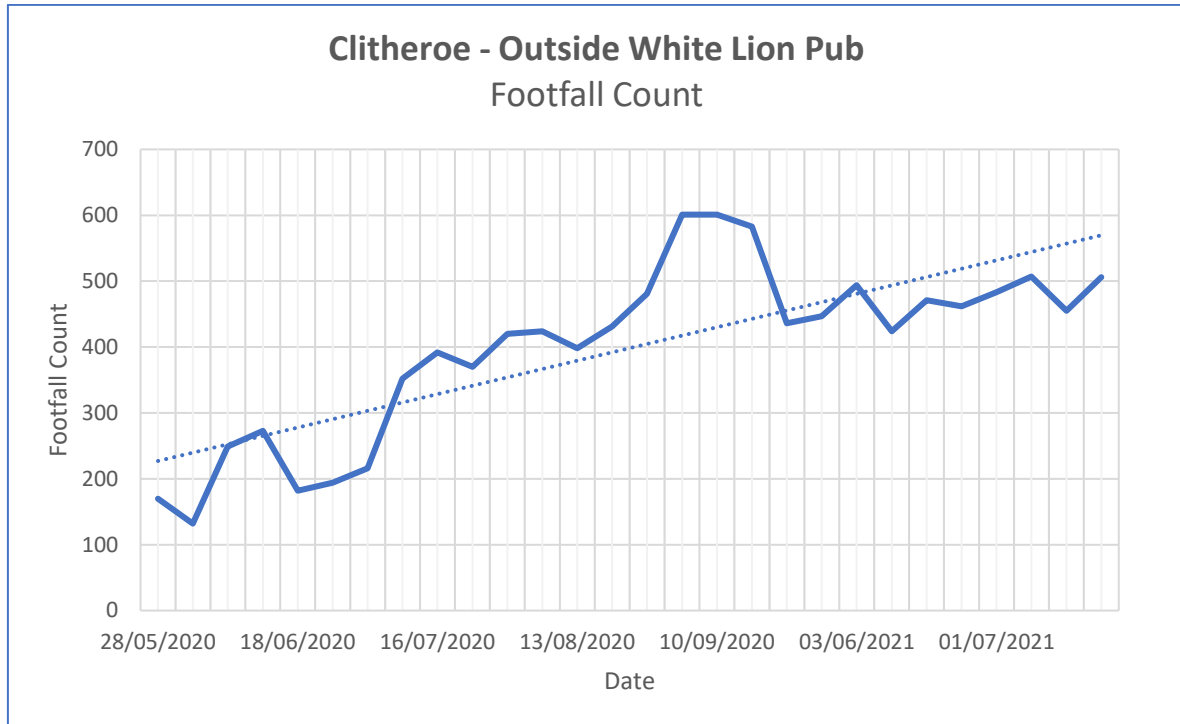
APPENDIX A

Table showing number of vacant premises within centres of Clitheroe, Longridge, and Whalley from May 2020 to August 2021.

Clitheroe				
Date	Total vacancies	New Additions	Continued vacancies from last survey	Vacancies in last survey now occupied
May-20	10	N/A	N/A	N/A
Oct-20	10	7	3	7
Mar-21	10	8	2	8
Aug-21	9	3	6	4
Longridge				
Date	Total vacancies	New Additions	Continued vacancies from last survey	Vacancies in last survey now occupied
Jun-20	4	N/A	N/A	N/A
Mar-21	1	1	0	3
Aug-21	0	0	0	1
Whalley				
Date	Total vacancies	New Additions	Continued vacancies	Vacancies in last survey now occupied
Jun-20	1	N/A	N/A	N/A
Mar-21	2	1	1	0
Aug-21	1	0	1	1

APPENDIX B

The following graphs show the outcomes from the monitoring of footfall counts at various points across the three service centres of Clitheroe, Longridge and Whalley. Monitoring is undertaken for an hour at each location on Thursdays.



APPENDIX B

