

RIBBLE VALLEY BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

meeting date: THURSDAY 24th MARCH 2022
title: WELCOME BACK FUND
submitted by: DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING
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1 PURPOSE

1.1 To update Members on the progress of the Welcome Back Fund following the resolution of this Committee in June 2021.

1.2 Relevance to the Council's ambitions and priorities:

- Community Ambitions-
 - To sustain a strong and prosperous Ribble Valley
 - 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 15th June 2020.

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

- 2.3.1 Developed Action Plans
- 2.3.2 Creation of a marketing campaign
- 2.3.3 Signs and pavement markings, to raise awareness of the need to social distance
- 2.3.4 Localised temporary road closures/ one-way systems to allow for extra space for pedestrians and socially distanced queuing at shops
- 2.3.5 Increased pedestrian and cycle access in some town centres, through adjustments to traffic restrictions
- 2.3.6 Temporary suspension of some parking spaces and laybys, where extra space for widening footpaths to help pedestrians respect social distancing rules could be provided.
- 2.3.7 Engagement with local businesses including the provision of business guidance advice documentation

- 2.3.8 Production of guidance document for Queue Management and Social Distancing Advice Note
- 2.3.9 Shoppers Survey
- 2.3.10 Production of banners and bollard covers to advise customers the high streets were re-open and social distancing measures.

2.4 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.

2.5 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).

2.6 In June 2021 Members of this Committee approved the following actions in respect of utilising the funding:

- 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.

3 UPDATE ON FUND

3.1 Following the resolution in June the following actions have been undertaken.

3.2 Ark Consultancy were appointed to develop actions plans for the three retail areas covered by this fund. This piece of work involved assessments of the three areas along with engagement with various stakeholder groups. The report as a result of this work is appended to this report (Appendix 1).

3.3 Members will note that the report includes an Action Plan with numerous suggestions. These will form the basis of the Service Centre Action Plans which will be developed by the Economic Development Team for our three main retail areas. However some of the identified actions have been undertaken already as set out below.

3.4 A Christmas tree switch on event was organised at Clitheroe Market with the tree and lights funded through this fund. The lights were switched on by the Borough and Town Mayor.

3.5 One of the actions within the work undertaken by Ark was to investigate pop up events. Two pop up events have been arranged to promote our existing markets. Four temporary market stalls have been purchased which will be erected on Berry Lane and Calder Avenue, Longridge on 24th March to promote the existing market at the civic hall. A similar pop-up market will be held on Castle Street on Saturday 26th March to promote Clitheroe Market. The existing traders can utilise the stalls free of charge to promote what can be purchased on the main markets and will include advertising materials detailing the location of the markets and what they offer. Advertising banners to promote these events have also been purchased.

3.6 The Ark report identifies an oversupply of bins particularly in Clitheroe. Additionally, some of this infrastructure is in a relatively poor state detracting from the visual appearance of the high street. In this regard temporary bins have been purchased which can ensure sufficient provision is provided within the town and enable the street scene to be improved visually in advance of the Queens Jubilee celebrations.

3.7 One of the main actions identified within the Ark piece of work is to develop the #LOVERIBBLEVALLEY brand. The first step in this regard and to promote our retail areas three short promotional films have been commissioned which will be promoted through our social media channels to showcase what our retail areas have to offer and to encourage people back into our towns.

4 CHALLENGES

4.1 As set out within the previous report the use of this fund is very restricted and there are strict procurement rules which need to be adhered to. The funding is defrayed at risk with the Council submitting a claim each quarter for the money already spent. These claims are subject to strict scrutiny by the assessing department at Central Government level with only eligible spend, which has followed the procurement guidelines, being paid back. The procurement limits are attached at Appendix 2.

4.2 The purpose of this fund was to bring people back to the high streets however this had associated challenges with several periods of lock down and the omicron variant resulting in restrictions. These periods of lockdown and new variants restricted the types of activities this fund could be utilised for as it would have been challenging to host an event which attracted a lot of people in the retail areas during a time when the infection rates in the Borough were high.

4.3 Any activities funded by the fund have strict branding requirements which must be adhered to.

4.4 Several the suggested activities would not be suitable for our retail areas. One example would be the purchase of temporary planters. Although this would assist in improving the visual appearance of our retail areas the restricted nature of our high streets would mean that planters could cause additional obstructions at a time when social distancing restrictions were in place.

4.5 Any work undertaken by existing Council staff is paid at their standard rates as the fund cannot be used to fund overtime premiums. As our staff already have full time jobs the cost of offering additional tasks outside both their normal working hours and normal tasks would be borne by the Council not the fund.

4.6 This is a revenue only fund with the following restrictions:

4.6.1 This funding cannot support activities which provide direct revenue generation for local authorities as income/payments for the creation/running/maintenance of events. Activity is limited to public space (land in public ownership).

4.6.2 Temporary measures mean interventions that are:

- revenue expenditure only;
- items/activity that are moveable; and
- directly or indirectly connected to the purpose of making high streets, neighbourhood shopping areas and public spaces safer to users during the Covid-19 pandemic.

5 ACTIVITIES THE FUND HAS SUPPORTED

5.1 To date approximately in excess of £81,000 of the fund has been utilised (this includes some VAT which is recoverable) on the following:

- The production of Action Plans
- Creation of a dedicated webpage
- Direct high street interventions which included:
 - signage erected around the retail centres
 - Reverse graffiti utilised
 - One-way system signage and pavement markings
 - Signage detailing highway adjustments, location of car parks and Clitheroe market
- Shoppers Survey (July 2020)
- Introduction of free car parking to encourage shoppers back to the retail areas
- Information campaign- high street reopen which included:
 - Banners around the retail centres
 - Corex signage through the retail centres
- Initial letter drop to all the non-essential retail businesses within the three areas
- Production of guidance document for Queue Management and Social Distancing Advice Note
- Second letter drop/e-mail to all premises within three areas retail areas including:
 - Details of where to obtain guidance and advice
 - A copy of the Queuing and Social Distancing Guidance Document
 - A map of the highway adjustments which will take place in their retail area along with a timescale for implementation
 - Details of where to direct queries
 - ‘Staying COVID-19 Secure’ in 2020 poster
 - Info re #LoveRibbleValley campaign
- Highway adjustments undertaken within two of the main retail areas within one week of the non-essential retail shops reopening
- Correspondence with traders following implementation of highway adjustments
- Highway adjustments were altered following feedback
- Christmas Tree Light Switch on event Clitheroe Market
- Consultants undertook a review of the medium-term impacts of Covid on our retail centres
- Purchase of temporary market stalls
- Pop-up promotional market events in Clitheroe and Longridge
- Advertisement material associated with pop up events
- Purchase of temporary bins
- Three short promotional films commissioned

5.2 Members will note that not all the Council’s funding has been allocated. This is due to the restrictions seen within the Valley throughout various stages of the pandemic along with the very strict eligibility criteria associated with this fund set by Central Government and the ERDF.

6 RISK ASSESSMENT

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

- Resources-** the ERDF funding rules are very complex and detailed. All agreed areas of activity will be checked to ensure compliance before undertaking any activity to seek to guarantee that any funding defrayed can be claimed back from the fund within the next claim period.

- 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 Note to work done to date in respect of the Reopening High Street Safely/ Welcome Back Fund and the associated challenges.



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Appendix 1- Ark Report

Appendix 2- Procurement rules

Value of contract	Minimum Procedure	Advertising Required
£0 - £2,499	Direct award	None
£2,500 - £24,999	3 written quotes or prices sought from relevant suppliers of goods, works and services	None
£25,000 – Relevant Public Contracts Regulations threshold	Formal tender process in line with the Interpretative Communication and the relevant guidance set out below	1) Advertised on Contracts Finder and 2) the opportunity is advertised on the ESIF grant recipient's website for a reasonable time period.