



## Report to Leader of the Council

<b>Decision Date:</b>	<b>29 April 2021</b>
<b>Reference:</b>	<b>L04.21</b>
<b>Title:</b>	<b>Buckinghamshire Business First (BBF): agreement and authorisation for funding for 2021/22</b>
<b>Relevant councillor(s):</b>	Cllr Martin Tett – Leader and portfolio holder for Economic Development
<b>Author and/or contact officer:</b>	Lisa Michelson – Service Director for Economic Growth and Regeneration
<b>Ward(s) affected:</b>	All
<b>Recommendations:</b>	<b>That the Leader approves the extension of the provision of a £400,000 grant for 2021/22 to Buckinghamshire Business First to deliver its key strengths of business engagement, membership and creation of the business community under the terms of the grant agreement dated 17 June 2019.</b>
<b>Reason for decision:</b>	BBF has demonstrated that they have outperformed their targets and are delivering a high quality service to the business community in Buckinghamshire, which has proven even more valuable and well used in the year of Covid-19. The Council are able to confirm that the annual review as required by the current grant agreement has been successful. The current grant agreement includes a provision to extend the existing funding arrangements until 2022 and which is being recommended at this time to maintain consistency of delivery and continue strong partnership working between BC and BBF.

## **1. Executive summary**

- 1.1 Buckinghamshire Business First (BBF) is a countywide organisation which exists to support business growth. It is dependant on grant funding to be able to operate its support services which includes advice, signposting, access to finance, events and training. The County Council (BCC) has been providing a grant to BBF since 2011 to support BBF activity. In 2019-2023 MFTP, the Council agreed £400,000 per annum to support the business growth agenda and this was agreed to be allocated to BBF until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021. A key decision is required to allocate the £400,000 funding to BBF for 2021/22 and which can be exercised through extending the existing grant agreement for this next financial year only.

## **2. Content of report**

- 2.1 Established in 2011, BBF is a not for profit organisation which exists to support and facilitate success within the business community in the county and looks for opportunities to address the key challenges faced by businesses in the areas of skills, finance and business support. In 2013, BBF was appointed by National Government as the first non-city Growth Hub and works with Bucks LEP taking a role as the ‘first stop shop’ for all Buckinghamshire businesses and is a well regarded delivery model. BBF, led by a Board of 11 business people, currently has 13,000 business members representing circa 35% of the county’s businesses, and 3 business hubs (Chesham, Buckingham and Great Missenden).
- 2.2 The County Council (BCC) has been providing a grant to BBF since 2011 to deliver economic development activity in the county and BBF has used this grant to secure and match to other UK and EU funding available to support business growth.
- 2.3 In the 2019-2023 MTFP, BCC agreed £400,000 per annum within the Leaders Portfolio to support the growth agenda which was allocated to BBF for two years to cover until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021 and confirmed via a Leaders decision. This arrangement was secured in the form of a grant agreement dated 17 June 2019.
- 2.4 The existing grant agreement includes a requirement for an annual review to be conducted each year between the Funder and Recipient to determine whether the grant agreement and payment of £400,000 per annum will continue for a further year but not beyond 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022.
- 2.5 BBF produces 6 monthly detailed reports on business support activity carried out for companies in Buckinghamshire and which includes a general picture of the Bucks economy. In the first six months of the year April – Sept 2020, during the early stages of the pandemic, BBF demonstrated their extensive reach and activity across the Buckinghamshire business community. The second 6 monthly report is still being

prepared but the following progress information on performance was also provided to the period to end Jan 2021 to aid the review (shown in the table below).

	Annual Target 2020-21	YTD Target as at 31 Jan 2021	Actual performance To 31 Jan 2021	Last Years actual performance yr to 31 Mar 2020
<b>Business Assists</b>	20,000	16,666	57,010	34,401 (incl BREXIT effect)
<b>New Jobs</b>	400	333	770	543
<b>New Prod / services</b>	150	125	321	109
<b>Grants Awarded</b>			£6,878,375	£2,145,840
<b>Intensive assists (12hrs+ or £1,000+ grant))</b>	300	250	1,008	411 (incl Brexit effect).
<b>Resource (no. of employees)</b>			59	45

- 2.6 This demonstrates that BBF has significantly outperformed against its targets, and expanded its services and resources. The valuable role it has played particularly in providing support through the pandemic is recognised and also for businesses through the transition period to the EU exit.
- 2.7 It is therefore considered that a successful review has been achieved and as permitted by the provisions of the current grant agreement, it is recommended that the provision of a £400,000 annual grant to Buckinghamshire Business First to deliver its key strengths of business engagement, membership and creation of the business community is approved for the financial year 2021/2022.
- 2.8 Beyond 2022, if the Council wishes to continue to provide funding support to BBF, a new agreement will need to be devised and agreed. It is recommended that this is through a contract for services arrangement in line with previous procurement advice to enable greater performance management and/or shaping of services to complement the Council activity.

### 3. Other options considered

- 3.1 The Council could decide that the review is unsuccessful or to make a reduced amount of grant or decide not to allocate any grant to BBF. This would have an impact on the range of activities that BBF provides, reduce the overall benefit to the business community and put other match funding at risk. BC could also seek to provide a grant for these activities to another provider but there is currently no

provider which covers the whole of Buckinghamshire or the range of business activities provided by BBF.

- 3.2 BC could also seek to discontinue the grant agreement this year and to engage BBF as a contract for services but this would disrupt the continuity of service to businesses and cause further uncertainty in these already difficult times.
- 3.3 The current grant agreement cannot be continued beyond end of 2022 so further advice will be sought on securing a contract for future years.

#### **4. Legal and financial implications**

- 4.1 Advice has been sought from legal services on the current grant agreement in place and which is not subject to the Public Contracts Regulations 2015. It has been confirmed that BC as the successor organisation to BCC means that BC effectively replaces BCC for the purposes of the agreement. Advice also confirms that the current grant agreement includes a provision to extend the grant period until the end of March 2022 and no further documentation is required except for the authority to continue to pay the grant (which is the purpose of this report).
- 4.2 Evidence received and summarised above confirms that BBF is performing well and offering value for money. The MTFP for 19/20 to 23/24 included £400,000 per annum for the “Investment in the Growth Agenda linked to Local Industrial Strategy, Aylesbury Garden Town and Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF); extending the grant agreement therefore does not create any budget pressures. The proposal is to continue existing payment arrangements and provide the sum of £400,000 for the financial year of 2021/22 in a lump sum, in advance at the beginning of the financial year to assist BBF’s cashflow.

#### **5. Corporate implications**

- 5.1 The proposal is in line with the corporate key priority of increasing prosperity and sustains close working with partners to deliver on this aim.

#### **6. Local councillors & community boards consultation & views**

- 6.1 None.

#### **7. Communication, engagement & further consultation**

- 7.1 BBF has regularly appeared in front of the Growth, Infrastructure and Housing Select Committee to update on their activity and business support undertaken and the Committee has recognised and valued the good work which BBF have carried out.

## **8. Next steps and review**

- 8.1 If approved, the payment will be made to BBF. The existing grant agreement includes a requirement for regular monitoring. Work will also begin on considering the options for securing business support in the form of a contract beyond 2022 to ensure the correct procedure and formal arrangements are in place and followed ahead of when needed.

## **9. Background papers**

- 9.1 BBF 6 monthly and annual reports – available on [Buckinghamshire Business First website](#).

## **10. Your questions and views (for key decisions)**

- 10.1 If you have any questions about the matters contained in this report please get in touch with the author of this report. If you have any views that you would like the cabinet member to consider please inform the democratic services team. This can be done by telephone 01296 382343 or email [democracy@buckinghamshire.gov.uk](mailto:democracy@buckinghamshire.gov.uk)

