



Report to Growth, Infrastructure & Housing Select Committee

Date:	14 October 2021
Title:	Supporting Buckinghamshire's High Streets following Covid-19 Pandemic
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Recommendations:	For the Select Committee to note the work undertaken to date, and the future activities planned, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the aim to support Buckinghamshire's high streets.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant on our town and village centres and on our high street businesses. The lockdowns and resulting change in consumer behaviour during 2020 came at a time when our market towns, villages and local high street retail offer were already experiencing challenges, particularly from online shopping.
- 1.2 In recognition of the importance of supporting our high streets and businesses, the Government allocated funding to all Local Authorities from June 2020 under the 'Reopening High Streets Safely Fund' (RHSSF) – renamed and expanded from April 2021 to the 'Welcome Back Fund' (WBF). In total this allocation is £963,176. This money is European Regional Development Fund money and has strict eligibility criteria and procurement rules. The fund is not a 'grant' that the council has been given in advance and can simply allocate; the council has to 'spend at risk' and claim back.
- 1.3 To support the delivery of eligible spend schemes, a Reopening Team consisting of representatives from a number of council teams was established in May 2020. The

Team has delivered, and continues to develop, a range of interventions which are helping to improve the look and feel of our town centres; which support high street businesses and which give residents a reason, and the confidence, to return to our town and village centres.

2. Content of Report

- 2.1 The report provides a summary of the measures undertaken in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns. It also highlights the activities that are currently being developed to continue to support high streets under the six themes of the 'Welcome Back Fund'.

3. Reopening of High Streets: Lockdowns

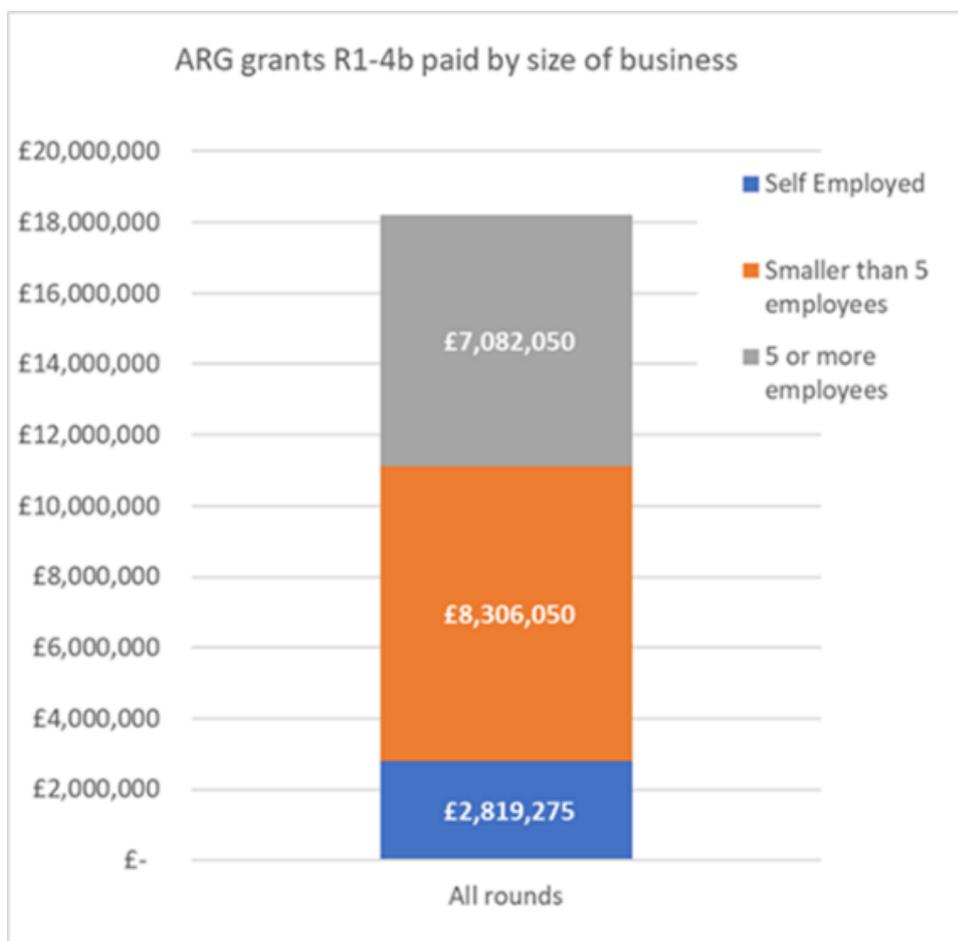
Reopening High Streets Safely Fund

- 3.1 To support the reopening of high streets following the first Covid lockdown, a Reopening Team was established. This brought together representatives from Highways, Licensing, Communications, and Local Economic Growth to identify and coordinate measures to support businesses and encourage people safely back to town and village centres. The Reopening Team was "highly commended" in the Proud of Bucks Staff Awards.
- 3.2 There have been a number of activities undertaken with the Reopening funding across Buckinghamshire including:
 - **Highways interventions** – working with town and parish councils, a number of temporary road closures and new pedestrianisation areas were developed including in parts of Aylesbury, Chesham and Wycombe. In other areas, parking bays were temporarily suspended; temporary crossings were installed and advisory 20mph zones were introduced.
 - **Simplified pavement licencing** – to support businesses in the hospitality sector, a simplified pavement licencing process was introduced. This reduced fees and streamlined processes for quicker permissions to support 'al fresco' activities for businesses impacted by new social distancing and other lockdown restrictions. This scheme has recently been extended and businesses can now apply for permission up to the end of September 2022. Encouragingly, many of the businesses who successfully received a pavement licence in 2020 have sought to renew their permission.
 - **Communications** – pavement graphics and a range of signs were designed and installed across towns and villages to support social distancing. National schemes to support high streets, including the Eat Out to Help Out and Shop Local schemes were also promoted.

Business Support

3.3 During the different lockdowns, a range of financial support grants were available to businesses. These grants were administered by the council, and through the efforts of the council and partners, the funds were distributed quickly, thereby maximising the benefit of the support available to businesses.

3.4 The Local Restrictions Support Grant (LSRG), based upon rateable values, was available to businesses who were forced to close due to lockdown. For businesses unable to apply for the LSRG, support was available through the Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG). Through the various LSRG rounds, over £18m in LRS grants was awarded, with a further £20.9m in ARG support. A majority of the funding for ARG went to businesses with fewer than 5 employees and the self-employed as per the graph below.



- 3.5 Buckinghamshire prioritised the rapid distribution of these business grants to put the funding directly into the businesses urgently requiring support in the midst of the winter/early spring lockdown period. The Council was a national best performer in distributing the funding as quickly as possible.

Markets and Market Traders – Recognising the important role that markets played during lockdown, the Council supported the markets to adjust to and implement new social distancing and hygiene measures and provided additional staff to support their operation. In addition, the council took the decision to suspend market trader fees, with a phased re-introduction (now that lockdown restrictions are fully lifted) through 2021 back to 100% by October 2021.

4. Welcome Back to the High Street: Spring 2021 onwards

- 4.1 From April this year, Government flexed the previous Reopening High Streets Safely Funding (RHSSF) with a further allocation to local authorities rebadged as the ‘Welcome Back Fund’ (WBF). Buckinghamshire was allocated a further £481,588. The WBF is similar to the RHSSF in its aims, but with a few additional flexibilities in what the funding can be used for. Some of these additional areas for spend include using this funding for innovation pilots and information gathering for improvement planning. All spend and delivery for both the RHSSF and the WBF must be completed by 31st March 2022.
- 4.2 Further engagement with communities regarding this additional funding has been taking place throughout the summer and is ongoing. This engagement has been with town and parish councils, community boards, and business representative organisations and has included ‘walk/talks’, presentations at local meetings, and other correspondence and discussion. The further spending for this funding crosses the 6 themes identified in the funding guidance and include:
- Temporary public realm changes that support reopening and public safety – planters, hanging baskets, lamppost banners, etc.
 - The ‘Welcome Back’ campaign – signage, social media content, materials that business can utilise in their storefronts
 - Place promotion materials – developed in partnership with ‘Visit Bucks’ this includes a suite of videos including short films with local businesses, photographic content and other material which can be used for promotional videos and other place branding and tourism with Bucks ‘Open for Business and Visitors’
 - Beautifying the High Street – additional cleaning making the public realm inviting including various ‘deep-cleans’, murals and public art.

- Creating vibrancy through events and activities – seasonal events (for example related to Halloween and Bonfire Night), festivals, and specialty markets
- Christmas Campaign – a programme of events across the county aligned to the busy Christmas celebration and shopping period for example new holiday decorations for commercial areas and high streets, entertainers, and Christmas tree trails
- Online High Streets – a new pilot to support better ability for consumers to shop locally, online
- Footfall monitoring, data collection, and business analysis to help shape future activities and investment

