



## Report to Leader of the Council

<b>Decision Date:</b>	24 May 2022
<b>Reference No:</b>	L04.22
<b>Title:</b>	Buckinghamshire Business First: agreement and authorisation of funding for 2022/23
<b>Relevant councillor (s):</b>	Cllr Martin Tett - Leader and portfolio holder for Economic Development
<b>Author:</b>	Lisa Michelson - – Service Director for Economic Growth and Regeneration
<b>Ward (s) affected:</b>	All
<b>Recommendations:</b>	That the Leader approves the continuation of the provision of a £400,000 grant for 2022/23, and for a further year up to and not exceeding 2023/24, following a successful annual review, to Buckinghamshire Business First to deliver its key strengths of business engagement, membership, and creation of the business community.

### 1. Executive summary

- 1.1 Buckinghamshire Business First (BBF) is a countywide organisation which exists to support business growth. It is dependent on grant funding to be able to operate its support services which includes advice, signposting, access to finance, events and training. Buckinghamshire Council (formerly through the County Council) has been providing a grant to BBF since 2011 to support BBF activity. In April 2021 the Council agreed £400,000 per annum to continue to support the business growth agenda and this was agreed to be allocated to BBF until 31st March 2022. A key decision is now required to allocate the £400,000 funding to BBF for 2022/23 and for a further year up to and not exceeding 2023/24, following a successful annual review in January 2023. This can be exercised through a continuation of the existing grant agreement.

### 2. Content of this 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.

- 2.2 In 2013, BBF was appointed by National Government as the first non-city Growth Hub and works with Bucks Local Enterprise Partnership 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).
- 2.3 BBF has been able to demonstrate that it continues to play a valuable role particularly in providing business support through the pandemic and recovery period. BBF is a valued partner of the council and part of the Buckinghamshire Growth Board.
- 2.4 The former county council provided grant support to BBF since 2011 when it outsourced its economic development function, and this was done via a grant agreement. It was originally set up on a reducing scale with the long-term aspiration that BBF will eventually become self-sustainable without council funding.
- 2.5 Buckinghamshire Council has provided BBF with a grant of £400,000 for the financial year 2021-22 under the pre-existing grant agreement drawn up by Buckinghamshire County Council.
- 2.6 The existing grant agreement expired on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022. To ensure BBF can continue delivering their services at current levels, it is recommended that the provision of a £400,000 annual grant to BBF to deliver its key strengths of business engagement, membership and creation of the business community is approved for the financial year 2022/2023 and for a further year up to and not exceeding 2023/24, following a successful annual review in January 2023.

### **3. Options explored**

- 3.1 The Council could decide to reduce the grant or not to allocate any grant to BBF. This would have an impact on the range of activities that BBF provides, reduce the support available and overall benefit to the business community and put other match funding at risk.
- 3.2 Another option could be 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.
- 3.3 BC could also seek to discontinue the grant agreement this year and to develop a contract for these services. However this would disrupt the continuity of service to businesses and cause further uncertainty in these already difficult times.

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

- 4.1 Advice has been sought from legal services on the current grant agreement which is not subject to the Public Contracts Regulations 2015 which confirms that the current grant agreement includes a provision to continue the grant period until the end of March 2022.
- 4.2 Legal services have updated the grant agreement which sets out that the Council continues the existing payment arrangements and provide the sum of £400,000 for the financial year of 2022/23 in a lump sum payment, and in the subsequent year but not exceeding 2023/24 following a successful annual review.
- 4.3 There is a base budget of £400k in the Economic Growth & Regeneration revenue budget to fund the grant agreement.
- 4.4 From 23/24 onwards there is an MTFP budget savings target of £50k, rising to £100k by 24/25, earmarked to be made from partnership arrangements. As part of the review of BBF's grant agreement for 23/24 it will be determined whether the funding to BBF can be amended to help meet this target, or whether alternative proposals are needed.

#### **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.

