



Report to Growth, Infrastructure & Housing Select Committee

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Title: COVID-19 update

Relevant councillor(s): Martin Tett – Leader
Warren Whyte – Planning & Enforcement
Steve Bowles – Town Centre Regeneration
Isobel Darby – Housing & Homelessness

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Recommendations: For the Select Committee to note the impacts of COVID19 on the activities within the Leader's, Planning & Enforcement, Town Centre Regeneration and Housing & Homelessness portfolios.

Leader

Economic Development

1. The Council's partnership with Buckinghamshire Business First (BBF) has enabled us to work closely with the local business community to provide guidance and support for those whose business has been affected by COVID-19. The online Business Support Hub was developed on the Council's website to provide a source of key information, linked to BBF's covid website. By working together, Buckinghamshire Council and BBF are ensuring that there is no 'wrong front door' for businesses seeking support.
2. In response to the coronavirus pandemic the government announced grants for small businesses, and businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure industries in the form of grants to compensate them for loss of business from the emergency and the resulting lockdown.

Business Rates Relief Grant

3. The Council is responsible for administering Business Rates Relief Grants and received over £91m from the government to fund the grants. Working closely with Bucks Business First we identified those businesses who would be eligible and contacted over 6500 businesses

across Buckinghamshire who are eligible to receive a business grant. In addition to this direct contact we have promoted the scheme regularly via BBF, press releases and on our website to encourage high levels of take up.

4. Most businesses in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors and those receiving Small Business Rate Relief or Rural Rate Relief will receive a grant as follows:
 - Properties with a rateable value of £15,000 or less will receive a £10,000 grant
 - Properties with a rateable value of more than £15,000 and up to £51,000 will receive a £25,000 grant.
5. In order to ensure that businesses received funding as soon as possible, we developed a five working day end to end process from receipt of the application to the money arriving in the business bank account. We have asked staff to work over weekends to ensure that this money reaches our business as soon as possible. To date, we have received and processed applications from over 6100 eligible businesses and awarded just over £80m of grants as of 17 June 2020. Performance data is at Appendix B.
6. We continually look for ways to communicate to the remaining businesses that are eligible to encourage them to apply. This includes through BBF, social media and local radio stations.

Discretionary Business Grant Fund

7. Government announced on the 1st May 2020 an additional 5% uplift to the funding previously allocated to support some of the businesses that were not eligible for the initial grant programme. This allows the authority a level of discretion to provide support to further businesses. For Buckinghamshire this amount is approximately £4.59m.
8. The Buckinghamshire scheme was approved on the 1st June and broadly follows government guidance including that it be limited to cover ongoing fixed building-related costs, businesses that can demonstrate that they have suffered a significant fall in income and for businesses that have fewer than 50 employees and meet the criteria of small and micro businesses.
9. Government guidance suggests that the fund be prioritised for small businesses in shared offices or other flexible workspaces (who may not have their own rates assessment), regular market traders, bed & breakfasts which pay council tax instead of business rates and charity properties in receipt of charitable business rates relief which would otherwise have been eligible for small business rates relief or rural rates relief.
10. The local authority will exercise its discretion and use a small proportion of this funding for grant payments to local bus companies operating 'closed commercial' school routes as these operators are unable to access any support apart from the government's job retention scheme (up to £25k).

11. The scheme was launched at the start of June. The amount of each grant awarded (excluding bus companies) will generally be up to a maximum of £10k and will depend on the evidence to support the application.

Strategic Infrastructure

12. Strategic Infrastructure schemes have experienced some impacts of COVID19, for example:

- South East Aylesbury Link Road is on programme but a significant risk has been caused by COVID-19 due to a potential delay to utilities work required by the scheme, the project team are working closely with UK Power Networks to mitigate this as far as possible.
- Access to the Eastern Link Road site was initially impacted causing a two month delay to surveying however access to the site was restored in mid-May and this activity has now resumed.

Town Centre Regeneration

13. Despite COVID19, the Aylesbury Garden Town Masterplan has been progressing as planned and is recommended for agreement at Council in July 2020. COVID19 has put an increased focus on walking and cycling - both key priorities within the masterplan – and brought the town centre agenda to the forefront. Existing Aylesbury Garden Town grants have been re-profiled to align to COVID19 priorities including supporting food banks.

14. As part of a wider taskforce, colleagues in the Economic Growth & Regeneration team have been working on an approach to safely re-open town and village centres. Officers have been reaching out to local councils, Business Improvement Districts, businesses and local stakeholders as well as liaising with other council teams to identify measures needed to enable social distancing.

15. A *“Guidance on Covid-19 safe distancing measures for town centres & high streets”* has been produced which sets out the principles and approach applying to all of Buckinghamshire’s communities. As well as this, specific measures are being introduced in some in some towns and villages. The Council is developing, ordering and providing signage and pavement stickers for usage across the County and will also be launching a website to provide further information and signposting to guidelines.

Planning & Enforcement

16. Despite initial concerns about disruption to Planning Committees having an impact on decision making, virtual meetings have enabled this activity to continue in line with social distancing requirements. The first three Planning Committees took place virtually in week commencing 8th June with more meetings scheduled.

17. Site visits for building control and highways works have now resumed but experienced some initial issues due to site closures and social distancing. Desk based tasks have experienced less disruption as colleagues have been able to work from home, for example continuing to process applications.

18. COVID19 has had a significant impact on income across the planning and development area; there has been approximately a 20% reduction in income though this number is pending ongoing review. This equates to a projected £2.25m reduction in income for 2020/21.
19. In order to support developers, a decision has been taken to extend S106 and CIL payment deadlines for four months for contributions that are due between 1st April 2020 and 1st August 2020 except for where specific contributions are required to fund commenced schemes that are in a capital programme of either the Council or delivery agencies, including local councils. This is expected to have a short term impact on the funds received by the council, and a review is planned before the end of the period.
20. The service is anticipating possible changes to the planning process which may be announced by Government to support the economy.

Housing and Homelessness

21. The service is continuing to support those at risk of losing their accommodation or who currently have nowhere to live as well as establishing the Housing Cell as part of the Buckinghamshire Council COVID19 response.
22. Supported by a number of agencies, volunteer groups, local churches and businesses the council housing team have found temporary accommodation for around 100 people. This has involved taking advantage of the availability of accommodation in a number of hotels, B&B's etc. in Aylesbury and High Wycombe.
23. Outreach work has also continued for the few rough sleepers who have not taken up the offer of temporary accommodation. This is a highly vulnerable group who are often unable to isolate themselves and many have underlying health conditions that could leave them less able to fight coronavirus and also at risk of passing it on to others. Support has been facilitated for physical and mental health and substance misuse support needs, and ensuring that they have food and medication.
24. Work is also well underway on a rough sleepers exit strategy. This has the aim of ensuring that the rough sleepers currently in emergency housing as a result of the pandemic do not need to return to the street, following the likely future withdrawal of a significant proportion of the emergency hotel space currently in use, as restrictions on hotel use are lifted. Following a recent government funding announcement, officers have submitted outline proposals to MHCLG to seek financial support for alternative provision of rough sleeper and other emergency accommodation.