

## WELCOME BACK FUND PROJECT REVIEW

Cabinet - 7 July 2022

**Report of:** Detlev Munster, Strategic Head of Commercial and Property

**Status:** For Consideration

**Also considered by:**

- People & Places Advisory Committee - 14 June 2022
- Improvement & Innovation Advisory Committee - 23 June 2022

**Key Decision:** No

**Portfolio Holder:** Cllr. Lesley Dyball

**Contact Officer:** Emily Haswell, Ext. 7261

**Recommendation to People and Places Committee and Improvement & Innovation Advisory Committee**

The Committee is asked to note the successful delivery of the Reopening High Streets Safely/Welcome Back fund and the positive impact the interventions have had across the District.

**Recommendation to Cabinet**

To note the successful delivery of the Reopening High Streets Safely/Welcome Back fund and the positive impact the interventions have had across the District.

**Reason for recommendation:**

The Reopening High Streets Safely/Welcome Back fund has concluded with £212,383 of funding providing direct support to the Town and Village centres across the District during the Covid pandemic. 99% of the allocated funding was used with 100% of the claims paid in full, the project has therefore successfully contributed to the mitigation of negative impacts of the pandemic by supporting businesses, residents and visitors in Town and Village centres across the District.

### Introduction and Background

- 1 In June 2020, the government announced the Reopening High Streets Safely fund (RHSSF) allocation for Local Authorities. The initial allocation for

Sevenoaks District was £107,106. As this was part of European funding (ERDF), it was subject to strict delivery guidance and restricted expenditure eligibility. Eligible disbursements were financed by the Council in advance of claiming back finance from Central Government.

- 2 In order to access funding, the Council had to produce an action plan demonstrating key activities and this was agreed as part of the Grant Funding Agreement. This had to be completed at pace to get projects up and running due to the nature of the pandemic and the negative effects on the High Streets and Town Centres.
- 3 A cross-departmental working group was formed and met regularly to produce and deliver an agreed action plan. Initially the focus was on supporting safety in the High Streets. Key interventions included: purchase of hand sanitiser stations, production and delivery of a business pack for traders as well as communication activity to reinforce safety messaging.
- 4 The programme of activity had to be responsive to the fast changing environment (due to constantly changing restrictions) with the key aim of supporting high street safety and recovery. The key activity themes throughout were communication with businesses and traders, communication with the public and temporary public realm changes and support.

## **Achievements**

- 5 A list of project achievements can be found in Appendix A, along with two communication campaign reviews. Interventions included safety signage, a temporary road closure as well as the production and delivery of business packs providing reopening and safety information for Town centre businesses. In December 2020, a High Street project officer was recruited to oversee delivery of the scheme.
- 6 In March 2021, the RHSSF timeframe was extended and became known as the Welcome Back Fund, with an additional allocation. This provided an opportunity to extend activities to encompass a much wider geographical area and also increased eligible activities to focus more on beautification and encouraging visitors back to Town Centres.
- 7 The key to success in delivering the Welcome Back fund has been the need to work collaboratively with Town and Parish Councils to ensure that the Fund supported all areas in the District. Responsibility for project delivery and financial claims remained with the District Council; this was important as the project was funded 'at risk' so all expenditure was made and then reclaimed. All Town and Parish Councils were consulted and invited to submit a list of interventions for their area. The key criteria remained in place such as proving additionality, the need to ensure all interventions were temporary and interventions occurred in the key activity areas.

All four Town Councils received support along with 23 Parish Councils ensuring that the reach of the funding was maximised. 4 Parish Council's declined to be involved (Cowden, Weald, Hextable, Kemsing).

- 8 This was a complex project to be delivered at pace, within a period of fast changing Government restrictions meaning it had to remain agile. The successful delivery of not only the activities but the administration of complicated financial claims is testament to the Council's team approach to delivery. In particular, cross departmental engagement ensured most efficient use of funds and expertise. Early partner engagement also contributed to the scheme's successful implementation.
- 9 Each of the seven financial claims submitted were paid in full meaning that there was no negative financial impact on the Council. This is a significant achievement given the scheme's complex eligibility and procurement criteria, as well as the financial evidence requirements. There was also very stringent programme and contract monitoring by the funders which increased the Council's management burden.. At the end of the project period in March 2022, 99% of the finance allocated to Sevenoaks District was spent, a total of £212,383.68.

### **Next Steps**

- 10 The success of the Welcome Back fund has demonstrated the advantages of delivering Town Centre Management and interventions at a District level. Research funded by the Welcome Back Fund added to the recent 'Town Centre Strategy' report, which forms part of the emerging Local Plan evidence base. The report outlines potential interventions to support Town Centres providing a framework for future activities, which will also link to the actions in the emerging Economic Development strategy (2022-2027). The UK Shared Prosperity Fund, recently announced by the Department of Levelling Up Housing and Communities, has a focus on developing places through supporting business, communities and skills. Proposed investments around Town Centres and place will benefit from the learning that delivery of RHSSF and the Welcome Back fund has provided.

### **Other options Considered and/or rejected**

The offer of finance to spend on Town Centres could have been declined by the Council if felt it was too resource intensive, but that approach would not have supported the Town Centres through the difficult times of the pandemic, so was not considered to be an appropriate course of action.

### **Key Implications**

#### Financial

There are no financial implications to note as the project has been delivered with the external finance provided and all claims have been met in full meaning no risk to Council finances. Additional staffing was funded from the allocation via

temporary contract meaning no onward financial implication. There is an ongoing requirement for document retention for audit purposes, which will be managed from within existing economic development team resource so no financial implication.

#### Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement.

There are no legal implications to note.

#### Equality Assessment

The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

#### Net Zero Implications

The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the council's ambition to be Net Zero by 2030. There is no perceived impact regarding either an increase or decrease in carbon emissions in the district, or supporting the resilience of the natural environment

In addition items recommended to the Parishes were all recycled items adhering to the District Net Zero commitments.

#### **Conclusions**

The Committee is asked to note the successful delivery of this programme, the achievements made and how this has informed future Town Centre Management for the District.

#### **Appendices**

Appendix A - RHSSF and WBF list of achievements

Appendix B - Sevenoaks RHSSF End of campaign report - Spring 2021

Appendix C - Sevenoaks RHSSF End of campaign report - Winter 2021/22

**Detlev Munster**

**Strategic Head of Commercial and Property**