

# ARUN DISTRICT COUNCIL

## REPORT TO AND DECISION OF LITTLEHAMPTON REGENERATION SUB COMMITTEE ON 7<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER 2020

### PART A : REPORT

**SUBJECT:** Economy Group's support to businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic

**REPORT AUTHOR:** Denise Vine

**DATE:** 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2020

**EXTN:** 37854

**PORTFOLIO AREA:** Economy Group, Place Directorate

#### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

This information paper updates Members on some of the activities undertaken by the Economy Group to help businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Members of the Sub Committee are requested to note the contents of this report.

#### **1. BACKGROUND AND ACTIVITIES:**

1.1. The COVID-19 global pandemic has brought about a seismic shift in the lives of everyone the council serves with ongoing implications for health and wellbeing, society and community, and the local economy.

1.2. From March 2020 to the present day, council officers have adapted and reacted to the fast-changing guidance coming from central government both personally and as a council unit. At very short notice, most officers necessarily had to work from home initially with multiple IT and communications issues and find new ways to continue to do their own work plus the immense additional workload impelled by the pandemic.

1.3. The pandemic has affected some services much more than others; some have continued with little interruption to their usual work, while others like the Economy Group have been in the forefront of the response from the outset and have needed to adjust their work priorities accordingly.

1.4. As some semblance of a "new normal" is approaching, and officers are beginning to return to their usual work priorities it is an appropriate time to review the range and volume of work undertaken and the reactivity of the service to keep the public safe and support the safe recovery of the local economy.

1.5. The underpinning foundation of all this work has been working in partnership with all relevant partners across West Sussex to tackle this threat in a co-ordinated and holistic

manner. The success of this approach speaks volumes for the strong working relationships already built up by officers.

1.6. Strategic partnerships - Throughout the pandemic regular contact and liaison has been maintained with our strategic partners. This included weekly conference calls with the County Council and District and Borough Councils across West Sussex, the Local Enterprise Partnership and Coastal West Sussex. This has enabled quick and reactive responses to issues, for example, the collection and distribution of economic data and business intelligence and the preparation of the countywide joint policy regarding the issuing of the Discretionary Grants.

1.7. Business information - As all non-essential businesses closed and the government put in place various support schemes and safety guidance for those that were permitted to continue operating, getting correct information out to businesses regularly in an easy-to-read format was an essential requirement.

1.8. The Arun Business Partnership has over 3000 local businesses on its mailing list and they received weekly electronic bulletins with the most up to date government guidance and information. It also contained regular information about different grant streams and financial support available from all sources to ensure our businesses were able to take advantage of these.

1.9. Working in partnership with the Council's Communications Team, Arun Business Partnership, Bognor Regis Business Improvement District (BID), Littlehampton Traders Association and the parish councils, the same information was circulated to many retail, parade and town centre businesses. Copy was being shared between partners and reused to ensure the same key messages were consistently being shared and circulated.

1.10. Tourism businesses also received the above, plus sector-specific information pertinent to them, working in partnership with Experience West Sussex Partnership, Visit England and Tourism South East. Over this time working relationships have evolved and grown with all these regional and national tourism organisations plus other hospitality sector organisations and destinations; finding how best to help each other and our local tourism businesses. National assurance and advisory schemes have been developed and provided, to share with our local businesses in order to help promote each destination and reassure residents and potential visitors of their safety. Regular updates continue to be sent to hospitality businesses. Latest information is also provided on the tourism website – "Know Before You Go" page and also on the social media channels.

1.11. Early into the lock down, Arun Business Partnership businesses were surveyed to understand the issues they were facing and what help they needed at that time. The most common request was for help and training with setting up websites, developing online sales and electronic payments. This knowledge has been used to inform the funding bid to the Strategic Investment Fund, part of the recovery programme, to provide tailored training to businesses.

1.12. Grant support for businesses - The government launched various grant and loan schemes to support businesses. Some, such as the Large Business Loans for those with turnover more than £45m, was applied for direct to central government, some were distributed via the Local Enterprise Partnerships grant-making schemes such as the Coast to Capital Backing Business Fund which helped people adapt and respond to the

pandemic, and some came to the council for allocation and distribution. The various grants Arun DC has dealt directly with are listed below.

1.13. Local Authority Discretionary Grants Fund – this funding stream aimed to help those businesses not in receipt of other business grants who had ongoing property costs and had incurred significant losses during the pandemic. It operated on a pan-West Sussex set of criteria to avoid disputes and was led by the Economy Team. The total value of the fund was £1,539,000 and all but £500 has been awarded. This fund is now closed,

Breakdown by amounts:

£1,000	x 6	= £6,000
£2,500	x 27	= £67,500
£5,000	x 168	= £840,000
£10,000	x 45	= £450,000
£25,000	x 7	= £175,000
Total grants = 253		

1.14. Business Support Grants Fund – This was led by the Revenue and Benefits Team. A total of £39,380,000 was made available. As at 10<sup>th</sup> September this has paid out £29,925,000 to around 2,658 eligible businesses.

1.15. Business rates holiday for retail, hospitality and leisure industry – no Business Rates to be paid in 2020-2021 financial year for all businesses within these sectors. Bognor Regis Business Improvement District levy however, remains payable.

1.16. Small Business Grant Fund – for small businesses with Rateable Value under £15,000 i.e. those in receipt of Small Business Rate Relief. Eligible businesses were contacted and grants of £10,000 were awarded. The Economy Group was involved peripherally in chasing up those eligible businesses that had not returned the required information.

1.17. Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Business Grants Fund – for smaller businesses with Business Rates valuation under £51,000. eligible businesses were contacted and grants of £25,000 were awarded to qualifying businesses with NNDR £15,000 to £51,000, and of £10,000 for NNDR valued less than £15,000. The Economy Group was involved peripherally in chasing up those eligible businesses that had not returned the required information.

1.18. Reopening the High Streets Safely Fund – £143,718 was awarded to the council by central government, via European Regional Development Fund for spend in this financial year. This enabled us to meet the immediate requirements to deliver and support a safe trading environment for businesses and customers. The focus - the staged reopening of non-essential retail (15<sup>th</sup> June) and food and drink outlets (4<sup>th</sup> July), hairdressers and additional measures as they are introduced such as the mandatory wearing of face coverings within retail settings.

1.19. Partnership working has been developed with town and parish councils, Bognor Regis BID and Littlehampton Traders Association. Main expenditure items include: generic and localised social distancing signage across the district, business-facing guidance and information for SME's, generic and localised communications campaigns informing

residents the town centres/parades are open for business and safe, a local radio campaign supported businesses through the introduction of the mandatory wearing of face coverings.

1.20. Two temporary Community Information Officers were funded to cover the initial stages of reopening in a public-facing role to offer guidance and reassurance to residents and visitors and to assist businesses in accessing, understanding and delivering the government 'COVID Secure' guidance. The funding enabled Pier Road in Littlehampton to be closed temporarily for safety reasons – see below. Some town and parish councils requested a direct allocation of the funding to enable them to deliver according to local need – siting public hand sanitisers, producing and delivering localised safety signage and social distancing 'pathways', safe return to shopping communications campaigns and support for SME's.

1.21. An option for an additional business facing Community Information Officer specialising in ensuring COVID Secure measures are in place is being explored. Dependent on the detail, remaining funds will be allocated to enhance local media communications with the public and any immediate support required for SME's around any imminent 'circuit-breaker' measures/restrictions affecting the high streets.

1.22. The temporary road closure of part of Pier Road, Littlehampton was put in place in partnership with West Sussex County Council and their traffic management consultants WSP. This was done on public safety grounds – on busy summer days when many people from the beach came here to buy food and drink, large queues were forming across the two-way road, and people were not able to observe social distancing. The absence of space for social distancing combined with road traffic presented a serious risk to public safety which lead to the temporary closure being put in place until the end of September. This involved speaking to traders ahead of the closure to gain their views about a potential road closure and ensuring deliveries in and out could be successfully managed, and many mentioned they had seen near-misses between cars and people, applying to West Sussex County Council for a Temporary Traffic Regulation Order, arranging for traffic signage for the road closure, diversion route and restricted access to neighbouring roads as recommended by WSP and communicating this to traders.

1.23. Rent Holiday – businesses occupying council-owned land or premises were offered a rent holiday via Property and Estates.

1.24. Other centrally distributed financial business support mechanisms that applied to local businesses are listed below:

- Employee furlough – employers could apply for staff to have 80% of their wages paid by central government until the end of October 2020. Arun had the second highest percentage in West Sussex of the workforce furloughed with 33%, take-up, Crawley had 41%. It is expected that as furlough ends, many jobs will be lost.
- Self-employed income support – self-employed people could apply to receive up to £2500 per month for at least 3 months depending on turnover and subject to government eligibility. The take-up rate of the eligible population is now 76% in Arun and rising, and this is the same as the West Sussex average.

- Universal Credit – the main benefit for people out of work or with low earnings – claim rates in West Sussex have more than doubled since March from 27,353 to 59,541, and this is echoed in Arun.
- Impact of COVID-19 on the West Sussex Economy – for more details see Appendix A

1.25. Recovery Planning – As restrictions now hopefully remain lifted, economic recovery plans are being discussed with several key partners and a range of proposals and interventions are coming forward and that the Economy Group are supporting. Some of these are listed below:

- a) Town Centre Recovery Plans are being prepared with partners, such as the Bognor Regis Business Improvement District, for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton.
- b) West Sussex County Council have shared a draft Recovery Framework with Districts and Boroughs.
- c) The council's COVID-19 Recovery Working Party recommendations to Cabinet will be implemented and included in the recovery plans.
- d) Pop-up shops – the council has agreed to support the provision of new Pop-up shops in Bognor Regis and Littlehampton using vacant retail premises in the town centres. COVID-19 restrictions have impacted on the project being delivered but it is hoped this can be progressed again soon.
- e) Support Programme for Independent Retail Businesses – a bid has been submitted, on behalf of six West Sussex D & B Councils including Arun, to the Strategic Investment Fund, to provide specialist training and mentoring support, as well as a grant programme to support refurbishment of shop fronts, for independent retailers.
- f) Youth Works project – a bid has been submitted to the DWP/JCP to deliver intensive support to prepare long term unemployed 18-25 yr olds, with significant barriers to work, for employment opportunities.
- g) Kick Start Scheme – this is a new central government initiative to provide unemployed young people with paid work experience opportunities for 25 hours a week for 6 months. Organisations and councils can become intermediaries to represent employers who are not able to achieve the minimum of 30 placements. ADC is considering taking on this role. Other local organisation such as Sussex Chamber of Commerce and Chichester College have also offered to lead on this, and the council may look to work in partnership with them.
- h) Arun Economic Development Strategy – this was recently approved and provides clear direction for the longer-term economic development of the area. The evidence-based priorities remain the same post recovery and an action plan to support delivery of this will be developed and align with the emerging recovery initiatives.
- i) Arun Business Partnership will continue to be used to communicate with our businesses and understand their business needs.

j) Tourism and Hospitality - sector specific Tourism Recovery Plans and campaigns are being designed by our regional and national tourism partners; Experience West Sussex Partnership, Tourism South East and Visit England / Visit Britain. The council is participating in all these campaigns. The campaigns are designed to encourage residents to 'discover and support local' and visitors who are healthy and able to travel to 'discover or re-discover the area'.

### 3. OPTIONS:

To note the report

### 4. CONSULTATION:

Has consultation been undertaken with:	YES	NO
Relevant Town/Parish Council		x
Relevant District Ward Councillors		x
Other groups/persons (please specify)		x

### 5. ARE THERE ANY IMPLICATIONS IN RELATION TO THE FOLLOWING COUNCIL POLICIES: (Explain in more detail at 6 below)

	YES	NO
Financial		x
Legal		x
Human Rights/Equality Impact Assessment		x
Community Safety including Section 17 of Crime & Disorder Act		x
Sustainability		x
Asset Management/Property/Land		x
Technology		x
Other (please explain)		x

### 6. IMPLICATIONS:

### 7. REASON FOR THE DECISION:

To provide Members with information about the activity of officers during the pandemic.

### 8. BACKGROUND PAPERS:

Appendix A - [Impact of Covid-19 on the West Sussex Economy](#)