

 <p><b>COTSWOLD</b> DISTRICT COUNCIL</p>	<p><b>COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCIL</b></p>
<p>Name and date of Committee</p>	<p><b>CABINET – 13 MAY 2021</b></p>
<p>Report Number</p>	<p><b>AGENDA ITEM 10</b></p>
<p>Subject</p>	<p><b>REOPENING HIGH STREETS SAFELY FUND/WELCOME BACK FUND</b></p>
<p>Wards affected</p>	<p>ALL</p>
<p>Accountable member</p>	<p>Cllr Tony Dale, Cabinet Member for Economy &amp; Skills Email: <a href="mailto:tony.dale@cotswold.gov.uk">tony.dale@cotswold.gov.uk</a></p>
<p>Accountable officer</p>	<p>Paul James, Economic Development Lead Tel: 01285 623558 Email: <a href="mailto:paul.james@cotswold.gov.uk">paul.james@cotswold.gov.uk</a></p>
<p>Summary/Purpose</p>	<p>To note the spend on Reopening High Streets Safely Fund projects to date and to agree a broad approach to the use of the Welcome Back Fund.</p>
<p>Annexes</p>	<p>None</p>
<p>Recommendation/s</p>	<p><i>a) That the use of the Reopening High Streets Safely Fund to date is noted;</i> <i>b) That the proposed approach to the use of the Welcome Back Fund is endorsed and authority is delegated to the Deputy Chief Executive to agree specific allocations in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills</i></p>
<p>Corporate priorities</p>	<p>Enable a vibrant economy - Help our town centres recover from Covid-19 and in the face of changing shopping habits.</p>
<p>Key Decision</p>	<p>NO</p>
<p>Exempt</p>	<p>NO</p>
<p>Consultees/ Consultation</p>	<p>Consultation has taken place with the Cotswold Economic Advisory Group, the Cirencester Chamber of Commerce and Town Councils.</p>

## **1. BACKGROUND**

The Government announced £50 million of funding in May 2020 to assist with the reopening of town centres and provide short-term support following the first lockdown. The funding was from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and this element of it was named the “Reopening High Streets Safely Fund” (RHSS). The Government announced a further tranche of £56 million in March 2021 under the banner of the “Welcome Back Fund”, but which is effectively an extension of the RHSS.

## **2. MAIN POINTS**

**2.1** The funding was allocated to local authorities across the country and Cotswold District Council’s share of it was £81,144. The initial scheme was meant to run until the end of March 2021 but as a result of the further lockdowns it was extended until the end of June 2021.

- Use of the money had to be linked to an action plan to safely reopen town centres, as part of the Council’s overall response to Covid-19, and needed to fit in with four themes:
- Support to develop an action plan;
- Communications and public information activity;
- Business facing awareness;
- Temporary public realm changes.

**2.2** Expenditure also had to provide additionality, could not be capital spending and could not be used for grants to businesses. In common with other ERDF schemes, there are strict rules on state aid, procurement and branding. The Council has to submit a claim to recover expenditure, which is subject to audit.

**2.3** The Council’s RHSS grant action plan was approved in January 2021 and a funding agreement between the Council and the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, which enables the Council to submit a claim for expenditure, was issued in March 2021.

**2.4** The original RHSS funding for Cotswold is now largely committed, although a relatively small balance remains which can be used alongside the new funding, and has been deployed as follows:

- Temporary public realm changes, signage etc. in a number of the larger towns in the District;
- Business packs with signs, stickers etc showing safety messages;
- Footfall counters for Cirencester, Stow-on-the-Wold and Tetbury;
- Promotional campaigns with public safety messages;
- Cirencester town centre ambassadors in the run-up to Christmas;
- Webinars for the hospitality sector on reopening safely and successfully following the easing of restrictions;

- Business advisers (Heartflood) who were tasked with ensuring town centre businesses across the District were accessing the support they needed;
- Support for businesses to improve their digital presence, working with tech company Maybe\*.

**2.5** The Government announced a further tranche of £56 million in March 2021 under the banner of the “Welcome Back Fund” (WBF), but which is effectively an extension of the RHSS. £6 million was earmarked for coastal towns, with the remaining £50 million allocated in the same way as the RHSS i.e. CDC’s share is £81,144. This scheme will run until the end of March 2022.

**2.6** The rules for the WBF are looser than the RHSS. The detailed guidance has now been published along with an FAQ document and webinars are being held by the relevant team within the MHCLG to answer any further questions. The initial four areas of scope still apply (see para 2.1 above), but added to these are:

- To support and provide a safe public environment for a local area’s visitor economy;
- To allow local areas to develop plans for responding to the medium term impact of Covid-19, including trialling new ideas. This could include creating a “Virtual High Street” and research projects to futureproof local economies.

**2.7** Other examples of what could be covered are:

- Publicity campaigns for markets and events;
- Improving green spaces and seating areas;
- Beautification of areas to support the visitor economy.

**2.8** As with the RHSS, the expenditure for the WBF needs to be linked to our overall response to Covid and to our grant action plan. Rules around procurement, state aid and branding still apply. The process for claiming back expenditure remains the same.

**2.9** Councils are expected to consult town (and in some cases parish) councils as well as businesses and business groups. The town councils within the District have already been contacted about the Fund and several have come forward with ideas within their towns. The idea of a virtual high street seems to be popular with them and is certainly worth exploring further. The work being done by Heartflood (business advisers - see para 2.4 above) in supporting town centre businesses across the District will also be used to help identify priorities for the use of this fund.

**2.10** Initial thoughts on how the funding could be spent are:

- physical changes to town centres, whether these are cosmetic improvements or changes to aid social distancing;
- creating a virtual high street for the Cotswolds to enable traders without a dedicated e-commerce website to trade online and to promote events and provide information about each town centre;

- information/promotional campaigns, whether this is for public safety information or to promote markets and events;

All of these strands of work will be joined up with the efforts to assist the recovery of the visitor economy by working closely with Cotswolds Tourism.

- 2.11** The guidance from Government, in a recent webinar, was to concentrate on a small number of projects as the amount of money is relatively modest. The views of the Cotswold Economic Advisory Group have been sought and they are supportive of the proposed approach. Although it is difficult at this stage to put exact figures against each of the headings, it is anticipated that a virtual high street could cost around £30k. The information and promotional campaign, for which £10k seems a reasonable figure, can be funded from the balance of the RHSS fund, leaving just over £50k for physical improvements to town centres. Once Cabinet has given approval, Officers will progress these strands of work in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills and other key stakeholders.

### **3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 3.1.** The proposed expenditure can be recovered from the European Regional Development Fund by submitting a claim via the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

### **4. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1.** Any funding will need to be in accordance with the guidance issued by the Government. As this is grant funding, it can be agreed by Cabinet subject to the Chief Finance Officer being content with this approach.

### **5. RISK ASSESSMENT**

- 5.1.** There is a risk that some or all of our expenditure may be deemed ineligible and therefore rejected by MHCLG. This risk is being mitigated by carefully following the guidance and ensuring rules around procurement, branding and state aid are adhered to and holding regular meetings with the RHSS Contract Manager.

### **6. EQUALITIES IMPACT (IF REQUIRED)**

- 6.1.** The projects undertaken through the RHSS and Welcome Back Fund aim to ensure the Council's town centres are safe and welcoming for all.

### **7. CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1.** Shopping locally is often the most environmentally-friendly option. By ensuring our town centres are vibrant and serve the needs of local communities we can reduce the need for travel to more distant centres.

**8. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

- 8.1.** The District Council could choose not to spend its allocation of RHSS and WBF funding, but this would be a missed opportunity to help our town centres to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic.

**9. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 9.1.** None.