
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, ENVIRONMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the Economic Development, Environment and Infrastructure Scrutiny Panel was held on Wednesday 21 July 2021.

PRESENT: Councillors S Walker (Chair), R Arundale (Vice-Chair), D Branson, D Coupe, T Mawston and M Saunders

PRESENT BY INVITATION: Councillors

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

OFFICERS: G Field, D Ingoldsby, D Jamison, S Lightwing and P Thwaites

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Councillors T Furness, B Hubbard and M Storey

21/10 **WELCOME AND EVACUATION PROCEDURE**

The Chair welcomed all present to the meeting.

21/11 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest received at this point in the meeting.

21/12 **MINUTES - ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, ENVIRONMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE SCRUTINY PANEL - 30 JUNE 2021**

The minutes of the meeting of the Economic Development, Environment and Infrastructure Scrutiny Panel meeting held on 30 June 2021 were taken as read and approved as a correct record.

21/13 **MIDDLESBROUGH REGENERATION POST COVID-19 SCRUTINY REVIEW - BUSINESS SUPPORT/GRANTS**

The Strategic Business Manager, Regeneration, was in attendance and provided overview of the business support/grants provided by the Council during the pandemic.

Since March 2020 the Council's Revenues and Benefits team, Economic Growth/Regeneration and Finance Service, had collaborated to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic to support businesses. Whilst continuing to deliver a regular day to day service, a range of additional initiatives and grant schemes were designed. Teams worked quickly to ensure support was provided speedily and effectively where it was most needed.

At the earliest opportunity information was disseminated through web and social media platforms and business networks to promote and guide businesses through the support available both via the Local Authority and the wider business support landscape. Several support mechanisms were initiated and promoted by Middlesbrough Council which included:

- Buy Boro campaign: promotion of local supply and services.
- 1 to 1 business workshops – targeted to small/independent business to 'plan it not panic'. The workshops covered managing cashflow, business planning, emergency procedures.
- Comprehensive list of PPE suppliers prepared and promoted through the Council's website.

- Businesses linked directly to Teesside University Digital City to receive free support to improve website and ecommerce options.
- Outdoor tables available to loan to retail/leisure/hospitality businesses and supported to acquire an outdoor licence.
- Town Centre cleaning stations, ambassadors to support high street shoppers and businesses.
- Guidance and signposting via dedicated web pages and help lines for businesses to access full range of support.

A range of grant schemes were designed with quick delivery remaining a priority throughout. Middlesbrough Council was the first Local Authority in the area to distribute an emergency Covid grant.

The onus was placed on Local Authorities to determine the approach and design of the schemes to best support their respective local economies. This was challenging at times due to changing legislation combined with the perceptions of the business community on eligibility.

Middlesbrough's emergency and discretionary business grant schemes sought to support businesses through the covid pandemic and restrictions by:

- Providing direct grant support to businesses impacted by restrictions.
- Supporting businesses that were unable to access other business support schemes.
- Supporting home businesses and sole traders with fixed business costs.
- Introducing business support measures to stimulate the local economy through key sectors and priority regeneration areas to facilitate long term job creation and investment.

Both the mandatory grants and discretionary funding had been used to full effect, with grants distributed in accordance with government guidance and discretionary elements tailored to target gap areas and provide the most strategic impact. In the first 6 months of the pandemic, over £25m was initially distributed in grants to support Middlesbrough businesses.

Local Restriction Support Grants (LRSG) were issued in November 2020, as restrictions and lockdowns became more prevalent. Alongside the LRSG a discretionary Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG) was launched to address gaps. Both schemes were regularly reviewed and included several enhancements to the scheme to ensure that gaps in eligibility were addressed, targeted sector support was provided and business support measures were introduced to stimulate the local economy, create jobs and provide rapid recovery.

Almost £16m was distributed through the LRSG schemes and this funding was utilised to provide emergency support to eligible businesses. In addition to those businesses that had to close, there were others that were essential and required to stay open and trade, but were still impacted. £300,000 was issued in grants to support these businesses which did not meet the eligibility guidelines for the main LRSG grants. There was also a sector specific grant for those business required to close from March 2020 such as Nightclubs and approximately £17,500 was allocated to six eligible businesses in Middlesbrough. Wet Led pubs received a Christmas payment grant which totalled £53,000. Finally there was a Restart grant to support re-opening of retail, hospitality, leisure, personal care, accommodation and gyms. 794 Restart payments were made totalling approximately £5.7 million.

The ARG grant was awarded to Local Authorities based on population, to identify the gaps, look at the local economy and provide funding to businesses not covered by the other schemes. The service identified businesses where the grant would make the most impact. The scheme had just been completed with approximately £4.1 million in grants issued. Home based businesses, supply chain, businesses in shared spaces had all benefitted. Middlesbrough Council collaborated with other local Councils to ensure the same sort of grants were being issued, although there was a particular element that just worked for Middlesbrough. From the start of scheme in December it was reviewed every four weeks and enhanced five times over its lifetime, to make sure it brought in the sectors that were impacted but still required to trade. Those sectors included manufacturing and engineering, as well as taxi drivers and driving instructors.

The LRSG schemes had now closed and the Additional Restriction Grant was fully committed.

In total £45m had been distributed by the Council in grants to support Middlesbrough businesses since March 2020. The service had issued six briefing papers to Elected Members over the last year to provide updates on the various schemes. Members were invited to provide details of any businesses that were seeking assistance.

Whilst most sectors had been supported it was acknowledged that there would be some businesses that could not access schemes as they had not provided evidence that there were eligible for a particular grant. Some businesses had sought support that was being offered elsewhere through government schemes such as the Furlough scheme.

It was anticipated that a second phase of ARG funding would be triggered as soon as 100% of spend was reported. This would provide Middlesbrough Council with a further £670K to support business recovery through to March 2022. The aim was to focus the second phase of ARG funds to supporting new start-up businesses, as well as further grants to support businesses in their recovery.

A Business Recovery Officer had recently been appointed on a one year fixed term contract, using other covid funding. The Officer would offer additional support to businesses to enable them to access grants both from the Council and other sources.

The Council's Revenues and Benefits team, Economic Growth/Regeneration and Finance Service had worked closely together over the past year to support businesses and residents. The intelligence gathered would help inform future contingency plans and clean up the data currently held. It was highlighted that rapidly changing guidance and information from Central Government had been difficult to follow at times.

Current government guidance and rules on self-isolation were having an impact on retail, leisure and hospitality in particular. The Council was consulting with public health to ensure that all the latest information was available on the website. If certain sectors were severely impacted, potentially there would be opportunities for support in the next round of funding.

It was acknowledged that in the longer term, the Covid-19 pandemic would change the nature of the local economy. The Council would focus on the recovery of viable businesses and sectors, to have an impact on Middlesbrough and create jobs and provide opportunities for local residents.

Generally those businesses that had experienced a 30 percent drop in turnover had received a similar level of support. However a wide range of sectors had received more or less in grants.

The Chair, on behalf of the Panel, congratulated the team for their efforts throughout the pandemic and in particular for the speed at which grants had been issued.

AGREED that the information provided was received and noted.

21/14

TEESSIDE CREMATORIUM - UPDATE PRESENTATION

The Operational Manager, Environment and Community Services, provided an update three recommendations from a previous review by the Economic Development, Environment and Infrastructure Scrutiny Panel, in respect of Teesside Crematorium.

Voile curtains had now been installed in both Chapels. There had been some concern regarding the lighting in St Hilda's Chapel but that had been resolved.

The accessible parking review had been undertaken. An additional footpath had been installed at St Bede's Chapel. St Hilda's Chapel complied with accessibility requirements and additional parking had been introduced. Accessibility within the crematorium and cemetery would be reviewed as part of the ongoing accessibility audits carried out by Asset Management.

A chart showing details of income in relation to cremation services was presented and it was noted that this had declined since 2017-2018. The Panel was assured that the changing situation in relation to finance would continue to be kept under review and the Council would adapt its services to meet the community's needs.

Middlesbrough Council set a budget for the Cremation and Burial Services and the objective for the Service was to operate within that budget. It was confirmed that Teesside Crematorium was operating within its budget as part of the Council's current financial plan. Provisions would continue to be built into the Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) as part of the Council's response to increased competition for crematorium services since two local councils had opened their own facilities.

In relation to query regarding the lack of air conditioning in the chapels it was explained that in line with current government guidance during the covid-19 pandemic, such units should not be used to circulate air.

With regard to future improvements at Teesside Crematorium, the service area had looked at a number of digital solutions over the last year and a number of them had been introduced. It was important to get the right balance of what people required at such an emotional time. The team would continue to look at opportunities to make sure the best service was provided.

The Chair, on behalf of the Panel, thanked the Officers for attending the meeting and providing an update. The Chair also placed on record the Panel's thanks for team's hard work in difficult circumstances throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

AGREED that the information provided was received and noted.

21/15 **DATE OF NEXT MEETING - 8 SEPTEMBER 2021**

The next meeting of the Economic Development, Environment and Infrastructure Scrutiny Panel would be held on Wednesday 8 September 2021 at 10.30 am.

21/16 **OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD UPDATE**

The Chair provided a verbal update on the following items which were discussed at the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting held on 29 June 2021:

- Chief Executive's update in respect of the Council's response to Covid-19 and other organisational matters.
- Director of Regeneration's update regarding the Future High Streets Fund, as well as an overview of the plans for the transformation of the Town Centre.
- Strategic Plan 2020-2023 – Progress at Year-End 2020-2021.

NOTED

21/17 **ANY OTHER URGENT ITEMS WHICH IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIR, MAY BE CONSIDERED**

None.