



RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET

8th MAY 2019

**CREATING VIBRANT TOWN CENTRES IN RHONDDA CYNON TAF –
GROWING BUSINESSES WITH A TARGETED PACKAGE OF SUPPORT IN
OUR TOWN CENTRES**

**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF PROSPERITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN
DISCUSSION WITH THE CABINET MEMBER FOR ENTERPRISE
DEVELOPMENT AND HOUSING, COUNCILLOR R BEVAN**

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 This report sets out a framework for a targeted, focussed and co-ordinated package of support for businesses in our town centres that will allow businesses to grow and thrive increasing employment and prosperity leading to town centres becoming vibrant places at the heart of our communities.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that:

- 2.1 The Targeted Package of Support for Businesses set out within the report delivered and monitored for the benefit of town centre businesses;
- 2.2 The detailed proposals for a local discretionary town centre Business Rate Reduction scheme, as set out in the report, be developed and brought forward for Cabinet's consideration; and
- 2.3 Elements of the Package should be further developed and reports prepared as appropriate for the development of town centre strategies and masterplans and a prominent building enhancement programme.

3. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION

- 3.1 To continue to deliver on the Council's commitment to support the regeneration of town centres and encourage private sector investment in the high street economy, as set out in Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council's 2016-20 Corporate Plan "The Way Ahead".

- 3.2 To deliver this commitment and to tackle the many challenges and opportunities currently faced by our town centres, the solution requires an integrated, coordinated and holistic approach to town centre regeneration that provides a focussed package of support measures to local businesses.

4. BACKGROUND

- 4.1 All town centres are facing a multitude of challenges to their future vitality and viability. They are characterised by falling retail sales, reduced footfall, increased business failures and rising vacancies. The growth of internet shopping and multi-channel retailing also means that many retailers are actively seeking to reduce rather than increase their store portfolios.

- 4.2 Enabling vibrant and attractive town centres, with a strong offer, which recognises that they are at the heart of our communities is a clear commitment within Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council's 2016-20 Corporate Plan "The Way Ahead". The Plan also makes a commitment that they will benefit from investment to ensure an attractive environment exists for businesses, residents and shoppers.

- 4.3 To deliver this commitment and to tackle the many challenges currently faced by our town centres, the solution requires a new and sustainable approach to supporting our town centre businesses helping them to grow and thrive. This approach needs our local businesses to be able to grow, develop and diversify to meet the current challenges and to take advantage of new opportunities. These new opportunities include the growth potential of the Cardiff City Region and City Deal initiative and planned investments such as the Metro which have the potential to be game changing for the South East Wales economy with Rhondda Cynon Taf at the heart. A targeted package of support measures will help town centre businesses achieve their potential.

5. A TARGETED PACKAGE OF SUPPORT FOR OUR TOWN CENTRE BUSINESSES

- 5.1 This package of support is about the long term future of our town centres and residents, visitors and businesses that depend on them. Creating sustainable long term prosperity across our town centres is critical to the prevention of decline in our communities and facilitating investment which will create jobs and prosperity with strong local businesses.

- 5.2 The support measures will be made available to our town centre businesses so that they can take advantage of trading and market opportunities at the right time and come forward with sustainable investment proposals. The package will be focussed in a coordinated

way across our key town centres. Certain measures will be available across all centres where others may be made available at different times or in different centres to address particular issues and opportunities.

- 5.3 This support will be delivered by a **Team RCT Approach** with the relevant services coming together to support businesses in a co-ordinated and streamlined way that will be effective for the participating businesses and efficient for Council Service Delivery. This approach will also comprise a consistent and co-ordinated marketing and communication methodology so that businesses and customers have a clear understanding and easy access to the opportunities provided by the Support Package. The results and outcomes of the delivery of the package will be monitored so that we can measure the progress and benefits that are being achieved. The support measures within the package are set out in more detail below.

6. DETAILS OF THE SUPPORT PACKAGE PROPOSALS

- 6.1 It is proposed that the Town Centre Business Support Package will comprise the following elements:

- **Town Centre Strategies and Masterplans** – Developing a series of town centre strategies and masterplans as a framework for development, growth and investment is an important tool which will help to support businesses, developers and investors. This will build on our framework for development and growth which is set out in our Strategic Opportunity Areas for Rhondda Cynon Taf. A clear plan for development and prioritised improvement projects in our town centres will enable us to engage effectively with existing businesses and potential investors and developers and other important stakeholders including the local communities. This will help to maximise the effectiveness of private sector investment, target Council and other public sector resources more effectively and draw down sources of external funding that are available. This will result in achieving the right mix of development and investment for towns making them as vibrant and sustainable as possible for the future.

This approach has already begun in Porth and Mountain Ash where local strategies are in place to help to guide development, investment and project delivery. These will be followed by strategy and masterplan development in other towns. Initial development work is currently underway in Tonypany, Treorchy and Pontypridd which will be reported separately for Cabinet discussion and potential future consultation and delivery.

- **Non Domestic Rates (NDR) – A New Business Rate Reduction Scheme** - Non Domestic Rates (NDR) is a national tax on non-domestic

property that is levied by local councils. The basis of the amount of rates payable in any financial year in respect of a property is the multiplication of the rateable value of that property (assessed by the Valuation Office Agency) by the NDR rate multiplier (annually set by Welsh Government). The role of the Council is to administer the levy on behalf of Welsh Government and this extends to administering any additional relief schemes introduced, including:

- Charitable Rate Relief
- Discretionary Rate Relief (DRR)
- Small Business Rates Relief (SBRR)
- High Street Rate Relief (HSRR)

The cost implications of these schemes are usually borne by Welsh Government.

It is proposed that the Council now develops a new local discretionary scheme of NDR relief that is targeted toward increasing the sustainability and growth of our town centres. The scheme will seek to target further NDR relief to town centre businesses and be in addition to any other relief which they are already in receipt of.

The Council has set aside £200k in the 2019/20 revenue budget for the purpose of supporting such a scheme. This could see up to 300 local businesses benefit from a further reduction in their NDR bills.

It is proposed that officers are requested to now develop the detail of such a scheme and this be reported back to a future Cabinet for consideration and, if appropriate, agreement (and subsequent incorporation into the Council's existing charitable and Discretionary Relief Policy).

The implementation of such a scheme will help ensure that town centres across Rhondda Cynon Taf remain an inviting and attractive place for businesses to invest and provide a solid platform from which they can develop and grow.

- **Enterprise Support Programme** - A refocussed Enterprise Support Programme which recognises modern business investment needs and opportunities including those in our town centres. This will offer a range of grant support for business modernisation, equipment, IT development and start up support. The Programme is available for businesses across RCT but will be an integral part of the focussed approach of the town centre support package.

This was subject to a Cabinet Report on 19th March 2019.

- **Town Centre Maintenance Grant** - Town Centre Maintenance Grants for existing businesses to maintain their properties, avoiding buildings deteriorating and to make them more attractive to customers and improve the town centre environment. Small easily accessible grants are available on a rolling programme of town centres. Currently the scheme is operational in Aberdare, Ferndale and Porth following on from Tonypany, Mountain Ash and Treorchy.

This was subject to a Delegated Decision on 12th March 2019.

- **Pontypridd Property Investment Programme** – This grant fund will provide financial support for applicants to improve their commercial premises in Pontypridd Town Centre and is being supported by Welsh Government Targeted Regeneration Investment funding. The grants will enhance the physical condition and appearance of buildings including shopfronts and exteriors and bring back vacant internal floorspace into productive use for business and residential purposes.

This was subject to a Delegated Decision on 30th October 2018.

- **Town Centre WiFi** – This measure will provide free access to Town Centre WiFi within Aberdare, Ferndale, Mountain Ash, Porth, Pontypridd, Tonypany and Treorchy Town Centres. This will have significant benefits including;
 - Town Centre businesses can advertise and promote their goods and services;
 - Access to potential savings and discounts offered from local businesses;
 - Improved access to public services which are increasingly available online;
 - Increased attractiveness of our Town Centres for visitors.

Key features of this provision will include;

- Service availability between 7am and 7pm daily (maximum), with actual service times to be agreed in consultation with Town Centre businesses;
- Support for a full range of devices (Mobile, Tablet, Laptop);
- Service would be free of charge for the public.

This was subject to a Delegated Decision on 8 April 2019.

- **Building Resilience, Prosperity and Wellbeing Project** - The Building Resilience, Prosperity and Wellbeing Project will offer support to micro, small and medium size businesses within Rhondda Cynon Taf. It will provide HR advice and support to help businesses respond to the needs

of their workforce, promote health, wellbeing and diversity in the workplace

An effective approach to absence management, and a healthy workforce, will be crucial to business productivity, competitiveness and sustainability.

- **Town Centre Prominent Building Enhancement Programme** – This measure will support town centre businesses with more significant investment plans which will improve commercial premises and bring back vacant floorspace into productive use including for residential purposes. This approach will target prominent buildings in town centres where improving the building will benefit the business applicant but also the town centre environment making it more attractive for visitors, residents and potential investors. Grant support will be available for suitable business investment proposals subject to further development work on the arrangements.
- **Support For Businesses to Meet Their Statutory Obligations** - This will be offered in a co-ordinated way in targeted town centres. The approach will help businesses ensure that they are complying with legal requirements when they are trading or planning to improve or expand their businesses, diversify and develop. Support and advice will be co-ordinated by the appropriate Services for planning and building regulations, environmental health and licensing issues. Businesses will also be offered advice so they can avoid having enforcement action taken against them if they are at risk of failing to comply with their statutory obligations.

7. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) screening form has been prepared for the purpose of this report. It has been found that a full report is not required at this time. The screening form can be accessed by contacting the author of the report or the Cabinet Business Officer.

8. CONSULTATION

- 8.1 There are no direct formal consultation requirements arising from these proposals. Individual projects, initiatives and strategies which arise as a result of the proposals will be subject to appropriate consultation at the time.

9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)

- 9.1 The financial implications of the range of measures set out in this report have already been incorporated into the Council's budget.

10. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED

- 10.1 The Localism Act 2011 amends Section 47 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 and enables councils in Wales to reduce the business rates of any local ratepayer.

11. LINKS TO THE CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT

- 11.1 The Targeted Package of Support For Our Town Centre Businesses contributes to the Building a Strong Economy priority within the Council's Corporate Plan 2016-2020 "The Way Ahead". It is line with one of the key principles of 'Building a Sustainable County Borough' by supporting an initiative that stimulate economic growth.
- 11.2 It will also complement the Council's Digital Strategy 'Digital RCT – Our 2020 Digital Vision' by supporting the growth of the digital economy as vehicle for regeneration as well as contributing to the digitising of business to business services.
- 11.3 The scheme will contribute to improving the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales and support the delivery of a prosperous Wales, a more resilient Wales and a Wales of cohesive communities.

12. CONCLUSION

- 12.1 The proposals set out in this report establish and deliver a Targeted Package of Support for Town Centre Businesses and help the local businesses to grow, thrive and be more sustainable and resilient. This in turn will make our town centres more attractive places to do business, work, live and visit and be vibrant places at the heart of the communities they serve.

Other Information:-

Relevant Scrutiny Committee

Finance and Performance Scrutiny Committee

Public Service Delivery, Communities and Prosperity Scrutiny Committee

Contact Officer Derek James, Service Director – Prosperity and Development

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

AS AMENDED BY

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

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Background Papers: None

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