

Report of Chief Officer Operations

Report to Director of City Development

Date: 11 January 2020

Subject: Reopening High Street Safely Fund (RHSSF)

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|--|---|
| Are specific electoral wards affected? If yes, name(s) of ward(s): | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No |
| Has consultation been carried out? | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No |
| Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration? | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No |
| Will the decision be open for call-in? | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No |
| Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? If relevant, access to information procedure rule number: Appendix number: | <input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No |

Summary

1. Main issues

- Central government, through the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), have allocated funds to Local Authorities, forming part of plans for managing COVID-19 response activity. The fund is used to support specific activities in safely re-opening the city centre, towns and districts, and neighbourhood high streets.
- A paper setting out a request for approval to accept a reallocation fund agreement could not have been brought forward any sooner, until such an agreement had been made available to the Council. This agreement was received on the 5th January. . The government has required that a response is provided by the Council by 19th January. This makes it necessary for the recommendations in this paper to require special emergency, as per paragraph 2.6 of the Executive and Decision Making Procedure Rules.
- The reimbursement fund differs in that it is not a grant provision that is being paid to the Council, but a reclaim process that is subject to the process managed by MHCLG parameters of which activities are eligible.
- The purpose of the fund is therefore to defray costs incurred within specific activity directed by MHCLG so far. This then enables funding to be drawn down to continue delivery of safe reopening of high streets projects within the strict parameters specified by government.

- Leeds City Council has been allocated a reimbursement pot of £701,850 ring-fenced to specific expenditure, with restrictive use.
- The Leeds Grant Funding Agreement (GFA) was issued on the 5th January 2021. A condition of the offer is that a mandatory response to the offer is returned within 14 days for the acceptance by the local authority to be valid, by 19th January.
- Local Authorities have been receiving evolving guidance on the scheme from May 2020, however formal funding agreements have lagged behind the announcements, and Leeds City Council received its funding proposal of 5th January 2021.
- The period of eligible activity is from 1st June 2020 to March 31st 2021. The model for claiming funds used by MHCLG is based on elements of European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). Expenditure is first incurred by the Local Authority and claimed back from the funding allocation within a strict framework.
- Having due regard to the Government's guidance and restricted timeframe as a condition of an accepted offer, it is proposed that the offer is accepted within the timeline set out by government. This will ensure that the claims process can meet set requirements. In line with the Government's guidance, all claimable expenditure incurred by the Council must meet stringent procurement conditions.

2. Best Council Plan Implications (click [here](#) for the latest version of the Best Council Plan)

- Activities and plans under RHSSF will support the Best City Ambition to have 'A Strong Economy and a Compassionate City' by providing support to high streets to ensure that they can re-open safely from COVID-19 lockdowns. This will encourage footfall to return and thereby helping to protect jobs and livelihoods and ensure that our economy has a better chance of recovery.

3. Resource Implications

- The Council will be able to claim reimbursement from the scheme for activities in 4 fixed categories. These projects are being led by colleagues from Highways and transportation, city centre management, visitor economy and data and Innovation services.
- Eligible administration costs of administering the scheme have also been included and the fixed permissible 4% of total scheme value towards staff costs is to be claimed. This represents part of the staff cost for the head of city centre management who is the lead officer for the scheme and the economic programmes leader, who is managing a range of activity under the curation theme of the City centre COVID recovery plan.
- The scheme requires the Council to enter into an agreement by signing the Grant Fund Agreement before it can access reimbursement claims for expenditure incurred to re-open High streets safely. This will enable financial support to the Council to become claimable and provide access to the funding.

Recommendations

The Director of City Development is recommended to:

- a) Note the contents of the report and the advice contained within it.
- b) Approve the acceptance of the proposed offer of COVID-19 Re-Opening High Streets Safely Fund from MHCLG of £701,850 by signing the agreement so claims can be progressed.
- c) Delegate the approval to make claims from the fund to officers with delegated authority under City Development's existing Sub delegation scheme.
- d) Agree, in consultation with the Chair of the Infrastructure, Investment and Inclusive Growth Scrutiny Board that the decision should be exempt from call-in due to the reasons outlined in paragraph 4.5.2 of the report (Special Urgency Provision).

1. Purpose of this report

- 1.1 This report sets out the details of the Re-opening High Street Safely Fund (RHSSF) which is subject to accepting the offer of reimbursement funding from central government. The response to government is set in a tight window of 14 days in order for the Council's response to be accepted and binding.

2. Background information

- 2.1 High streets are critical to the economic recovery of towns and cities and they continue to play an important role to support the economic and social recovery from COVID-19 pandemic, as key locations of economic and social activity in the region.
- 2.2 The RHSSF Project announced in May 2020 is a £50m project fund drawn from ERDF uncommitted resources, to help councils in England introduce a range of safety measures to kick start local economies by getting people back to work and customers back to the high streets after lockdowns.
- 2.3 The fund is administered by the Cities and Local Growth Unit (CGLU). CGLU is a joint government delivery alliance between the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the Business Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) arm of government.
- 2.4 Expenditure for reimbursement under RHSSF will be eligible from 1 June 2020. The detail of the requirements of the ERDF direct grant is covered in the Funding Agreement attached as Appendix 1. Once this agreement is in place then claims for reimbursement for expenditure incurred from 1 June can begin to be made. The grant awards will be available to access up until the end of March 2021.
- 2.5 Given the nature of the evolving regional Tier system, ad hoc changes in guidance and 3 lockdowns, CGLU is considering extending the closing period to June 2021.

3. Main issues

- 3.1 Detailed guidance was published for the RHSSF scheme from government. The guidance was made available from 24th May and can be read [HERE](#)

3.2 The RHSSF scheme for Leeds covers activity in the 4 strands set out in the RHSSF scheme as required MHCLG. The requirement is for claims to be set within these areas and work completed and in progress include:

- i. Developed a plan for how the Council has re-opened safely in high streets through a COVID recovery plan.
- ii. Communications and public information activity to ensure that re-opening of local economies can be managed successfully and safely. This is being delivered through the “RE-DISCOVER LEEDS” safely campaign.
- iii. Safe travel campaign focussing on public transport, highway use, active travel.
- iv. Safe public spaces campaign focussing in on communities, district centres and the city centre.
- v. Safe delivery of services campaign to support museums and galleries, attractions, broader public and other services when reopening.
- vi. Safe settings campaign to support schools, nurseries, colleges, universities, activities.
- vii. Supporting Digital Advertising campaign, media, online and print media
- viii. Development of a technology app to enable public information to be pushed to mobile phones to support workers and visitors returning to the city centre and district centres safely, which would include real time information about hot spots, queue lengths in certain parts of the city centre and information that will support a safe return. Consumers will be able to make informed decisions about their safe visit to Leeds, their direction of travel and use the app as a tool to support positive decision making in coming back to the centre with greater confidence.
- ix. Providing a range of materials freely distributed to businesses on social distancing, signage units, lamp post banners, bollard covers, floor vinyl and a range of regular and constant stream of messaging in various media on safe re-opening and visits to high streets both to customers and businesses
- x. #postersforthepeople campaign in support of NHS and frontline Key Workers, working with a collective of artists, using art to bring joy, colour and gratitude to the city centre
- xi. Installed 18 (2.5m) high information towers across the whole city providing COVID safe information and welcoming visitors back
- xii. Installed 180 lamppost banners on Safe COVID messaging across the whole city.
- xiii. Installed hand sanitisation stations at key locations in the city centre.
- xiv. We installed 132 corex information boards in localities, informing about COVID safe activities.
- xv. Distributed over 5,000 floor markers FREE of charge to businesses to manage queues and social distancing.
- xvi. Developed and distributed guidance to businesses on social distancing measures.
- xvii. Launched a team of 12 Leeds City Ambassadors to support safe reopening.
- xviii. Business-facing and awareness raising activities to ensure that reopening of local economies can be managed successfully and safely. We employed a team of High street ambassadors for re-opening in summer that delivered this role in the city centre
- xix. Temporary public realm changes to ensure that reopening of local economies can be managed successfully and safely. We installed safe

distancing barriers across the whole city in key locations of risk and reduced carriageway width, in order to increase pedestrian space to support safe distancing in high streets.

- 3.3 The work stream on RHSSF has been pulled together quickly as a new concept responding directly to the challenge to restore and grow public confidence, support a safe return and provide public information, guidance and promotion to enable safe return to the city centre and high streets as a direct result of the impact of COVID-19.

4. Corporate considerations

4.1 Consultation and engagement

- 4.1.1 Development of COVID 19 reopening plan, strategy and proposals were consulted on with the following groups and stakeholders:

- Leeds Venues & Hotels association
- The city's silver group on business & economy including the Chamber of Commerce, Federation of Small Businesses, West Yorkshire Combined Authority and Leeds Business Improvement District.
- The city's bronze group on reopening safely that includes West Yorkshire Police, British Transport Police, West Yorkshire Fire Service, Leeds City Council services in Safer Leeds, CCTV Leeds Watch, Parks, Licensing and Communities services
- Leeds Top 12 retail group

There was broad support for an approach which focused on 3 key strands in reopening safely. **Curation, Communication and Place Making**. There was also an acknowledgment that the activities may need to be repeated at intervals if the pandemic persisted and continued to have a negative impact on returning safely to High streets.

- 4.1.2 The Executive Member for Learning, Skills and Employment and the chair of Infrastructure, Investment & Inclusive Growth Scrutiny Board and have been consulted on the recommendations outlined in this report.

4.2 Equality and diversity / cohesion and integration

- 4.2.1 Activity that is being delivered under the RHSSF scheme covers high streets across the district and Leeds as a whole. Due care has been given to ensuring that communities benefit from the programme. Key high streets and areas of high BAME populations are included, such as Harehills, Dewsbury Road, Roundhay road, Chapel town road and Armley High street.

4.3 Council policies and the Best Council Plan

- 4.3.1 RHSSF will support the Best City Ambition to have 'A Strong Economy and a Compassionate City'. Providing support to high streets and the city centre to ensure a safe re-opening enables promotion of social distancing, public messaging and bring about confidence to bounce back from COVID-19. This will help protect jobs and livelihoods and ensure that our economy has a better chance of recovery.

Climate Emergency

4.3.2 RHSSF is being delivered through a range of projects that meets our challenge on Climate change emergency. Creation of temporary public pedestrian areas, by removing carriageway space will reduce car use and contribute to our wider work on reduction of car emissions.

4.4 Resources, procurement and value for money

4.4.1 RHSSF is a direct offer of reimbursement of Council expenditure on specific activities relating to re-opening the High street. The Council was not a formal applicant to the scheme and the funding opportunity is being made available to the Council by government at without a bidding exercise.

4.4.2 There is no requirement for match funding and the Council therefore does not need to provide any financial contribution to the project in order to make claims from the fund. This represents good value for money in that it will help to reduce Council's overall spend, if eligible claims are made.

4.4.3 Eligible projects will need to meet stringent ERDF procurement rules in order for claims to be agreed and reimbursed. These rules are set out within the guidance of the ERDF framework for funding.

4.5 Legal implications, access to information, and call-in

4.5.1 In accepting the offer, the Council must have due regard to the government guidance and advice as set out in the RHSSF guidance and the offer agreement. It must act in a proportionate, objective, rational and reasonable manner. In addition, the Council must also act in a business-like manner with reasonable care, skill and caution and with a due and alert regard to the interests of the council tax and business rate payers of Leeds.

4.5.2 The recommendations contained in this report are Key Decisions which have not been included the List of Forthcoming Key Decisions for 28 clear days before they will be made. Given that the Government has asked local authorities to respond to the offer within 14days, the acceptance must be made as quickly as possible in order to be compliant with the condition. It would be impractical to defer the decisions sought until they have been included in the List of Forthcoming Key Decisions for 28 clear days. In the circumstances, and in accordance with the Council's special urgency procedure, the chair of the Infrastructure, Investment and Inclusive Growth Scrutiny Board has been consulted and has agreed that the decisions are urgent and cannot be reasonably deferred. Therefore the decision advised in this report is designated as exempt from call-in. The decision sought could not have been made earlier due to the need to respond within a 14 day timeframe, in order to be compliant with condition set out by Government.

4.5.3 As a consequence of the lockdown measures associated with the response to the Covid 19 pandemic, many high streets are suffering significant loss of footfall as the government has directed people to stay at home in the main. Consequently, the RHSSF project has been supporting re-openings appropriately when they have been enabled by government. It has been necessary for officers to work at pace following re-openings to ensure that high streets are as safe as can be in supporting the local and city centre economy.

4.6 Risk management

- 4.6.1 In order to minimise the risk to the Council of ineligible claims to the fund, officers have worked closely with the CLGU service to set out and appraise activity to be delivered under the scheme. This has enabled streamlining of the number of existing projects and expenditure, in order to provide scheme assurance.
- 4.6.2 The Council is required to respond quickly in signing the agreement of an offer within a prescribed time window. If the specific condition of return is not honoured within the 14 days timeline, it could mean that the offer is not valid and therefore the funds not made available.

5 Conclusions

- 5.1 The RHSSF is an opportunity for the Council to be reimbursed for expenditure incurred in supporting high streets and the city centre to re-open safely as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a direct allocation to the Council and does not require any match funding to fulfil the claim of funds. The report has set out the need to act within the response time, in order to meet the requirement to respond within a 14 day window. It is proposed that the funding agreement is signed and agreed at the earliest opportunity.

6 Recommendations

- 6.1 Director of City Development is recommended to:
- a) Note the contents of the report and the advice contained within it.
 - b) Approve the acceptance of the proposed offer of COVID-19 Re-Opening High Streets Safely Fund from MHCLG of £701,850 by signing the agreement so claims can be progressed.
 - c) Delegate the approval to make claims from the fund to officers with delegated authority under City Development's existing Sub delegation scheme.
 - d) Agree, in consultation with the Chair of the Infrastructure, Investment and Inclusive Growth Scrutiny Board that the decision should be exempt from call-in due to the reasons outlined in paragraph 4.5.2 of the report (Special Urgency Provision).

7 Background documents¹

- 7.1 None.

¹ The background documents listed in this section are available to download from the council's website, unless they contain confidential or exempt information. The list of background documents does not include published works.