

REPORT TO: Executive Board Sub Committee

DATE: 5th November 2009

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director, Environment

SUBJECT: CLG Grant – Extra Support for Town Centres

WARDS: Kingsway, Appleton, Mersey

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

To present proposals for the use of the recently awarded DCLG Grant – Extra Support for Town Centres.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That

- (1) The Board agrees the approach to implementing a support programme for Runcorn and Widnes Town Centres, funded by this new DCLG Grant.

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 CLG Grant – Extra Support for Town Centres

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government announced in August 2009 a £3million funding package to support town centres in the current economic downturn. Halton Borough Council is now in receipt of £52,632 from this grant to support our town centres.

Guidance on how Local Authorities can support town centres is provided in the “Looking after our town centres” document. One of the key issues addressed in this, that led to the grant is the re-use of empty units in town centres, although the grant is flexible for use by Local Authorities to spend in the best way to combat issues in their locality.

It is yet to be ascertained as to whether this funding must be used within this financial year or whether a scheme can be developed over this year and next. Until we are certain of the conditions of the grant (particularly the timescales), there is an element of over programming at 12% built into the proposals presented although expenditure will not be allowed to exceed the grant of £52,632

3.2 Existing Town Centre Improvement Activities

There are already a number of ongoing initiatives to regenerate and support the town centres in Halton. It is suggested that the CLG grant should be used to augment, develop and complement ongoing activities.

£130,000 of WNF funding has been secured for Town Centre Improvements this year as part of the Urban Renewal WNF allocation. The prime outcome of this funding, agreed by the LSP and the Urban Renewal SSP, is to improve Widnes Town Centre in anticipation of the opening of the new Widnes Shopping Park. Some of this funding is also being utilised in Runcorn in support of the development of the Canal Quarter scheme.

A number of key issues and solutions were proposed for the Town Centre Improvement scheme, with the primary activity being a Widnes Town Centre Branding Strategy and Action Plan to inform the improvements programme. URBED were commissioned to undertake this work in August with a final report expected in November 2009. The strategy will provide a brand image for Widnes which will be used to produce promotional material, update the promotional maps and location plans, identify improvements to pedestrian routes and provide solutions for the treatment of empty shop units.

Officers have undertaken an audit of street furniture in Widnes to advise on improvements and possible replacements. WNF funding will be used to action the findings of the audit, following the outcome of the branding strategy. A similar audit is scheduled for Runcorn.

In Runcorn work has focussed on the ongoing development of the Canal Quarter scheme, including ongoing property purchases and negotiations with developers. However it is acknowledged that work is required to improve the wider town centre, in particular to address the issue of vacant properties.

Vacancy and condition surveys have been undertaken in both Widnes and Runcorn town centres to ascertain the number of vacant properties and to identify properties in need of improvement. The surveys revealed vacancy rates of 13% in Widnes and 16% in Runcorn.

The street market has been a great success in Runcorn, increasing footfall in the town and improving perceptions of the town as a shopping destination. This now needs to be augmented with further support for local businesses to improve the attractiveness of Runcorn as a district centre.

The Shop Local scheme is currently being rolled out across the borough to encourage residents to shop in Halton's three town centres. Further elements of the marketing strategy for this scheme could be rolled out with additional funding from the CLG grant.

There are also a number of schemes provided in previous years by the Town Centre Manager which currently have no funding for 2009/10.

3.3 Proposals for use of CLG Grant

In the first instance it is important to recognise that £52,632 is not going to achieve a 'big bang' impact on the town centres as it is a relatively small pot of funding. Therefore, it is important to achieve the maximum impact over a

variety of schemes. Whilst there will be no new developments, we will be seeking an improvement in trading conditions and levels of trade through a number of schemes.

It is proposed that the grant is split between Runcorn and Widnes according to need. Given the commitment to WNF spend in Widnes and the relative vacancy rates in the two town centres, it is proposed that the grant is split approximately 40% for Widnes and 60% for Runcorn, with a number of the proposed 'town centre management' schemes covering both town centres.

"Looking after our town centres" notes the importance of working in partnership in order to create strong town centres and it is important that we utilise the existing Business Partnerships in Halton in order to progress plans for improvements.

As per the existing management of projects, a 7% (£3,500) fee for management of the grant has been applied.

An element of over-programming is recommended to ensure the full spend within the financial year.

As the CLG grant is a relatively small pot of funding, it is proposed that the principle is adopted of no more than 10% of the grant to be spent on any single individual scheme unless there is exceptional merit to that scheme.

All proposals for schemes are put forward on the following conditions:

- An evaluation of the impact of that scheme on the improvement of the town centres is completed in April 2010.
- Each scheme publicises appropriately the support from both CLG and Halton Borough Council.

A number of Town Centre Management proposals cover both Town Centres:

- Support for the ongoing promotion of the Shop Local Scheme. Further elements of the existing scheme could be rolled out, including advertising on buses and/or posters in vacant units. £5,000 (10%)
- Support for street cleansing activity as required by the Town Centre Manager, including gum removal or street washing. £5,000 (10%)
- Christmas Music for both town centres, including the installation of the system and all required licenses. £5,000 (10%)
- Support for market events as prioritised by the Market Manager, including one off events to promote the markets, in particular to be co-ordinated with the opening of Widnes Shopping Park. £5,000 (10%)
- Contribution towards works required to update the CCTV system in the town centres, to be prioritised by Principal Engineer (Traffic and CCTV). £5,000

Sub-Total £25,000 (47% of total grant) split 50/50 across both town centres.

Proposals for Widnes Town Centre

- Implementation of Victoria Road strategy (to be prioritised and costed) £5000
- Christmas grotto to be jointly provided with Morrison's and Town Centre Manager. £3,500 with further match funding required.
- £5,000 to fund a community arts group's Community Film Theatre initiative, working with the community to display historic materials and show films collected from the community in a shop unit converted into a 'cinema for a day'; the scheme to be run in conjunction with other events to be held to promote the Town Centre and coincide with the opening of the Widnes Shopping Park in 2010.

Sub-Total £13,500 (26% of total grant)

Proposals for Runcorn Town Centre

- Treatment of empty units, to provide improvements to the paintwork and possibly signage. This is estimated at between £250 and £750 per property. Properties will be prioritised based on the vacancy and condition survey. £5,000 (10%)
- Grant support for other units in poor condition units for property improvements and structural improvements £5,000 (10%).
- An extension of URBED's recommendations for the treatment of empty units to cover Runcorn Town Centre. £5,000 (10%)

Sub-Total £15,000 (29% of total grant)

A final proposal, covering both town centres is to hold a competition for the public to suggest possible improvements. It is suggested that a small prize could be offered, and that £2,000 is set aside to allow the implementation of some of the winning suggestions. This would enable community consultation, particularly via the local press, and would also help to promote the other activities to improve the town centres.

Sub Total £2,000

Total (including programmed over-spend) £59,000

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The delivery of actions under the CLG grant to support the town centres are in line with the strategic management of the Town Centres. The aims and objectives of the grant have been identified by both Major Projects Department (responsible for regeneration of the town centres) and the Town Centre Manager. It is important that the recommendations for use of this grant are also in line with the recommendations for further town centre improvements following the URBED commissioned strategy. Both pieces of work will feed into the long term planning for the strategic management of the town centres.

Where any re-use of empty units is proposed consideration will have to be given to the current Business Rates policy. Where the re-use is community based, for example local artists, then business rates need to be waived in order to encourage owners to participate in the scheme. This policy is promoted in the 'Looking after our Town Centres' document.

5.0 OTHER IMPLICATIONS

The financial implications for the CLG grant relate to the use of the grant in terms of the conditions and monitoring. *(It has not yet been clarified as to whether there are any conditions attached to the grant, or how it will be drawn down from CLG.*

Similarly it needs to be confirmed whether the grant must be spent within this financial year. It is imperative that the grant is maximised so as to avoid the loss of any funding that has been provided to assist the town centres in the current economic climate.)

It is also important to acknowledge that other funding may be available for some of the key actions required to improve the town centres. Where possible, any scheme utilising art to re-vitalise the town centres is eligible for Arts Council funding as identified in the offer letter for the CLG grant. The activities identified above and in the URBED strategy will also stimulate discussions regarding the allocation to town centre improvements for 2010/11 WNF.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Children and Young People in Halton

The improvement of the town centres is important in improving opportunities for everyone in Halton, including Children and Young People. A more attractive town centre will attract visitors and businesses, improving the offer to all parts of the community.

6.2 Employment, Learning and Skills in Halton

The improvement of the town centres and the re-use of empty shop units are vital in supporting the local economy and businesses based in the town centres. Supporting businesses leads to increased employment opportunities.

6.3 A Healthy Halton

The improvement of the town centres will contribute to an improved quality of life in Halton. The attractiveness of the town centres will impact on the range of cultural and leisure opportunities in the town centres, as well as access to a range of services.

6.4 A Safer Halton

This scheme will support the improvement of the town centres, ensuring pleasant, safe and secure environments and good quality local amenities. Attractive town centres will help people to enjoy where they live, work and shop.

6.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

This scheme complements Halton's Urban Renewal objectives by improving the urban fabric of the town centres, creating exciting and vibrant centres for people to live, work and shop. One of the key objectives for the Urban Renewal priority is to revitalise the town centres, which has become a key focus in the current economic climate.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

Failure to commit grant in financial year – conditions of grant need to be advised by financial services. If the grant is only available for 2009/10 then action must be taken to implement each scheme within the next 5 months.

Schemes provide limited improvement to the town centres – schemes have been identified through consultation, and further negotiations are required with local business partnerships to ensure that each has the maximum impact. An evaluation of each scheme is also necessary to assess the level of impact in order to inform the continuation or roll out of individual schemes.

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

No issues.

9.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

Document	Place of Inspection	Contact Officer
Looking After our Town Centres	Major Projects Department, 5 th Floor, Municipal Building	Helen Baxter, Ian Goodall