

Agenda Item No:**Report To:** Cabinet**Date:** 27 July 2023**Report Title:** Ashford Town Centre Business Grants**Report Author:** Tom Jenkins, Economic Development Manager**Portfolio Holder:** Cllr Heather Hayward, Portfolio Holder for Performance and Direction**Summary:**

This report provides an update on the Ashford Town Centre Support Grant (ATCSG) 2021/22, analyses the issues and outcomes of that scheme as well as providing a proposal for a renewed grant scheme. The report explains the rationale for the ATCSG in 2021 and the need to renew a town centre grant scheme from 2023.

The trial ATCSG allowed Ashford Borough Council to test the concept of town centre grants with a budget of £100,000 overall to be spent within 5 months.

The scheme was well-received and saw grants totalling nearly £90,000 being issued for 23 projects in the town centre. This has also enabled over £155,000 of match funding investment into these premises and directly brought 6 empty units into use.

This report reviews the trial grant scheme and sets out a proposed new Ashford Town Centre Grants policy for the period up to March 2025.

Key Decision: YES**Affected Wards:** Victoria Ward**Recommendations:** Cabinet are asked to:-

- I. **Note the content of this report and the work to deliver grants in Ashford Town Centre.**
- II. **Approve the Ashford Town Centre Business Grants Policy to run between 2023-2025.**
- III. **Support the use of officer delegation to approve the £140,000 of S106 funding to deliver this grants scheme.**
- IV. **Agree to delegated authority to the Deputy Chief Executive to approve grants and administer the scheme.**

Policy Overview: The Town Centre Reset, approved by Cabinet in November 2022, considers what role the Council can play to directly influence any 'reset' of the traditional town centre area so that it can remain relevant in the current economic climate. Town Centre Grants are a proven method to affect change directly

and quickly to revitalise town centres and support the businesses trading there.

The Corporate Plan 2022-2024 has Objective TG5 which aims to “Stimulate vibrant, accessible and sustainable Town Centres for residents, visitors and business”. The Corporate Plan references the 2020 residents survey which showed residents felt the town centre was unsatisfactory due to perceptions the shopping provision being poor and too many shops were vacant among other issues. A new Town Centre Grant scheme would directly deliver on residents’ concerns and thus on Objective TG5 of the Corporate Plan 2022-2024.

Financial Implications:

If the recommendations are approved, the resource implications are involved in dedicating officer time to deliver the proposed activity outlined in Sections 20-28. An overall budget of £140,000 is being sourced from the Designer Outlet S106 funding dedicated to improvements in Ashford Town Centre.

Legal Implications:

The requirement to comply with Subsidy Control and Planning or Listed building consent, is considered within the Ashford Town Centre Business Grants Policy in Appendix A.

Risk Assessment

Please see Section 29 within the report.

Equalities Impact Assessment

Supporting businesses to start or grow within the town centre is a key way of creating job opportunities for local residents. This could help reduce unemployment and thus inequalities within the Borough.

The Policy will also consider applications for access improvements to ground floor shop front premises within Ashford Town Centre to improve the accessibility of these premises for all residents of the borough, where deliverable.

Exemption Clauses:

N/A

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Agenda Item No.

Report Title: Ashford Town Centre Business Grants.

Purpose of the Report

1. To report to Cabinet on the Ashford Town Centre Support Grants scheme run by the Council in 2021/22 and to propose a new Town Centre Business Grant scheme for 2023-25.

Issue to be Decided

2. Cabinet to approve a new Ashford Town Centre Business Grants Policy, and the use of £140,000 of S106 funding to administer this grants scheme.

Background and Context

3. In response to the Coronavirus pandemic, the UK Government provided grant funding for councils to administer financial support to businesses. One of these grant schemes was the Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG)(Discretionary) introduced in November 2020 which allowed councils to provide support at their discretion to businesses under their jurisdiction.
4. Local Authorities could use ARG funding for wider business support activities. This primarily took the form of direct discretionary grants, but Local Authorities could also use this funding for wider business support programmes. In October 2021, Ashford Borough Council had less than 2% of its overall ARG allocations left to provide a business support programme that could target some of the most impacted and challenging sections of the local economy.
5. In assessing how best to administer the remaining grant funding, officers investigated various options and assessed these mainly based on feasibility, deliverability and level of impact. The outcome was to provide grants to support investment and improvements to commercial premises in key areas of Ashford town centre.
6. The grant scheme was mainly funded by Central Government using Ashford's remaining ARG funds of £79,773. Ashford Borough Council also committed a further £20,227 from the Council's reserves. This made the total budget for this grant scheme trial £100,000.
7. Currently, the retail and hospitality sector remains severely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic which has quickened the challenges that Ashford town centre already faced. The current economic climate has further impacted businesses without allowing a longer recovery period after Covid-19. As of April 2023, Ashford town centre has a vacancy rate over 14%, which is above the national average of 11%. A survey of the town centre found that of 335 premises

with a frontage in the town centre, 48 were vacant¹. Furthermore, since the Town Centre Grants scheme closed, the Economic Development Team has received numerous enquiries from businesses seeking to open ventures in the town centre requiring support with the initial set-up costs.

8. As part of the proposed Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill, Government are also consulting on a High Street Rental Auctions (HSRA) policy, which would seek to give Local Authorities powers to auction vacant premises on behalf of absent landlords. Ashford Borough Council has provided feedback as part of the consultation process, but due to Parliamentary processes and timings, the HSRA policy is unlikely to come into effect until next financial year, at the earliest. The Economic Development Team would also advise that alongside the HSRA policy, a mechanism for supporting businesses to open in vacant premises where the landlord is not absent, would further reduce the vacancy rate in Ashford Town Centre.

Ashford Town Centre Support Grant Overview

9. The Ashford Town Centre Support Grants (ATCSG) opened from October to December 2021 and saw the Council approve 23 grants totalling £87,819. Of these, 17 grants (£41,767) were Shop Improvement Grants and 6 (£46,052) were Empty Premises Grants. These grants resulted in a total investment value of over £243,000, with all of the 6 shops that were brought back into use still trading and creating an estimated 10 new jobs in the town centre as shown in Appendix D to this report.
10. The Shop Improvement Grant provided grants to cover 75% of a project's costs up to £3,000. This grant was aimed at supporting physical improvements to commercial premises in the town centre, subject to Planning permissions, to improve their appearance and trading. These could include repairs, repainting, signage, lighting as well as internal improvements, the installation of energy efficiency measures or non-fixed improvements such as commercial furniture, fixings or appliances.
11. The Empty Premises Grant provided grants to cover 75% of a project's costs up to £10,000. This grant was aimed at supporting investment for empty commercial premises in the town centre, subject to Planning permissions, to attract tenants into vacant units. These could include external renovations, energy efficiency measures and overall internal fit-out of commercial premises.
12. Applications were assessed by officers from the Economic Development Team, with occasional assistance from colleagues in Planning and Licencing. Finalised assessments were then presented to a panel, chaired by the Deputy Chief Executive for an ultimate decision. Officers from Finance then assisted in issuing the payment to the successful applicants.

¹ "Vacant" defined as a premises where there is no clear activity on the survey day. Premises that are being renovated or that have recently been let without the tenant being in place yet, would be considered vacant. This is the methodology that has been used for all ABC's Vacancy Rates surveys to provide consistency.

13. The ATCSG scheme saw expressions of interest from 45 businesses which led to 36 applications being submitted. Of these, 26 applications were for Shop Improvement Grants and 10 were for Empty Premises Grants.
14. Overall the Council used £77,819 of ARG funding and £10,000 of Council funding to provide these grants. The ATCSG also enabled over £155,000 of match funding to be invested, alongside the grants, into the successful projects. Combined, this represents a total investment value of over £243,000, improving the appearance and trading capability of 17 premises and bringing 6 empty premises into use.
15. By supporting these businesses, the council has supported jobs in pre-existing companies and facilitated the creation of new jobs as well. Approximately 65 jobs were supported through the Shop Improvement Grant and an estimate of 10 jobs have been created through the Empty Premises Grant. That totals approximately 75 jobs in Ashford Town Centre supported by the council.
16. Bringing 6 vacant units back into use has also resulted in Business Rates being payable by the incoming tenants. Once the new VOA valuation has been taken into account from April 2023, along with eligible reliefs or exemptions, the additional likely Business Rates receipts to Ashford Borough Council are approximately £23,000 a year.
17. The 6 high street units that were filled represented 12.5% of the vacant units in Ashford Town Centre in October 2021. In the year following October 2021, the vacancy rate in Ashford saw a marginal increase, particularly due to higher vacancies in managed centres in the town, whereas vacancies on the high street specifically dropped. The impacts of the economic challenges and the resulting pressures on businesses since October 2021 are likely to have led to this period of higher vacancies. Without the grants supporting the activation of 6 vacant units, the vacancy rate one year after the launch of the scheme could have been higher.
18. All 23 business supported by the grant scheme continued to trade from their premises for at least 12 months after the grant was awarded. The conditions of the grant were that the business had to trade from their applicant premises for at least 12 months after the grant was awarded. All 6 businesses that received the Empty Premises Grant continue to trade from their premises.
19. The scheme was publicised on key news outlets and was broadly well-received by businesses in the town centre. This has led to further enquiries being made to the Economic Development Team about this scheme continuing. Some of the successful projects have also been showcased in the local press, such as Ashford Sewing Centre's article on KentOnline from 10 March 2022, as shown in Appendix C to this report.

Proposal for a new scheme

20. The previous grants trial has identified demand trends and requirements as well as shown issues that would be addressed in a new scheme. A new Ashford

Town Centre Business Grant (ATCBG) scheme would be made up of two grant streams: Shop Improvement Grants and Empty Premises Grants. The policy for this scheme is attached as Appendix A to this report.

21. The proposed policy would provide grants to support with 60% of costs of projects that are eligible. This is in line with similar grant schemes in Kent that have been run previously, including LoCASE and Tonbridge and Malling's Shopfront Improvement Scheme. The maximum amounts of grants (£3,000 and £10,000) are also in line with previous similar grants and have proven to be set at the correct level for Ashford.
22. The works have a broad scope of improving the visual aspect of a property, as well as supporting the Net Zero agenda with energy efficiency measures. Finally the council is procuring, through UKSPF funding, an accessibility study of the town centre. Officers propose that these grants can provide support to businesses that have been 'audited' to deliver any of the recommendations from their report, to ensure premises are accessible to all.
23. The priority areas have been identified based on the approved Town Centre Reset. This recognises that the 'town centre' is generally considered within the former ring road (A2042, Wellesley Road, Station Road, Elwick Road, West Street, Forge Lane and Somerset Road). The Town Centre Reset Strategy however also identifies Elwick Road (from Elwick Place to Station Approach) as a key investment corridor. For this reason we have extended the Priority 3 area to include these premises. The inclusion of premises on the external side of Station Road up to Wellesley Road have been included to take account of the vision that an improved connection between the International Station and the town centre can be brought forward. The maps showing the priority areas can be viewed in Appendix B to this report.
24. Applications for the Town Centre Grants would be open from September 2023. Officers would take time prior to the official launch, to seek to contact landlords of vacant premises and ensure the promotion of these grants is prepared. Applications would be made using an online form on the council's website which allows applicants to provide details of their proposals as well as evidence to support the application.
25. The rationale behind this scheme is to incentivise private investment into the town centre. Officers would therefore suggest restricting eligible works for current tenants to exclude works required of ABC in our capacity as landlords.
26. The grant scheme would be promoted via ABC with the Town Centre Team engaging with potential applicants and landlords to identify eligible works and the viability of proposals. Officers from the Economic Development Team / Town Centre Team would then assess the applications with the support and advice of colleagues in Planning, Licencing and Property. Decisions would be taken by a panel of senior officers chaired by the Deputy Chief Executive. This will likely require 0.3 FTE time for officers within the existing Economic Development with ad-hoc support from colleagues in the aforementioned teams.
27. Following the ATCSG trial and advice from other authorities that have been administering similar schemes previously, it is suggested that a new scheme

provide £140,000 in grants up to March 2025. This funding would be drawn from the Designer Outlet S106 funding that the council currently has available. There would therefore be no direct cost to ABC, except officer time to administer the scheme.

28. Proposed outcomes:
 - i. Increased footfall in the town centre
 - ii. Decreased vacancy rate, particularly in the Priority 1 area
 - iii. Improved business resilience for successful applicants
 - iv. Positive news stories for Ashford town centre

Risk Assessment

29. The main key risks currently identified are:
 - a. A lack of such a grant scheme has anecdotally hampered Ashford's attempts to attract businesses into vacant premises. This is the feedback received by businesses and specialist advisers in the town centre.
 - b. Higher vacancy rates in the town centre lead to lower footfall, to lower turnover for businesses currently in the town and to higher levels of anti-social behaviour.
 - c. Higher numbers of vacant properties increases the likelihood of numerous Change of Use Planning Applications being received to convert commercial premises into housing. This could negatively impact on the vibrancy of the town centre.
 - d. Inflationary pressures mean that many private funding providers are restricting their lending, which makes it harder for businesses to access capital for investments like those suggested above.

Options Considered

30. In considering the options for Ashford Borough Council to act, the principle objective is to incentivise investment into Ashford town centre to improve its appearance and fill empty premises. All options for projects were considered in the formulation of the Ashford Town Centre Reset, and this grants programme formed one of the Actions of the Ashford Town Centre Reset Action Plan, approved by Cabinet in November 2022.
31. The chosen option is to create a new Town Centre Grant scheme which would address the issues faced previously and secure private investment to achieve the council's vision for Ashford town centre.

Next Steps in the Process

32. If approved by Members, officers will seek to launch a new grant scheme as outlined in Sections 20-28 to help deliver Objective TG5 in the Corporate Plan. Members are asked to allow delegated authority to the Deputy Chief Executive to approve individual grant awards as part of a panel with the Head of Economic Development and the Economic Development Manager.

33. Officers will provide updates to the Portfolio Holder on a regular basis with the option of providing an update to other Members on an ad hoc basis. Officers will provide an update to Cabinet for review after a year of the new scheme.

Conclusions

34. The retail sector has been severely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic which has quickened the challenges that Ashford town centre already faced. As of April 2023, Ashford town centre has a vacancy rate over 14%, which is above the national average of 11%. Higher vacancy rates in the town centre lead to lower footfall, to lower turnover for businesses currently in the town and to higher levels of anti-social behaviour. Whilst there could be legislation being introduced to tackle long-term vacant high street properties, action can be taken now to incentivise investment into these properties in Ashford.
35. The proposed grant scheme will incentivise investment into empty premises as well as enable improvements to currently active properties that support the tenant businesses. This can improve the look and feel of the town centre, increase footfall and build more resilience into the current town centre business community. This grant scheme would work alongside the Town Centre Reset to deliver on Objective TG5 of the Corporate Plan 2022-2024 and ensure the council's ambitions for a vibrant Ashford town centre are realised.

Portfolio Holder's Views

36. "This report clearly shows the Council's commitment to tackling the issues that we see in Ashford Town Centre, particularly around empty shops. It shows that this type of grant scheme works and can work again to bring much needed improvements to active premises and fill empty properties too. The last grant scheme showed that £88,000 can lead to nearly £250,000 in investment, 75 jobs created or supported, additional Business Rates receipts and 6 newly-filled premises. The proposed scheme can further these very positive outcomes at no additional cost to the Council due to the funding by developer S106 monies. I would urge colleagues to support this great opportunity to tackle Ashford Town Centre's vacancy rate, revitalise our town centre, support investment and job creation and support some energy efficiency measures, without impacting our core service delivery budget."
37. Cllr Heather Hayward, Portfolio Holder for Performance and Direction

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Appendix A

Ashford Town Centre Business Grants

Business Support Policy to 31 March 2025

Ashford Borough Council – Policy

Background

Ashford Borough Council trialled the implementation of Ashford Town Centre Business Support Grants in 2021-22 using Government's ARG (Discretionary) funding. This resulted in 23 grants being issued to improve the appearance and trading capability of street-facing business premises as well as supporting businesses fitting out vacant premises for occupation. It has resulted in 6 vacant premises being filled and lead to a total investment value of £243,000 into the town centre.

Since the last scheme, many factors are affecting businesses in town centres across the UK, with the cost of living crisis, rising inflation and higher business costs. These pressures being faced by businesses, almost immediately after Covid-19, are putting town centres and high streets at risk with vacancies likely to rise. As of April 2023 Ashford Town Centre had a vacancy rate of just over 14% compared to a national average of 11%.

In 2022 the council adopted the Ashford Town Centre Reset Strategy which provides a framework of projects to influence the traditional town centre area so that it can remain relevant in the current economic climate. The council's Corporate Plan 2022-24 also aims to stimulate a vibrant, accessible and sustainable Town Centre for residents, visitors and business. Town Centre Grants have proven to be a method to affect change directly and quickly to revitalise town centres and support the businesses trading there.

This policy relates specifically to grants for businesses eligible under this scheme and will be valid to and including 31 March 2025.

This grant scheme is fully funded by S106 contributions aimed at supporting the vitality and viability of Ashford Town Centre.

ATCBG Structure

The Ashford Town Centre Business Grants (ATCBG) will be made up of two grant streams:

- Shop Improvement Grant: A grant of up to £3,000 for a business that can demonstrate they are due to undertake needed improvements to their premises in the town centre.

- Empty Premises Grant: A grant of up to £10,000 for a business that can demonstrate they are bringing a unit in the town centre back into use and needs support for the refurbishment. This scheme can be used in conjunction with Kent County Council's No Use Empty Scheme.

These grants cannot be used in conjunction with each other. For example recipients of the Empty Premises Grant cannot access funding from the Shop Improvement Grant as well. They can be used in conjunction with other financial support schemes available beyond the two named above, subject to those other schemes allowing this. Applicants that have either received a grant from one of these two schemes, or that have already submitted a grant application which is being assessed, will not be considered.

Applications will open in rounds, with the first round being from 1 September 2023 to 5 November 2023. Applications submitted outside of these times will not be considered subject to significant material considerations and mitigating factors. These dates may vary at short notice depending on the level of applications the council receives.

The council reserves the right to close applications if the funding is likely to be committed, is committed or has been spent.

Shop Improvement Grant Details

The intention of this grant is to facilitate and support improvements to the interior and exterior of occupied commercial premises within the priority areas and within the designated Ashford Town Centre area.

Eligibility Criteria

1. Independent businesses that do not have more than 5 premises across Kent
2. Businesses actively trading from a ground floor commercial property, that faces onto the highway, within the priority areas (see maps), where the property is over 5 years old
3. The business can demonstrate the need for the works proposed and these won't negatively impact the surrounding area
4. Individual landlords are eligible to apply for this grant

Work that can be carried out using this funding

Works that may require Planning Applications (such as Listed Building Consent, Advertising Consent or similar) can be considered. Applicants will need to submit their Planning Application, if required, before submitting the grant application. Work therefore within scope of this grant includes:

- External renovations or improvements to front elevations of buildings (areas visible from the street), including, but not limited to:
 - repairs
 - repainting of shop fronts in suitable colours
 - signage
 - external lighting
 - security grilles and/or security glazing
 - repair of external stonework and brickwork
 - repair and reinstatement of guttering and down-pipes
- Internal repairs or improvements to the ground floor of the property
- Works to improve the energy efficiency and carbon footprint of the premises which could include (but is not limited to) insulation and draft proofing, upgraded windows, LED lighting
- Works to improve accessibility to the business premises, where an accessibility audit has been undertaken and provided actionable suggestions

Tenants within premises owned by Ashford Borough Council will not be able to apply for the Shop Improvement Grant if it is for works that are the responsibility of the landlord. Eligible Ashford Borough Council commercial tenants will be able to apply for work that does not benefit the council, which includes:

- Any works from the above-listed that are not the responsibility of Ashford Borough Council as landlord.

Levels of Grant

Applicants are required to provide a fully costed quote of the works being proposed. The assessment will consider this and, if successful, applicants will receive a grant equivalent to 60% of the cost of works. The maximum level of grant allowed under this scheme is £3,000.

In exceptional circumstances the council reserves the right to award a higher level of grant where this may be necessary and where there is supporting and significant additional evidence have been submitted.

Information and evidence needed for application

- A completed application form

- Evidence that:
 - The applicant is the freeholder or leaseholder or where written consent from the landlord to carry out the work, has been obtained and submitted
 - The business trading at the subject address is likely to trade there for more than 1 year after the work is complete
 - The applicant has the funds available for their share of the renovation works (40%)
 - The applicant should demonstrate they have considered the Planning guidance in relation to their project and have submitted a Planning Application where necessary
- A fully costed quote for the work or quote for items to be purchased
- Recent photos of the property (internally and externally) showing it's condition
- Details of any grants or funding received from a public authority in the previous three years
- Any further information or evidence required or which the applicant considers relevant

Monitoring and Assurances

The grant will be paid to successful applicants once conditions are met such as (but not limited to):

- The works proposed are due to start imminently and be completed in a reasonable time
- Any permissions such as Planning Permission have been successfully obtained
- Items such as furniture, fixings or appliances have been ordered or bought

The condition of payment for this grant will be included in the decision notification sent to the applicant and is discretionary (to be applied on a case by case basis). For grant applications requiring a Planning Application, the grant can only be paid if Planning Permission has been received by the applicant.

The council reserves the right to attend the property to monitor the progress of work until the expected end date detailed in the applicant's proposal. The council has the discretion to reclaim the grant funding if the conditions are not met within a reasonable time.

Terms and Conditions

- Properties must be over 5 years old
- Grant applications (and relevant Planning Applications) must be made before work takes place
- Our staff must be allowed to inspect the works and see all relevant documentation
- It is the responsibility of applicants to comply with all relevant regulations and legislation
- It is the responsibility of applicants to check and confirm whether they comply with the Subsidy Control requirements (formerly State Aid)
- Any grant money awarded, must be repaid within 1 year of the payment if:
 - The applicant sells or vacates the property within 12 months of receiving the grant
 - The property is vacant for more than 3 months during the 1 year after the grant payment date
 - Works are undertaken without obtaining the relevant permissions or licences as needed
 - The works are not undertaken

Empty Property Grant Details

The intention of this grant is to facilitate and support the occupation of vacant commercial units within the priority areas and within the designated Ashford Town Centre area.

Eligibility Criteria

1. Independent businesses that do not have more than 5 premises across Kent
2. Businesses due to be trading from a ground floor commercial property, that faces onto the highway, within the priority areas (see maps) and is empty at the time of application
3. Businesses that are the freeholder or leaseholder of the commercial property (with at least 2 years left on the lease)
4. Individual landlords are eligible to apply for this grant

Work that can be carried out using this funding

Works that may require Planning Applications (such as Listed Building Consent, Advertising Consent or similar) can be considered. Applicants will need to submit their Planning Application, if required, before submitting the grant application. Work therefore within scope of this grant for this period includes:

- External renovations or improvements to front elevations of buildings
- Works to improve the energy efficiency and carbon footprint of the premises
- Internal ground floor fit-outs to commercial properties

Levels of Grant

Applicants are required to provide a fully costed quote of the works being proposed. The assessment will consider this and, if successful, applicants will receive a grant equivalent to 60% of the cost of works. The maximum level of grant allowed under this scheme is £10,000.

In exceptional circumstances the council reserves the right to award a higher level of grant where this may be necessary and where there is supporting and significant additional evidence have been submitted.

Forms and evidence required to apply

- A completed application form
- Evidence that:
 - The applicant is the freeholder or leaseholder or where written consent from the landlord to carry out the work, has been obtained and submitted
 - The applicant has the funds available for their share of the renovation works (40%)
 - The applicant should demonstrate they have considered the Planning guidance in relation to their project and have submitted a Planning Application where required.
 - Details of your proposals for the property and plans for the business and why they are suitable for the building/area
- Fully costed quote(s) for the work
- Recent photos of the property showing it's condition
- Details of any grants or funding received from a public authority in the previous three years
- Any further information or evidence required or which the applicant considers relevant

Monitoring and Assurances

The grant will be paid to successful applicants once conditions are met such as (but not limited to):

- The works proposed are due to start imminently and be completed in a reasonable time
- Any permissions such as Planning Permission have been successfully obtained

The condition of payment for this grant will be included in the decision notification sent to the applicant and is discretionary (to be applied on a case by case basis). For grant applications requiring a Planning Application, the grant can only be paid if Planning Permission has been received by the applicant.

The council reserves the right to attend the property to monitor the progress of work until the expected end date detailed in the applicant's proposal. The council has the discretion to reclaim the grant funding if the conditions are not met within a reasonable time.

Terms & Conditions

- Quotes for the work must be provided
- Grant applications (and relevant Planning Applications) must be made before any work takes place
- Our staff must be allowed to inspect the works and see all relevant documentation
- This grant scheme can be used in conjunction with the **No Use Empty scheme** Kent's empty property initiative
- It is the responsibility of applicants to comply with all relevant regulations and legislation
- It is the responsibility of applicants to check and confirm whether they comply with the Subsidy Control requirements (formerly State Aid)
- Any grant money awarded, must be repaid within 1 year of the payment if:
 - The applicant sells or vacates the property within 12 months of receiving the grant
 - The property is vacant for more than 3 months during the 1 year after the grant payment date
 - Works are undertaken without obtaining the relevant permissions or licences as needed
 - The works are not undertaken

Subsidy Control (formerly State Aid)

A subsidy is where a public authority such as a Local Authority provides support to an enterprise that gives them an economic advantage, meaning equivalent support could not have been obtained on commercial terms.

On 4 January 2023, the UK's new subsidy control regime came into force, implementing a new subsidy regulation framework designed for the post-Brexit era. Underpinned by the Subsidy Control Act 2022 (the "Act"), related statutory instruments and government guidance, the new regime aims to grant public authorities the power to design and award subsidies in an agile way while complying with the UK's international commitments on subsidy control.

For smaller value subsidy awards, Minimal Financial Assistance (MFA) allows financial assistance of up to a maximum limit of £315,000 to be made to a single enterprise within a rolling period of three financial years (consisting of the current financial year and the two previous financial years), without the need to comply with the majority of the subsidy control requirements.

However, MFA requires a written declaration from the beneficiary confirming that the limit has not been exceeded before the subsidy can be awarded. This effectively mirrors the historic EU De Minimis regime but sets the threshold at a fixed sterling amount and at a higher level than previously.

Applicants will therefore be required to provide information and a declaration in relation to subsidies they may have received in the previous three years.

Exclusions to these grant schemes

- Businesses that have already received grant payments that equal the maximum permitted levels of subsidy will not be eligible to receive funding. (See Subsidy Control section above)
- For the avoidance of doubt, businesses that are in administration, insolvent or where a striking-off notice has been made, are not eligible for funding under this scheme.
- This funding should not be used as a wage support mechanism or for capital projects that do not provide direct business support.
- This funding cannot be used to pay for costs directly to Ashford Borough Council (for example Business Rates or rent) or for work to the fabric of properties owned by Ashford Borough Council where the work is the landlord's responsibility.

Decisions

The funding available for these grant schemes is very limited and the council will likely need to prioritise applications to provide best value for money. Decisions will be taken by a panel on a monthly basis. Each round of decisions will prioritise eligible applications based on their location in the town centre (see the priority areas maps), the visual and practical impact of their project as well as the deliverability of their proposal.

Applications will only be taken forward to be decided where all the relevant information and evidence has been submitted by the applicant. The decision to award any grants under this scheme will be taken by a panel chaired by the Deputy Chief Executive of the council. The decision reached by the panel will be final and the council will not consider any appeals submitted. Applicants will subsequently be notified of the outcome of their application. For grant applications requiring Planning, the decision whether to award a grant will be dependent on the approval of Planning Permission. For grant applications during this period that do not require Planning Permission, the decision will be dependent on the content and evidence included in the grant application.

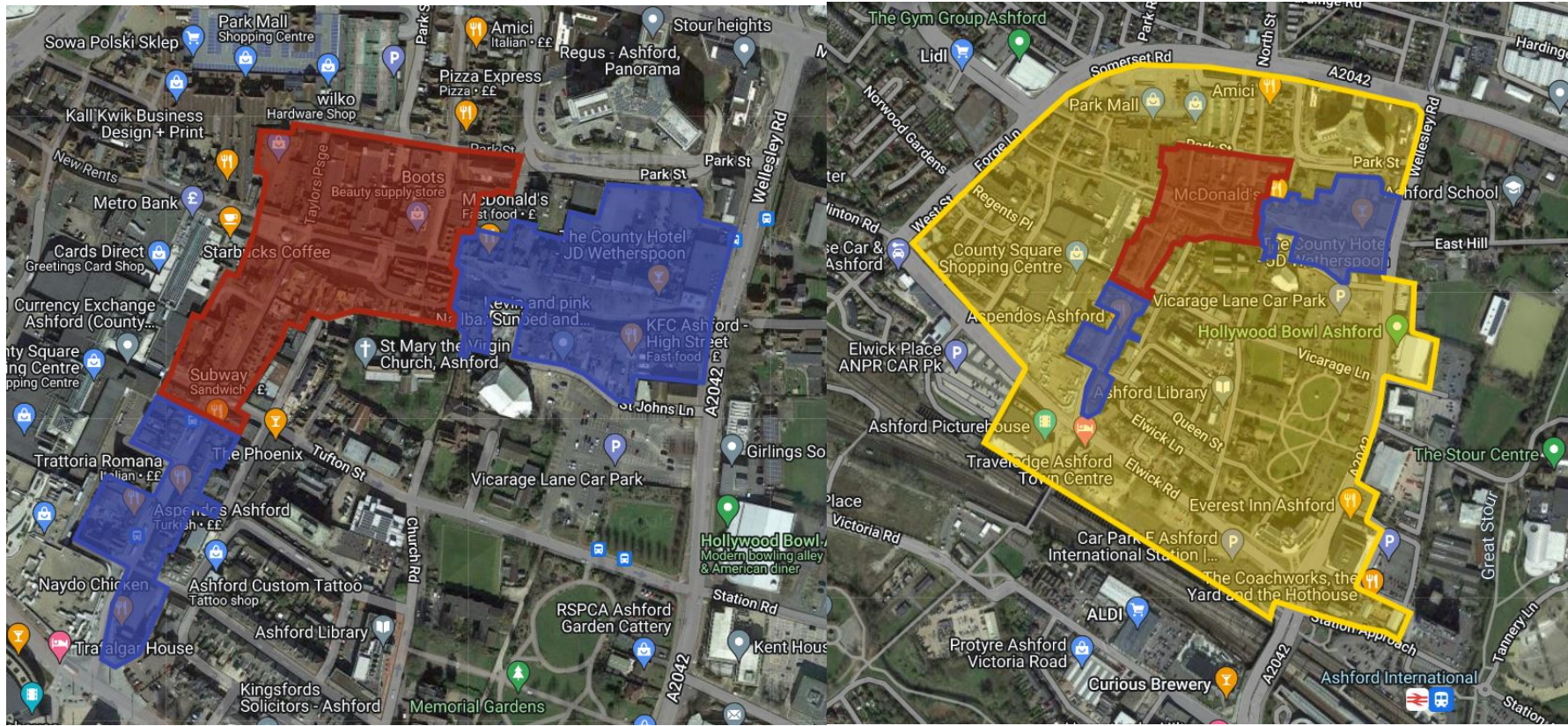
Due to its very limited nature, once the funding is completely allocated there will be no further applications or grants available to interested businesses.

Queries

All enquiries about this grant funding and this policy should contact the Economic Development Team using the email address economicdevelopment@ashford.gov.uk.

Appendix B

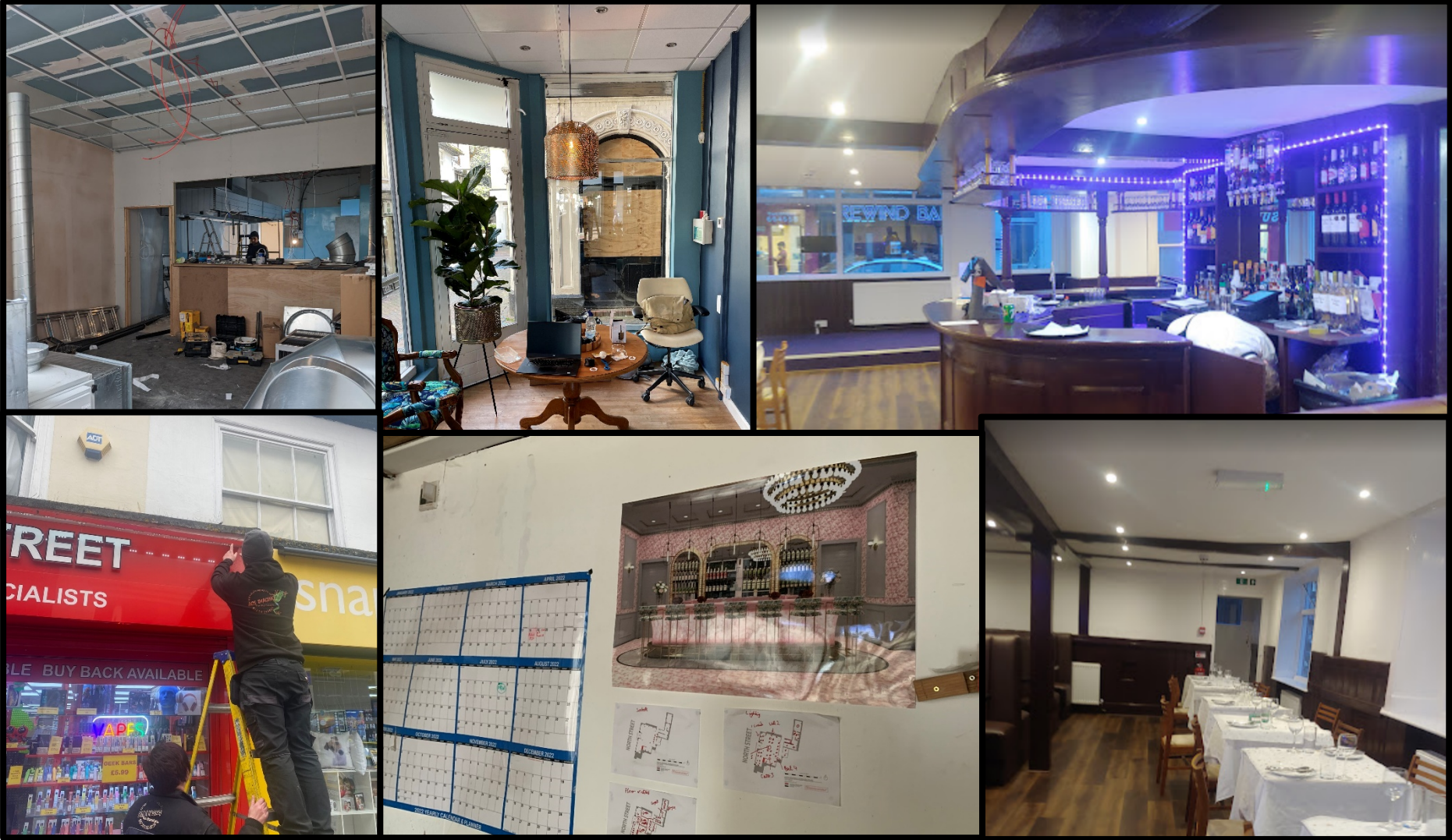
Ashford Town Centre Business Grants - Priority Areas Maps



Ashford Town Centre Grants, proposed Priority Areas. Red as Priority 1, Blue as Priority 2, Yellow as Priority 3.

Appendix C

Some images of works taking place and some finished elements from the ATCSG scheme.



Appendix C (cont'd)

Ashford Sewing Centre Case Study

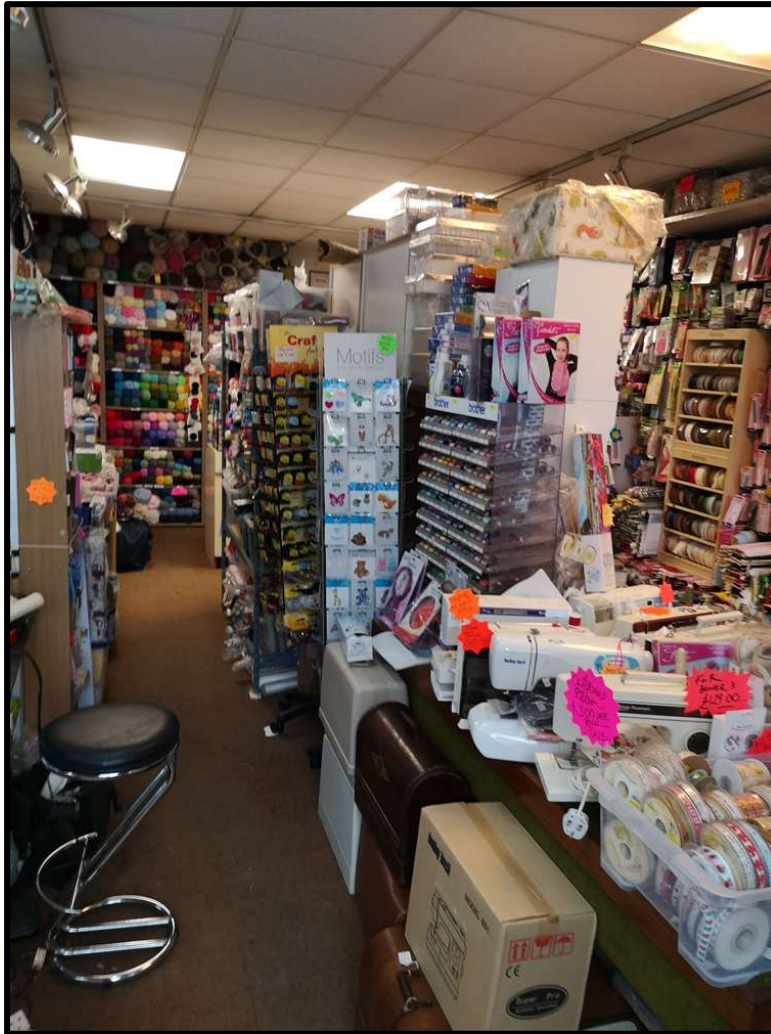


Figure 2. Interior prior to works - KentOnline

A screenshot of a news article from KentOnline. The article is titled "Ashford Sewing Centre in New Rents gets full refurbishment for first time" and is written by Liane Castle. It was published on 10 March 2022. The article includes a navigation menu at the top with links for Home, News, Sport, Business, What's On, Education, Pets, Directory, and Jobs. There are also buttons for "KENT TRAVEL NEWS" and "SIGN ME UP FOR NEWS ALERTS". At the bottom of the article, there is a pink button that says "More news, no ads" and a yellow button that says "LEARN MORE".



Figure 1. Interior after works - KentOnline

"We applied for the local council grant and we got a contribution [...] which prompted us to then give the store a top to tail refurbishment". "It has been very positive and everyone who has come in has been really pleased."

Kevin Webb – Business Partner interview for KentOnline 10 March 2022.

Appendix C (cont'd)

Some press coverage from the launch of the scheme.

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Ashford Borough Council launches Town Centre Support Grants

A new grants scheme has been launched by Ashford Borough Council to support businesses and improve the visual appearance of Ashford Town Centre.

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Ashford Borough Council launches Town Centre Support Grants

Posted 22/10/21

A new grants scheme has been launched by Ashford Borough Council to support businesses and improve the visual appearance of Ashford Town Centre.

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The Ashford Town Centre Support Grants scheme is made up of two grant streams:

Shop Improvement Grant

A grant of up to £3,000 for a business that can demonstrate they are due to undertake needed improvements.

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Ashford town centre support grant launched amid high vacancy rate

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By Rhys Griffiths rgriffiths@thekmgroup.co.uk [Read all comments | 6](#)

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New businesses could receive grants of up to £10,000 to help bring vacant shops in Ashford town centre back to life.

The funding has been announced by Ashford Borough Council (ABC) as part of its efforts to revitalise the town centre as the economy seeks to bounce back from the impact of the pandemic.

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Appendix D

Overview of key benefits from the previous grant scheme.

