

Agenda item 7

For information – an update on the work to support local businesses

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Summary

This report provides an update on the ongoing support for the business community in Frome and, in particular, the support FTC have been providing businesses during the pandemic.

Business Bulletins & Website

Our Business Bulletin goes out to over 900 subscribers. The frequency of Government and other news releases over the year due to the pandemic has resulted in an increase in the frequency of these bulletins. Prior to COVID:19, the bulletins were scheduled bi-monthly; however, this raised to fortnightly at points over the last few months to keep businesses afresh on advice and support.

The bulletins have proved a useful resource in sign-posting businesses to funding and support coming from Central Government, as well as highlighting initiatives and support being developed locally for the town's business community.

We continued to update the Business section on the FTC website as a central space for businesses to find out about latest support available, with links to useful resources such as the Government's 'Support Finder Tool'.

Grant Funding

We have worked closely with the Economic Development team at Mendip District Council to disseminate information on how business can apply for business support grants, including the Small Business Grants and Retail & Hospitality Grants during the first lockdown, and the Local Restrictions Support Grant during the second lockdown.

Our discussions with businesses highlighted that some did not fit into the initial eligibility criteria and we worked with Mendip District Council to help support these businesses to apply for Additional Restrictions Grants.

As well as business grants, we sign-posted individuals to the Self-employment Support Scheme and highlighted initiatives such as the Job Retention Scheme in our communications to businesses.

Business Events

One of the valued activities we offer businesses is the opportunity to come along to our business networking events, usually held either at the Town Hall or hosted at a local business venue. We have since March moved our business events online, working with Frome Chamber of Commerce to run workshops and webinars through Zoom. Take up of these online

workshops has proven popular and we are exploring how we can continue to offer a blend of online and in person events moving forward.

A significant amount of preparation had gone into the Festival of Businesses that had been planned for 15 October 2020. The event aims to enable local businesses to showcase their services and products to encourage Frome businesses to partner with more local suppliers. It was scheduled to take place at the Cheese & Grain, and we are looking at how we can take the event forward next year.

Employment

Developing a skilled and resilient workforce is key to Frome's economy. We are working closely with DWP/ Jobcentre Plus to understand the demands and changes in the local labour market.

To support young people gain workplace skills and experience, FTC has been promoting the Kickstart Scheme to local business, which gives financial support to businesses who take on a trainee aged 16 – 24 who is on Universal Credit. The number of businesses in Frome expressing an interest in the scheme has been extremely positive, with the first placements already in planning. We have also expressed interest in taking on a Trainee Ranger as part of the scheme and news from DWP is awaited.

We also ran a webinar to local businesses to highlight the new support from Government for businesses taking on apprenticeships. The Training – Spring Forward section on the FTC website was launched this month and we are working with training providers from the Vocational Training Group to promote training opportunities.

Shop Locally

Restrictions on non-essential shops has been a particular struggle for Frome's independent retailers. We ran a three-day Fiver Fest campaign in October to encourage shoppers to come out and shop locally. Shops promoted what people could buy locally for £5, with thirty-nine shops taking part. During the first and second lockdown we developed the Discover Frome website to showcase the different ways that residents can continue to support local shops through promoting retailers offering click and collect, vouchers and online shopping.

A Virtual Christmas Market has been launched to identify local 'hidden' makers and creators who do not have a shop front, many of whom who would have made sales through Christmas Markets such as the Bath Christmas Market. Through launching the market on our Facebook site and offering a virtual stall to traders joining the group we have connected with a new business sector (independent makers) and plan to continue to forge connections with this group beyond the Christmas period as part of our aim to reach out further to micro-businesses and enterprises in the town.

A new page on the Discover Frome site has also been developed to promote individuals who make and sell their own products in town. To encourage shoppers to go out and visit the shops when they opened on 2 December, FTC is running a 'Spot the Elf on the Shop Shelf' campaign throughout December in the run up to Christmas.