

Feedback, comments, and queries.

- With regards to Option 2, referencing slide 15 of Scrutiny Board Victoria Street Review and consideration Presentation 140323

It states that the process will be minimised, and financial support would be available within weeks/months. Can we have, as soon as possible, a timescale for the process and a timescale as to period of wait between application, acceptance, and payment.

It states that the grant will be enhanced by a wider programme of support. What exactly does this include? Will the council offer no charges for local businesses to have stalls at events, or, at the very least, reduced rates on stalls for events? Can local traders get first refusal on stalls for said events? How is the council planning to increase footfall to the area - events cannot be held all the time - will the council offer support through advertising/promotions for businesses at little to no cost to businesses. Will council liaise with businesses with regards to possible attractions/events and accept suggestions? Is the council prepared to prioritise local businesses over that of the pop-ups that appear on stalls at events? What support will be available to businesses going forward?

- With regards to Option 2, referencing slide 16 of Scrutiny Board Victoria Street Review and consideration Presentation 140323

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As this process supersedes all previous exercises and is a “new” grant scheme, the previous “Initial Victoria St. Works Disruption Payments” given to several businesses, as a discretionary gesture (said businesses having clearly demonstrated a works-related financial loss) those businesses should not have monies awarded from a previous scheme deducted from this “relaunch grant,” if indeed that is what it is. It is also of note that letters sent to businesses on the 14th December 2022 categorically stated: “Given this ongoing review, we want to be clear that accepting this money will not affect your position should the council receive recommendations following the audit” - clearly, the council can change its options as and when necessary to fit its own rhetoric, and is misleading in its statements if the intention is that businesses will have monies deducted from any new sum payable through this new process.

It seems that the council are trying to distance from any responsibility and accountability of the effect of the works on businesses and setting any precedent for “hardship support” by changing the rhetoric and naming the process “relaunch” grant. Referring to this as such does not sit well with several traders. It also appears to be an attempt to make it seem as though the council is financially supporting businesses that are unable to survive due to conditions outside of the pedestrianisation project. A more accurate name would be “disruption grant” given the significant disruption caused by the works.

- With regards to the signing of a grant agreement there are several queries raised:

It states that the agreement “includes but is not limited to” the list presented. What are the other stipulations that traders must agree to? Not having a fully disclosed list of stipulations puts traders in

a difficult position for determining to agree to this option - again, traders should not be expected to make an informed decision when such information is omitted.

It states that "the payment is final and legally binding." It is important that the council considers that while the current works will soon be complete, that the commencement of the next phase of the project may still have an impact on the area. Will businesses that qualify for the "relaunch grant" be considered ineligible for any processes/grants for subsequent works that may have an adverse financial impact? Are businesses eligible to appeal the "relaunch grant" outcome if the need arises?

It states that any business rates arrears would be offset before any grant was paid over. This is a grant to reopen/relaunch with the aim of supporting businesses to continue to trade/remain viable. In some cases, businesses are only in rates arrears because of the loss of finances due to the impact of the roadworks, and this could have been avoided had support been provided by way of a business rates holiday or forgiveness of debt, something that was recently suggested at scrutiny board by Cllr Birch and has previously been mentioned in council meetings with the subgroup. Businesses should be able to budget any monies received from the relaunch grant as they deem appropriate.

It states, "commitment that intending to remain open for business at the current location for the foreseeable future." It should be recognised that some businesses are on month-to-month licences and not leases so this requirement is out of their hands should a landlord decide they have to leave their current premises. It should also be recognised that one of the reasons businesses have been asking for support from the Council due to financial losses caused by the works, is because of the desire to remain trading in the City Centre.

Additional Comments & Queries

- Who will review the traders' feedback? Will it be the RSM or council members?
- Is the RSM still involved in the process, or has their work been completed?
- How will the council demonstrate that they are considering the traders' feedback in this process?
- Will the council respond to traders' requests for additional information before making final decisions? This is concerning as the deadline for feedback is 5pm on March 22nd, and a report will be presented to the Leader of the Council and Councillor Steve Simkins.
- What dates will the grant cover? Will it include the period from November 2021 to March 2023? Is this assuming that the works will be almost complete, and that people will return to the town centre?
- Like other traders, we believe that the grants should cover, at a minimum, the point at which all remaining traffic bollards (14 of which still need to be installed at the top of Victoria Street), street furniture, and other works are completed, reflecting the council's CGI imagery that has been used in marketing.
- It is also important to consider that even after the works are completed, there will still be a need for support for businesses. It is unlikely that shoppers will immediately return to the area without a plan in place to encourage them. To our knowledge, the council has not engaged with businesses to discuss ways to attract people to the newly paved area of the town.
- Overall, we are extremely concerned that this process is simply a "box-ticking" exercise, where decisions have already been made. If this is not the case, it is difficult to understand why the council set a deadline with only a two-day turnaround for businesses to provide feedback before making recommendations for a decision. Nevertheless, we challenge the council to prove us wrong.