

Cabinet report



Report of head of economy, leisure and property

Author: Suzanne Malcolm

Telephone: 01235 540542

Textphone: 18001 01235 540542

E-mail: suzanne.malcolm@southandvale.gov.uk

Wards affected: all

Cabinet member responsible: Elaine Ware

Tel: 01793 783026

E-mail: aeware.house@btinternet.com

To: CABINET

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High Street Innovation Fund and Town Teams

Recommendations

That cabinet:

- (a) recommends to full council to approve the addition of £155,000 to the economic development budget, from externally received monies, for the delivery of high street innovation projects for the Vale towns, town teams in Abingdon and Faringdon and the creation of a Vale-wide business partnership
- (b) subject to approval by full council of recommendation (a) above, authorises the head of economy, leisure and property, in consultation with the strategic director and relevant cabinet member, to make any necessary changes to the action plans and to allocate funding as appropriate, including allocating the town teams funding for Abingdon and Faringdon

Purpose of report

1. The purpose of this report is to seek cabinet's recommendation to full council to approve the addition of £155,000 to the economic development budget, from externally received monies, for the delivery of high street innovation fund (HSIF) projects for the Vale towns, town teams in Abingdon and Faringdon and the creation of a Vale-wide business partnership. The report also outlines draft action plans for each of the towns.

Strategic objectives

2. The delivery of the HSIF fits with the strategic objective of “building the local economy” and the corporate priority of “continue to invest to improve the viability and attractiveness of our towns”.

Background

3. The Vale Council was awarded £100,000 on 30 March 2012 as part of the HSIF allocation awarded by Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG). An additional £35,000 was received for Abingdon from Scottish Widows in November 2012, as part of the lease agreement relating to the Abbey Shopping Centre refurbishment. Additionally, £20,000 was received from DCLG on behalf of town teams in Faringdon and Abingdon in November 2012.
4. The allocation of the HSIF funding was determined by DCLG using NNDR3 data from March 2011, along with information on the total number of empty hereditaments in a local authority area, which includes all non-domestic property such as shops, offices, business units etc. Government considered that this data set provides suitable evidence of the scale of empty properties, and is an indicator of high street decline.
5. The Portas Review has helped to identify what government, local authorities, businesses and communities can do together to promote the development of new models of prosperous and diverse high streets. High streets are a very visible indicator of how well a local community and economy is thriving.
6. The HSIF money was received on 30 May 2012 and DCLG has advised that there will be no official monitoring or review, however there is guidance that funding must be spend in line with the recommendations of the Portas Review.
7. On 23 October 2012, Mark Prisk announced that over 300 town teams had applied to become town team partners, these included Abingdon town team (Choose Abingdon Partnership) and Faringdon town team. The additional funding of £20,000 (£10,000 each for Abingdon and Faringdon) received in November was as a result of an invitation to MPs representing the town teams who were not successful in the bids to become a Portas pilot. This funding enables town teams to access a support programme to put key elements of their original plans into action. They will also have access to:
 - an advice line and a network of advisors managed by the Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM)
 - direct mentoring and visits from a range of retail experts
 - regular meetings with other town teams to share lessons learned, tips and ideas, and an online community to receive advice and information from retail experts.

As this funding has only recently been announced, the town teams are still considering how this money will be used in relation to the HSIF projects, although officers envisage that the money will be used in a similar manner. Therefore, officers recommend that the towns are encouraged to allocate their funding for

projects compliant with the Portas Review recommendations and for projects that will be sustainable.

Use of High Street Innovation Fund allocation in the Vale

8. Officers propose that the DCLG funding is split £22,500 for Abingdon, £22,500 for Botley, £22,500 for Faringdon, and £22,500 for Wantage. The remaining £10,000 will be used to establish a Vale-wide business partnership. Scottish Widows has contributed £35,000 towards the Abingdon projects as part of the promotion of the redevelopment of Abbey Shopping Centre, giving a budget of £57,500 for Abingdon.
9. Officers have worked with the relevant town and parish councils, chambers of commerce and key stakeholders to develop HSIF action plans for each location. Draft action plans are attached in appendix one to this report.
10. Following the guidance received from DCLG the action plans focus on the following key themes:
 - addressing problems with vacant shops
 - improving the appearance of the high street
 - projects to improve the visitor experience
 - projects to attract footfall to the town.
11. The establishment of a Vale-wide business partnership is in progress with positive meetings underway with key businesses across the district. The purpose of the partnership is to enable wider engagement with businesses across the Vale and sharing of best practice. It is anticipated that the partnership will be fully established by 31 March 2013.
12. Officers recommend that, given the changing nature of project delivery and the timescales involved, cabinet authorises the head of economy, leisure and property, in consultation with the strategic director and the relevant cabinet member, to make any necessary changes to the action plans to ensure that delivery is achieved and also to allocate funding as appropriate. This includes allocating the town teams funding to Abingdon and Faringdon, ensuring they use the funding in a sustainable manner.

Financial implications

13. This project will be fully funded from the unbudgeted grants already received and detailed in paragraph 3 above. Project costs will be limited to this funding and will not exceed £155,000. There is a requirement for this external funding to be added to the Vale Council's approved budget for economic development, so that officers have authority to spend the money, and this requires full council's approval. All other financial implications are contained within the body of the report.
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Legal implications

14. On 26 July 2012, the Vale Council entered into a grant of lease over property at Abbey Shopping Centre, Abingdon. This included provision of a payment of tenant contribution to the Vale Council of £35,000. This was subject to the Vale Council contributing match funding of not less than £20,000. The lease agreement stipulates that the fund is to be used for the promotion of retail activities within the Abingdon town centre including (without limitations) events, promotions and advertising material, subject to agreement between the landlord and tenant (both acting reasonably) as to the exact nature of such expenditure. There is a requirement for the Vale Council to provide Scottish Widows at reasonable intervals with a breakdown as to how the funds have been used.

Risks

15. The main risks are that the projects are not delivered and the money is not spent. These risks will be minimised by ensuring projects are delivered effectively and within allocated budget with officers overseeing the management of each action plan with the stakeholders involved, using standard Vale Council project management and procurement practices.
16. DCLG has confirmed that there are no restrictions on how the money is spent, although it would like the spending to be broadly in line with the Portas Review, which has been addressed through the action plan development.

Other implications

17. None

Conclusion

18. There are a number of ongoing initiatives that demonstrate the Vale Council's commitment to supporting its towns, including two hours free car parking and free Wi-Fi for the town centres. With the additional delivery of these action plans and creation of town teams and a Vale-wide business partnership, a large number of initiatives can be achieved that will help increase the attractiveness and prosperity of the Vale and the Vale's towns.
19. Therefore, officers recommend that cabinet recommends to full council to approve the addition of £155,000 to the economic development budget, from externally received monies, for the delivery of high street innovation projects in the Vale towns, town teams in Abingdon and Faringdon and the creation of a Vale-wide business partnership.
20. Additionally, subject to full council's approval of the budget, officers recommend that, given the changing nature of project delivery and the timescales involved, cabinet authorises the head of economy, leisure and property in consultation with the strategic director and the relevant cabinet member to make any necessary changes to the action plans and to allocate funding as appropriate, including allocating the town teams funding for Abingdon and Faringdon.

Background papers

- None
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