
Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny Committee
4th November 2020

Report of the Director of Regeneration & Enterprise

The Impact of Covid-19 on Business and Employment and Skills Support

Purpose

1. To inform Committee of the impact of Covid-19 on the delivery of business support and employment and skills support by the Regeneration & Enterprise Directorate.

Recommendations

2. It is recommended:-
 - That Committee note the contents of the report and the actions being taken by the Directorate to ensure the continuation of business support and employment and Skills support services across the Borough.
 - To consider the planned interventions for business and employment and skills support as part of a Covid 19 response.

Background

3. The Regeneration & Enterprise Directorate has responsibility for the delivery of a range of business support services to local businesses via the Dudley Business First Team (DBF).
4. In addition, the Directorate provides a range of learning and skills support for local residents via the Post 16 Skills team, Black Country Impact team and Adult and Community Learning (ACL) teams.



Business Support provided during lock down

5. Following the launch of the Small Business Grant Fund (SBGF) and the Retail Hospitality and Leisure Fund (RHLF) by the Government in March 2020, the DBF team supported colleagues in Revenue and Benefits together with support from colleagues in Audit Services and the wider Regeneration & Enterprise Directorate in the delivery of the Small Business Grant Fund (SBGF) and Retail, Hospitality & Leisure Grant (RHLG) scheme's
6. Over a period of 4 weeks commencing in late March 2020 some 4500 businesses were contacted by the teams to raise awareness of the grant support available and to aid in the application process.
7. In addition on 1st May 2020 the Government launched the Discretionary Business Grant Fund (DBGF) to support businesses who were ineligible for either SBGF or RHLG. The DBF team led on the delivery of the fund which included three rounds of funding with the final round ending on 28th August 2020 following the Government's decision to end the business grant programmes.
8. In total circa £58.7 million business grants have been paid out to circa 5270 businesses in Dudley via the business grant schemes with this number still being finalised and subject to change. This has been a huge effort by cross directorate teams and has demonstrated the flexibility and adaptability of teams in working together to support Dudley businesses
9. The DBF team have also continued to provide specialist support to businesses during this period via the Aim For Gold business support programme (an European Regional Development funded project) which has been re-purposed due to the impact of Covid-19 with an emphasis now on business resilience and recovery support for businesses
10. The delivery of generalist business support has also moved from face to face to online support, including the delivery of the council's Start-Up Dudley business support programme (led by the Black Country Chamber of Commerce), which has seen an increase in registrations to the programme during lockdown.

Re-opening the High Streets Safely

11. Colleagues from Regeneration and Enterprise, Public Realm and CAPA have led on the "Reopening the High Streets Safely" programme (European Regional Development Fund) to support the safe re-opening of Town Centre's and High Streets.



12. Funding has been used for the *Shop Local*, *Explore Local* and *Stay Local* campaigns, which has included the development of posters, barrier covers, and bollard covers which will start appearing around the borough. The Reopening High Streets team are also working with local community groups in Dudley and Stourbridge to develop more permanent public realm interventions to encourage social distancing including raised decking and parklets.
13. This has complemented the work of the Public Realm Directorate who led on the Emergency Active Travel Funding (EATF) to support the use of physical infrastructure (barriers, cones and signage) to enable the safe reopening of high streets within Dudley.

Employment & Skills support during lockdown

14. Following the physical closure of buildings on 23rd March 2020 the Adult Community & Learning team (ACL) quickly switched to online delivery of learning courses and over the period of lock down have delivered approximately 80 classes to around 600 learners.
15. For learners who did not have access to technology or the internet (circa 150 learners) workbooks were posted out to learners with completed work returned, marked and new work sent out.
16. Two virtual learning environments were also developed to support additional programmes of learning. *Skills Forward* for Maths and English learners and *Moodle* for other courses. Over 20 online courses have now been developed with courses to support community cohesion and health and wellbeing included.
17. Individuals on formal qualification programmes were also continued to be supported however, with end of course examinations not possible estimated grades were submitted by tutors to the examination boards. Over 300 residents successfully passed their qualifications through this method.
18. In summary, over 650 local residents have been supported to continue their learning with 171 qualifications completed and approved by various examination boards and 18 new online classes were developed and delivered online and 130 new residents were recruited and registered for adult learning programmes during lockdown.
19. The Post 16 Skills team have been working closely with the Education Skills Funding Agency, West Midlands Combined Authority, Colleges, Adult Education providers and private training providers to ensure that apprentices and employees who have been affected by COVID-19 on their employment status are supported back into appropriate job opportunities as soon as possible.



20. The team have also been working with partners including Dudley College and the West Midlands Combined Authority in driving forward the Dudley Regeneration Academy which is seeking to ensure local residents benefit from employment and training opportunities resulting from the large scale regeneration projects being delivered in Dudley.

Emerging economic indicators

21. The ending of the Job Retention scheme on 31st October 2020 has potential implications for Dudley businesses however, at present it is not clear what the extent of these implications maybe. In terms of service delivery it is likely that DBF will see an immediate increase in demand for start-up support, increased enquiries related to business resilience and Covid-related capital expenditure for continued safety measures.
22. The number of furloughed staff has continued to increase In Dudley and at the end of July 2020 48,600 Dudley workers were furloughed, a 15.3% increase on the June 2020 figure. The total for the Black Country was 177,500 (BC Consortium Intelligence Unit 2020).
23. Whilst the introduction of the Job Support Scheme on 1st November 2020 is welcomed the reduced scope and eligibility for the scheme means it is unclear how many Dudley businesses will benefit and what this will mean for employees who are currently furloughed.
24. At the same time the claimant count for Dudley residents over the age of 16 years has also seen an increase. In August 2020 the claimant count stood at 14,865 or 7.7% of resident age population an increase of 555 from July 2020 (BC Consortium). When compared to March 2020 the number of claimants has increased by 6350 (an increase of 74.6%).
25. The Government has also provided support for the self-employed via the Self Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS). At the end of August 2020 some 9,300 Dudley residents had applied for the scheme which equates to 64% of those residents eligible with an average SEISS claim of £2,500 (BC Consortium Intelligence Unit 2020). The Government has recently extended the SEISS scheme to April 2021 to include a further two lump sum instalments.

Support moving forward

26. Officers are currently working with a range of partners to develop interventions to support businesses and employees/residents as part of the continued Covid 19 response.



27. The Government have recently announced the launch of the Covid-19 Small Business Grant Scheme which will offer grants of between £1,000 and £3,000 (£5,000 in exceptional circumstances) to help small and medium size businesses adapt and recover following the pandemic. The funding is to be administered by the Black Country Growth Hub, with DBF helping to support Dudley businesses to apply for the funding will be available to pay for access to professional advice and/or purchase of minor equipment to adapt or adopt new technology.
28. The Post 16 Skills team have recently submitted an expression of interest to become an intermediary organisation to Department for Work and Pensions under the Government's *Plan for Jobs* scheme. Commencing in November 2020 and initially lasting until December 2021, the *Kickstart* scheme will enable the teams to work with groups of 30 employers who will offer a 6-month work placement to young people who are 16-24 claiming Universal Credit and at risk of long-term unemployment. There is a £1500 per placement to help with the costs of training whilst the Government will pay for 100% of the National Minimum Wage for up to 25 hours a week as well as employer National Insurance contributions and employer minimum automatic enrolment contributions. All jobs have to be new jobs and not replace existing or planned vacancies or cause existing employees or contractors to lose or reduce their employment
29. Each employer will be supported to help placement learners to develop their skills and experience and they will be given support including how to look for long-term work, including CV and interview preparations, career advice and setting goals and basic skills such as attendance, timekeeping and teamwork etc.
30. A Care Gateway scheme has also been developed linking residents who have an interest to work in the care sector to have intensive work support and attend a ten day short course developed by the ACL and Post 16 Skills Team to give industry recognised qualifications in Infection Control, Emergency First Aid and Food Safety before each learner is then matched to suitable vacancies in Care with transferable skills. The scheme has already proved successful with the first learner gaining a job outcome with a local care home.
31. The Post 16 Team are also continuing to support employers to secure Dudley MBC Apprenticeship Levy Transfer funding for existing employees aged 19+ and/or new apprentices aged 19+. Over 45 learners are currently engaging in learning across Level 2-Level 5 in Dudley based businesses.
32. The Black Country Impact partnership has recently applied to Department for Work and Pensions to extend the programme beyond its current end date of 31 December 2021 to the end of 2023 has been submitted to the Managing Authority and the application is currently in appraisal. The project supports 16-29 years olds across the Black Country back into employment through a range of interventions.



33. In addition, the partnership has also responded to a call issued by Department for Work and Pensions to support participants that have little or no access to online information or services. An application was submitted on 30th September which will enable Black Country Impact to purchase 90 devices with internet access and loan them to participants who would not be able to access digital information otherwise. This will support with the reskilling of employees to help them be work ready.
34. The above interventions will continue to support the delivery of corporate objectives and the aspirations of the Dudley Vision.

Finance

35. There are no direct financial implications arising directly from this report. Any applications for external funding as part of a Covid-19 recovery response will require a financial assessment prior to submission.

Law

36. There are no legal implications arising directly from this report. Any applications for external funding as part of a Covid-19 recovery response will require a legal assessment prior to submission.

Equality Impact

37. The Directorate's services are delivered to all residents across the Borough. There are no equality implications arising from this report.

Human Resources/Organisational Development

38. There was a requirement in the early period of lock down to redirect staff resources from within Regeneration & Enterprise to support colleagues in Revenues and Benefits and Dudley Business First in the delivery of the business grants. In addition, staff from Adult & Community Learning and Post 16 skills had to quickly adapt traditional delivery models through the introduction of online learning modules to ensure residents continued on their learning pathways. These changes were delivered within existing staffing resources and demonstrated the resilience and adaptability of staff to ensure continued service delivery.

Commercial/Procurement

39. None arising directly from this report.



Health, Wellbeing and Safety

40. In continuing to deliver support to businesses and residents throughout lockdown the health and wellbeing of staff and clients has been considered throughout, with particular attention to vulnerable groups, leading to the introduction of alternative delivery models to accommodate all.



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List of Background Documents

Total Number of Workers Furloughed, Black Country Consortium Intelligence Unit, August 2020

Claimant Count Summary for August 2020, Black Country Consortium Intelligence Unit, August 2020

Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) – Claims Received up to 31st August, Black Country Consortium Intelligence Unit, August 2020

<https://www.the-blackcountry.com/economic-intelligence-unit/black-country-intelligence-reports/intelligence-briefings>

