

Policy & Resources Committee

Date:	18 February 2020
Title:	Economic Development
Contact Officer:	Cassie Pinnells, Community Services Manager

Purpose of Report

1. To request that the balance of grant funding that has not been spent in 2019/2020 be allocated to the work of the Market Town Coordinator (MTCO), to cover the shortfall in budget as a result of unexpected withdrawal of funding by SODC.

Background

2. At the Town Centre Working Group meeting on 29/10/19 (reported to NPCC on 15/11/19) the MTCO informed the working group that she had been copied into an email to the SODC Economic Development Team from the MTCO at Wallingford. The email asked SODC if the current £4000 funding was going to be continued and was informed by reply that a proposal had been put to Cabinet about this and that the decision would be made based on this. Thame MTCO asked directly whether the proposal was to continue or discontinue the funding and received no reply.
3. The Town Centre Working group discussed the lack of connection to and communication from SODC Economic Development team. Although the Economic Development team are available if contacted, their focus is very reactive. With an overall lack of outreach into the Market Towns since they withdrew funding for staff members. Focus seems to be elsewhere, with the Vale and large Business parks being prioritised over other Business areas. If they are reaching out to Businesses in our area they are doing this without engaging with Thame Town Council. Cllr Fickling contacted Cllr Pieter-Paul Barker, to start a discussion about what their strategy is in relation to Economic Development in South Oxfordshire Market Towns. This was followed up by an email to Cllr Barker from the MTCO.
4. At this time, there was frustration expressed at the fact we had found out our funding could be under question by chance, despite the fact that our budget setting process in Thame was already well progressed. As there was no formal communication budget setting continued as planned.
5. On 7/1/20, we received a letter direct from SODC's Economic Development Manager informing us of the funding cut, and an email from Cllr Barker on the same day inviting the MTCO to work more closely with the SODC Economic Development team going forward.

Current Situation

6. Following internal discussion it was decided that the Community Services Manager would progress the working relationship with the SODC Economic Development team going forward, as the need is for more strategic communication. An email was sent to the SODC Cabinet Member for Economic Development, Cllr Bennett, about how to move forward, seeking reassurance on the following issues:
 1. What plans SODC has in place regarding the support of the 50% of SME businesses based in the market towns?
 2. How does SODC plan to communicate and consult on its Strategic plans to give Thame the ability to communicate what is needed?

3. How SODC will provide support for the growth of the Visitor Economy in Thame going forward?
4. Whether SODC has an action plan or will provide advice on what it believes is needed to support the local economy and create the right conditions for economic growth?
5. How SODC will facilitate input into Thame's revised Neighbourhood Plan to ensure that the redevelopment of the Cattle Market site and its future use reflect the needs of the local community of Thame?

An invitation was also extended to the SODC Economic Development team, inviting them to attend both the Business Forums scheduled in the town, and a meeting with Thame Town Council with a set agenda that will benefit Thame. This will allow us to share information that may be beneficial for all parties.

At the time of writing this report, we are still waiting for a response to the questions, with Cllr Barker arranging a meeting with the Town Clerk, Community Services Manager and Cabinet Member Cllr Bennett.

7. Despite communication being reviewed and hopefully improved with SODC Economic Development Team, we are still facing the situation of being £4000 short within the budget for the work of the MTCO.
8. The SODC Grants team have been approached but at present they are not able to suggest anything. They will continue to explore what options may be available in the future and communicate this with us. This still does not resolve our current issue.
9. Meanwhile our budget for Thame Town Council General Grants is showing a surplus this year as not all funding has been requested.
10. This report asks you to consider allocating £3,700 of this surplus to the work of the MTCO in order to fund some feather flag infrastructure needed to improve the events that are held in the town centre.

Proposal

11. Evidence is increasingly showing that experience is the key to keeping town centres alive. Each year Thame Town Centre host several events that offer such experiences, raising the profile of the town, encouraging footfall on the day of the event as well as return footfall when visitors come back to visit the town. This all serves to benefit our local economy and boost the vibrancy of the town.
12. Many of these events are now multi-venue events, and new events being developed seek to avoid road closures, and instead encourage participants to explore the shops and venues that are in the town centre. The result is that visitors explore places they may never have been before, and it encourages them to return. In 2020 the town will host 5 such events:
 1. Taste of Thame
 2. Thame Town Music Festival
 3. Thame Wedding Show
 4. Thame Art Crawl
 5. Thame Arts & Literature Festival
13. For residents and visitors who know Thame well this is no problem, as they often know the venues used and can find them easily. However feedback from events last year was that the same is not

true for visitors to Thame. The proposal is to invest in a numbered feather flag infrastructure that events can share and use in conjunction with their publicity to help people identify the correct venues. The flags will also serve to draw more attention to each event as it will give the events an increased on-street presence. Each flag will contain a number and a changeable panel that allows the flags to be customised to suit each event.

14. Work needs to be done further to scope this properly to ensure that it meets the needs of each event and is suitable for each venue identified.

15. Maximum NET costs for this are as follows (likely to be less due to multi-buy discounts):

Item	Cost per unit	Units needed	Total costs	Funding source
Feather flag	£195.00	15	£2,925	Grant funding
Changeable panel	£50.00 per set	Dependent on event	Various	Project specific costs
Base	£30	16	£450	Grant funding
Total MAXIMUM grant funding requested			£3,375	

Recommendation:

- i) *To approve financial support of up to £3,375 be released from the General Grants 2019/20 Budget, subject to scoping venue suitability and monitoring by the Community Services Manager.*