

Title of Report:	Consideration of virement of funding from Workforce Development Programme to Advice Services.
Committee Report Submitted To:	Leisure and Development Committee
Date of Meeting:	18th August 2020
For Decision or For Information	For Decision

Linkage to Council Strategy (2019-23)	
Strategic Theme	Accelerating our Economy and Contributing to Prosperity
Outcome	Promoting the Borough as an attractive place to live, work, invest and visit
Lead Officer	Head of Service, Prosperity and Place

Budgetary Considerations	
Cost of Proposal	£10,000
Included in Current Year Estimates	YES – funding is within existing budget
Capital/Revenue	Revenue
Code	
Staffing Costs	No staffing costs

Screening Requirements	Required for new or revised Policies, Plans, Strategies or Service Delivery Proposals.		
Section 75 Screening	Screening Completed:	Yes/No	Date: N/A
	EQIA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date: N/A
Rural Needs Assessment (RNA)	Screening Completed	Yes/No	Date: N/A
	RNA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date: N/A
Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA)	Screening Completed:	Yes/No	Date: N/A
	DPIA Required and Completed:	Yes/No	Date: N/A

1.0 Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to seek Members' permission to use £10,000 of existing budget, from the Workforce Development Group activities, to further support advice services in the Borough as the employment schemes and furlough programmes come to an end.

2.0 Background

As part of the Prosperity and Place programme for the current year, budget has been set aside for Workforce Development projects, generally developed in-year from submissions from Workforce Development Group members.

In April, Prosperity and Place developed a series of activities in response to the emerging and ongoing Covid crisis. This included extensions and increased activity in the Alchemy and Digital Causeway Programmes, extensive survey work from Town and Village Management, and response actions to those who needed assistance to access government funding.

Further to those proposed actions, the team had discussions with local advice service providers about increased advice services which could be available in the third quarter of the year. This was also in line with recovery actions undertaken in previous large scale closures – for example, the closure of the Seagate plant in 2008 – or as part of recovery actions undertaken after the last recession.

The current situation for jobs and business is unprecedented, however the current NISRA figures for claimant count show some fluctuations.

Month	CC&G Claimant Count	NI Claimant Count
March 2020	2,540	30,200
April 2020	4,570	56,425
May 2020	5,255	63,860
June 2020	5,045	62,465

The claimant count for the Borough dropped by around 200 in the June/July period, but is likely to increase further as furlough and other schemes come to a close.

In summary:

- Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme will continue until end of October.
- Furloughed workers across UK will continue to receive 80% of their current salary, up to £2,500.
- However, new arrangements will be introduced from August, and as employer contributions commence as part of this scheme, there may be an increase in redundancies.

A recent Ulster University study completed in July, states that the most vulnerable sectors, even with a reduction in social distancing, will be wholesale & retail, accommodation and food, manufacturing, "other service sectors" and administration. These are key sectors within Causeway Coast and Glens.

3.0 Budget Proposal

The funding will provide additional advice services to:

- Small business advice for those experiencing difficulty.
- Extra assistance toward Universal Credits claims from same, and others as furlough schemes wind up.

It is proposed that £10,000 is allocated from the Workforce Development Group budget currently held by the Strategic Projects Manager. The funding will support existing staff salaries to provide extra hours of service.

Funding could be used either over the remainder of the financial year, or to deal with any upsurge in specific claims for Universal Credit and other benefits. It is expected that as furlough periods begin to wind down, the demand for assistance in completing UC forms and other challenges will start to rise – debt management, especially for the self-employed.

While the general economic development budget has put in place several actions to assist businesses, the Unit recognises that in the face of job losses, which are currently occurring and yet to transpire, this would be a tangible help to those most in need.

Budgets are limited, however, in consultation with advice service staff, £10,000 will provide a further 680 hours to deal with an additional 400 enquiries.

Although funding will come from this year's Workforce Development Programme, it will still maintain budget for other reactive programmes as lockdown eases and suggested programmes come forward from WDP group members.

Very recent feedback from the existing advice service provision was as follows:

"We started to see a change in our trends shortly after lockdown began, with increased queries from lone traders and small businesses regarding accessing government schemes, responsibilities towards employees, dealing with debt and accessing benefits. This has continued throughout the last four/five months. We expect a further increase as schemes come to an end. NI wide debt services are set to expect a sharp increase in demand from September, including queries from businesses and sole traders."

Council's services which have been provided to businesses in distress during the lockdown period will also continue – the proposed recommendation will be in addition to those services.

4.0 Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- The Prosperity and Place budget contributes £10,000 from its budget for enhanced advice services, to be provided through the Causeway Coast and Glens Advice Consortium.
- This funding will be monitored for best use – either through immediate enhanced hours, or hours enhanced throughout the remainder of the financial year, depending on demand.
- Reporting will be made through existing channels through Community & Culture.