

**From:** Mike Whiting, Cabinet Member for Economic Development  
Barbara Cooper, Corporate Director of Growth, Environment and Transport

**To:** Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee – 3 July 2020

**Subject:** The Kent and Medway Growth Hub Covid-19 Business Support Helpline

**Classification:** Unrestricted

**Past Pathway of Paper:** N/A

**Future Pathway of Paper:** N/A

**Electoral Divisions:** All

**Summary:**

This paper provides an overview of the enhanced growth hub service designed, implemented and delivered specifically as a response to the Covid-19 crisis. This additional service is an example of a contributory brokerage model between Kent County Council and the local authorities within Kent and Medway.

**Recommendation:**

The Cabinet Committee is asked to note the contents of this report and to offer to the Cabinet Member for Economic Development observations on the support being provided to Kent Businesses in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

**1. Background**

1.1. In mid-March 2020, to help mitigate the economic impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on local businesses, KCC Economic Development Division, with the support of partners in the Kent districts, working with the Kent and Medway Growth Hub (Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce), put in place the necessary resources (funding, IT and trained staff) to establish the Covid-19 Business Support Helpline for Kent.

**2. The Covid-19 Business Support Helpline**

2.1. The Covid-19 Helpline became fully operational on 25 March 2020. The purpose was to offer a single point of contact providing authoritative help and advice to companies in Kent. The Helpline was set up and funded to operate for a period of three months. Initially, most callers needed help in finding financial assistance, for example how to apply for the government funded Covid-19 business support schemes such as the Small Business Grants Fund (SBGF), the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Business Grants Fund (RHLGF), the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CBILS) and the

Coronavirus Bounce Back Loans Scheme (CBBLs). Latterly, the Helpline team has collated expressions of interest for the Local Authority Discretionary Grant Scheme, to support the districts whilst they brought their schemes online.

- 2.2. The Helpline was launched with a dedicated team of six call handlers backed up by eight business advisors – all working remotely - who answer detailed enquiries by phone or video conferencing which are specific to the needs of individual business. The call handlers deal with the most frequently asked questions to ensure that answers are given promptly while more complex issues are forwarded to the business advisors.
- 2.3. The phone line 03333 602300 has been open from 8 am to 5 pm Monday to Fridays. Initially, the line stayed open in the early evening but most calls after 5 pm asked about announcements that had only just been made from Downing Street, so it was agreed that these questions could best be answered on the following day.

### **3. Achievements**

- 3.1. To date, the Kent & Medway Growth Hub Covid-19 Business Support Helpline has fielded:
  - 7,118 enquiries and 1635 Live Chat.
  - 2,568 hours of advice from Business Advisers
  - Kent businesses have successfully accessed £315,475,000 of grant funding.
- 3.2. Approval ratings for the Helpline have been consistently very high at 96%, with 100% of all businesses saying that they would recommend the service. An additional response to the crisis is also now being provided by local businesses offering support through a dedicated website moderated by the Growth Hub, <https://www.cv19supporthub.org/>.
- 3.3. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Rt Hon Alok Sharma, has written to the Cabinet Member for Economic Development recognising the “excellent work” of the Growth Hub Covid-19 Helpline in “supporting your local business base”.
- 3.4. The Kent and Medway Growth Hub, which hosts the Kent Helpline, together with KCC Trading Standards and other partners (Dartford and Sevenoaks Environmental Health Partnership, Kent Fire and Rescue Service and South East Water) have produced and launched a new video specifically to advise retail businesses in Kent on the new COVID-19 regulations concerning re-opening safely. The Helpline and Trading Standards have received a high volume of enquiries from businesses asking about the new regulations and guidelines and how they can make sure they are following them correctly. The video offers guidance on which types of businesses are allowed to re-open, which COVID-19 social-distancing and safety guidelines they should follow, how to make changes to store layouts, including fire regulations and how to

make sure a store is safe. There are also links to tools for businesses, such as a sign they can display to show their employees, customers, and other visitors that they have followed COVID-19 guidance. Further help and advice for businesses has also been available through a live Question and Answer session via the internet.

#### 4. The Covid-19 Business Questionnaire

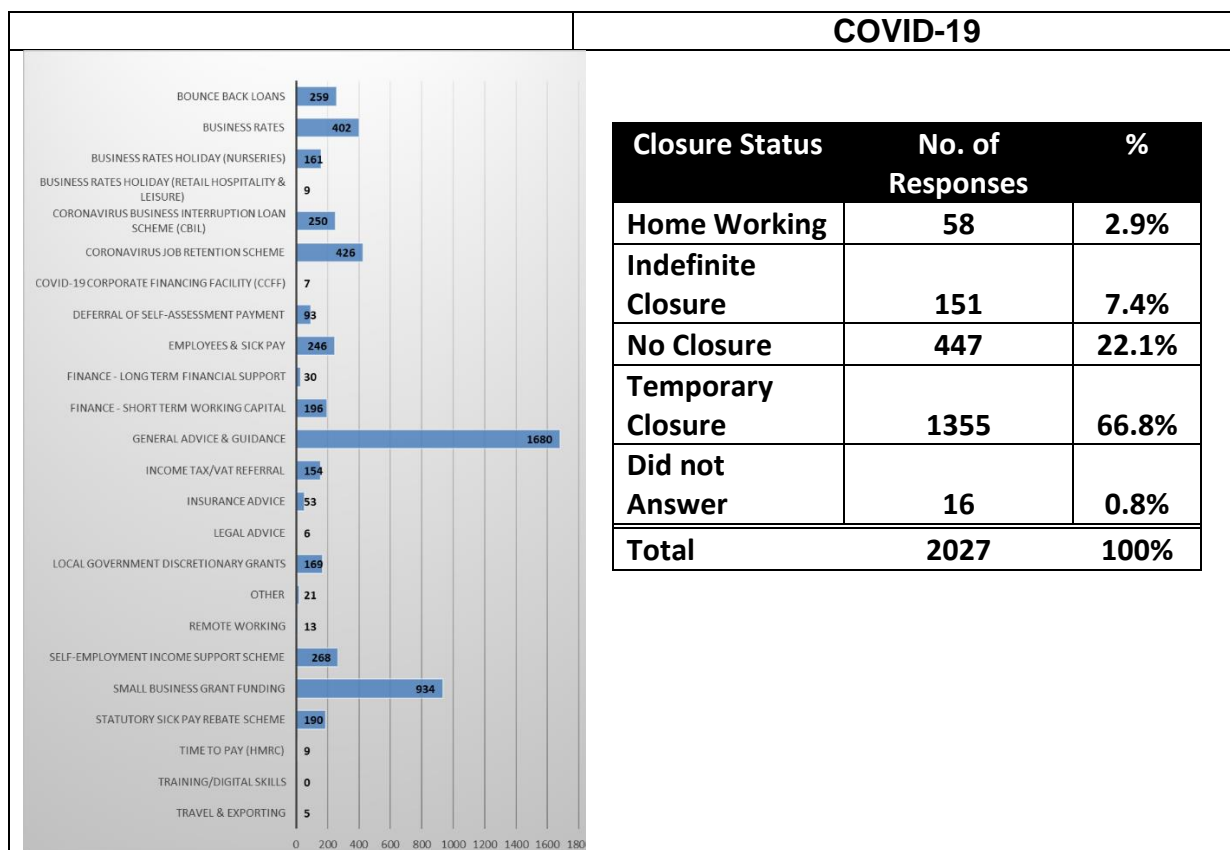
4.1. To help gain feedback and to support the work of Kent & Medway Growth Hub Covid-19 Business Support Helpline, KCC also established an on-line COVID-19 Questionnaire to encourage feedback and build intelligence on local companies and the Kent economy. Since the questionnaire went live on the 26th March 2020, 2,027 responses have been received (by 15 June) from businesses within Kent and Medway.

4.2. The tables below provide a breakdown of the responses:

- Table 1 – number enquiries by District;
- Table 2 – number of enquiries by sector and District;
- Table 3 – Types of enquiries;
- Table 4 – Closure of businesses due to Covid-19.

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## 5. Cost of Service

5.1. The cost of the Covid-19 Business Support Helpline was met by Kent County Council and the local authorities within Kent as follows:

Funded by KCC	£100,000
District Authority contributions	£60,000
<b>Total cost of Provision</b>	<b>£160,000</b>

## 6. Next Steps

6.1. Much information has been gathered during the delivery of this enhanced growth hub service providing intelligence as to what businesses require to return to growth. For the future, we are looking at what further practical support could be provided, for example:

- Wider business engagement
- A Bounce Back Support Programme, based on the national scale-up model which provides 12 months support which includes
  - A 90-minute online workshop
  - Weekly support from a business advisor
  - Continued and further intelligence gathering.
- Extending the Helpline service for another three months.

## 7. Recommendation

7.1 The Cabinet Committee is asked to note the contents of this report and to offer to the Cabinet Member for Economic Development observations on the support being provided to Kent Businesses in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Contact details**

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