

Ashford Town Centre Business Grants

Business Support Policy to 31 March 2025

Ashford Borough Council – Policy

Background

Ashford Borough Council trialled the implementation of Ashford Town Centre Business Support Grants in 2021-22 using Government's ARG (Discretionary) funding. This resulted in 23 grants being issued to improve the appearance and trading capability of street-facing business premises as well as supporting businesses fitting out vacant premises for occupation. It has resulted in 6 vacant premises being filled and led to a total investment value of £243,000 into the town centre.

Since the last scheme, many factors are affecting businesses in town centres across the UK, with the cost of living crisis, rising inflation and higher business costs. These pressures being faced by businesses, almost immediately after Covid-19, are putting town centres and high streets at risk with vacancies likely to rise. As of April 2023 Ashford Town Centre had a vacancy rate of just over 14% compared to a national average of 11%.

In 2022 the council adopted the Ashford Town Centre Reset Strategy which provides a framework of projects to influence the traditional town centre area so that it can remain relevant in the current economic climate. The council's Corporate Plan 2022-24 also aims to stimulate a vibrant, accessible and sustainable Town Centre for residents, visitors and business. Town Centre Grants have proven to be a method to affect change directly and quickly to revitalise town centres and support the businesses trading there.

This policy relates specifically to grants for businesses eligible under this scheme and will be valid to and including 31 March 2025.

This grant scheme is fully funded by S106 contributions aimed at supporting the vitality and viability of Ashford Town Centre.

ATCBG Structure

The Ashford Town Centre Business Grants (ATCBG) will be made up of two grant streams:

- Shop Improvement Grant: A grant of up to £3,000 for a business that can demonstrate they are due to undertake needed improvements to their premises in the town centre.
- Empty Premises Grant: A grant of up to £10,000 for a business that can demonstrate they are bringing a unit in the town centre back into use and needs support for the refurbishment. This scheme can be used in conjunction with Kent County Council's No Use Empty Scheme.

These grants cannot be used in conjunction with each other. For example recipients of the Empty Premises Grant cannot access funding from the Shop Improvement Grant as well. They can be used in conjunction with other financial support schemes available beyond the two named above, subject to those other schemes allowing this. Applicants that have either received a grant from one of these two schemes, or that have already submitted a grant application which is being assessed, will not be considered.

Applications will open in rounds, with the first round being from 1 September 2023 to 5 November 2023. Applications submitted outside of these times will not be considered subject to significant material considerations and mitigating factors. These dates may vary at short notice depending on the level of applications the council receives.

The council reserves the right to close applications if the funding is likely to be committed, is committed or has been spent.

Shop Improvement Grant Details

The intention of this grant is to facilitate and support improvements to the interior and exterior of occupied commercial premises within the priority areas and within the designated Ashford Town Centre area.

Eligibility Criteria

1. Independent businesses that do not have more than 5 premises across Kent
2. Businesses actively trading from a ground floor commercial property, that faces onto the highway, within the priority areas (see maps), where the property is over 5 years old
3. The business can demonstrate the need for the works proposed and these won't negatively impact the surrounding area
4. Individual landlords are eligible to apply for this grant

Work that can be carried out using this funding

Works that may require Planning Applications (such as Listed Building Consent, Advertising Consent or similar) can be considered. Applicants will need to submit their Planning Application, if required, before submitting the grant application. Work therefore within scope of this grant includes:

- External renovations or improvements to front elevations of buildings (areas visible from the street), including, but not limited to:
 - repairs
 - repainting of shop fronts in suitable colours
 - signage
 - external lighting
 - security grilles and/or security glazing
 - repair of external stonework and brickwork
 - repair and reinstatement of guttering and down-pipes
- Internal repairs or improvements to the ground floor of the property
- Works to improve the energy efficiency and carbon footprint of the premises which could include (but is not limited to) insulation and draft proofing, upgraded windows, LED lighting
- Works to improve accessibility to the business premises, where an accessibility audit has been undertaken and provided actionable suggestions

Tenants within premises owned by Ashford Borough Council will not be able to apply for the Shop Improvement Grant if it is for works that are the responsibility of the landlord. Eligible Ashford Borough Council commercial tenants will be able to apply for work that does not benefit the council, which includes:

- Any works from the above-listed that are not the responsibility of Ashford Borough Council as landlord.

Levels of Grant

Applicants are required to provide a fully costed quote of the works being proposed. The assessment will consider this and, if successful, applicants will receive a grant equivalent to 60% of the cost of works. The maximum level of grant allowed under this scheme is £3,000.

In exceptional circumstances the council reserves the right to award a higher level of grant where this may be necessary and where there is supporting and significant additional evidence have been submitted.

Information and evidence needed for application

- A completed application form
- Evidence that:
 - The applicant is the freeholder or leaseholder or where written consent from the landlord to carry out the work, has been obtained and submitted
 - The business trading at the subject address is likely to trade there for more than 1 year after the work is complete
 - The applicant has the funds available for their share of the renovation works (40%)
 - The applicant should demonstrate they have considered the Planning guidance in relation to their project and have submitted a Planning Application where necessary
- A fully costed quote for the work or quote for items to be purchased
- Recent photos of the property (internally and externally) showing it's condition
- Details of any grants or funding received from a public authority in the previous three years
- Any further information or evidence required or which the applicant considers relevant

Monitoring and Assurances

The grant will be paid to successful applicants once conditions are met such as (but not limited to):

- The works proposed are due to start imminently and be completed in a reasonable time
- Any permissions such as Planning Permission have been successfully obtained
- Items such as furniture, fixings or appliances have been ordered or bought

The condition of payment for this grant will be included in the decision notification sent to the applicant and is discretionary (to be applied on a case by case basis). For grant applications requiring a Planning Application, the grant can only be paid if Planning Permission has been received by the applicant.

The council reserves the right to attend the property to monitor the progress of work until the expected end date detailed in the applicant's proposal. The council has the discretion to reclaim the grant funding if the conditions are not met within a reasonable time.

Terms and Conditions

- Properties must be over 5 years old
- Grant applications (and relevant Planning Applications) must be made before work takes place
- Our staff must be allowed to inspect the works and see all relevant documentation
- It is the responsibility of applicants to comply with all relevant regulations and legislation
- It is the responsibility of applicants to check and confirm whether they comply with the Subsidy Control requirements (formerly State Aid)
- Any grant money awarded, must be repaid within 1 year of the payment if:
 - The applicant sells or vacates the property within 12 months of receiving the grant
 - The property is vacant for more than 3 months during the 1 year after the grant payment date
 - Works are undertaken without obtaining the relevant permissions or licences as needed
 - The works are not undertaken

Empty Property Grant Details

The intention of this grant is to facilitate and support the occupation of vacant commercial units within the priority areas and within the designated Ashford Town Centre area.

Eligibility Criteria

1. Independent businesses that do not have more than 5 premises across Kent
2. Businesses due to be trading from a ground floor commercial property, that faces onto the highway, within the priority areas (see maps) and is empty at the time of application
3. Businesses that are the freeholder or leaseholder of the commercial property (with at least 2 years left on the lease)
4. Individual landlords are eligible to apply for this grant

Work that can be carried out using this funding

Works that may require Planning Applications (such as Listed Building Consent, Advertising Consent or similar) can be considered. Applicants will need to submit their Planning Application, if required, before submitting the grant application. Work therefore within scope of this grant for this period includes:

- External renovations or improvements to front elevations of buildings
- Works to improve the energy efficiency and carbon footprint of the premises

- Internal ground floor fit-outs to commercial properties

Levels of Grant

Applicants are required to provide a fully costed quote of the works being proposed. The assessment will consider this and, if successful, applicants will receive a grant equivalent to 60% of the cost of works. The maximum level of grant allowed under this scheme is £10,000.

In exceptional circumstances the council reserves the right to award a higher level of grant where this may be necessary and where there is supporting and significant additional evidence have been submitted.

Forms and evidence required to apply

- A completed application form
- Evidence that:
 - The applicant is the freeholder or leaseholder or where written consent from the landlord to carry out the work, has been obtained and submitted
 - The applicant has the funds available for their share of the renovation works (40%)
 - The applicant should demonstrate they have considered the Planning guidance in relation to their project and have submitted a Planning Application where required.
 - Details of your proposals for the property and plans for the business and why they are suitable for the building/area
- Fully costed quote(s) for the work
- Recent photos of the property showing it's condition
- Details of any grants or funding received from a public authority in the previous three years
- Any further information or evidence required or which the applicant considers relevant

Monitoring and Assurances

The grant will be paid to successful applicants once conditions are met such as (but not limited to):

- The works proposed are due to start imminently and be completed in a reasonable time
- Any permissions such as Planning Permission have been successfully obtained

The condition of payment for this grant will be included in the decision notification sent to the applicant and is discretionary (to be applied on a case by case basis). For grant applications requiring a Planning Application, the grant can only be paid if Planning Permission has been received by the applicant.

The council reserves the right to attend the property to monitor the progress of work until the expected end date detailed in the applicant's proposal. The council has the discretion to reclaim the grant funding if the conditions are not met within a reasonable time.

Terms & Conditions

- Quotes for the work must be provided

- Grant applications (and relevant Planning Applications) must be made before any work takes place
- Our staff must be allowed to inspect the works and see all relevant documentation
- This grant scheme can be used in conjunction with the [No Use Empty scheme](#) Kent's empty property initiative
- It is the responsibility of applicants to comply with all relevant regulations and legislation
- It is the responsibility of applicants to check and confirm whether they comply with the Subsidy Control requirements (formerly State Aid)
- Any grant money awarded, must be repaid within 1 year of the payment if:
 - The applicant sells or vacates the property within 12 months of receiving the grant
 - The property is vacant for more than 3 months during the 1 year after the grant payment date
 - Works are undertaken without obtaining the relevant permissions or licences as needed
 - The works are not undertaken

Subsidy Control (formerly State Aid)

A subsidy is where a public authority such as a Local Authority provides support to an enterprise that gives them an economic advantage, meaning equivalent support could not have been obtained on commercial terms.

On 4 January 2023, the UK's new subsidy control regime came into force, implementing a new subsidy regulation framework designed for the post-Brexit era. Underpinned by the [Subsidy Control Act 2022](#) (the "Act"), related statutory instruments and government guidance, the new regime aims to grant public authorities the power to design and award subsidies in an agile way while complying with the UK's international commitments on subsidy control.

For smaller value subsidy awards, Minimal Financial Assistance (MFA) allows financial assistance of up to a maximum limit of £315,000 to be made to a single enterprise within a rolling period of three financial years (consisting of the current financial year and the two previous financial years), without the need to comply with the majority of the subsidy control requirements.

However, MFA requires a written declaration from the beneficiary confirming that the limit has not been exceeded before the subsidy can be awarded. This effectively mirrors the historic EU De Minimis regime but sets the threshold at a fixed sterling amount and at a higher level than previously.

Applicants will therefore be required to provide information and a declaration in relation to subsidies they may have received in the previous three years.

Exclusions to these grant schemes

- Businesses that have already received grant payments that equal the maximum permitted levels of subsidy will not be eligible to receive funding. (See Subsidy Control section above)

- For the avoidance of doubt, businesses that are in administration, insolvent or where a striking-off notice has been made, are not eligible for funding under this scheme.
- This funding should not be used as a wage support mechanism or for capital projects that do not provide direct business support.
- This funding cannot be used to pay for costs directly to Ashford Borough Council (for example Business Rates or rent) or for work to the fabric of properties owned by Ashford Borough Council where the work is the landlord's responsibility.

Decisions

The funding available for these grant schemes is very limited and the council will likely need to prioritise applications to provide best value for money. Decisions will be taken by a panel on a monthly basis. Each round of decisions will prioritise eligible applications based on their location in the town centre (see the priority areas maps), the visual and practical impact of their project as well as the deliverability of their proposal.

Applications will only be taken forward to be decided where all the relevant information and evidence has been submitted by the applicant. The decision to award any grants under this scheme will be taken by a panel chaired by the Deputy Chief Executive of the council. The decision reached by the panel will be final and the council will not consider any appeals submitted. Applicants will subsequently be notified of the outcome of their application. For grant applications requiring Planning, the decision whether to award a grant will be dependent on the approval of Planning Permission. For grant applications during this period that do not require Planning Permission, the decision will be dependent on the content and evidence included in the grant application.

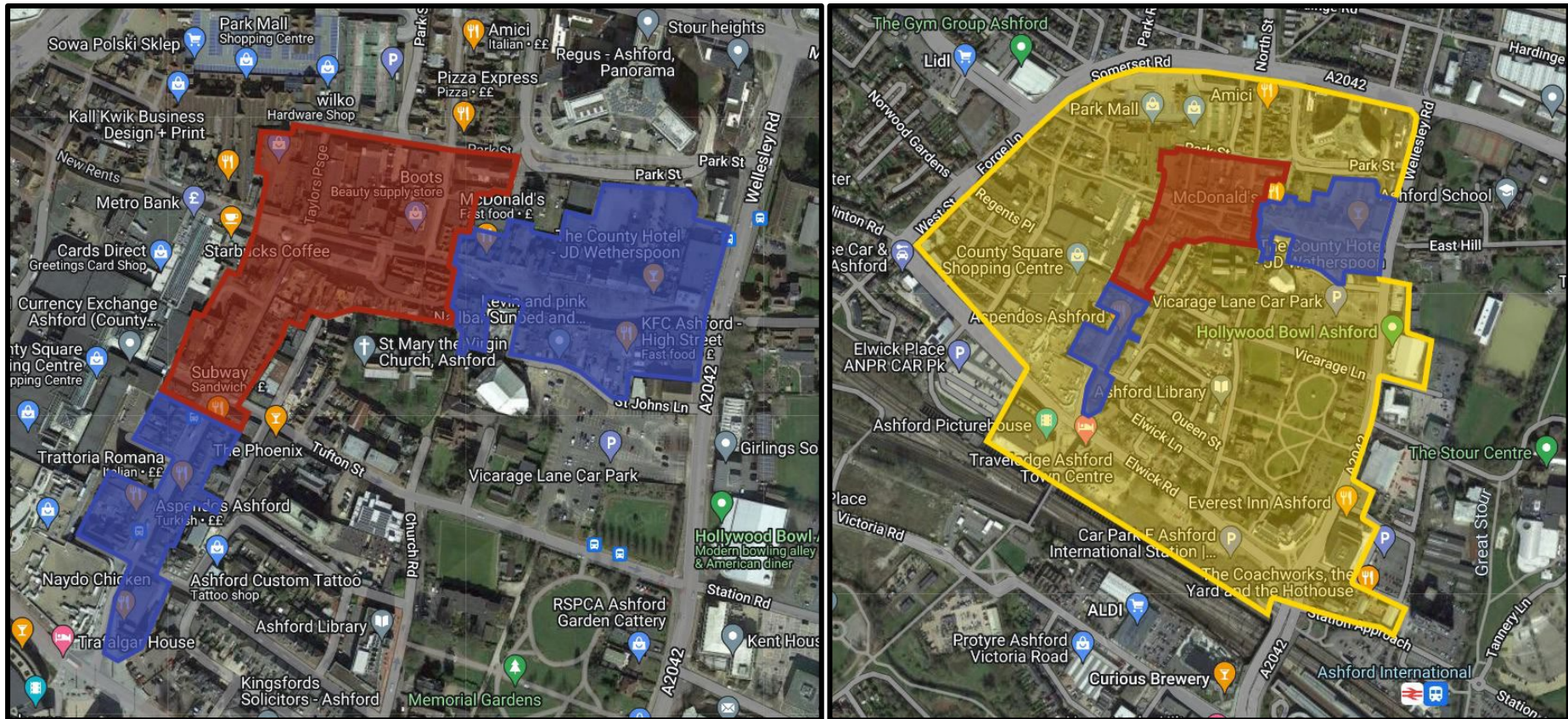
Due to its very limited nature, once the funding is completely allocated there will be no further applications or grants available to interested businesses.

Queries

All enquiries about this grant funding and this policy should contact the Economic Development Team using the email address economicdevelopment@ashford.gov.uk.

Appendix A

Ashford Town Centre Business Grants – Priority Maps



Priority Areas: Red is Priority 1; Blue are Priority 2; Yellow is Priority 3.