



GunnedahShire
Open New Horizons

Gunnedah Shire Council Community Resilience – COVID-19 Business Support Package



Introduction

COVID-19 has already had a significant impact on businesses in Gunnedah Shire due to social distancing measures and in some cases restrictions on trade. Gunnedah Shire Council has been mindful of the economic impacts of the Coronavirus and resultant partial lock down by the Federal and State Governments. With this in mind, Council resolved in March to curtail some of this pressure by freezing interest accrual against rates, fees and charges and cease escalation of any outstanding accounts to debt recovery action whilst ever the Business Continuity Plan (BCP) is enacted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It should also be noted that Council's significantly escalated Capital Works Program (\$28 million), and Community Resilience Program (CRP) (\$3.2 million of this \$200,000 has already been spent with local suppliers for plant upgrades and a large body of works is already committed to projects in the community utilising local tradespeople and suppliers) in response to the unprecedented drought impacting our community, will also assist in alleviating some of the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, Council is committed to wherever possible maintaining the employment of its staff, without funding from the Federal Jobseeker Package, not only to support our staff but to ensure further stimulus to the local economy. Where redeployment of staff to alternate duties in support of the community, or work from home, is not possible Council will also provide paid special leave to staff where appropriate.

Purpose

Gunnedah Shire Council aims to support, and advocate for the needs of, the Gunnedah Shire community during the devastating impact of COVID-19. Council's primary objective to date under its Business Continuity Plan (BCP) has been the health and wellbeing of Council staff to ensure the ongoing delivery of critical services to throughout Gunnedah Shire.

Nevertheless, the Community Resilience - Business Support Package (Package) is intended to provide even further targeted support to the businesses within our Shire who require it, both now and to ensure that once the pandemic has been declared over, during the recovery phase for our Shire's economy.

This Package has been developed in consultation with a number of Gunnedah businesses and the Gunnedah Chamber of Commerce and Industry. It also considers the intent of the Gunnedah Shire Coronavirus Response Strategy.

Council is acutely aware that the environment is rapidly changing as a result of both the spread of the pandemic and the response strategies implemented by the Federal and State Governments. The Package will therefore be delivered in two phases, the first of which is outlined within this document, with the second to be developed in the coming weeks and months:

1. COVID-19 Community Resilience Business Support Package
2. COVID-19 Community Resilience Business Recovery Support Package

Objectives

The objectives of the COVID-19 Community Resilience – COVID 19 Business Support Package are to:

1. Provide fees and charges relief to small business;
2. Provide relief from interest on overdue rates, annual charges and fees whilst ever Council's BCP is activated;
3. Provide assurance that Council will not escalate overdue debts whilst ever the Council BCP is activated;
4. Support local employment and local purchasing;
5. Encourage business diversification and capacity building;
6. Communicate updates from all tiers of Government and Non-Government to the business sector;
7. Further support to those businesses in need due to the pandemic impacts where any significant gaps are identified in the Federal and State packages

Package initial value

Estimated Value of Total Package: \$1.6 million

Due to the uncertain nature of the crisis being experienced, this Package includes an estimate of measures in place from adoption until 30 June 2020, (the current financial year), noting that measures will continue where required and possible for the duration of the activation of Council's BCP with the potential to be extended upon further consideration once Council has the opportunity to assess impacts at that point.

There is currently approximately \$500,000 in uncommitted funds in the Community Resilience Program, which could potentially be used to offset costs against components of this Package, in order to limit the impacts of the Business Supports Package on ratepayers and the broader community into the future. It is noted that the Federal and State Governments are likely to have significant budget deficits well into the future due to the economic packages being implemented in response to the COVID-19 crisis, and therefore access to the amount of grants currently available may not continue.

Initiatives against each Objective

The following provides an overview of the initiatives identified at this stage against the first of the two phases of the Community Resilience – COVID-19 Business Support Package. The Phase 2, Business Support Recovery Package is discussed later in this document.

1. Provide fees and charges relief to small business

Actions

1. Cease charging local businesses fees for any consultation with Planning and Compliance team up until 30 June 2020 (e.g. pre-lodgement consultation fee)
2. Council to offer a full refund of fees to any Development Application (DA), Construction Certificates and Complying Development Certificate applicants wanting to withdraw applications currently under assessment. (Excluding applications that have already been determined)
3. Street Trading and Footpath Occupation fees were waived in 2019/20 via resolution as a drought stimulus measure and as an extension of that initiative, no fees will be charged in 2020/21. Permit use of public space to provide take-away food services (e.g. takeaway counters on footpath in front of Café to allow social distancing of queues)
4. Waive annual Liquid Trade Waste Inspection fees for Category 1 and 2 customers
5. A flexible approach to enforcement and compliance to be taken during this period. (Food businesses must continue to meet food safety laws requirements at all times)

2. Provide relief from interest on overdue rates, annual charges and fees whilst ever Council's BCP is activated

3. Provide assurance that Council will not escalate overdue debts to recovery processes whilst ever the Council BCP is activated

Actions

6. Freeze interest accrual against rates, fees and charges that are currently outstanding or may become outstanding from 24 March 2020 up until 30 June (where there is a payment agreement entered into)
7. Reimbursement of part of Non-Residential Sewer Access Charges – targeted support for commercial and industrial businesses until 30 June 2020.

4. Support local employment and local purchasing

Actions

8. Attempt to maintain current Council resourcing, with the desired result in wages being spent in the local economy.
9. Redeploy Council staff, who cannot be redeployed internally or undertake meaningful work from home, to assist external community charity organisations in providing support to the community sector (e.g. Meals on Wheels and Community Transport)
10. Redeploy Council staff who may otherwise be stood down to assist internal project delivery teams (administration, acquittals, grant support) (3 people)
11. Actively promote the availability of internal and external grant writers to assist with grant applications
12. Use 'Localised' platform and Council website to disseminate funding, information, opportunities, and incentives to facilitate the retention of local jobs
13. Extend Subscription for 'Localised Platform' for 2021 financial year (customisation of COVID-19-page, menu development, training and support)
14. Maintain significantly expanded Capital Works Program, where possible and communicate this to the local business community and suppliers to build confidence in the economy.
15. Council will use local contractors and suppliers in accordance with the Local Procurement Policy. An example of this will be: If successful, 80% of Saleyards master plan delivery will utilise local contractors, resulting in a potential \$14.2 million spend with local suppliers significantly expanded
16. Allocate funds from within existing Economic Development Community Programs and Events budget to:
 - a. promote Localised, highlighting the 'marketplace' functionality, which promotes local procurement
 - b. Support local food businesses by advertising updated listings of changed services in the local paper and online
 - c. Promote "Ways to Support Local Businesses" Campaign on social media
17. Continue to lobby local supermarkets to accept Gunny Money cards
18. Assist and encourage local suppliers to get established on Tenderlink to expand business potential
19. Form further preferred supplier panels with an emphasis on engaging with local suppliers
20. Review Capital Works Program to identify elements that could be brought forward to stimulate the economy

5. Encourage business diversification and capacity building

Actions

21. In accordance with the NSW Government Planning Ministerial Orders – Council enacts and supports the following:
- Construction work, including building and demolitions, to be undertaken on Saturdays, Sundays, and public holidays to allow workers to be socially distanced,
 - Food trucks to be used anywhere in Gunnedah Shire at any time with landholders' permission.
 - Allow access to additional public space for essential services where necessary (e.g. tables outside pharmacies and supermarkets)
 - Dark kitchens – also known as virtual kitchens, cloud kitchens and ghost kitchens – cook meals solely for delivery, rather than eat-in diners will be easier to operate and set up
22. Delivery curfew and trading hour restrictions removed for essential services. A temporary blanket exemption from any delivery curfews for supermarkets, pharmacies and shops of essential household items has been imposed across the Gunnedah Shire
23. Make available a range of business training webinars on the Localised platform
24. Provide additional support for businesses to get online or on social media – (i.e. fund webinars)
25. In response to the NSW Government's call on manufacturers to retool for COVID19 - Council will actively promote this to the business community. Encourage them to sign up to:
- <https://tenders.gov.au>
 - ICN – Industry Capability Network <https://icn.org.au/> - a business network that introduces Australian and NSW companies to projects large and small
 - AMGC – <https://www.amgc.org.au/> Advance Manufacturing Growth centre collates what businesses can do to support COVID19 demand for health equipment

6. Communicate updates from all tiers of Government and Non-Government to the business sector

Actions

26. Continue to promote the Gunnedah Shire Council 'Funding Finder' including COVID-19 specific grants.
27. Continue to provide relevant updates to the community and businesses via Council websites, Council Facebook, electronic direct mail (eDMs), local paper and email distribution lists.
28. Utilise established community networks to provide community with up to date advice and support information.
29. Develop a COVID-19 business and community resources and information page on Council website.

7. Further support to those businesses in need due to the pandemic impacts where any significant gaps are identified in the Federal and State packages

Actions

30. Utilise funding from existing Business Partner Program (BPP) Reserve to support businesses that diversify their manufacturing to meet the needs of COVID-19 combat requirements.
31. Deliver an additional round of Business Partner Program aimed at getting businesses online with e-commerce platforms - \$2,000 to be awarded to each business with budget allocation from existing BPP Reserve.
32. Subscribe "smarty-grants" to provide greater accessibility for Gunnedah Shire businesses to access COVID-19 targeted funding available under grant programs.

Phase 2: Business Recovery Support Package

It is recognised that the Gunnedah Shire economy will need a robust COVID-19 recovery Strategy to set us on the right path and give greater chance to recovery across all sectors of the economy. We are still unclear of the circumstances and the state in which our economy will be when trading conditions return to normal, following the end of the lock-down period. Similarly it is recognised that there is little point in attempting to stimulate the economy in sectors where the Federal Government is trying to effect hibernation, or sectors where there is no down-turn evident at this stage.

It is therefore important that Gunnedah Shire Council further consider ways to stimulate the economy, and when to effect such stimulation, in order to prepare an effective Business Recovery Support Package. This work will be ongoing and concurrent with the rollout of the Phase 1 Business Support Package.

Council Endorsement

Version 1.0 of this document was approved by resolution of Council on April 15, 2020.