

New Forest Covid-19 Business Needs Survey June 2020

This is a summary of The Covid-19 Business Needs Survey was conducted in the May and June of 2020. A detailed report was produced for the District Council's Covid-19 Economic Task and Finish Group.

The purpose was to understand the impact of the crisis on the local business community. It was promoted extensively throughout the District and was completed by over 200 local businesses.

Responses were received from businesses throughout the district and broadly mirrored the concentration of businesses within the authority with higher volumes returned from the District's urban centres.

85% of responding businesses had been negatively impacted by the lock down restrictions. Over half of all businesses has closed altogether for a period of time during lockdown. However, a smaller proportion of 14% had been able to continue operating by adapting the business focus. Specific examples of this included provision of a takeaway service and/or switching the focus to online sales. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some businesses intend to retain these new practices as the economy recovers, as previously unexplored gaps in the market have been identified.

Around 87% of businesses had been able to access some form of financial support (the survey was completed ahead of the launch of the Discretionary Business Grant Fund). Of those to receive financial support, the vast majority had accessed the Small Business or Retail, Leisure and Hospitality Fund followed by the Job Retention Scheme. 13% had been unable to access any financial support which if extrapolated across the New Forest business population, may represent more than 1000 businesses.

Business were asked separately about concerns during lockdown and as restrictions were lifted. However, the two most frequently highlighted across both measures were a shortage of cashflow to allow the business to continue trading and re-establishing the customer base where customers' habits may have changed, or custom taken elsewhere during closure.

The Covid-19 pandemic has seen businesses turning to business support or government help in volumes never seen previously. As administrators of many of the grant scheme, New Forest District Council has been the main point of contact but over half of businesses had also sought help from central government support hubs. Close to 90% of businesses had accessed assistance from at least one source during the crisis.

There is clear evidence from the survey that the requirement for financial support and cashflow will remain beyond the lockdown and re-opening phases. Businesses stated that they will need financial support into the future as despite re-opening, normal levels of income will not be achieved for some time. Beyond this, there was concern from businesses regarding their ability to comply with new and developing regulations, albeit this guidance was not consistently available at the time of the survey.

Many businesses recognise that they will need to develop new ways of working or adapt their business model to continue being viable in the future. Similarly, many recognised the need for support in developing new/updated business plans and/or continuity plans in the future.

Even into the longer-term future (12 months plus), businesses believe that the requirement for financial support will remain with around 90% believing that they will need further support.