

Report to: **Overview and Scrutiny Panel**

Date: **1 November 2018**

Title: **Town Centres Strategy**

Portfolio Area: **Customer First**

Wards Affected: **All**

Relevant Scrutiny Committee: N/A

Urgent Decision: **N** Approval and clearance obtained: **Y**

Date next steps can be taken: through individual
Neighbourhood Plans

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RECOMMENDATION

That the Panel expresses its support for the proposed way forward as outlined in Section 5 of the report.

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 Members have expressed concern that changes to the provision and consumption of retail services has and will continue to have a profound effect on communities in South Hams. Specifically, that in the absence of a co-ordinated approach to monitoring change and seeking to address any adverse impacts, the risk exists that the role of main (and other) centres could change in a manner that is detrimental to the well-being of residents and commercial interests.
- 1.2 At the O&S Panel meeting of 2 August 2018, Members requested that the CoP Lead Place Making, following discussion with Ward Members for each of the four main towns, brings a proposal to this Panel to set out whether and what the approach of the Council should be to the vitality of town centres.

2. Background

- 2.1 Recent reports (Portas and Grimsey) commissioned by the Government / main political parties together with anecdotal evidence, including frequent reports in the media, indicate that the provision and use of on line retail services is having a profound impact on the amount and mix of retailers on the High Street.
- 2.2 Conversely, the Retail and Leisure Study (2017), which is the primary evidence to support the Joint Local Plan, suggests that the four main centres in South Hams have been successful in retaining their retail offer and that the retail offer is comparatively robust. The Report describes each of the towns as being an 'attractive centre which is considered to perform well in term of its function in the hierarchy; meeting retail needs of local residents and residents from the surrounding rural catchment'.
- 2.3 Informal research by the CoP Lead, including ad hoc interview with shopkeepers and representatives of the various Chambers of Commerce, suggests that the position is more precarious, with many retailers expressing concern about medium to long term viability.
- 2.4 There is no similar report or survey information available with respect to the wider scope of services that centres provide and / or that are provided within a Town / Parish. It is perhaps these rather than retail services that are of greatest interest since retail in itself is more about comparison goods than essential services and can be accessed on line, whereas communities rely on the physical and local provision of some services.
- 2.5 The Portas and Grimsey Reports both point to the risk that town centre decline can lead communities to fragment, and towns to lack identity and not be attractive for investment or a cradle for enterprise. From a Place Making point of view my concern would be that in the event of a collapse of town centres residents, particularly vulnerable residents, may struggle to access services and resources. The response championed by the Grimsey report is that in the face of market forces, which is for retail transactions to be increasingly on line, we are to ... 'Forget retail for town centres, they need to become community hubs based on health, education, entertainment, leisure and arts and crafts.'
- 2.6 Whilst I concur largely with this view, there is a significant proportion of the South Hams population that does not enjoy good access to the internet and / or is not comfortable using it. In addition, as a major destination for vacations the towns of the South Hams provide a valued tourist resource with shopping being a key activity.

- 2.7 With reference to the Council's Corporate Plan and key responsibilities we can see that relevant objectives within this subject area include supporting enterprise; protecting, conserving and enhancing our built and natural environment; supporting positive, safe and healthy lifestyles; and helping those most in need.
- 2.8 It is the view of the CoP Lead, therefore, that it is in the public interest and in keeping with the Corporate Objectives of the Council to co-ordinate the approach to town centres and / or 'community centres' to seek to ensure residents have good access to key services and that these centres remain vibrant for residents, visitors, service providers and general commerce alike.
- 2.9 It is recognised that each settlement has a unique combination of circumstances, although the majority of the individual issues are the same. Issues arising through conversation (as referenced in paragraph 2.3, above) include:
- Access to services and facilities;
 - Environment (built and natural) and ambience
 - Legibility and ease of movement
 - Events / marketing unique offer of each town
 - Parking provision and price
 - Business rates
- 2.10 A key area of responsibility is strategic planning since it is the regulatory planning framework that guides appropriate uses in town centres.
- 2.11 It is also notable that the scope of interested and 'responsible' parties is wider than the scope of responsibility of the Council.
- 2.12 It is the view of the CoP Lead for Place Making that the response of each community needs to be tailored to the unique combination of circumstances and that Neighbourhood Plan Groups provide an appropriate and effective vehicle through which to develop individual approach to Town Centre vitality. This activity presents opportunities for the Council to work in a supporting and co-ordinating capacity, with the emphasis being to act as a guide for a planning policy approach; a forum for discussion of the wider scope of issues; and a catalyst for community led actions.

3. Outcomes /outputs

- 3.1 Neighbourhood Planning Groups would act as a focus for formal and informal interest groups, providing an opportunity to discuss the wider scope of activities that affect the provision of community centre functions.
- 3.2 NPGs would provide a strong forum to act as a catalyst for community led action supported by the Council. The CoP Lead for

Place Making would provide advice with respect to the development of planning policy and act in a co-ordinating role to ensure the wider interests of the community, such as those at paragraph 2.9 above, are considered.

- 3.3 Neighbourhood Plans would provide a bespoke planning response to set a framework for a managed evolution of town (and community) centres to maintain and enhance vitality; and to secure access to key services.
- 3.4 The CoP Lead Officer is able to commit to time to support NP Groups following the appointment of a Project Manager to lead the JLP Team. It is estimated that this would be, on average, no more than one day a week.

4. Options available and consideration of risk

- 4.1 The alternatives can be categorised broadly as either providing more resource or providing less resource.
- 4.2 A commitment by the Council to a greater resource might include more Officer time and undertaking / commissioning reports and assessment with a view to better understanding the forces and opportunities in each centre. It is the view of the CoP Lead Officer that this is likely to lead to the Council failing to meet expectations since there is insufficient Officer resource and budget available. There is also a risk that greater involvement by Council Officers would not be welcome as a key purpose of Neighbourhood Planning is for communities to lead with respect to the appropriate responses to issues within their area.
- 4.3 A lesser resource would vary from less time to no involvement. It is the view of the CoP Lead Officer that this would represent an inadequate response to addressing potentially damaging changes to communities.

5. Proposed Way Forward

- 5.1 It is recommended that the CoP Lead for Place Making engages with Neighbourhood Plan Groups to develop individual and a co-ordinated approach to Town Centre vitality.
- 5.2 This would predominantly entail, amongst other activities, advising with respect to appropriate planning policy responses to issues identified by a NP Group; co-ordinating meetings between interested parties; working with a NP Group to secure funding for related work / studies / activities; and providing general related support.

6. Implications

Implications	Relevant to proposals Y/N	Details and proposed measures to address
Legal / Governance		In addition to supporting the preparation of Neighbourhood Plans the Council has a remit to support enterprise; protect, conserve and enhance the built and natural environment; support positive, safe and healthy lifestyles; and to help those most in need. The recommended course of action would consolidate existing actions of the Council in respect to all of these matters. The CoP Lead can operate within existing delegated authority and in conjunction with Cllrs.
Financial		There are no financial implications.
Risk		There is no known risk of any significance.
Comprehensive Impact Assessment Implications		
Equality and Diversity		No specific Equality and Diversity implication, but to be monitored, as usual, for any subsequent actions / activities. It is anticipated that NP objectives and policies would seek to support equality and diversity.
Safeguarding		No direct implications.
Community Safety, Crime and Disorder		No specific implication. It is anticipated that NP objectives and policies would seek to support safety and crime.
Health, Safety and Wellbeing		Positive outcomes are anticipated from the making of the Neighbourhood Plan.
Other implications		None

Appendices:
None