

Report to: **Overview and Scrutiny Panel**
Date: **17 October 2019**
Title: **Town Centres Strategy**
Portfolio Area: **Customer First**
Wards Affected: **All**
Urgent Decision: **Y** Approval and clearance obtained: **Y**

Date next steps can be taken: **ongoing**

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Recommendation:

That the Overview & Scrutiny Panel support the continuing use of Officer time to seek to co-ordinate action and to seek opportunities to collaborate with communities with the objective of furthering the resilience and self sufficiency of the main towns in the South Hams District and the hinterland(s) that they serve.

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 The Overview & Scrutiny Panel Meeting of 4 October 2018 agreed that the Council should seek to collaborate with its local communities with the objective of supporting the vitality of the main towns in the South Hams District.
- 1.2 The project recognises that the Council is well placed to influence, promote and lead local initiatives to further the resilience of our main towns – in line with a key objective of the Joint Local Plan (JLP), which is for Thriving Yowns and Villages.
- 1.3 The Head of Place Making, with Case Management Support, has engaged in initial meetings with the following communities:
 - Ivybridge;
 - Modbury; and
 - South Brent.

- 1.4 Contact has also been made with the following Town Council Clerks and dates are being agreed to meet:
- Kingsbridge;
 - Totnes;
 - Dartmouth; and
 - Salcombe.
- 1.5 The major output to date is that the Head of Place Making submitted to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) on 22 March 2019, in collaboration with Ivybridge Town Council and Ivybridge Neighbourhood Plan Group, a Bid for funding through the Government's Future High Streets Fund.
- 1.6 Initial meetings have indicated that potential for collaboration exists in the following areas:
- parking and traffic management;
 - public realm improvements;
 - inclusivity and access to services and facilities;
 - joint ventures to deliver health and other services;
 - joint ventures to deliver housing; and
 - active transport.
- 1.7 Within the Council, Officers are linking other work streams, notably the Capital Programme of the Assets Team, Health and Well Being and Climate Change.
- 1.8 It is anticipated that the creation of the Place Making and Enterprise Directorate will better facilitate joint working with communities.
- 1.9 The project also provides a very early opportunity for communities to feed objectives and opportunities into the review of the JLP, which is likely to commence by 2022. With this in mind, the Head of Place Making has contacted the Government's Future High Streets Task Force and is meeting with health providers with a view to seeking funding for a 'Healthy Town' audit for South Hams, possibly in collaboration with West Devon Borough Council and Dartmoor National Park.
- 1.10 The Head of Place Making continues to work with the respective Ward Councillors to guide discussion and outcomes.

2. Background

- 2.1 Reports commissioned by the Government / main political parties together with anecdotal evidence, including frequent reports in the media, indicate that the use of on line retail services is having a profound impact on the amount and mix of retailers on the High Street.

- 2.2 Evidence, (including reports supplementing the Joint Local Plan) and discussions with local communities and service providers, indicates that the long term sustainability of other Town Centre functions is uncertain. South Hams District Council has initiated a series of meetings with local communities to consider issues and the opportunities to resolve them. The meetings are being convened by Town and Parish Councils. The respective local Ward Members and the Head of Place Making are working with these bodies to shape and guide discussion and to help identify opportunities for action.
- 2.3 In December 2018, the Government launched the Future High Streets Fund and Task Force, leading the Councils to focus on this potential funding stream.
- 2.4 South Hams District Council submitted, in March 2019 and in collaboration with Ivybridge Town Council, the Ivybridge Neighbourhood Planning Group and others, a bid for funding.
- 2.5 The bid was unsuccessful. The FHF Task Force has provided generic feedback. This combined with review by Officers of successful bids indicates that the key reason that the bid was not successful is the small scale of the problems experienced by towns in South West Devon when compared with elsewhere in the Country; comparatively limited scale / population reach of potential projects; and the absence of specific and significant capital projects in the bid.
- 2.6 The Head of Place Making considers that it is unlikely that a bid for Ivybridge or another town is likely to be successful for these reasons and that instead the focus of efforts should be to seek funding for a pilot study that would start with a Healthy Towns audit. The Head of Place Making has contacted the Future High Streets Task Force and local / regional health providers (Public Health England, the NHS and the Clinical Commissioning Groups) with a view to considering joint working to design, bid and undertake the work.
- 2.7 The meetings with communities have and will continue to consider other matters. Each agenda will be set by the respective community leaders, including Ward Councillors. This approach recognises that each town has a unique combination of circumstances, although the majority of the individual issues are the same. Should any town wish to submit a bid for the second round of FHF Ward Councillors and the HoPM would, of course, provide support.
- 2.8 A key factor in identifying opportunities for action will follow advice from the Local Government Chronicle (LGC) and Local Government Association (LGA) that funding bids will need to be driven by evidence of direct and indirect benefits in terms of financial returns and quantifiable social value.

3. Outcomes/outputs

- 3.1 Meetings to date have typically brought together Town and Parish Councils, Neighbourhood Planning Groups and a variety of special interest groups. Meetings have taken place in South Hams and West Devon. With respect to South Hams the following formal meetings have taken place (there have been other related / informal meetings – some of which are referenced below):
 - Two in Ivybridge;
 - One in Modbury; and
 - One in South Brent.
- 3.2 Dates are actively being arranged for Totnes and Kingsbridge. Dartmouth and Salcombe have expressed interest in meeting.
- 3.3 Significant outputs to date include the FHSF bid for Ivybridge. This was unsuccessful, but proved a useful exercise in bringing together the various stakeholders / interested parties. This has served three notable purposes to date. Firstly, assisting community engagement with respect to the Council's proposals for development at Leonard's Road; secondly, helping to precipitate a round table meeting, to be Chaired by Sir Gary Streeter, with health providers; and thirdly, Officers from Strategic Planning, Open Space Sport and Recreation Team and Devon County Highways / Transport met a collective of groups that are pursuing cycle and footpath projects across the District, West Devon Borough and the National Park. In this respect further meetings are planned to discuss the scope for working together on funding bids.
- 3.4 In Modbury, an outcome of the initial meeting has been a series of informal discussions regarding better utilisation of the White Hart pub and a commitment to review the use of Council owned land adjacent to that property.
- 3.5 Similarly, in South Brent, a commitment has been made to meet again, on site, to engage in further discussion regarding the optimum use of Council land and other car parking facilities / resources in the Town. The South Brent meeting also provided the opportunity to exchange ideas with the Sustainable South Brent Group and this will feed into the 'greening the economy' strand of the Climate and Biodiversity Action Plan.
- 3.6 A common agenda that is emerging from meetings is concern with respect to current and future provision of and access to health services together with the linked issues of green infrastructure and active transport. Officers have, consequently, compared notes with colleagues leading in health and well-being. The potential to bring the overlapping agendas together is being discussed. Related to this the Future High Streets Fund Task Force (MHCLG) have recently contacted the Head of Place Making to advise that they are

considering the details of the Ivybridge bid and will offer 'some support'. The nature of that support is unknown. Officers have taken the opportunity, therefore, to respond by advising that the Council continues to liaise with local communities and is interested in discussing the potential for funding to run a pilot project. The objective would be to review and assess rural community centres against the same criteria being used for the Healthy New Towns Agenda. Contact has been made with Devon County Council, Public Health England, Clinical Commissioning Groups and the NHS with a view to potential collaboration. The Head of Place Making is meeting representatives of PHE, CCGs and NHS to discuss this amongst other matters on 10 October 2019.

- 3.7 Initial discussion with Totnes Town Council and local interest groups indicates that this agenda fits well with the objectives of the town, notably the 'Inclusive Totnes' initiative.

4. Options available and consideration of risk

Options are available to the Council. These include:

- 4.1 **Option 1** – if Members consider that wider activity in the Council covers the linked issues described sufficiently well then the Council could choose not to continue pursuing the Town Centre resilience / self sufficiency agenda as a specific and co-ordinated project.
- 4.2 **Option 2** – continue to convene Town Centre Meetings with communities leading and the outcomes providing evidence and focus for other work streams at the Council.
- 4.3 **Option 3** - the Council could take a more active role in promoting, leading and delivering change in the community. This might be achieved by a lead Officer / Officers and Councillors dedicating additional time to convening meetings, assessing opportunities and creating working groups / task and finish groups to deliver against the agenda.
- 4.4 The advantage of Option 1 would be to free up the time of the Head of Place Making for other tasks at the Council including providing planning support to Development Management and Assets. The disadvantage would be to lessen the ability of the Council to work collaboratively with communities to deliver change that would support the objectives of both improving resilience of communities and providing intelligence and a framework for capital investment that would deliver community benefits and financial returns.
- 4.5 The advantages and disadvantages of Option 2 are the reverse of Option 1. In addition, the ongoing nature of discussion is proving a valuable means to build better relationships with our communities

and is acting as early and informal consultation ahead of the review of the JLP.

- 4.6 The advantage of Option 3 would be to provide a strong platform for collaboration with our communities to address the challenges of Brexit and the Climate and Biodiversity emergency; and deliver beneficial outcomes from the networks and ideas that are building through initial meetings and discussion.
- 4.7 It is recognised that there would be financial implications in pursuing this option. It would be necessary for the Council to have the capacity, knowledge and skills both with regard to numerous subject areas and project management. Implementing Option 3 would require new or diverted Officer resource.
- 4.8 Option 2 is recommended since it retains the strength of the benefits of engagement and co-ordination to communities and the capital development agenda as well as the relationships and collaboration essential to the effective local government. In addition the role in informing the review of the JLP in a collaborative manner is of great value.
- 4.9 Option 1 is not considered appropriate at this time since there is no other strong framework in place to secure co-ordination within and outside the Council.
- 4.10 Option 3 is not preferred since the Council is currently in the process of reviewing Officer roles. In this respect it is recommended that the approach is reviewed following the re-organisation of the Council's third tier of management.

5. Proposed Way Forward

- 5.1 The Council recognises the importance of continuing to improve collaborative links and action with our communities as well as the benefits of communities having formal and informal opportunities to help steer the capital investment programme.
- 5.2 The Head of Place Making, with Case Management support, will continue to meet with and discuss this agenda with a view to
 - a. Identifying Town specific and District wide issues to be noted and, where possible and appropriate, resolved;
 - b. A network of organisations and individuals that can work together to resolve these issues;
- 5.3 The Head of Place Making will prepare a report for the consideration of the Panel in April 2019 with a view to establishing whether the approach is effective and / or necessary.

6. Implications

Implications	Relevant to proposals Y/N	Details and proposed measures to address
Legal/Governance	Y	This project seeks to support other mandatory services, but is discretionary. If effective it would support all six Council Strategies and provide a valuable link between Place Making and Assets.
Financial implications to include reference to value for money		The recommended course of action (Option 2, paragraph 4.2) has no direct financial implications. An successful outcome would be that the capital programme delivers projects that are value for money.
Risk		The risk exists that the project could involve extensive discussion with limited tangible outcomes. To guard against this the proposal includes a review of progress in April 2020 such that activity could be either accelerated or the project ended.
Supporting Corporate Strategy		If effective it would support all six Council Strategies and provide a valuable link between Place Making and Assets.
Comprehensive Impact Assessment Implications		
Equality and Diversity		A focus for the project is accessibility to services / resilience of Town Centres. In convening meetings Town and Parish Councils are encouraged to recognise equality and diversity such that any subsequent actions can properly be informed by the community.
Safeguarding		There are no direct Safeguarding implications.
Community Safety, Crime and Disorder		A focus for the project is to promote safe and inclusive Town Centres. Any subsequent projects can benefit from input from the Police Liaison Officer.
Health, Safety and Wellbeing		A focus for the project is accessibility to services / resilience of Town Centres. This includes health services, green infrastructure and active transport.
Other implications		No direct implications.

Supporting Information

Appendices:

None.

Background Papers:

None.