

Report to Overview & Scrutiny Committee



Date of meeting: 2 February 2021

SCRUTINY



Portfolio: Commercial & Regulatory Services

Subject: Local High Streets Task & Finish Panel

Responsible Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992 564243)

Democratic Services: Vivienne Messenger (01992 564243)

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

(1) That the reconvening of the Local High Streets Task & Finish Panel be deferred until after the ending of the third national Covid-19 pandemic.

Report:

1. The Local High Streets Task & Finish Panel was established by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 28 January 2020. The terms of reference of the Panel was agreed, along with its membership and a Chairman was appointed. The terms of Reference are attached for Members' information at Appendix 1.

2. The Panel was originally established to support the review of the future of the local high streets within the District. The original work programme for the Panel envisaged a schedule of three to four monthly meetings before reporting back to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee with its findings in June 2020. Unfortunately, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, only one meeting of the Panel took place in February 2020.

3. During the initial lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Portfolio Holder for Commercial & Regulatory Services established a Portfolio Holder Advisory Group to consider the recovery of the District from the Pandemic. Part of the remit for this Group included the recovery of the District's high streets.

Overview & Scrutiny Committee 22 June 2020

4. At its meeting on 22 June 2020, the Overview & Scrutiny Committee discussed the future of the Panel. The Committee was clear that it did not want the Panel to be subsumed by the Portfolio Holder Advisory Group, but was advised that it was important to ensure that the work of the two groups was aligned to avoid duplication. It was agreed that the work of the Portfolio Holder Advisory Group should take priority. This decision was confirmed at the Committee's next meeting on 16 July 2020, and it was agreed to reconsider the future of the Panel again in the autumn. In the meantime, it would remain on the Committee's work programme.

Overview & Scrutiny Committee 19 November 2020

5. The Overview & Scrutiny Committee again considered the future of the Panel at its meeting held 19 November 2020. Several the members of the Committee wished for the Panel to reconvene, but the pandemic was still continuing with a second lockdown having been entered into by the country. Officers reported that making high streets safer, in addition to the economic recovery and social wellbeing focus was being reported back to Cabinet and there would be other reports coming forward. The Policy Advisory Group was overseeing

Covid-19 work on the high streets through a number of different projects, the degree and nature of the economic recovery and some other items.

6. The Portfolio Holder for Commercial & Regulatory Services, Cllr A Patel, advised the Committee that he was keen to avoid Officers having to duplicate work, and that the Advisory Group was better placed to progress this work. The Leader of the Council requested the Committee to postpone the reconvening of the Panel until after the recovery from the pandemic, when the Panel could reconvene and look again at the longer-term vitality of the District's high streets.

Overview & Scrutiny Agenda Planning Group 12 January 2021

7. The reconvening of the Local High Streets Task and Finish Panel was considered again at the Agenda Planning Group held on 12 January 2021. It was acknowledged that the reconvening of the Panel was dependent on there being sufficient recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, this currently showed no signs of abating.

8. Officers advised that progress was being made with the post Covid-19 town centre projects through the Portfolio Holder Advisory Group. As part of the focus on recovery, projects have been established specifically for each town centre, with papers presented to the Cabinet for Waltham Abbey in December 2020 and for Ongar in January 2021. Further projects will be established for each of the town centres. Each project will have a lead officer and part of the delivery of the projects will include the involvement of members and the progress of these projects will be scrutinised at the select committees.

9. The Agenda Planning Group generally felt that it was not the right time for the Panel to reconvene with the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic showing no signs of subsiding. However, the reconvening of the Panel is an item on the Committee's work programme, and therefore the Overview & Scrutiny Committee is requested to consider the deferral of the reconvening of the Task & Finish Panel until after the ending of the third national pandemic lockdown.