

Report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting: 12 October 2021

Portfolio: Finance, Qualis Client & Economic Development Portfolio (Cllr J Philip) and Community & Regulatory Services Portfolio (Cllr A Patel)



Subject: Local High Streets Task and Finish Panel

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Recommendations/Decisions Required: None – for discussion on how to proceed on this Task and Finish Panel.

Report:

1. Introduction

Approximately two years ago the Overview and Scrutiny Committee established a task and finish panel to look at issues concerning the various town centres in the District.

The various town centres within the District have adapted throughout the past with changes in retail, entertainment, housing and trade and manufacture mix.

Data has also shown that generally the retail sector has not only dealt well with the banking challenges of 2008 but seems to have coped with the challenges of Covid 19 with reference to vacancy rates in general and the performance of the District's own asset investment portfolio.

However, there are differences between the high streets, with the areas of Ongar and Waltham Abbey posing some additional challenges.

2. Position Now

The Local High Streets Task and Finish Panel's activities were suspended after an initial meeting, predominantly because of the Covid pandemic.

The pandemic however did result in a renewed interest in town centres and a series of actions and reports were requested and separately considered by Cabinet.

The basic approach has been as follows:

- Safer High Street Initiatives, April 2020 – March 2020. Final delivery of more permanent Epping High Street measures June 2021.
- Town Centre Reports Short Term Actions, December 2020 – May 2021, Waltham Abbey, Ongar, Epping, Loughton High Street, Loughton Broadway, Buckhurst Hill.
- Town Centres Developments, from December 2020. Commencing with Epping with further work being undertaken in respect of other town centres.

The progress of the projects has involved, and they are highly dependent on the actions of Town and Parish Councils, the existing and potential retail community and other key partners, e.g. Essex Highways.

Attempts have been made and continue, to include all local councillors in discussions around the reports and developments, but it is appreciated that time and diary issues means that this has not always happened.

The main point to note is that progress with town centre issues is now well advanced, momentum is building, and that inclusion of Town Councils and Parish Councils and other interested groups is important.

Whilst the approval of the town centre plans has set the objectives for 2021/22 and 2022/23, the District has indicated that through its 100% owner development company, Qualis, regeneration in town centres will be a key objective.

It would appear that the short-term, if not also the medium-term objectives of the “start and finish” group have been overtaken by events, decisions and actions.

3. Options

The four suggested options for consideration are as follows:

- A. to support initiatives either by reviewing the processes ongoing within Place and/or take a more detailed look at the Panel’s work programme; or
- B. do something different such as becoming involved with the high street working groups and local councils’ initiatives; or
- C. scrutinise some other elements, such as the medium/long term health of the high streets; or
- D. end the current task and finish group but restart it with a unique and updated remit that is acceptable to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

It should be noted that irrespective of the options shown above, further progress with all the town centre initiatives will require a specific town by town meeting to ensure all parties commit and support progress. Local members and other groups will of course be involved in this process.

4. Summary

Members will need to consider the efficiency of each option as well as recognising the momentum already building around progress with individual town centres.

5. Terms of Reference

The Terms of Reference of the Local High Streets Task and Finish Panel is attached as Appendix 1 to this report.