

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-043-2021/22

Date of meeting: 7 February 2022



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Portfolio: Finance, Qualis Client and Economic Development

Subject: Town Centre Regeneration – an update and progress report

Responsible Officer: Paul Messenger (07973 418001).

Democratic Services: Adrian Hendry (01992 564246).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) That Members note and endorse the contents of this report and give guidance on further priority activity.**
- (2) That a district wide town teams' group is set up with representatives of the district and parish councils who are contributing financially to oversee the regeneration programme and advise on deployment.**
- (3) That members agree to retain the town centre management function moving forward.**
- (4) That members agree to refer the draft strategic priorities for town centres to the High Street Task & Finish Panel for review and suggestions on a small set of metrics that can be used to measure progress.**

Executive Summary:

This report provides a further update to Cabinet on the delivery of projects within the Town Centre Regeneration programme. It sets out the current funding packages secured from central government and their allocation. It also provides further information around guidance and advice from national high street bodies for town centre regeneration.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

To enable progress to be made on the structure and delivery of Town Centre Regeneration initiatives.

Other Options for Action:

The initiatives highlighted in this update report are linked to central government funding requirements and the recommendations of the Town Centre Regeneration studies approved by Cabinet.

Report:

This report is split into 2 sections. The first provides oversight of the actions which have been carried out or are in progress locally and the second reviews a number of findings from national studies i.e Bill Grimsey's latest report on the state of the High Street, Against All Odds <http://www.vanishinghighstreet.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/AgainstAllOdds-REVIEW-16th-July-optimised.pdf>. There are some key observations and learnings highlighted which explain why the council needs to view its town centres differently and why it is important that local Councils provide the leadership, support and guidance required to assist in making towns thrive and flourish.

In many ways town centres in Epping Forest continue to outperform the national averages particularly around vacancy rates, and the presence of a significant proportion of independent stores offers real hope for the future. However, the District's town centres are changing, particularly with the increasing impact of online retailing and will not revert to the old "normal", providing significant challenges in the longer term which will need to be managed. This is a great opportunity for Epping Forest's district and parish council's to lead the way in creating vibrant and successful towns across the district by working closely with local businesses to support town centres, and the feeling of community and wellbeing they provide.

Section 1 - Progress and Achievements to date

Six town centre reports were commissioned for Waltham Abbey, Ongar, Loughton Broadway, Loughton High Road, Buckhurst Hill and Epping. They were produced in consultation with a wide range of key local stakeholders. Work is now being done to build relationships with the individual town/parish Councils and town partnerships to start the process of working with key stakeholders to regenerate and reinvigorate the towns using the key drivers of Localism, Leadership and Sustainability. Covid has partially overshadowed the recommendations of these reports with the team increasingly focused on supporting directly local businesses through various lockdowns and their impact. A key focus of the team's work has been ensuring the effective distribution of central government grants to enable businesses to continue to function combined with short term projects linked to government funding requirements. In excess of £45 million of government grants have been distributed to local businesses. In addition grants from ECC via the EBAF fund has seen a further circa £450,000 distributed to businesses in Epping Forest District. Additional funding has also been received from Environmental Health to support Covid response (COMF). This has been used to support the high street ambassadors project.

Officers have also been producing a list of longer term strategic objectives to oversee town centre work, post covid and also as a result of conversations with town stakeholders. An initial list has been produced (see below) and it is recommended that this receive further scrutiny by the Local High Streets Task & Finish Panel.

Overall vision

Successful, vibrant and diverse high streets that work for residents, businesses, shoppers and visitors.

Objectives

To deliver attractive and safer places to enjoy and spend time and make the most of new 20 minute neighbourhoods.

Establish stronger partnerships with local stakeholders to lead investment, coordinate and champion our High Streets.

Together, deliver effective support to local businesses to enable them to survive and thrive.

Agree clear long-term plans to support growth and viability.

Maintain and expand footfall across the daytime and evening economy.

Work together to enhance the District's independent retailer offer and diverse high streets in ways which work for local businesses and communities.

Deliver new ways to make access to Epping Forest's town centres easy and sustainable.

To date the following actions have taken place:

- The Economic Development Team have been successful in obtaining further funding from the Governments Welcome Back Fund (£116,000) which followed the Reopening High Streets Safely Fund (£116,000). These funds have been used to assist in the re-emergence of the District's High Streets and Town Centres from the pandemic, by encouraging increased footfall and providing for more attractive, safe and inviting town centres across the District.
- Appointment of a Town Centres Project Manager and appointment of a Deputy Town Centres Project Manager (6 month contract).
- An independent survey of retail units across the District has been carried out and confirms an average vacancy rate of 9% - compared with a national average of 14.5%. Having said this and with the benefit of local knowledge, it is considered that in fact the vacancy rate is considerably lower as a number of the units shown as vacant in the review are in fact under offer and awaiting legal completion before their occupation. Additionally, the survey takes into account secondary frontages and some above shop space which can skew the actual town centre retail vacancy rate.
- Officers have written to the 6 town and parish councils with significant high street assets to request financial support for the town centre regeneration programme. These are currently being discussed at town and parish council meetings. Officers will provide an update on progress at the cabinet meeting.
- Launch of Click it local www.clickitlocal.co.uk in the District and in coordination with councils across the county, providing an online shopping and delivery service for businesses.

- Launch of Loyal Free app in October 2021, www.loyalfree.co.uk across the District. This app provides free advertising for businesses and also enables businesses to provide loyalty schemes, discounts and other promotions for app users. Currently in excess of 80 businesses have signed up. This figure will grow further as the town centre regeneration team continue to promote the app in their town centre visits. In addition, there are circa 400 registered app users who are taking advantage of the benefits. This figure too is growing week on week as the app gains momentum.
- Submission of a bid to participate in the DCMS DCIA project to encourage 5G services in Epping Forest linked to council assets particularly in town centres.
- Highway Rangers have completed extensive physical works to brighten up and improve the town centres of Waltham Abbey, Ongar and The Broadway, Loughton. This work has included the replacement of broken gates in Market Square, Waltham Abbey and then the servicing and redecoration of lampposts, bollards, railings, benches etc in all towns, together with the relaying of broken/uneven paving and planting of trees.
- A Market Policy has been drawn up for the District. When agreed this Market Policy will provide a means of licensing markets in the areas which don't have Charter Market status – such as High Road, Loughton, The Broadway Loughton and Buckhurst Hill. Successful markets are a great way of increasing footfall to a town centre, provide a further dimension to the retail element of a town and also generally increase trade for all. In addition, markets play an important community role, promote social well-being and in these Covid times, enable people to shop in the relative safety of the open air.
- Initial discussions have taken place in respect of the protection of the heart of our High Streets from new Permitted Development Rights (PDR's) and the possible conversion of retail premises to residential use. Although not considered an immediate threat, the time may come where landlords are seeing reduced rents from retailers and/or are unable to let empty retail units and where as a result residential lets may become more attractive and financially viable. Any change by landlords from retail to residential use could seriously fragment our high streets and become the start of a serious break down of our towns and communities. It is also considered that the increase in residential use of this area's town centres will put additional pressure on local services, parking, refuse provision etc, unless these are considered and taken into account at the planning stage.
- Proposals have been drawn up and discussions undertaken in respect of works to improve/reinstate the central reservation on The Broadway, Loughton.
- Early discussions have taken place in respect of the refurbishment/redecoration of the shopfront surrounds and doorways along The Broadway, Loughton.
- The Visit Epping Forest website has been reconfigured to provide greater promotion of town centres and promotion of events in these areas. This site, which has been used by up to 9000 people in a week, has been used to promote one off events in town centres. 3,081 visited the Epping Forest Christmas Market page up until the 21st of December 2021.
- The Town Centre Manager is developing close and effective relationships with town and parish councils. Considerable amounts of work and contact have also

been had with the traders and the Town Partnerships in all areas and a strong and positive working relationship is being established.

- Town Centre Regeneration has been discussed with the Epping Forest Youth Council and updates were provided in respect of the work of Town Centre Project Manager and the town centre regeneration team. The Youth Council were encouraged to input their thoughts, idea and proposals for their future high streets and town centres.
- Significant efforts have been made to deliver a successful Christmas trading period for high streets following a very difficult year. In the run up to Christmas numerous initiatives took place to encourage people to visit their High Street and shop local. These include a radio advertising and a lamppost banner campaign with the key message of “*A Better Christmas All Together*” and encouraging people to “*Visit, Shop, Enjoy, Support and Take Part*”. Epping Forest District Council have supported Town & Parish Councils by providing match funding initiatives to improve Christmas lighting within the towns - contributions have also been made to Ongar, North Weald & Stanford Rivers. The Council supported Waltham Abbey Town Council in their extremely successful Festival of Light celebrations, by helping to provide advertising and marketing support, covid marshals, masks etc. The Districts town centres were each provided with 6 bottles of Champagne as prizes for their Towns Christmas window competition (where this event was held) and the Epping Brass Band was engaged to support Christmas shoppers with a selection of Christmas carols in The Broadway and on the High Road in Loughton.
- A first retailer newsletter has been put together and with the support of the Town Partnerships will be distributed to retailers across the district – this is a first step to establishing a relationship and working with retailers.
- The Sustainable Transport Officer has been in discussion with local partners to secure for a limited period an electric shuttle bus to trial between The Broadway, Loughton and the Epping Forest Retail Park – with a view to connecting the two areas and encouraging footfall to The Broadway.
- Provision has been made by EFDC for a funded membership of the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB), in particular to enable local businesses to avail themselves of the support packages around debt, legal advice etc offered to their members. This is a limited offer facilitated on a first come, first served basis and is available to small businesses across the District.
- Established contact and dialogue with the Post Office, with a view to establishing “Banking Hubs” in the District – in particular Waltham Abbey, Ongar and Buckhurst Hill.
- Initial approaches undertaken with John Lewis in respect of their proposed new small format stores and opportunities for them within the District.
- EFDC has joined with neighbouring councils to deploy a footfall monitoring system from Huq Industries. This will enable access to data to evaluate performance and identify opportunities. In addition, the team can also benchmark the District’s performance against neighbouring councils, who are using the same system. This tool has been funded via Government Covid recovery grants.

- An additional 22 planters have been ordered, with 10 planned for Waltham Abbey, 8 for The Broadway, Loughton, 2 for High Road, Loughton and 2 for Queens Road, Buckhurst Hill. These planters are supplied by the EFDC on the basis that the individual towns take the responsibility for their planting and continued upkeep.
- A Parklet has been commissioned for the centre of Market Square in Waltham Abbey. Funded by a the UK Government's Welcome Back Fund this initiative provides a focal point and sociable outside space for residents and visitors to Market Square, whilst at the same time assisting in assessing the benefits of having a more permanent and long term structure erected within the square.
- Research and evaluations have been carried out via neighbouring Local Authorities and directly with the operators of Business Improvement District (BID's) in respect of the introduction of a BID within the Epping Forest District. Consideration has also been given to the benefits of Community Improvement Districts (CID's). The BID concept is not actively being pursued further at the minute following this review.
- The Economic Development team is also supporting the local High Streets Task and Finish panel which has been re-established to look at performance and make recommendations for longer term action.
- Supported by EFDC, the Ongar Town Forum reinstated its farmers market. This monthly market has proved a great success and in addition to being well attended, also provides a significant increase in footfall to the High Street. This has resulted in a positive reaction with increased interest from other market traders for future events, an increased awareness of retailers to the benefits of being open on market days and also of the benefits of the Town Forum to businesses as a whole.
- With the resurgence of Covid the Districts High Street Ambassador program has been continued with the provision of large numbers of lateral flow test across the Districts Town and Village Centres.
- Plans are being made for Business and Resident/Shopper surveys to be carried out across the District. In view of the resurgence of Covid however this may be delayed.

See appendix 1 for list of programmes delivered or in delivery.

Future developments/considerations

The six town centre reports agreed by Cabinet make it clear that the regeneration of Epping Forest's town centres cannot take place without the combined efforts of all stakeholders, including the town centres retailers and businesses.

Through the various Town Partnerships, the Council's Covid Ambassadors and work by the Town Centre regeneration Team the Council is developing new and stronger relationships with retailers and businesses across the District and expanding a database of business contacts and email addresses. This will enable the Council to encourage two-way dialogue and in turn assist the Council with its objective of building strong Town Teams in each area. Covid has impacted significantly on the operation and activity of the local Epping Forest Chamber of Commerce, the Federation of Small business is now making efforts to expand its membership in the district. Experience from other areas is that strong business umbrella

groups/BIDs etc provide firmer foundations for local work on town centres. The Town Partnerships in Waltham Abbey, Ongar and The Broadway, Loughton are active. Given the pressures on local retailers from the pandemic it has been difficult for the partnerships to encourage retail participation. Loughton High Road, Buckhurst Hill and Epping, although having Town Partnerships, are not actually active.

It is considered that there is a great deal that could be done to build relationships with town centre retailers however the Council needs to expand dialogue with them. The aforementioned newsletter is a first step, however the Council also needs to continue the process of building a retailer/business data base and then start communicating with them on a regular basis, to provide support, keep them updated on Council initiatives and also establish how officers and services can best assist them. The Council can then work with the Towns to put in place town centre events, training schemes and sustainability & cost saving schemes such as free recycling, discount schemes for things like PAT testing, handyman work, competitive services packages etc. - Things that will assist them in running their businesses cost effectively, assist them in flourishing and also that will encourage the support of the local community.

This although a priority is not a “quick win”. It should pay off in the longer term though as the towns, their Councils and their businesses work together to make the Town Centres lively, attractive and compelling for all.

The regeneration reports adopted by cabinet, made it clear each of the District’s town centres are different, with different opportunities and capacities to improve. While experience can be gleaned from other areas, a successful local approach must be fundamentally based on the context of each of Epping Forest’s town centres.

Epping Forest District Council should be at the front of town centre regeneration, leading the way and setting examples that other Towns follow.

Section 2 – The Grimsey Review, Against All Odds

Since the aforementioned reports were completed and approved by Cabinet, the latest Grimsey Review, Against All Odds, has been published (available at <http://www.vanishinghighstreet.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/AgainstAllOdds-REVIEW-16th-July-optimised.pdf>). It is recommended that all Councillors take the time to read it and relate its findings to their own town centres. It provides interesting reading following the pandemic and lays out the following key findings:

- Independent businesses will emerge from the pandemic with almost five times more debt than they had before. Most have been forced to take on unsustainable levels of debt and many are teetering on the brink as a result. Urgent support is required to stop a tsunami of closures.
- Independent businesses have been treated unfairly throughout the pandemic. While larger corporations have been able to trade and benefit from generous government support (so much so that several major retailers have returned billions to the Treasury), smaller businesses have been unable to trade and felt unsupported and unappreciated.

- The struggle to survive the pandemic has taken its toll on the mental health of business owners – and many are at breaking point.
- Despite unprecedented financial challenges, independent businesses have prioritized supporting local communities and maintaining the social fabric.
- Independent businesses offer place makers an opportunity to create a unique experience that cannot be replicated.
- Independent Businesses are stronger together and need a loud voice to be heard by both Central and Local Government.

The reason for highlighting the above is to ensure that Councillors are fully aware of the potentially longer-term fragile state of the District's high streets and their independent retailers, many of which are also local residents and taxpayers.

The Epping Forest District is blessed with extremely high numbers of independent retailers. It's not suffering like some parts of the Country with a mass exodus of national chains leaving large numbers of empty retail units and it doesn't suffer from the one-size-fits-all approach to our Town Centres, where every high street looks alike. The district has traditionally had a very high level of out commute. With the impact of the pandemic and digital transformation in the workplace there are now many more residents working from home and the potential for 15-minute neighbourhood trends to be applied locally. This means that the district has a potentially high number of people who are home working and as a result could be supporting their local high streets and the shops, coffee bars and restaurants on a much more frequent basis. Currently it is considered that the Epping Forest District is in a strong position with a number of interesting and unique shops meeting the needs and requirements of the community they serve. In addition a number of them are strongly rooted in their communities, proving a level of community service and support which cannot be obtained from a branch of a national chain. A good example of this would be The Broadway, Loughton (Debden), where the retailers pull together and support each other and also have gone out of their way to provide the highest possible levels of service to the local community throughout the pandemic – this includes providing home deliveries and offering a personalised service to the elderly and vulnerable who have felt uneasy about going out.

These retailers need to be supported and protected. Without the eagerness of national chains to take vacant shops, the pressure may come off of ever-increasing rents and independent retailers can continue to flourish and grow and provide their local area with the range of shops, restaurants, cafes and services it requires. Councils should be working with towns to support markets and pop-up opportunities for new and emerging talent.

Grimsey in his latest review makes it clear that nationally towns cannot continue to be seen as the major revenue source they once were. He advises that where possible councils need to adopt a holistic approach to their towns looking at car parking availability, fees and charges etc to ensure an environment is being delivered in which independent retailers and other businesses can thrive.

The Grimsey report also advises that it's the small details and constant nurturing that makes a town centre successful. "Cleanliness, attractiveness, digital signage, events and safety are critical details that are frequently overlooked". The report goes on to confirm that "making sure town centres are not only litter-free but attractive environments with ample green space and aesthetically pleasing public realm helps develop a sense of place. So too does regular events and prioritising safety also drives civic pride. Similarly, councils need to recognise that the stewardship of a vibrant town centre is something that needs to be done in

partnership with other groups that give business and wider community stakeholders a bigger voice”.

Another significant takeaway from Against All Odds is that leadership is key. The report confirms that “Towns cannot rely on leadership from Westminster to turn around high streets and make them fit for a vastly changed post-pandemic world. They need strong and stable leadership at a local level to drive this change – and they need a plan. It won’t happen by accident”.

Against All Odds also advises that quick-win solutions aren’t the answer and that “putting in the hard work to nurture hundreds of smaller, agile solutions that require patience and a longer-term commitment – but when combined create a much more powerful impact” are needed.

The report advises that Councils can make all the difference by:

- Providing clear, stable, and well communicated leadership.
- Valuing the independent retail and service sector.
- Accepting responsibility for its town centre and high street.
- Providing a clear visionary plan (built by stakeholders) for its town centre.
- Ensuring a true corporate approach is taken throughout the whole local authority toward delivery of the plan.
- Structuring its delivery to best support the needs of the town centre, (it is not uncommon for up to five or six different departments to be involved in operating its town centre functions each with separate budgets, responsibilities, etc.)
- Accepting that the cost of maintaining and sustaining a vibrant, clean, safe, and environmentally friendly town centre are core functions not underpinned by a commercial model driven by charges and fees, (keep market pitch rents to an absolute minimum or peppercorn as well as trading spaces for independents.)
- Providing safe, affordable incubation and start up space with appropriate help and support.
- Supporting and actively pursue local social value.
- Ensuring effective partnership with police and partners for town centres to be safe.
- Value and support the arts and culture contribution to town centres and community that actively animates the high street
- Ensuring its own services and facilities are in and around its town centres (leisure, sport, health etc.)

This approach has been central to the Town Centre Regeneration reports in the District and is also core to the programmes set out earlier in this report. However clearly there is more to be done to ensure Epping Forest District Council addresses ongoing challenges to local town centres in a timely and effective way.

Resource Implications:

The cost of these initiatives are currently being met primarily from the Reopening High Streets Safely/Welcome Back Fund and from a top slice of Additional Restrictions Grant previously approved by Cabinet. It is anticipated that this will end, unless further pandemic restrictions are brought into place, by the end of March. Further investment, retention of capacity to undertake work will need to be met from existing budgets, additional contributions and access to government grants.

Legal and Governance Implications:

There are clear guidelines from central government setting out the purposes for which these grants can be used. The programmes in this report are compliant with these guidelines. This funding is required to be implemented and completed within the current financial year.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

Many of the actions in this report are designed to enhance the District's town centres and will have obvious safer, cleaner and greener benefits.

Consultation Undertaken:

The initiatives set out in this report are aligned to the recommendations in the town centre studies which involved significant consultation.

Background Papers:

Town Centre Regeneration Reports for Waltham Abbey, Ongar, The Broadway Loughton, High Road Loughton, Buckhurst Hill & Epping - available at:

<https://www.eppingforestdc.gov.uk/business/town-centre-regeneration-studies/>

Risk Management:

There are significant risks inherent in initiating and delivering these programmes within the funding timetable all reasonable steps have been taken, including expanding Officer capacity to ensure delivery.