

# **Report to Planning Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

**Date of meeting: January 10th 2011**

**Portfolio: Finance and Economic Development  
Planning and Economic Development**



**Subject: Town Centres Officer Post/Future management of Town Centre**

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**Committee Secretary: Mark Jenkins**

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## **Recommendations/Decisions Required:**

**1) To decide on the options for the future of the Town Centres Officer (TCO) post:**

- a) To budget for the continuation of the post for a further temporary period (eg 2 years);
- b) To make the post permanent as an addition to the establishment;
- c) To discontinue the post once the current budget has expired.

**2) To note and consider options for the future operation of the Town Centres:**

- d) Business Improvement Districts (BIDS);
- e) Membership Schemes;
- f) Social Enterprise

## **Report:**

1. The Town Centres Officer post (PPC08S) has been funded for a 3 year period from 2008 by LABGI monies. Because the initial post-holder went on an extended period of sick-leave which included a period of reduced salary, the budget will extend for a short period into the financial year 2011/2012. The post is currently a Grade 8.
2. The main duties of the post are (a) to develop effective working partnerships with the district's 6 Town Centre Partnerships (TCPs) and other stakeholders such as Town Councils (b) to suggest and support programmes of activities, promotions and events specific to each locality; (c) to work closely with the Economic Development Officer and attract external funding for projects and other events.
3. The creation of the post, which was funded for its first 3-year period through Section 106 monies from the Sainsbury's development in Old Station Road, Loughton, reflects the Council's commitment to Economic Prosperity and, in particular, Corporate Objective EP6 of the Council Plan 2006 – 2010 (To maintain and improve the links between the Council, local town centres and the business community of the district). The post along with that of the Economic Development Officer plays a key role in delivering Objective 2 of the Council's key objectives 2010/11 (mitigating the impact of the current economic conditions on local people and businesses through the development and implementation of appropriate initiatives).

4. As of mid December 2010 there has been a recruitment freeze on external recruitment to vacant posts within EFDC. Exceptions have been made for posts that have implications for health and safety, demonstrate that they generate surplus income, or are externally funded. Whilst the Town Centre Officer post does not directly fall into these categories it provides added value to existing Council initiatives such as freezing car parking rates, in helping boost local economies and support business income generation specifically. So while there is no direct income generation for the Council, the work that the Economic Development Officer and the TCO provide assist in sustaining viable town centres, promoting businesses and ensuring shop units remain occupied. An aspiration is for the team to also assist in improving the skill base and employment potential for local residents.
5. The current post-holder, who has been in position since March 2010, is from an agency and has many years of town centre management experience with other authorities, mainly but not solely in Essex. She has introduced a number of initiatives including the Vacant Units Project (often known as "Pop-up" Shops) the first of these opened in October 2010 in Ongar. Loyalty Cards, which encourage shoppers to visit the district's 6 centres, were introduced in the New Year. Other current work includes (a) helping Buckhurst Hill TCP with a Special Projects Grant application to fund the creation of a website; (b) preparing a questionnaire for Epping businesses asking them how they would like the town centre to develop; (c) working with ARU students to design a re-branding for Loughton TCP (d) developing a marketing strategy for The Broadway (Debden) and (e) working with the Waltham Abbey Town Partnership on a marketing seminar to be held in Waltham Abbey in January and supporting their plans for celebrating events leading up to the Olympics and maximising the legacy especially for businesses in the area.
6. During the previous post-holder's period of sick leave, concern was expressed by a number of TCPs about the lack of cover for this post, and this included articles in the local press. This was reported to Cabinet in December 2009, when it was agreed that temporary cover should be provided. The current post-holder has established much better and closer working relationships with the TCPs, and it is therefore likely that concern will again be raised about the deletion of the post when the current budget expires.
7. Members are therefore asked to consider whether the post should be continued beyond its current 3-year term and how this could be budgeted. There appear to be 3 options: (a) to continue the post for another temporary period of at least 2 years; (b) to create a new permanent post on the establishment or (c) to abolish the post once the current budget is used up. (a) and (b) will obviously have budget implications for the Council as external sources of funding, notably LAGBI, have not been continued. (c) runs the risk of adversely affecting relations between the TCPs and the Council, with consequent negative publicity, and of being contrary to Corporate Objective EP6.
8. Option {(c) Social Enterprise} below may fund the Town Centre Officer post if successful as an option for managing the Town Centres. This option is currently being reviewed. It would be estimated that the Town Centre Officer post will be funded via this route from 2012/13 onwards when the Enterprise set up is fully established.

## **Review of options considered for the future management of Town Centres:**

9. BIDS Business Improvement Districts – The 6 town centres are too small to make this a feasible option
10. Membership Schemes. Again the town centres are very small and would create an inefficient balance between administration and income. The Partnerships are very different and it would be difficult to create a generic membership scheme
11. Social Enterprise. This would be the most positive option and links in with the Government Localism and Big Society agenda. There are currently funding opportunities to set up and assist with the operation of Social Enterprises and these would be sought. Part of the concept is that the Social Enterprise for the 6 Town Centres would offer services to towns and to Town Centre businesses. These services would be offered by a variety of people, returners, trainees, semi-retired persons, who found main stream work difficult to access. The services would include:
  - a) event management
  - b) web design
  - c) administration
  - d) temporary sales assistant cover
  - e) marketing
12. There are a series of potential partners already expressing an interest in providing some of these activities and a Town Centre Partnership would be an ideal vehicle for moving things forward. Businesses would only have to pay for services they required and could afford, these services would be provided by local people who in time would build up skills and experience so that they were in a position to enter the jobs market independently.
13. Any profits from the social enterprise would be put back into the project supporting local businesses and local people. The enterprise would therefore use operational activities (stewarding at events, window cleaning, retail assistance) to finance strategic work provided by a Town Centre Officer.
14. As discussed, the Town Centre Officer would work within and on behalf of the Enterprise set up. It is envisaged that formal partnership agreements would exist between the Enterprise and associated partners including EFDC.

### **Reason for decision:**

Current funding for the Town Centre Officer post is running out in July 2011. Given the recession and the ongoing work that the Economic Development team are delivering in order to boost local economies and town centre regeneration it was felt that the post of Town Centre Officer should be considered for continuation, even in light of the recruitment freeze. The role is seen as important by the Town Centre Partnerships and provides vital support for their function.

### **Options considered and rejected:**

None

### **Consultation undertaken:**

Within Planning & Economic Development and with Town Centre Partnerships

**Resource implications:**

Option (a) £39,260 per annum for a fixed term period from CSB budget or DDF

Option (b) £39,260 per annum from CSB budget or DDF

Option (c) No budget implications post July 2011

**Budget provision:**

Option (a) Grade 8 per annum salary, as above

Option (b) Grade 8 per annum salary, as above

Option (c) None

**Personnel:** N/A

**Land:** N/A

**Community Plan/BVPP reference:** EP6

**Relevant statutory powers:** N/A

**Background papers:** None

Environmental/Human Rights Act/Crime and Disorder Act Implications: N/A

Key Decision reference: (if required)