

Report to the Cabinet

Report reference: C-045-2012/13
Date of meeting: 3 December 2012



Portfolio: Economic Development & Asset Management

Subject: Action to Support the District's Town Centres

Responsible Officer: Vicki Willis (01992 564593).

Democratic Services Officer: Gary Woodhall (01992 564470).

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) That Members note observations made regarding the current situation on high streets within the District;**
- (2) That a one-off District Development Fund sum of £35,000 is allocated in 2013/14 to deliver additional support to the district's town centres, as this will involve activity both in individual town centres as well as broader district-wide initiatives; and**
- (3) That a District Town Team Taskforce is assembled to lead on town centre matters, including the allocation of funds to individual Town Centre Partnerships (TCPs), but also to champion the needs of the high streets, coordinate and promote activity right across the District, to innovate and test new ideas and to share learning with the other partnerships.**

Executive Summary:

It is a challenging time for town centres. The district is fortunate that to date it has not suffered the extent of empty units as many other locations but things are tough. Independent operators for instance are seeing margins slashed, the cost of raw materials increase and consumer spend down. EFDC is committed to supporting its vibrant and diverse high streets as seen in initiatives such as One Shops Local and its continued support for town centre partnerships. This report explores further potential initiatives, as well as a delivery structure, for stepping-up the Council's support for town centres. A DDF sum of £35,000 is requested to deliver this extra support in 2013/14 which will comprise cross-district initiatives as well as more local projects.

Reasons for Proposed Decision:

The health of the district's town centres is vitally important and the measures outlined in this report have been developed to support the district's diverse town centres. It is essential that residents can access shops and services locally but one should also appreciate the broader role town centres have as places for social interaction, focal points for the community and thus their importance in providing residents with a good quality of life. The district's town centres are also key in providing significant local employment and injecting money into our local economy.

Other Options for Action:

The other option would be to refuse the DDF allocation of £35,000 to provide further support to the district's town centres.

Report:

1. The council is committed to supporting vibrant and diverse high streets in the district and understands the importance of ensuring good choice and value for residents from national chains as well as a variety of independent retailers. A recent workshop with town centre partnerships and the Chamber of Commerce to assess current issues and challenges facing the districts high streets has revealed a complex picture. It is something of a 'mixed bag' when one looks beneath the surface of high streets in Epping Forest district. The district is fortunate that to date it has not suffered the swathes of empty units that have blighted other town centres but at the same time things continue to be tough for town centre businesses with margins slashed, the cost of raw materials increasing and consumer spend down. Epping Forest district is an enterprising location and new businesses are appearing but some long established High Street occupiers have closed down. Some independent businesses are feeling the squeeze from larger multiple operators, particularly with their big hitting loss leader campaigns, but in some areas independents are performing strongly because they are effectively targeting a niche market or because they have a strong online presence in addition to their High Street frontage.

2. It is perceived that residents locally have a strong support for their high streets which have a great offer of independent shops but there is scope for a greater mobilisation of this support in a positive sense rather than in reaction to say, a closure or with the news that a further multiple retailer might be moving onto the high street. On 08 October 2012 the council received a petition from Epping resident Louise Want concerning the importance of maintaining a good range of independent shops in Epping town centre. The petition, signed by more than 300 people, appears in response to the Community Choices questionnaire undertaken to inform the revised Local Plan but the issues it raises extend beyond being solely a planning policy matter. A study into the district's town centres revealed significant 'retail leakage', i.e. money which could be spent in the district's shops is effectively being lost to larger nearby centres outside the district. The concept of this is not surprising given the district's geographical position but the extent of loss is alarming. This applied to roughly 70% of all comparison goods in 2009, amounting to roughly £694 million and 66% for convenience goods, equating to roughly £377 million in 2009.

3. At a district level, One Shops Local (OSL) is continuing to champion the importance of independent retailers and service providers locally. The initiative has developed strongly in its first year with nearly 250 businesses signed-up and offers emails circulated to several hundred subscribers on a fortnightly basis. There are clear opportunities to further OSL. One Epping Forest established a tourism development taskforce earlier this year to understand the growth aspirations and potential of the sector. There is clear scope within this work to link strongly with town centres and exploit their pleasant environments, heritage, shops, restaurants and other facilities.

4. In addition, six town centre partnerships operate across the district to address priorities within local centres. Waltham Abbey for example, has majored in recent years on promoting its tourism potential and developing connections with the Lea Valley horticultural industry. Both Loughton and Epping town centres have introduced festival days in the last couple of years with a strong 'shop local' message which the TCPs have led or been key partners in. Waltham Abbey was not successful in its bid to become a Portas Pilot Town earlier in 2012 but it is set to receive £10,000 of central government money as kick-start funding to implement some priority initiatives within its original bid.

5. Officers have been asked to develop potential initiatives to further support the district's local high streets for Member consideration. This report therefore summarises a package of linked measures which build on current district wide and more local initiatives. If funding is approved it is envisaged that an element of funding will be allocated to broader cross-district initiatives with a sum also allocated to a Local Economic Initiatives Fund for projects in specific towns.

A/	High Street Hero Awards in Epping Forest district	Awards are a great way in which the broader message of why it is important to shop local can be promoted to residents (Braintree Council received over 10,000 votes in its 2012 awards). It is also a key mechanism by which OSL can be furthered (e.g. quotes on entries could populate the review section of OSL strengthening the qualitative aspect of the site and nominated businesses can be approached to sign-up). Recognition awards can also be a great boost to recipients. Announcement of awards could coincide with Independent Retailer Month below.
B/	Working with town partners to maximise local impact in 2013 from national campaigns which are gathering momentum e.g. Independent Retailer Month (IRM) (July), Love Your Markets campaign (from late June), Indie Christmas	Encourage and support the delivery of a suite of events and activities in local areas which are promoting these key messages. If this can be promoted at a broader district level there is the potential for a stronger marketing profile. Use of The Forester to promote these messages will prove cost effective. Epping TCP held Epping Festival during IRM last year and WATP ran various retailer competitions etc. It is not looking solely at say larger scale events but maybe animation of the High Street on market day with a street performer or art installation, distributing branded goodies celebrating Love your Markets campaign and the stronger inclusion of markets within OSL.
C/	Bitesize training for independent retailers and service providers	Sessions would address subjects which could have a direct impact on the business i.e. visual merchandising, use of social media, establishing a web presence. It is intended that the latter might also encourage further sign-up to OSL. It is envisaged that EFDC Officers could offer some of this training directly whereas other areas would need to be delivered by external specialists (i.e. visual merchandising).
D/	Local Economic Initiatives Fund	Until the current financial year TCPs have been able to access a small pot of finance to deliver 'special projects' but there is no longer a budget allocation for this purpose. It is proposed that a new Local Economic Initiatives Fund is made available to TCPs in 2013/14 to ensure each town centre, subject to a satisfactory application , has access to a meaningful sum to encourage and support activity relevant to their town centre. This might be between £4,000 - £5,000 per TCP. Bids will be encouraged for projects which support EFDC's priority areas of focus for the period e.g. item B above and also work to

		develop tourism within the district and connecting this with town centres. Officers will develop full criteria to guide the process. There would also be a requirement for match funding to support any project proposed. If TCPs are unsuccessful in bidding or opt not to bid then funds will be released for bids by other local partnerships.
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6. In order to deliver the programme of support as outlined a DDF sum of £35,000 is requested. It is proposed that this is administered by a newly established district wide Town Teams Taskforce. This will be established by April 2013 and will comprise the Chairmen of the six TCPs with support from Epping Forest Chamber of Commerce, Epping Forest College and the Federation of Small businesses (FSB), and Chaired by EFDC's Business Champion. The role of this group would be to allocate funds to individual TCPs, but also to champion the needs of the high streets, coordinate and promote activity right across the district and innovate and test new ideas and share learning with the other partnerships.

Resource Implications:

The report requests an additional DDF allocation in 2013/14 to support action in town centres. Existing budget allocation to support town centres in 2013/14 is predicted to be £6,000 which is divided between the six TCPs in the district as an administrative grant to support their operation throughout the year.

Legal and Governance Implications:

In further developing the district Town Team Taskforce due attention will be paid to governance issues and advice sought from relevant Officers at EFDC. There should be no legal implications for the Council.

Safer, Cleaner and Greener Implications:

Environmental benefits of residents choosing to shop locally. Individual initiatives might have greater implications and, if this is deemed the case, there will be communication with Officers in the Environment & Street Scene Directorate or with the Environmental Coordinator as relevant.

Consultation Undertaken:

A 'Supporting our town centres workshop' was held on 31 October 2012. Invitees included the Portfolio Holder for Economic Development, EFDC Officers, TCPs, Epping Forest Chamber of Commerce and the FSB. The agenda provided the opportunity for attendees to give an update on their local centre and for a productive open discussion on potential priority town centre initiatives and ways of working.

Background Papers:

None.

Impact Assessments:

Risk Management

This would be considered as an integral part of specific individual initiatives subsequently developed. In the case of direct grants to TCPs EFDC would stipulate that a condition of the

grant is that risk management is sufficiently addressed by the TCP itself.

Equality and Diversity

This would be considered as an integral part of specific individual initiatives subsequently developed. In the case of direct grants to TCPs EFDC would stipulate that a condition of the grant is that equality and diversity is sufficiently addressed by the TCP itself.

Did the initial assessment of the proposals contained in this report for relevance to the Council's general equality duties, reveal any potentially adverse equality implications? No

Where equality implications were identified through the initial assessment process, has a formal Equality Impact Assessment been undertaken? No

What equality implications were identified through the Equality Impact Assessment process?
Not applicable.

How have the equality implications identified through the Equality Impact Assessment been addressed in this report in order to avoid discrimination against any particular group?
Not applicable.