

Report to Town Centre and Car Parks Task & Finish Panel

Date of meeting: 2 October 2006

Subject: Scope of Review /Terms of Reference

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Recommendations:

- (1) To consider the issues identified in this report and the attached information;**
- (2) To consider the need to work with the Crime and Disorder Task and Finish Panel on joint issues and determine arrangements if necessary**
- (3) To agree and recommend a terms of reference for the Panel to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

(Head of Environmental Services). A copy of the proposal submitted by Councillor J M Whitehouse for this review is attached.

The Panel is asked to consider the issues and set the parameters of the review.

(a) Town Centres

The District has 6 main town centres; Epping, Waltham Abbey, Ongar, Loughton High Road, Loughton Broadway and Buckhurst. Each of these has its own town centre partnership and in addition some also have separate traders' associations or groups. Each town centre has its own characteristics, with Epping and Waltham Abbey for example having Chartered Markets. and are Conservation Areas. The role of this Council is different from a Council having a single large town. We have long had policies to protect the characteristics of these centres, but we cannot avoid changes in retailing which come about through national or social change.

There are some obvious factors which affect the vitality of our town centres and these include (in no particular order):

- access (i.e. road, cycle, pedestrian, public transport etc.)
- car parking availability and cost
- the type of retail outlets available
- leisure time facilities (e.g. pubs, clubs, restaurants etc)
- local employment opportunities
- availability of (affordable) housing
- environmental (street scene, lighting, CCTV etc)
- crime and disorder
- facilities for young persons, the elderly, the disabled etc

- presence of large multiples rise in use of internet to purchase particular goods
 - rise in café culture
- demise of specialist and independent traders (particularly in the prime frontage)

The Panel will wish to seek the views of the town centre partnerships

In simple terms the issues referred to in (b) above need to be addressed, although it must always be recognised that local circumstances will differ. It should also be recognised that the Council has a role to play, but in partnership with others, hence the creation and support of the town centre partnerships.

The Council has already done a lot, through for example:

- town centre enhancement schemes (Epping, Ongar, Buckhurst Hill, Loughton and The Broadway)
- establishment of town centre partnerships
- appointment of a town centre manager
- section 106 agreements to help fund local improvements / schemes etc
- reviews of car parking strategy
- free Saturday parking
- Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme in Waltham Abbey

Car Parking

(b) Development of the new car parking enforcement contract

The existing contract with Vinci Park expires in October 2007. This is a very complex contract and the procurement exercise is underway with the appointment of consultants 'Parking Associates'. It is important that the consultants report into this Panel throughout the process so that Members can comment upon the strategies for enforcement and procurement being put forward.

(c) Free parking on Saturdays

The provision of free parking on Saturdays is one of the new administration's "6 key Messages". Free parking has been provided for quite some time during the run up to Christmas each year, but the extension of this across the year does have significant financial implications. The proposed report to cabinet is set out elsewhere on this agenda for the Panel's views and comments. There is an issue of how much free parking to provide.

(d) Anti-social behaviour in car parks

Unfortunately problems in the Council's car parks are becoming more commonplace, arising from gatherings of young and other people on foot, with motor cycles or in cars, causing nuisance and distress through:

- (a) the playing of car radios at high volume;
- (b) driving around the car parks making a noise through engine and tyre noise etc; and
- (c) general disturbance through the gathering of people close to residential dwellings etc.

The Council is under pressure from local communities and the police to take some form of controlling action, such as to close car parks at night. This is not a straightforward issue carrying with it cost and operational consequences.

It is also noted that there is a Crime & Disorder Task & Finish Panel charged with reviewing new and forthcoming legislation.

It is suggested that the Panel work with the Crime and Disorder Panel in consideration of the matter. The Panel may wish to determine how this should be pursued.

(a) Church Hill, Loughton

Car park has been closed to prevent the gathering of people and their vehicles who were creating noise and distress for residents backing onto or in close proximity to the car park. The closure was at the request of, and supported by, Essex Police

(b) Sainsburys car park, Loughton

Similar difficulties resulted in a dispersal order, which has now expired. Essex Police report however that difficulties are still arising.

(c) Cottis Lane car park, Epping

Officers are currently engaged in a monitoring process in view of nuisance caused by young people and motorists. Local residents are very concerned, and there have been on-going meetings between them, the Council and Essex Police. Notices have been served and warnings issued, but difficulties continue. Essex Police are seeking a dispersal order. Environmental Services have altered the layout of the car park to limit the risk of high speed driving and manoeuvring, and have also enhanced the lighting and installed CCTV.

Problems also arise in town centre car parks through users of local facilities such as clubs, pubs and restaurants, making a nuisance of themselves when returning to their cars in car parks often in the early hours of the morning. In many cases the problem is not necessarily one of deliberate nuisance or disorder, but simply customers returning to their vehicles after a 'good night out'. However, the lateness of the hour can result in disturbance to local residents.

It has also to be remembered that the provision of car parks is a public service. the car parks are there to enable visitors to visit out town centres and use the wide range of facilities available. Whilst there is a significant amount of on street parking available during the evening, the car parks are important in supporting the local economy and many people prefer to use them rather than exposing their vehicles to some risk if parked on main roads etc.

Essex Police and some residents have requested that the Council consider the closure of car parks at night so as to prevent them being used as a source of nuisance and disturbance. This is not however as straightforward as it might initially appear, although there are many ways this could be achieved. The issues to consider include:

- (a) the timing of closures such that users are themselves not unduly inconvenienced;
- (b) who will close and then re-open the car parks in the morning?;
- (c) how will we deal with users who find themselves 'locked in'?;
- (d) if there is a technical problem who will attend to deal with it, especially outside of normal Council operating hours?; and
- (e) the costs of managing closures and any associated technology.

There are a number of different methods by which car parks may be secured at night. These include:

- (a) simple swing barriers (vertical or horizontal);
- (b) ramps (or blockers);
- (c) rise and fall bollards;
- (d) pay on exit barriers; and
- (e) pay on entry with auto raise exit barriers

Each has advantages and disadvantages, with the most simple requiring manual opening and closure whilst the more complex will only require intervention when the barrier fails to operate correctly or it is misused in some way. Costs vary from £10,000 at the barrier end of the scale to £20,000 plus for the rising blocker. Pay on exit arrangements will be even more expensive and would require additional manual intervention adding further to costs. These types of barrier will be adequate to prevent access by cars or light vans etc, but they will not prevent access by cyclists and motor cyclists who are able to 'go through' the barrier or around or under it.

7. The Council has also established a task and finish panel to look at new and forthcoming Crime & Disorder legislation. It seems sensible for the two panels to work together on this issue to ensure that this Panel has a full picture of the crime & disorder issues and the range of powers available to deal with it. This should be explored before any commitment to a potentially costly technical solution is considered.

(e) Potential development of car parks

Cabinet, at its meeting on 10 April 2006 resolved to appoint Bidwells (development consultants) to undertake a study of the development potential of a number of the Council's car parks. This study was to establish whether development could be undertaken whilst protecting as far as possible the existing capacity for car parking. The Consultants have completed their task and submitted their report, which officers are currently considering. It is intended that a report be made to this Panel at its mid October meeting.

Resourcing the Review

Where the Panel believes that expenditure is required to deal with issues raised, for example, securing car parks at night, reports will need to be completed and submitted to Overview & Scrutiny Committee in time to allow for inclusion in the 2007/08 budgetary process.

Terms of Reference

A draft set of proposals has been produced and is attached at page 11 of this agenda