

Report to the Overview & Scrutiny Committee



Date of meeting: 19 November 2019

SCRUTINY



Subject: Local High Streets - Viability & Regeneration

Responsible Officer: J. Houston (01992) 564094

Democratic Services: G. Woodhall (01992) 564470

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) That the Committee review and comment on the proposed programme of scrutiny activity relating to the viability and regeneration of local high streets;**
- (2) That the Committee consider the establishment of a Task and Finish Panel to review the evidence gathered through the activity outlined in this report; and**
- (3) That the Committee review and agree/amend the draft terms of reference attached.**

Report:

1. At the joint meeting of the overview and scrutiny chairmen and vice-chairmen held on 23 September 2019 Members had an in-depth discussion on the position of the local high streets across the district in an evolving and challenging economic situation. Members were interested in current performance, and challenges across the high streets and experience and initiatives from neighbouring authorities and further afield.
2. Members are concerned by increasing evidence that the traditional role of high streets is coming under a sustained challenge from many sources, not least the increasing impact of online retailing. Nationally this has seen online spend reach 20% with experts predicting this will climb to 50% within five years. The British Retail Consortium has highlighted up to a 10% fall in high street footfall in the last seven years.
3. The Epping Forest district differs from many comparable areas in that it contains a range of market towns without a single large urban settlement or retail offer. This poses particular challenges and opportunities.
4. Previous research and consultation revealed that the mix of independent and chain store high street choices in the district offered a distinct experience and was appreciated by shoppers. It was also clear that the nature of the districts commuter experience meant that a significant sum of retail spend was lost from the areas high streets in favour of London.
5. Central government has recognised this challenge and offered new funds to boost High Street sustainability in particularly challenged areas, those with significant vacancies and empty properties or containing significant social deprivation. However, it is

generally acknowledged that success in future proofing current performance in the face of new challenges will centre around new coalitions of private businesses, public bodies and investors, working together with common understanding of local challenges and joint action for local solutions.

6. The following four-phase approach is suggested to support a programme of scrutiny activity relating to the viability and regeneration of local high streets by the Committee:

Establishment of a Task and Finish Panel

7. The draft terms of reference for the suggested task and finish panel are attached as Appendix 1 to this report.

Information/Data Gathering

8. This will be completed by the Economic Development Team with a target date of the end of January 2020 to enable the beginning of work by the proposed task and finish panel. This data gathering exercise will involve the following:

- completion and analysis of the High Street Vacancy Survey undertaken by Planning Services;
- review of business movement and turnover based on business rates data;
- consultation with the Epping Forest Youth Council on young people's current use of high streets and their offer to this target group;
- section in economic strategy on town centres requesting feedback;
- workshop at Economic Stakeholder Conference in November 2019 focused on the particular opportunities and initiatives to future proof high streets;
- short high street survey across district assessing shoppers, workers views;
- key document review (the Portas Review, the High Street report (Timpson, DHCLG), the High Streets Report 'Achieving Change' (IPM), British Retail Consortium footfall reports), The Grimsey Review etc;
- review of neighbouring local authorities plans and approaches to high street sustainability.

Consultation with Key Stakeholders - Perspectives and Potential Actions

9. The following organisations would be asked to present evidence to the proposed Task and Finish Panel:

- Chamber of Commerce;
- Federation of Small Business;
- Town Centre Partnerships;
- Local Government Association; and
- national bodies promoting town centre solutions.

Formulation of Recommendation

10. These will be undertaken when the Task and Finish Panel has collected and reviewed the relevant evidence and completed hearing evidence from key stakeholders.

Resource Implications:

The recommendations of this report seek to enable scrutiny activity to more effectively meet work programme requirements.

Legal and Governance Implications:

The Council's constitution sets out rules for the management of its overview and scrutiny responsibilities. Although external organisations are not generally required by legislation to

attend before the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, it is hoped that most would be willing to engage constructively with the Council's scrutiny activity when invited to do so.

Safer, Cleaner, Greener Implications:

There are no implications arising from the recommendations of this report in respect of the Council's commitment to the Climate Local Agreement, the corporate Safer, Cleaner, Greener initiative, or any crime and disorder issues within the district.

Consultation Undertaken:

None

Background Papers:

None

Impact Assessments:

Risk Management

The Council's constitution sets out rules for the management of its overview and scrutiny responsibilities.

Equality:

There are no equality implications arising from the recommendations of this report.