

Report to Overview and Scrutiny Committee



SCRUTINY

Date of meeting: 19 November 2020

Portfolio: Finance & Economic Development (Cllr J Philip)



Epping Forest District Council

Subject: Report on Local High Streets.

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Recommendations/Decisions Required:

- (1) That the Local High Streets Task and Finish Panel should recommence its activities as previously set-out, in view of the progress being made with the Post Covid 19 Town Centre Projects; or**
- (2) That the Local High Streets Task and Finish Panel should recommence its activities but alter its terms of reference and mode of operation, in view of the progress being made with the Post Covid 19 Town Centre Projects; or**
- (3) That the Local High Streets Task and Finish Panel should cease and members involvement and oversight of the High Street projects need to be addressed differently.**

Report:

Introduction

In 2019, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee established a Local High Streets Task and Finish Panel to consider how best to support high streets in view of the pressures and changes that faced the high streets.

High streets obviously adapt and change over time and the mix of retail, office, craft production, and homes have altered both in the recent past and over a longer period.

However vibrant high streets are important to making a sense of community and place and providing economic opportunities and therefore, the key to change and adaptation of high streets is how best to achieve the adaptations and changes needed.

The concerns of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and members in general were accentuated by reports that showed that Waltham Abby and Ongar were particular high streets of concern when compared to other high streets within the District.

Covid-19

In February and March this year, concerns around Covid-19 increased culminating in a national lockdown, which of course recently has been re-imposed.

The initial lockdown potentially accentuated the strains in the high street but also increased the opportunities as a result of national planning changes regarding usage classes and an increase in home and local working and the consumption of locally produced foods and goods.

Concentration has naturally been in the past months about making high streets and safe as possible and supporting local businesses through national schemes and locally agreed support grants.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee has by agreement suspended further meetings of the Local High Streets Task and Finish Panel.

Post Covid-19 Projects

In July 2020, Cabinet approved work on a series of projects that were connected to making sure the High Streets would recover and adapt after the Covid-19 epidemic faded. This meant that there are projects for Epping, Waltham Abbey, Loughton, Ongar and Buckhurst Hill, and associated projects to encourage local trading through digital means, as well as the development of employment land and the airfield itself at North Weald.

These projects are in the initial review stage with firmer proposals are due to return to Cabinet in December 2020 and January 2021, noting that the Town Centres of Waltham Abbey and Ongar have been prioritised to date, but that other projects are now being advanced.

Members have been engaged in these projects both directly by officers and also through the all-party post Covid recovery Cabinet Advisory Group that has been reviewing the Council's response to the Covid-19 challenge.

Summary

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee needs to identify how best to address the high street issue either by recommending the Local High Streets Task and Finish Panel or through other means and scrutiny approaches.