

## Item 12                      Rejuvenation of Andover Town Centre

Report of the Economic Portfolio Holder

### **Recommended:**

**That, in accordance with the recommendations of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the Council's Corporate Action Plan be amended to include a project reflecting the proposals contained in this Report aimed at improving the economic vitality of Andover town centre.**

#### SUMMARY:

This report:

- analyses the current state and context of Andover town centre;
- reviews past and current initiatives in respect of the town centre undertaken by the Council;
- suggests a series of proposals for inclusion in the Council's Corporate Action Plan as a Project aimed at improving the economic vitality of Andover town centre.

## **1 Introduction**

- 1.1 At its meeting on 10 July 2012, Cabinet considered the recommendations of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Corporate Action Plan Annual Report 2011-2012 and resolved:

“That the recommendation to include the rejuvenation of Andover town centre in the Corporate Action Plan be referred to officers to scope any projects that should be considered for inclusion and report back to Cabinet.”

This report responds to that resolution.

## **2 Background**

- 2.1 The economic health of Andover town centre has come under close scrutiny over the last few months, prompted by The Portas Report and press coverage of the number of vacant units in and around the High Street. In turn, several local individuals, together with Andover Town Council, have held public meetings in order to try to better understand the current situation and to identify ways of making the town centre more vibrant.

### 3 General Context and Analysis

3.1 Town centres are seen as a highly prominent indicator of the state of the local economy. However, the Council's ability to create prosperous town centres is limited for two obvious reasons:

- **forces beyond its control:** out-of-town centre superstores have grown in accordance with national planning policy; internet shopping is growing dramatically and personal disposable income continues to shrink as the result of the recession and the Government's programme to reduce public expenditure. (The latter point is reflected in the increase in claimants for income related benefits, demand for the services of Andover Food Bank and demand for debt related advice at Andover CAB.)
- **lettings and vacancies are determined by the commercial property market,** which reflects the interaction between the expectations of landlords and potential occupiers and over which the Council has little influence.

3.2 Andover is well provided with convenience stores and retail warehouses and, like most towns, much of this has developed beyond the High Street.

3.3 Andover's neighbouring centres, several of which are undergoing major improvement, (Festival Place in Basingstoke, Parkway Shopping Centre in Newbury, Salisbury, Silver Hill in Winchester), offer a greater range of choice in certain comparison goods and Andover residents often look to these towns for this variety.

3.4 The realistic challenge therefore is to attract more of Andover's growing community, and its rural hinterland, to use Andover High Street.

3.5 **Vacancy rates:** Andover's vacancy rate is 11.5% (excluding 6.3% charity shops) which compares with 5.5% for Romsey, 12.7% for London and the South East and 14.6% for GB (sources: TVBC and The Local Data Company).

3.6 **Car parking:** For the period April – June 2012, there has been a significant increase in use of town centre car parks over the comparable period for 2011.

#### 3.7 Council responsibilities

The Council has a range of policy, ownership and regulatory responsibilities which influence how the town centre operates.

#### 3.8 Planning policy:

Planning sets the framework for new development: the environmental improvements to the High Street, the Asda/Odeon Cinema, the proposed new bus station and the allocation of George Yard/ Black Swan Yard for a major retail development all reflect the importance of this role. The new communities at Augusta Park and Picket Twenty will also bring significant extra spending power which town centre businesses need to compete for.

The growth of Andover will mean that the existing bus station needs to be upgraded. The £2.4million funding for this initiative has therefore been secured from the major development projects in the Andover area as part of the planning process. The enhancements have been a long-term aspiration of both Test Valley Borough and Hampshire County Councils.

- 3.9 **Car parking provision and management:** The Council is responsible for off street parking - its provision and charging. The pricing strategy has always been based on ensuring that there are sufficient spaces for shoppers.

There is an ample supply of parking in Andover and charges are generally lower than neighbouring centres. The Council has maintained a policy of providing free parking after 4 p.m. However, the town centre is competing with free car parking at the large superstores, notably Tesco at River Way and Sainsburys at Shepherd's Spring Lane.

Calls for cheaper parking will have to be assessed against all the relevant factors including whether they will materially increase town centre spending or simply affect the time at which people use car parks. The Council's parking strategy includes a commitment to continue to assess the merits of different methods of payment to enhance the convenience for users. Similarly, there is scope to consider whether the provision of *Parent and Baby* spaces would have a beneficial impact.

- 3.10 **Land ownership:** The Council owns only a very small number of freehold premises in the town centre which it leases at market rents. The Council also owns a 40% share in The Chantry Centre but is not responsible for managing the Centre and is guided by a fiduciary responsibility to obtain market rents for its properties. The Council also manages the use of the High Street and Time Ring for events etc.

- 3.11 **Events and Promotion:** The Council promotes events such as Christmas Lights Switch On, Sports Fairs, Jamborees at Beech Hurst, Olympic Torch, Hampshire Farmers' Markets etc. both independently and through Andover Vision.

- 3.12 **Liaison with Andover Town centre businesses:** Currently, the Council supports the Andover Business Forum, to focus the views of town centre businesses and to act as a point of contact with the Council.

Although successful in a liaison role, the potential for fuller engagement remains. Two town centre events are planned in the High Street, on Sunday 18 November and 16 December to coincide with the Farmers' Market.

- 3.13 Other Council responsibilities include ensuring the town centre is a safe and clean place and that businesses are regulated in line with local and national requirements (e.g. Planning, Food Hygiene and other inspections).

**4. Past Initiatives for Andover town centre undertaken by the Council**

- The Odeon Cinema
- The Lights Theatre
- Villagio Restaurant in the Lower Guildhall
- Environmental improvements to the Lower High Street and Upper High Street
- Walkway linking Anton Mill/Asda with Bridge Street
- Environmental improvements to encourage access in Bridge Street and London Street
- Supporting Andover Farmers' Market
- Car parking: a strategy which gives priority to shoppers over commuters and a tariff more affordable than in neighbouring centres and which encourages visitors to stay up to 3 hours. Significantly, parking is free after 4.00 p.m.
- A long term strategy for Andover's growth in terms of major new housing proposals (about 4,000 new homes in new communities at Augusta Park and Picket Twenty)

It is notable that much of the Borough Council's input over recent years has reflected the evolution in the town centre's role towards more diversified activity, including in particular leisure and recreation.

**5. Current Initiatives for Andover Town Centre being undertaken by the Council**

- £2.4 m new Bus Station
- Planning for a major mixed development for Black Swan Yard/George Yard
- Developing Andover Charter Market:

The Charter Market is a successful co-operative of stallholders and contributes to the town's retail "offer" by attracting footfall, providing personal shopping services to customers, offering good value, fresh local produce and adding "colour" and "life". The Council responded to economic pressure by reducing the market's rent.

There is already an offer of a start up pitch extended to College students which is due to be extended as part of the "Love your local Market" initiative linked to the Portas proposals. There is a perceived need for Arts and Craft type stalls, and it is hoped this offer will attract new young entrepreneurs with an expanded range of goods. Indeed, the Market has extended its offer of "pop up" stalls to anyone who wishes to try out a retail idea.

The Market is also keen, and is being supported in its efforts, to work with other speciality markets.

- Hampshire Farmers' Market

The Council has supported the Hampshire Farmers' Market in 2012 and it is hoped it will continue to grow and prosper. Stall holders will be deciding in October / November 2012 which of the farmers' markets across Hampshire they will support in 2013.

- "Pop up" Shops

The Council specifically requested the Chantry Centre to offer retail units for short periods of time and thereby limit the extent of the commitment which would need to be made by an aspiring retailer who wished to 'test the waters' or by those who simply wish to trade only for a short period. This facility is now available in the Chantry Centre.

- Events

Free events are always very popular in Andover and therefore an effective means of supporting town centre businesses. Some recent ones include Andover Carnival, The Olympic Torch procession, and the Jamie Gee Sports Fair at Vigo Park.

- Transport initiatives:

*journey planning* - via the web or using kiosks that the Council is proposing to introduce in the town, so that shoppers or visitors can plan their trips to the town centre, know what's on, where to park, which are the most convenient walking/cycling routes, how accessible certain shops are for people with disabilities, where the toilets are etc

*community street audits* are an established way of supporting and enabling residents and specialist user groups (eg. mothers with young children, the elderly, taxi-users, disabled people, partially sighted people) supported by Shopmobility to assess their street environments and advise what improvements are needed. The Council has undertaken a number of such audits in Andover.

Community Street Audits are consistent with the Portas Report which called for councils to do more to re-unite residents with their town centres and give them more influence over making the town centre more attractive, accessible and safe.

*improving accessibility* by removing, where appropriate, clutter and obstructions, signage, bollards and street furniture. Future maintenance and improvements (eg. dropped curbs) and new capital works (eg. crossing places) will seek to further this aim.

## **6. Recommended New Proposals**

### **6.1 Andover Town Centre Summit**

The increase in public attention on the state of town centres has led in Andover to the formation of several new groups and initiatives:

- Andover Development Team, led by Mr Tony Hook, which in turn has created several smaller groups to look at car parking, signage, charity shops and vacant premises.
- A proposal for a business improvement district service offered by a not-for-profit company led by Mr Raymond Bulpit.
- The Andover Business Forum, supported by the Council, which represents town centre retailers, which was previously supported by the Andover Vision Manager; and
- Andover Town Council which has set up an Amenities & Town Development Committee to consider projects and help develop and promote the town centre.

In the absence of a single, obvious “solution”, these groups are all calling for fresh ideas from the public. Therefore, rather than repeat these calls for suggestions it would be better if the Council prepared some clear proposals for action.

However, the scope for Council action, which will deliver radical change, is limited: much of the problem lies with the demand side rather than the supply side. The Council should acknowledge these limitations and work with all interested parties by convening a meeting to review its analysis and proposals for the best way forward.

Such a meeting or summit should include representatives of the retailers, Andover Town Council, TVBC (a member representative from each town ward, Leader, Economic Portfolio Holder, Chief Executive, Director of The Lights), Hampshire County Council, commercial agents, Chantry Centre Manager, Mr T. Hook and Mr R. Bulpit.

### **6.2 TVBC Town Centre Team**

The Council holds - and is perceived to hold - clear responsibilities to promote and regulate activity in the town centre. If the Council were to explicitly connect up and publicise all of its staff whose work has a bearing on town centre activities, this could help ensure that business enquires are dealt with in a co-ordinated and positive manner and could better inform businesses about what the Council can, and cannot, assist with.

This would involve nominated officers from:

- Planning and Transport (including car parking)
- Planning and Building
- Housing & Environmental Health (e.g. food hygiene, licensing etc)
- Leisure & Wellbeing (The Lights Director has responsibilities relating to town centre events and marketing)
- Licensing (taxis, licensed premises, entertainment)
- Estates and Economic Development (landlord responsibilities and economic development e.g. start up and training grants)
- Revenues (advice on Business Rates etc)
- Environmental (street scene)

Within this framework, it will be important to investigate whether there is scope for business support activity, including marketing the town centre to the new communities and further afield.

### **6.3 Incentivising new Town Centre Businesses**

The Council currently operates a Business Incentive Grant scheme aimed at making a positive contribution towards the cost of creating a small business. Grants of £500 are available to new full time businesses starting up within Test Valley once they have been operating for 6 months. There is clearly scope for investigating whether an enhanced version of this scheme could be trialled, aimed specifically at new businesses seeking to start up within the town centre.

### **6.4 Promoting use of The High Street as a venue for events and activity**

As well as supporting events, there is potential for the Council to more actively promote The Time Ring and High Street, as a space for performance and events. In particular, there are powerful arguments for the Council to be facilitating and encouraging the provision of live entertainment in the High Street.

At present the Council levies different charges for The Time Ring and High Street on non-market days and the Market Manager levies a charge on Market Days (Thursdays and Saturdays). Whether the nominal charge for a non-commercial organisation (£19 or £35) is a real or perceived deterrent to activity taking place, the Council could remove the charge for a trial period of a year or so to gauge its impact as part of the more active management and promotion of this prominent space. Such promotion could include publishing a timetable of how both spaces are used on the Council's web site (and on that of the Andover Vision).

The Council is currently supporting the events in November and December linked to the Farmers' Market, in which town centre businesses will create a market fair atmosphere, with entertainment. This approach of helping business do it for themselves perhaps offers a more sustainable blueprint for future activity.

There will, however, be an unavoidable administrative overhead around processing bookings, checking public liability insurance, completion by bookers of risk assessments for their events, access through bollards, access to power etc

## **6.5 Reviewing Planning Policies**

The Council needs to be aware of the changing nature of the town centre and to be flexible in its approach to what happens there - including residential development, entertainment, cultural and educational activities.

As part of the preparation of the emerging Test Valley Borough Local Plan, the Council will rigorously review any proposed planning policies that relate to the town centre. Every effort will be made to ensure that planning policies are clear and do not unreasonably restrict development opportunities that would positively contribute to the viability and vitality of the town centre. The Council will ensure that policies are drafted to ensure a flexible approach to new development recognising the changing nature and demands of town centres.

## **7 Corporate Objectives and Priorities**

- 7.1 The economic vitality of Andover town centre falls four-square within the Corporate Plan aim of supporting and achieving a competitive local economy.

## **8 Consultations/Communications**

- 8.1 The proposed project will be shaped by the Andover Town Centre Summit suggested in paragraph 6.1 above.

## **9 Options and Option Appraisal**

- 9.1 At this stage, the practical options are limited to deciding which of the proposals contained in this Report should form the basis of a project in the Corporate Action Plan, as well as suggesting any other such proposals.

## **10 Risk Management**

- 10.1 A risk assessment has been completed in accordance with the Council's Risk management process and the existing risk controls in place mean that no significant risks (Red or Amber) have been identified at this point in time.

## **11 Resource Implications**

- 11.1 The financial implications of each of the proposals contained in the Corporate Action Plan will be assessed as part of the Project.



**12 Legal Implications**

12.1 The legal implications of each of the proposals contained in the Corporate Action Plan will be assessed as part of the Project.

**13 Equality Issues**

13.1 Equality Impact Assessments will be carried out for each of the proposals contained in the Corporate Action Plan as part of the Project.

**14 Conclusion**

14.1 The economic state of Andover town centre today reflects many different factors, some general such as the growth in internet shopping and national planning policy for superstores and some local such as Andover’s relationship with neighbouring centres.

14.2 Many causes and many potential solutions have been put forward, both nationally (as part of The Portas Report) and locally. However, if there were a panacea, then businesses would already be using it. Therefore, there is real potential value in the Council leading an open process to discuss with all stakeholders the best way forward and investigating the other proposals suggested in this Report.

Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)

The Portas Review - An independent review into the future of our high streets by Mary Portas dated December 2011

Confidentiality

It is considered that this report does not contain exempt information within the meaning of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972, as amended, and can be made public.

No of Annexes:	None	File Ref:	
----------------	------	-----------	--

(Portfolio: Economic ) Councillor Peter Giddings

Officer:	David Gleave / Roger Tetstall	Ext:	8101
Report to:	Cabinet	Date:	31 October 2012