

Wincanton Town Centre Strategy (Executive Decision)

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Purpose of the Report

To seek approval to publish the Wincanton Town Centre draft strategy for consultation in January 2019 and provide an update to Members on progress to-date

Public Interest

We are aiming, through working with our partners, to boost footfall and help create a more vibrant town centre in which Wincanton's businesses can flourish. The preparation of a draft strategy with action plan will provide ideas on how this might be achieved and will form the basis of a public consultation early next year.

Recommendations

- (1) To approve the consultation draft strategy for Wincanton Town Centre
- (2) To note the report

Background

Members will be aware that there has been a long held local aspiration to regenerate Wincanton town centre and whilst there has been several previous projects (Market & Coastal Towns Initiative, HERS) these ceased a decade or so ago. There continues to be some legacy benefits to the town from these but more recent proactive initiatives such as the Neighbourhood Development Plan (led by the Town Council) have had a much broader basis than town centre regeneration

In 2013, in response to requests from councillors to encourage an anchor retailer to come to the town, experienced in-house staff prepared a confidential scoping report which considered the reasons the town was weaker than it might be and possible options for development. At the time the economic downturn meant that national chains were cautious about any portfolio expansion. This work was revisited in 2017 when a further approach was made to commercial agents to determine the appetite amongst retail users to come to Wincanton.

However, later in 2017 it was recognised that, whilst there were some signs of encouragement with a number of new 'lifestyle' businesses opening, Wincanton had the highest proportion of vacant units of town centres in South Somerset. In December 2017 the District Council's Strategic Regeneration Board approved funding for consultants to develop a strategy for the town centre to provide:

1. An overall approach to the development of the economic vibrancy of Wincanton town centre, set within an analysis of general challenges facing market towns within the UK such as Wincanton, the specific strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the town.
2. Physical development opportunities (sites) which will increase footfall in the town centre and improve the vitality and viability.
3. Complementary initiatives and interventions to improve the existing environment and boost the economy.

Four companies submitted tender proposals and following a selection process, Chilmark consulting were appointed in May 2018. In early June an inception meeting, 'meet - greet' for councillors and representatives of the Town Council was held ahead of work commencing.

Progress

Over the last few months Chilmark Consulting have been working to develop ideas to deliver positive change. They have engaged with many stakeholders through the process, including Town Council, community organisations with a town centre presence, landowners, businesses (individual and the Chamber of Commerce). The views and ideas shared during this process have informed the draft strategy, a copy of which has been sent to councillors and, subject to Area East Committee approval, will become publicly available in January. There will be a presentation to committee about the strategy, the aim of which is to provide a clear direction for:

- Encouraging quality investment from private and public sector
- Improve commercial confidence
- Inform Future decision making
- Co-ordinate town centre activities/management to achieve complementary improvements
- Promotion and marketing the town centre
- Encouraging and developing partnership to collaborate on implementing the strategy

The document includes early thoughts about potential town centre development opportunities, comprising possible residential and mixed use/workspace, about which there will continue to be a need to ensure a balance, preserving flexibility for alternative footfall generators over time. The hope is that these ideas could also highlight opportunities for better connectivity to the High Street with ideas for new pedestrian linkages which could be brought forward through future developments

Another strand of the work has been to consider public realm improvements such as widening footways, introducing different surface dressings, better delineation of on street parking and planting schemes, proposals are tailored to individual locations at:

- Market Place
- High Street (central area no's 7-15 and the eastern gateway)
- Carrington Way

This complements working with landlords to increase the appeal of existing properties, incentivising occupancy with higher grant interventions which is also included in the draft strategy.

The final strand of work is about drawing on good practice from elsewhere to see what 'tried and tested' complementary initiatives could be adapted for use in Wincanton. Ideas include marketing, capturing race day footfall, night markets and enticing passing traffic from the A303 into the town.

A stakeholder group provided early feedback on these emergent ideas last month, feedback included:

- Greatest challenge is whether this will boost footfall in the town centre
- Town Centres nationally are shrinking
- A lot of available land (Carrington way area)
- We need some 'quick wins' - how will this be delivered?
- Don't ignore the parking charge issue
- Housing needs to be the 'right type'
- Not all new thinking but how do we make it happen?
- Need to capitalise on the wealthy catchment area
- What difference will a strategy make?
- A sense of, 'the time is right'
- Need some 'quick wins'

Whilst some of the ideas and concepts are new, it was recognised that others will be familiar or build on existing practice (such as the Retail Support Initiative). The hope is that Members will support the draft proposals so that we can progress to a presentation to Town Council and public consultation in January 2019.

The feedback from the consultation will help to refine proposals ahead of further report to Area East Committee in Spring 2019. This will seek support for a package of interventions from District Executive with an emphasis on deliverability and aiming to achieve some early 'wins'. The strategy isn't a solution in its own right but it will provide a framework for delivery and funding support in the town centre, something which hasn't previously been available.

It is anticipated that Wincanton Programme Board will be set-up in Spring 2019, it will be modelled on the Yeovil and Chard Boards where they are the key bodies for managing, directing and delivering the broad aims of the regeneration programmes. The Wincanton board will feed into the Strategic Programme Board which has its first meeting in January 2019. Representation on the Wincanton Programme Board will include both Ward Members and the Chair of Area East Committee (who also has a place on the Strategic Programme Board). A stakeholder group comprising representatives of relevant local organisations will also be formed to inform/advise the board and be a forum for sharing ideas, developing projects and identifying potential regeneration opportunities.

Financial Implications

There are no direct financial implications resulting from this report. However, there is a further report to Area East Committee scheduled for Spring 2019 (following public consultation), this will comprise a delivery plan with resourcing identified on which endorsement will be sought.

Council Plan Implications

Complementing our priority 'working to promote a strong and growing economy with thriving urban and rural businesses, improving productivity'
Wincanton Town Centre has been identified as one of four Council Plan priorities

Carbon Emissions & Climate Change Implications

None directly resulting from this report

Equality and Diversity Implications

Tailored consultation will be undertaken with key interest groups

Background Papers
