

Future Chard Strategy

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Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of the report is to provide an update on the Future Chard Strategy public consultation and to seek its adoption by Full Council.

Public Interest

2. The Future Chard Strategy considers Chard's needs from the perspective of both people and place. It looks at the town's strengths and weaknesses, and the future opportunities and threats. The draft strategy proposes a long-term vision, priorities and action plan that aim to make Chard a prosperous place for all in the future.

Recommendations

3. That Full Council:
 - a. notes the feedback provided through the public consultation
 - b. agrees to adopt Future Chard Strategy.

Background

4. PER Consulting was appointed by South Somerset District Council to develop a new place-based strategy for Chard 2021-2035, to drive the town's long-term prosperity.
5. There are a number of significant challenges for residents of Chard. This includes urban deprivation, with several areas falling within the 20% most deprived nationally for education and skills, as well as concerns around income deprivation for example. There is poor social mobility, linked to low skills and income opportunity.
6. There is also a lower number of working people than is typical for Somerset and, where someone is employed, this is more likely to be in a low wage job. The economy could be particularly vulnerable to closures. A recent example was the closure of Oscar Mayer, where more than 800 jobs were lost to the town, representing 15% of jobs in the town at the time.
7. The strategy seeks to address these issues by setting out a long-term vision for Chard and the steps needed to reach it. The place-based approach tests a new way of working for SSDC, piloted in Chard due to its particular set of challenges. It was intended that, if successful, it could be rolled out to other towns.

8. Although Local Government Reorganisation (which was decided during the development of this strategy) means that SSDC will not be the main delivery agency, it will remain highly relevant to the new Somerset Council, who will have the opportunity to take the lead in delivery for Chard as well as developing similar strategies for other towns.

Future Chard Strategy

9. The PER Consulting team was commissioned to draft a long-term strategy that responds to the interplay of economic factors, the physical and natural environment, infrastructure delivery, deprivation and the wider determinants of health – considering both people and place.
10. PER Consulting was supported by the SSDC Place & Recovery officer team to draw together an evidence base of data, engage in one-to-one and group conversations with key stakeholders in Chard, conduct a community survey and visit the town to meet with local people and get a sense of its physical geography.



11. This research provided an understanding of Chard's needs, from its current strengths and weaknesses to its future opportunities and threats. The insight drawn from this led to the proposed long-term vision, priorities and action plan for the short, medium and long term set out in the Future Chard Strategy.
12. In September 2021, District Executive reviewed the draft Future Chard Strategy and approved it for public consultation.

Public Consultation

13. Public consultation was conducted at 3 in-person events at Chard Guildhall:
 - 10am to 2pm – Saturday 23 October
 - 9am to 4pm – Monday 25 October
 - 12pm to 8pm – Tuesday 26 October.
14. A range of times of day were chosen to encourage the greatest participation. It was advertised through the press, on social media and via posters displayed around the community. Over 100 people attended over the course of the three days.
15. Display boards presented a summary of the Future Chard Strategy and attendees were asked to respond to a number of questions in order to seek their feedback. They were also able to pick up a copy of the draft Strategy, Action Plan and Social & Economic Baseline Report.



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16. A review of the key themes arising from the consultation are set out below. In response to these themes, the Strategy has been updated where necessary. These are noted below.
17. The revised Future Chard Strategy and Action Plan are included as Appendix A and B. The Social & Baseline Report remains unchanged and is included as Appendix C.

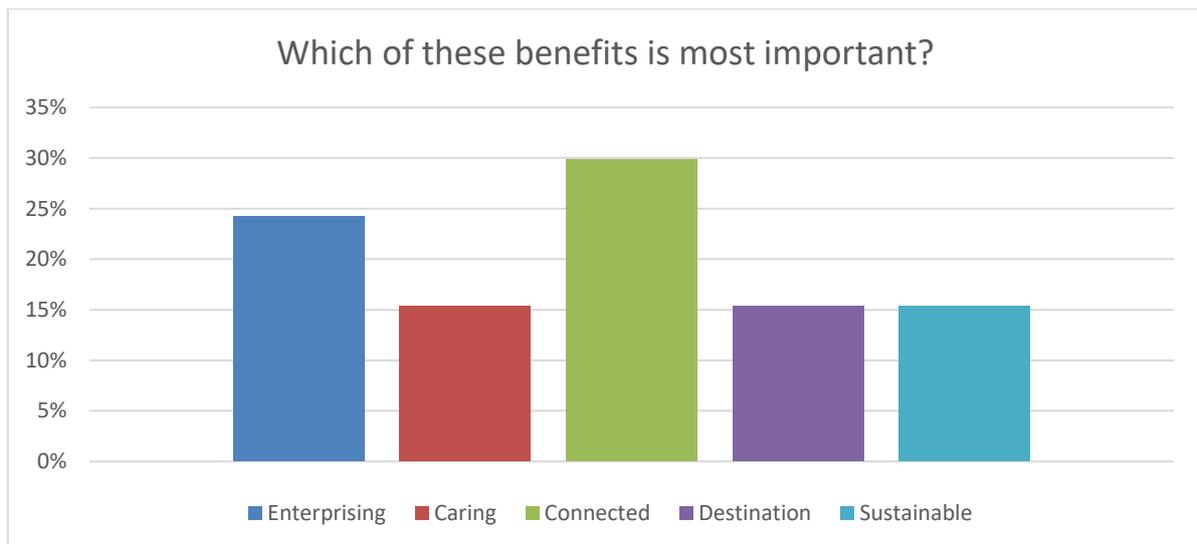
Themes Arising and Response

Summary

18. Overall, the comments received during the public consultation supported the content and direction of the Strategy. In particular, there was a strong message in favour of the Strategy’s recommendations around:
 - re-engaging with the community over growth plans to address concerns about housing development and associated infrastructure
 - resolving traffic connectivity issues
 - improvements to the town centre (many of which are already being addressed by the High Street Heritage Action Zone).
19. As mentioned above, some amendments to the Strategy have been made to draw out the nuances expressed. A review of the key themes of the consultation data against each section of the Strategy is set out below.

Vision & Desired Outcomes

20. There is broad support for the vision and all 5 outcomes set out in the Strategy. The ‘connected’ and ‘enterprising’ outcomes resonated particularly strongly.



SWOT analysis



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21. Consultation respondents agreed with the SWOT (strengths/weaknesses/opportunities/threats) analysis, and gave particular weight to:
 - Chard's industrial heritage (strength)
 - public transport (weakness)
 - active older population with skills and time to contribute (opportunity)
 - leisure centre as springboard for new opportunities (opportunity)
 - groups are starting to work together (opportunity)
 - worries over new housing developments and this not keeping step with local infrastructure and facilities development, plus impact on green spaces (threat)
 - lack of adult learning provision (threat).

22. These further points were raised and the Strategy document has been amended to reflect them:
 - opportunity to do more to support local artisan trades (opportunity)
 - negative impact of redundant mill sites (threat)
 - lack of community-owned spaces (weakness) – this was already picked up within the detail of the Strategy and Action Plan but not mentioned in the SWOT.

Ambition for Chard – Cross-Cutting and Priority Themes

23. The cross-cutting themes and priority themes were numbered in the draft Strategy but, following the consultation, it is felt that this wrongly implied an order of importance. Numbering has been removed in the revised version, to demonstrate the equal weighting of each theme.

Cross-Cutting Theme: 'Make It In Chard' New Identity

24. Consultation participants recognised the need to clarify Chard's identity and were keen to project a positive reputation externally.

25. "Make It In Chard" as a concept was accepted, with support for marketing the town as a place where people can thrive, as well as promoting the physical characteristics of its town centre.

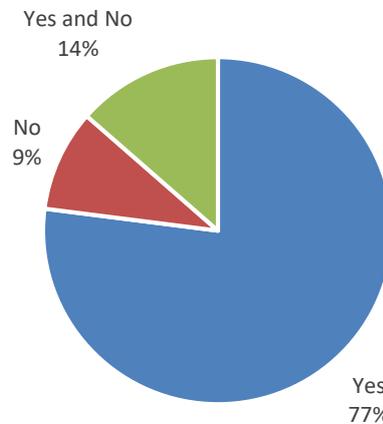
26. The consultation also showed support for the recommendation to deliver community events which align with the "Make It In Chard" message, in order to embed it across the town.

Cross-Cutting Theme: Working Together

27. More than three-quarters of respondents stated that they believe people will work together to support the future of Chard.



Do you believe that local people & community organisations would be willing to work together to bring about change?



28. Several organisations that attended the public consultation events stated that they would like to get involved. This is in addition to those who participated in the focus groups and one-to-one conversations that informed the development of the draft Strategy.
29. There was support for a medium-to-long-term plan and improved communication between those working to create change in Chard. Suggestions were made for a community hub building to facilitate this, which backs up the recommended action under the Town Centre Destination theme.

Priority Theme: Economy

30. Comments relating to the economy centred on support and incentivisation for businesses and new businesses, training and employment support, and encouragement of a start-up culture all of which is included in the Strategy.
31. There were also comments in support of local artisans and the Strategy's economy section has been tweaked to ensure that this is explicitly covered.
32. There was particular support for the Strategy's actions around establishing a business network for the town; establishing the employment hub and extending it into central training and advice provision; and nurturing an enterprise culture under the "Make It In Chard" banner.
33. In terms of incentivisation, SSSDC is currently providing grants to local property owners/businesses to improve their shop fronts and high street premises through the High Street Heritage Action Zone (HSHAZ). HSHAZ is referenced under the Town Centre Destination theme.

Priority Theme: Community, Health & Wellbeing



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34. The consultation asked people to state which of the Community, Health & Wellbeing actions were most important to them. All the actions drew support, but those which drew greatest support were the five actions which address:
 - the expansion and quality of local health/wellbeing services
 - healthy eating
 - youth achievement awards
 - improved adult education provision
 - more sports and recreation facilities.
35. Individuals made additional suggestions for facilities for particular social groups: mothers and babies; children and adolescents; older people with support for 'ageing well'. This should be considered in the development of a community hub – see Town Centre Destination theme.
36. There were also a number of comments received regarding anti-social behaviour in the town, which is acknowledged in the text of the Community, Health & Wellbeing section of the Strategy. The Community, Health & Wellbeing outputs have been updated to ensure continued focus on this issue tackled by social engage.
37. Collectively, the suite of inputs/actions proposed by the Strategy seek to address disenfranchisement, social engagement and other complex circumstances which result in such issues.

Priority Theme: Town Centre Destination

38. Feedback and comments received during the consultation relating to the town centre were very much in line with the Strategy and Action Plan, in particular:
 - the desire to address the number of empty premise
 - provide a more diverse town centre offer
 - support local businesses
 - improve wayfinding signage and connectivity for parking, cycling and walking.
39. There were a number of references made to the need for a community hub in the town centre – a free or affordable venue where local people could develop networks of support for others – which is part of the Action Plan but had not been clearly referenced in the key actions within the Strategy. The revised version adds in reference to this.
40. Responses also included suggestions for a number of town centre regeneration activities, which will be delivered over the next 2 years through the existing High Street Heritage Action Zone, such as:
 - investing in maintaining the historic properties on the high street
 - sprucing up the buildings
 - making more of the town centre's heritage when promoting the town
 - introducing lower kerbs for disabled access
 - providing larger spaces for gatherings/events.
41. Consultation responses also drew reference to the redundant mill sites and the need to renovate/repurpose/regenerate. At its September 2021 meeting, Full Council confirmed



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SSDC is keen to pursue 'Phase 2' of Chard Regeneration which would address the mill sites, but recognised that it is not feasible to enter into a Phase 2 programme of work at the current time, until significant external funding opportunities become available. As a key issue for Chard's town centre, it would be remiss of the Future Chard Strategy not to acknowledge. An action has therefore been added to reflect the current situation ("Address the redundant mill sites when external funding becomes available").

Priority Theme: Housing & Connectivity

42. Many consultation responses were received relating to the development of new housing and the need for associated infrastructure to follow in-step, which provides evidence towards the Strategy's recommendation to re-engage with the community over planned development, as part of the Local Plan review. The Strategy's outputs for Housing & Connectivity have been clarified to include the development of infrastructure alongside housing delivery, and explicit reference to the Local Plan.
43. Many also pointed out the issues of traffic congestion and dominance in the town (with particular mention of Convent Junction). There was support expressed for better transport planning and infrastructure (for business as well as residents), the relief road, and better public transport.
44. A few respondents suggested a need for more/free parking. A thorough review of Chard town centre car parking – both public off-street car parks and free on-street spaces – was carried in the 2019 Transport & Movement Appraisal. This indicated that whilst on-street car parking was 77% utilised, the public car parks were only 35% utilised. It is therefore not considered necessary to update the Future Chard Strategy in relation to this suggestion.
45. Concerns over flooding were also raised at the consultation. The draft Strategy didn't mention flooding as it was mostly developed before the impactful events that Chard experienced in 2021. A new action has been added to the Strategy and Action Plan for partners to work together to address the flooding issues.
46. All of the existing recommended actions under the Housing & Connectivity priority theme drew support. There was a notably high proportion of respondents in favour of prioritising cycling and walking, in line with the recommendation to develop and deliver the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP).

Conclusion

47. Overall, the comments received during the public consultation are in support of the draft Strategy. Updates have been made to pick up the particular points set out above, and the new version of the Strategy and Action Plan are attached as Appendix A and B respectively.
48. It is recognised that Local Government Reorganisation means that SSDC will not be the main delivery agency. Some of the actions are already part of existing SSDC work plans or projects (e.g. HSHAZ), however, and the Strategy was designed to be delivered through partnership. It will remain highly relevant to the new Somerset Council, who will have the opportunity to take the lead in delivery.

Financial Implications

49. Once the final Strategy is adopted, should SSDC wish to begin delivery prior to Local Government Reorganisation, consideration will need to be given to funding its delivery, through the Council's financial planning processes. (Note that some actions are part of existing work plans or projects where funding is already identified.)
50. The Strategy will put SSDC and/or the new Somerset Council in a strong position to apply for future strategic funds, along the lines of Town Deals or Levelling Up, thereby attracting new resources.

Legal implications (if any) and details of Statutory Powers

51. None arising from this report.

Council Plan Implications

52. This strategy supports our ambitions for regeneration and improved economic prosperity within South Somerset, consistent with our stated areas of focus and priority projects.

Carbon Emissions and Climate Change Implications

53. None arising from this report, although we would expect future activities to be consistent with our stated ambitions around net zero by 2030.

Equality and Diversity Implications



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<i>An Equality Impact Relevance Check Form has been completed in respect of the Proposal?</i>	Yes
<i>The Impact Relevance Check indicated that a full EIA was required?</i>	No
<i>If an EIA was not required please attach the Impact Relevance Check Form as an Appendix to this report and provide a brief summary of its findings in the comments box below.</i>	
<i>If an EIA was required please attach the completed EIA form as an Appendix to this report and provide a brief summary of the result of your Equality Impact Assessment in the comment box below.</i>	
Additional Comments	
The strategy has been developed in close consultation with organisations in Chard, to ensure that different voices in the community have been represented. It has also been subject to formal public consultation, plus informal online and in-person to those who may not have been able to come to us (e.g. older people's luncheon club). However, as the Strategy's action plan with its associated projects and service are delivered these will need to be subject to their own Equality Impact Assessments.	

Privacy Impact Assessment

54. Consultation responses were made anonymously and have been aggregated for analysis, therefore there are no issues arising.

Background Papers

- Appendix A - Future Chard Strategy
- Appendix B – Future Chard Strategy Action Plan
- Appendix C – Social & Economic Baseline Report
- Appendix D – Equality Impact Relevance Check Form