

Review of Town Centres

Report of the Chairman of the Review – Cllr Peter Hurst (Portfolio; Planning & Transport and Economic Development and Tourism)

Recommended:

That the Council continues to support Andover and Romsey town centre through the measures identified in the Corporate Plan 2019 – 2023 (2019), the Revised Local Plan (2016) and the Economic Development Strategy (2017); and

- 1. That the Head of Planning & Building and the Head of Planning Policy investigate the application of Policy LE12 and Policy LE13 of the adopted Revised Local Plan (2016);**
- 2. That the Head of Planning & Building and the Head of Planning Policy investigate what measures could be introduced to help facilitate planning advice to those businesses whose premises are within Andover and Romsey town centre;**
- 3. That the Council continues to explore opportunities to secure funds to deliver public realm improvements;**
- 4. That the merits of a potential Romsey Business Improvement District be explored in the future, once the experience of Andover’s BID, as well as other BIDs, have been fully considered;**
- 5. That the Council investigate ways to support existing town centre businesses;**
- 6. That the merits of producing a town centre prospectus for each town be explored; and**
- 7. To put in place measures to allow shoppers and visitors to provide ongoing feedback of their experience.**

SUMMARY:

- This report considers the findings from a Review of the Town Centres. The review has focussed on the role that the Corporate Plan, Local Plan and Economic Development Strategy has in supporting our Town Centres and whether improvements could be made.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 Our town centres and high streets are facing significant challenges. Retail behaviour has changed, including the ever increasing rise of internet shopping, and people are looking to use their town centres differently. With the right support and direction these challenges can be seen as an opportunity to encourage transformation in our town centres, making them destinations for the whole community.

- 1.2 As such OSCOM agreed to establish a review of our town centres, led by Cllr Hurst, to investigate what the Council could do to help support our town centres. This review focussed on what role the Corporate Plan, Local Plan, and Economic Strategy could take in responding to these challenges.

2 Background

- 2.1 Like many town centres across the country, Andover and Romsey are experiencing the impacts of changing retail habits and the different ways in which our communities are using their high streets. The scale and the form of the challenge between the two towns are in some ways different. However, both towns recognise that an improved and diverse town centre is needed in order to futureproof themselves and ensure that they have the ability to reach their potential.
- 2.2 How to solve the challenges facing town centres has been the topic of many national studies and reports¹. The OSCOM review comes at a time when there are various measures being promoted by Government, agencies and representative groups to help support the role of town centres. One example of this is the Government's recent £675M Future High Street Fund.
- 2.3 This review concentrated on the experiences of Andover and Romsey as the two largest town centres within the Borough. However, some of the recommendations may also be applicable for Stockbridge and the smaller local centres within the Borough.

3 Council documents and strategies

- 3.1 The OSCOM review considered what key TVBC documents and policies, specifically the new Local Plan, Corporate Plan and Economic Development Strategy, currently do to respond to the challenges facing the High Street.

Corporate Plan – “Growing our Potential”

- 3.2 The Council's ambitions for our town centre are captured in our forthcoming Corporate Plan 'Growing our Potential'. To emphasise this the new Corporate Plan contains a new priority *“Growing the potential of our town centres”*. Engaging with thousands of residents as part of the preparation of this new Corporate Plan, the future of town centres was one of the issues that people felt most strongly about. In particular, they identified the impact of a declining town centre on the wider town and its communities. Residents said they wanted the Council to play a leading role in supporting town centres to become fit for the future; namely less focused on retail and offering a broader mix of uses and to be places where people will want to spend time.

¹ For example

The House of Commons, Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee Report, 'High streets and town centres in 2030'

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomloc/1010/1010.pdf>

- 3.3 The four aims of this priority look to future-proof the town centres by making them a more diverse place for people to live, shop and work. Part of this aspiration will be linked to improving the public realm. By making our town centres more attractive, it will encourage our communities and visitors to stay longer. Both Andover and Romsey are benefitting from improvements at Town Mills and the Market Place, respectively.
- 3.4 By providing the strategic vision for our town centres, the Corporate Plan gives a direction for other Council documents such as the Local Plan and the Economic Development Strategy. The Corporate Plan also dovetails with those objectives of both the Andover Vision and Romsey Future. An additional benefit of demonstrating the Council's commitment to the town centres is that it has the potential to help unlock additional sources of external funding. For example, through the Corporate Plan and the Council's own funding, it helped secure £512,000 from Enterprise M3 LEP and £533,000 from Hampshire County Council towards highway and public realm improvements at Town Mills/ Riverside Park, Andover.

Revised Local Plan

- 3.5 The National Planning Policy Framework and supporting guidance sets out that local planning authorities 'should plan positively and support town centres to be attractive, diverse places where people want to live, visit and work.' In drafting the Revised Local Plan (2016), a more flexible approach to town centre policies was taken than in previous local plans, in order to achieve the aims of this guidance. The approach the Council took was to loosen the boundaries of the primary shopping areas and to consolidate five primary shopping zones into one zone covering the respective town centres. This approach allowed the market to determine where particular uses locate with more freedom, rather than being restricted by policy.
- 3.6 In drafting the current Local Plan, there remained a desirability to encourage a high proportion of retail (A1 use class) whilst restricting other uses. This is set out in the Local Plan town centre policies (policy LE12 and policy LE13). The basis for this approach is that an over concentration of non A1 uses may lead to less active frontages and make areas less attractive to shoppers.
- 3.7 The Council has started the review into the next Local Plan. An Issues & Options document '*Our Future – How Do We Plan For It?*' was consulted upon in 2018. As part of this consultation the Council emphasised the changing character of our town centres and how this should be reflected in future policy. A specific question was asked relating to whether a more relaxed approach to uses should be allowed. A summary of the comments received are contained in annex 1.
- 3.8 Overlapping with the Local Plan is the focused projects of South of Romsey Town Centre Masterplan and Andover Town Centre Masterplan. These projects will bring forward mixed use proposals and help transform each town centre. To help inform both the Local Plan and these masterplans, a series of evidence based studies have been commissioned, including a study into retail and leisure provision, and public car park provision. This latter topic has been the subject of a separate OSCOM task and finish panel lead by Cllr Baverstock (March 2019).

- 3.9 Each town centre sits within designated Conservation Areas and has a number of listed buildings and other heritage assets and character features, such as waterways and green spaces. The Local Plan has specific policies for guiding proposals which may affect the historic environment. Retaining these features, as well as undertaking enhancements of the public realm, helps to attract people to the town centre and encourage them to stay longer.

The Economic Development Strategy 2017 – 2019 and beyond (2017)

- 3.10 The Economic Development Strategy contains six priorities including 'improving our town centre'. The strategy identifies a number of roles and activities which the Council undertakes to support town centres. This includes: recognising the importance of sufficient car parking, which have relatively low parking charges when compared to neighbouring centres and the provision of an Independent Retailer Grant.
- 3.11 Since the approval of the Strategy, the Council has played a key role in establishing a Business Improvement District for Andover (BID). The BID is very much in its infancy and its progress and success will be monitored.
- 3.12 The review recognises that the strategy covers the period to 2019 and beyond and that any future update will continue to include a section on town centres. This would maintain that complementary approach with the Local Plan and Corporate Plan.

4 Review

- 4.1 An OSCOM sponsored town centre workshop was held on Tuesday, 5 March 2019, at Crosfield Hall in Romsey. This workshop considered the changing nature of retail and the effect this will have on the future vitality of our town centres in Test Valley.
- 4.2 The workshop included a presentation by Professor Christopher Turner who chairs British BIDs, the national organisation focused entirely on Business Improvement Districts. He gave a perspective on current trends, predications and potential best practice from elsewhere.
- 4.3 The workshop discussions covered a wide breadth of issues and potential solutions. This included what measures could be taken to support town centres through planning; working with the business community; promotion/marketing; and the ability to adapt to a changing market. The notes of the workshop are contained in annex 2.

5 Future recommendations

- 5.1 Following the workshop, the review highlighted a number of recommendations which should be considered as part of bringing forward the Corporate Plan; Local Plan and Economic Development Strategy.

Corporate Plan

- 5.2 It is recognised that the corporate plan has yet to be approved by Council and it would be too premature to forecast the impact it will have. However, the review did consider that it was correct for town centres to have a central focus.
- 5.3 The Corporate Plan should be used as a springboard to achieve the wider ambitions for the Borough's town centres. This includes working together with stakeholders to enable these ambitions to be delivered. The Council's ongoing work with Andover Business Improvement District, Andover Vision and Romsey Future demonstrate that there is a sound basis for this to be achieved.

Local Plan

- 5.4 The review recognised that town centres focussed on retail will continue to struggle unless they have the ability to adapt and transform with a mix of uses. However, this has to be balanced against allowing unrestricted uses within the town centre which may have a detrimental impact.
- 5.5 The current local plan policies put limits on the overall percentage of retail (class A1) in each of the primary streets in the town centre. The policies also seek to prevent a run of contiguous non A1 premises from being established. It is for consideration whether such policies can continue to be relevant to the changing High Street environment. The workshop identified that the contribution that employees of businesses located in High Streets make should not be overlooked. This suggests that a better approach is to see any employment use as better than an empty premise waiting for a class A1 use and that a change of use class should be facilitated rather than restricted.
- 5.6 However any change of use together with any associated building works should ensure that High Street premises remain flexible and can readily be adapted to another business use in the future. This suggests that conversion of High Street business premises to residential should be limited. These conversions generally appear to be one way with very few residential premises, if any, ever being converted to business use.
- 5.7 This has to be balanced against the fact that some residential use in a High Street helps to increase vibrancy in particular in the evening and night economy. This balance will not be easy to manage.
- 5.8 Whilst the relevant policies for town centres and other planning issues (e.g. those relating to heritage) would be reviewed as part of the next Local Plan, the review recommends that officers explore how these policies are being applied currently and what measures can be introduced to assist our town centres in the interim, prior to the application of the policies of the next Local Plan.

- 5.9 The changing face of town centres has happened at a pace, often quicker than national planning guidance or Local Plan policies can react. Providing quick and sound advice is vital for enquiries from commercial agents/ businesses looking to bring forward different uses within our town centres. In addition to the interim policy review, the OSCOM review recommends exploring what resources/ practices could be put in place to help provide dedicated advice.
- 5.10 A common thread throughout the discussions was the importance of the public realm to people's experiences of the town centre. An attractive town centre encourages people to stay longer and potentially make better use of the shops and facilities. Coupled with public realm improvements are the need for clear connections both around the town centre and links to public transport and surrounding residential areas. The review recommends that the Council continues to explore opportunities to deliver these improvements through Andover Vision and Romsey Future and with other partners.

Economic Development Strategy

- 5.11 Whilst Economic Development is a discretionary function for the Council, the role that it has in helping town centres face the challenges should not be underestimated. The Council's economic development strategy complements the planning and corporate strategies by supporting and working with town centre businesses and their representatives. The strategy identifies a number of actions covering Andover Business Improvement District (BID); events and public realm improvements. These have all been progressed.
- 5.12 The Andover BID has recently been agreed. Part of the BID's requirements is that progress is monitored. This is a matter that should be reported back to OSCOM at a later date. The review also recommends that the merits of a Romsey BID be explored in the future, once the experience of Andover's BID, as well as other BIDs, have been fully considered.
- 5.13 The Council, through the Economic Development Officer, has a strong working relationship with the Town Centre Managers (TCM) for Andover and Romsey. Both TCMs are part funded by the Council. Their interaction between businesses, the Council and other key stakeholders is key to understanding the current issues that are faced. However, the review thought this good relationship could be built upon to establish an approach of 'business enabling' which would see the TCM and Council working in partnership to attract new business to the town centres, with senior officers and Cabinet members being at the forefront, whilst also gaining information and understanding of what factors current businesses face.
- 5.14 There is a need to have a detailed knowledge of existing High Street businesses. A database of all such businesses should be built up. This should include, inter alia, where they are located, how many employees, how they are doing, what their needs are and contact details.

- 5.15 This database will help to fill one identified gap in our knowledge which is an understanding of the reasons why businesses make their decision to stay or leave our towns. Whilst recognising that there may be many variables, having a better understanding of their needs and improved ongoing communication between all businesses, the TCM, the BID and the Council may identify their reasons and clarify the areas for improvement. The database will also help the Council to promote the two town centres in a more proactive way so that businesses are encouraged to relocate here. The review recommended that the merits of a prospectus for each town centre also be explored.
- 5.16 Coupled with understanding the issues facing businesses is the need to understand peoples positive and negative attitudes to the two town centres. The Council has previously commissioned consultants to undertake surveys² and these provide valuable snap shots of patterns of use. However, the review recommended that the Council and other key partners (e.g. Andover BID) put in place measures to provide 'live feedback' on why people are coming, or not, to the town centre. This qualitative data would help monitor opinion and provide a quicker response to changing habits.

6 Conclusion

- 6.1 Our town centres are facing significant challenges. The Council has a leading role in supporting them to adapt to the changing customer behaviour and economic challenges. This review explored how the Council's Corporate Plan, Local Plan and Economic Development Strategy are supporting our town centres through developing collaborative partnerships, investing in the public realm, and exploring ways to secure external funding.
- 6.2 The report recommends areas for further investigation particularly around the planning process and the promotion of our town centres.

<u>Background Papers (Local Government Act 1972 Section 100D)</u> Corporate Plan (2019) Revised Local Plan (2016) Economic Development Strategy (2017)			
<u>Confidentiality</u> 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:	2		
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² Andover and Romsey Retail Capacity and Leisure Study. Carter Jonas (2018)
Romsey Town Centre Study. University of Southampton (2011)