

Town Centre Strategy Update

Timetable	
Meeting	Date
ERLPAC	4 April 2023
Executive	18 April 2023

Will this be a Key Decision?	Yes
Urgency	Not Applicable
Final Decision-Maker	EXECUTIVE
Lead Head of Service	Alison Broom, Chief Executive
Lead Officer and Report Author	Karen Britton, Head of Spatial Planning and Economic Development
Classification	Public
Wards affected	All, with particular impact for Bridge, High Street, East, Fant and North wards

Executive Summary

This report provides an update on the preparation of a Town Centre Strategy for Maidstone and sets out recommendations to the Executive on the proposed seven key areas for focus, proposed higher level spatial framework and missions that have emerged from the initial phase of analytical work. These will be used to inform the preparation of the draft Town Centre Strategy, which is expected will be ready for consultation during the Summer.

Purpose of Report

Decision

This report makes the following recommendations to the Executive:

1. That the update on progress towards producing a Town Centre Strategy for Maidstone town centre be noted; and
2. That the proposed higher level spatial framework, seven key areas of focus and the missions that have emerged from the analytical phase of work be agreed.

Town Centre Strategy Update

1. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
Impact on Corporate Priorities	<p>The four Strategic Plan objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embracing Growth and Enabling Infrastructure • Safe, Clean and Green • Homes and Communities • A Thriving Place <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accepting the recommendations will materially improve the Council's ability to achieve all corporate priorities; embracing growth and enabling infrastructure, Maidstone being a thriving place, safe clean and green and homes and communities. 	Chief Executive
Cross Cutting Objectives	<p>The four cross-cutting objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heritage is Respected • Health Inequalities are Addressed and Reduced • Deprivation and Social Mobility is Improved • Biodiversity and Environmental Sustainability is respected <p>The report recommendations support the achievement of the cross-cutting objectives.</p>	Chief Executive
Risk Management	Already covered in the risk section	Chief Executive
Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The proposals set out in the recommendation are all within already approved budgetary headings and so need no new funding for implementation. 	Section 151 Officer & Finance Team
Staffing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Budget has already been agreed to fund expertise from consultants to assist with preparing the Town Centre 	Chief Executive

	Strategy.	
Legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Local Government Act 1972, the Local Government Act 2003 and the Localism Act 2011 enable the Council to do anything which is calculated to facilitate, or is conducive or incidental to, the discharge of any of their functions. The recommendations are in accordance with the powers under the Council's Constitution. 	Interim Team Leader (Contentious and Corporate Governance)
Information Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The recommendations do not impact personal information (as defined in UK GDPR and Data Protection Act 2018) the Council processes. 	Information Governance Team
Equalities	The Town Centre Strategy once produced may impact on service delivery and a judgement will be made about the need for an Equalities Impact Assessment when consideration is given to adopting the Strategy.	Equalities & Communities Officer
Public Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We recognise that the recommendations will have a positive impact on population health or that of individuals. 	Public Health Officer
Crime and Disorder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We recognise that the recommendations may ultimately have a positive impact on community safety as the Council endeavours to incorporate a reduction in crime and disorder in all relevant strategies and policies. 	Head of Service or Manager
Procurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Council has already undertaken procurement and completed that exercise in line with financial procedure rules. 	Head of Service & Section 151 Officer
Biodiversity and Climate Change	<p>The implications of this report on biodiversity and climate change have been considered and;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are no implications on biodiversity and climate change, however the Town Centre Strategy will ultimately address these issues. 	Biodiversity and Climate Change Officer

2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Town Centres are always evolving to reflect changing needs and uses. Maidstone Town Centre is the social and economic heart of the Borough. It provides employment, leisure, retail and business/professional services for the Borough and beyond. The town centre is also home to a very significant residential population, therefore it also acts as a local centre to meet residents' daily needs.
- 2.2 In recent years, Maidstone town centre, like many others across the country, has experienced challenges as a result of changing retail patterns and different business needs. These challenges were exacerbated by the COVID 19 pandemic and it has been recognised nationally that town centres need support, in order to thrive and meet the needs of residents, visitors and businesses both now and in the future.
- 2.3 During 2021, Maidstone Borough Council started to consider the preparation of a Town Centre Strategy. The following committees considered the potential scope of the strategy - Strategic Planning and Infrastructure Committee 9th November 2021, Economic Regeneration and Leisure Committee 16th November 2021, Communities, Housing and Environment Committee 30th November 2021 and together these Committees helped to inform the brief for this work. On 23rd March 2022 Policy and Resources Committee approved an updated scope, workstreams, governance and an engagement strategy to inform the procurement of specialist consultants to assist officers with this work.
- 2.4 On 4th October 2022, the Economic, Regeneration and Leisure Policy Advisory Committee supported the procurement of specialist consultants to work alongside officers, members and stakeholders to prepare a member-led Town Centre Strategy. The Executive then approved the procurement on 26th October 2022 and in December 2022 consultants We Made That were appointed.
- 2.5 The consultants are tasked with providing specialist advice, working with officers, members and stakeholders to prepare a member led Town Centre Strategy and Delivery Plan, an Open Space Improvement Plan, a Lighting Plan for Maidstone and an Inward Investment Plan. Once finalised, the Town Centre Strategy will provide a 30 year vision and direction for the town centre. It will provide potential investors with confidence to invest in the area and will support bids to Government and other organisations to lever in funding to assist with delivery, so that Maidstone continues to thrive and provide a vibrant place to live, work, invest and visit.

Progress Update

- 2.6 A number of key challenges and "must get right" issues were identified at the beginning of We Made That's commission:
- i. Political buy-in and cross-party engagement with politicians with short, medium and long term goals; this will be achieved through

engagement with the executive, presence at Policy Advisory Committees and a series of themed stakeholder sessions including town centre organisations such as the Business Improvement District

- ii. Supporting, strengthening and expanding the arts and culture sector including consideration of the twilight economy; this will be achieved through engagement with the arts and culture sector to identify issues and opportunities, reassessment of outdoor spaces, lighting and pedestrian connections to support access and safety
- iii. Consolidating the town centre retail offer to support footfall and the town centre offer, particularly for families; this will be achieved by identifying opportunities for strengthening the town centre retail offer by potentially relocating them closer to each other and re-purposing existing sites to other uses that would support a sustainable, vibrant town centre
- iv. Ensuring Maidstone's role as a county town, a place where existing residents of the borough as well as new planned communities will gravitate towards for a high-quality town centre experience and offer; this will be achieved by creating an offer that competes in quality with other Kent towns, drawing visitors from the borough and beyond. Ensuring good access opportunities and a diversified offer to raise footfall and time spent in the town centre
- v. Rich building heritage with collections of valuable listed buildings, often dis-jointed by infrastructure and other changes that have adversely affected the setting and coherence of the town; this will be achieved by consideration of the different heritage assets as a whole and identification of ways to unify both the assets and the experience of them as one
- vi. Activation of the river and creating a rich, diverse offer alongside it, based on recreation and leisure including an audit of existing green spaces; this will be achieved by developing a deliverable plan for a riverbank culture, including high quality pedestrian routes and destinations; safeguarding the river edges of Opportunity Sites for leisure and recreation and delivering a lighting and green space feasibility study (which will be implemented via the UK Shared Prosperity Fund)
- vii. Good transport policies but a relatively poor track record of delivery and outdated gyratory roads which create severance between different parts of the town centre; this will be addressed by producing a comprehensive movement plan that will support a sustainable and deliverable transport vision

2.7 Since December 2022, officers have worked with the consultants to undertake data collection and analysis to develop a comprehensive, detailed understanding of the town centre. This has included initial scoping of work (stage 1) and a review of social, economic and environmental issues and engagement with key stakeholders (stage 2). This has included two deep dive workshops with stakeholders on 28

February and 1 March 2023 where topics discussed ranged from the need to improve health and wellbeing generally, through to design and technology, housing, town centre uses, access and public transport. Those attending included, for example the NHS, Kent County Council and Clinical Commissioning Group. A walkabout with Cabinet was held on 18 January 2023, followed by a discussion with Cabinet on 22 February 2023 about emerging issues.

2.8 All this fact finding, analysis and discussions have led to proposed **seven key areas for focus:**

- Maidstone's Role as County Town
- Town Centre Diversification
- Nationally Significant Heritage
- Transport Infrastructure
- Public Realm and Green Spaces
- Active Riverside
- Health and Wellbeing

2.9 These key areas for focus recognise that Maidstone town centre needs to:

- Be ambitious for the future
- Be adaptable to change and growth
- Diversify the land uses in the town centre
- Make the most of the town's rich nationally significant heritage
- Create an active riverside, making the most of the river
- Improve and enhance transport infrastructure
- Deliver high quality public realm and green space
- Embed health and wellbeing, the environment and climate change as golden threads that run through all future plans and projects in the town centre.

Proposed Higher Level Spatial Framework and Missions

2.10 From the analysis of information and engagement that has taken place to date, a proposed higher level spatial framework and missions for Maidstone Town Centre have also been developed. The proposed framework can be found at Appendix 1, which provides a synthesis of town centre information identifying key areas and connectivity. This is early work and will be developed further to inform the preparation of the draft Town Centre Strategy. The proposed missions are set out below.

Proposed Missions

2.11 Mission 1 - Maidstone as a County Town for the future:

- Maidstone to be Kent's most prosperous town centre:
 - Being the business capital of Kent
 - Desirable and high quality new mixed-use neighbourhoods
 - A diverse town centre offering which serves residents and attracts visitors
 - Best in county cultural and civic facilities

2.12 Mission 2 - Environmental and Placemaking Excellence:

- Maidstone to be known for its high quality places, heritage and green and blue spaces with:
 - Award-winning heritage areas which are active and easy to access for both residents and visitors
 - Attractive and connected public realm with exemplary environmental performance
 - A safe, connected and active riverside, serving leisure, commercial and environmental purposes

2.13 Mission 3 - High Quality of Life for All:

- Maidstone to be a desirable place to live with:
 - A low crime rate
 - High number of diverse jobs for local people
 - Great travel connections within the town, the surrounding area, and to London and beyond
 - Varied and high-quality leisure and entertainment offering

Next Steps

2.14 Together, the proposed seven key areas for focus, proposed higher level spatial framework and proposed missions provide the basis for further work to be developed, which will take place until Summer 2023 to prepare a draft Town Centre Strategy. Other work will also take place to start preparing an Open Space Improvement Plan, a Lighting Plan for Maidstone and an Inward Investment Plan. This suite of work will include considering the viability of different proposals.

2.15 Maidstone Borough Council have also been successful in securing funding from the Government's UK Shared Prosperity Fund towards town centre improvements. This will include green space and lighting improvements, alongside other town centre initiatives. The preparation of the town centre suite of work and funding will be coordinated to ensure that Maidstone considers all issues and opportunities holistically and maximises the benefits to the town centre, residents, businesses and visitors.

2.16 The draft Town Centre Strategy will be prepared over the coming months and brought back to a future Committee and Executive for approval, before wider public engagement this Summer.

3. AVAILABLE OPTIONS

3.1 **Option 1** – that the recommendations set out in this report are supported; the merit of this option is that the Town Centre Strategy work can be progressed quickly to enable a draft Strategy to be prepared by the summer.

3.2 **Option 2** - that the recommendations set out in the report are supported and agree an alternative approach; the impact of this is that the

recommendations have been developed from the information analysis and discussions that have taken place to date, which has included the input of stakeholders, so any amendments would need very careful consideration to ensure they are supported by the evidence.

4. PREFERRED OPTION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 Option 1. That the recommendations in this report be supported to enable a draft Town Centre Strategy to be prepared by the summer.
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5. RISK

- 5.1 The risks associated with this proposal, including the risks if the Council does not act as recommended, have been considered in line with the Council's Risk Management Framework. We are satisfied that the risks associated are within the Council's risk appetite and will be managed as per the Policy.
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6. CONSULTATION RESULTS AND PREVIOUS COMMITTEE FEEDBACK

- 6.1 A number of committees and Executive have considered the preparation of the Town Centre Strategy, along with a walkabout and discussion held with Cabinet and ward members and these are highlighted at paragraphs 2.3 and 2.4. Members have to date supported the preparation of the Town Centre Strategy and suite of work.
- 6.2 Once a draft Town Centre Strategy has been prepared, this will be consulted on (anticipated Summer 2023). The timetable for the preparation of the Town Centre Strategy is set out in Appendix 2.
- 6.3 This issue was considered by the Economic Regeneration and Leisure Policy Advisory Committee at its meeting held on 4 April 2023. It was pointed out that the wards affected also included Bridge ward and that some minor typographical and formatting changes were needed in relation to Missions 2 and 3. The Committee supported the recommendations set out in the report subject to these changes which are accepted and have been incorporated.
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7. NEXT STEPS: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION

- 7.1 If the recommendations are agreed, work will progress to prepare a Town Centre Strategy
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8. REPORT APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Proposed higher level spatial framework

Appendix 2: Town Centre Strategy Timetable

9. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None