

MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

RECORD OF DECISION OF CABINET

Decision Made: 20 December 2023

Town Centre Strategy Update

Issue for Decision

The report provides an update on the preparation of the Maidstone Town Centre Strategy and sets out the proposed next steps.

Decision Made

That:

1. The update report be noted; and
2. The next steps, set out in Section 3 of the report, for the development of the Maidstone Town Centre Strategy be approved.

Reasons for Decision

Maidstone has a successful town centre, but there are increasing challenges and scope for improvement. The Local Plan sets out a comprehensive description of its role, character, strengths and areas for development. Through the Town Centre Strategy our aim is to demonstrate how we can transform the offer, vitality and viability of Maidstone town centre including its employment, retail, residential, leisure, cultural and tourism functions and significantly enhance its public realm, historic and natural environment, including the riverside.

As the largest and most sustainable location for growth, Maidstone town centre is the focus for a significant proportion of new housing, employment and retail development in the borough. Our Local Plan identifies this through a combination of site allocations and identified broad locations. Development in the town centre will deliver in the region of 2,500 new homes by 2038, alongside complementary commercial and retail/food and drink floorspace.

Community, cultural and tourism facilities are a really important contributor to the success of the town centre and we will also identify opportunities to retain and enhance existing facilities, including Maidstone Museum and the Hazlitt Theatre.

The new Town Centre Strategy is needed to guide future development, including diversifying the economic base, ensuring that any housing growth is balanced by employment opportunities and complemented by new infrastructure, that sustainability and environmental quality are improved and to provide a canvas for activity and events to enhance the experience for town centre residents and businesses, the borough's communities more widely and visitors.

As the county town, Maidstone has a strong and dynamic presence in Kent and it

is important that we continue to manage and enhance what the town centre offers, so that it continues to thrive for the future.

What we want the town centre strategy to achieve

The purpose of the Maidstone Town Centre Strategy is to establish and provide clarity on the long-term vision for the town centre to 2050 -complemented by a comprehensive delivery plan to achieve this and an inward investment plan to enable Maidstone Borough Council (MBC) to engage with current land and property owners and potential investors.

Following extensive engagement with elected members, the council established that the aim is for the strategy to guide improvements and development in the town centre with a focus on:

- Strengthening the economic base of the town centre
- Bringing about the re-invention and renaissance of Maidstone town centre as an exemplar of sustainability and design
- Heritage, arts, culture, leisure and the visitor economy, including the evening economy
- Creating a place where people want to live and feel safe, including in the public realm
- Having an equal emphasis upon the town centre as the County Town, including as a district/regional destination for those visiting it from within the borough and beyond and its role as a local centre for those who live in the town centre or in the surrounding area.

The Strategy will:

- Guide regeneration, development and investment (including directly by Maidstone Borough Council)
- Guide infrastructure provision
- In the short / medium term enable the provision of support to town centre communities and businesses in continuing to recover from, and respond to, the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and a post Brexit economy
- Enable proactive management of potential change in land uses resulting from the relaxation of national planning rules
- Be complemented in the short term by investment of resources via the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (around £1m) and Safer Streets Fund (£.56m)

The Strategy will be used to:

- Complement the current Local Plan Review and inform the next plan, potentially being developed into a Development Plan Document
- Deliver actions of the Economic Development Strategy (adopted 2021) particularly Priority 5 "Destination Maidstone Town Centre"

- Inform actions and projects undertaken to achieve the future vision
- Inform future bids for funding, including through Levelling Up
- Promote inward investment into the town centre.

At the outset of developing the Strategy, the four core priorities of the Council's Strategic Plan (2019-2045) and cross cutting objectives were considered. The core priorities are:

- Embracing Growth and Enabling Infrastructure
- Safe, Clean and Green
- Thriving Place
- Homes and Communities

Our cross-cutting objectives are:

- Heritage is respected
- Health inequalities are addressed and reduced
- Deprivation is reduced and social mobility improved
- Biodiversity and environmental sustainability are respected

Several key challenges and 'must get right' issues were then identified that need to be addressed, as follows:

- i. Political buy-in and cross-party engagement with politicians with short-, medium- and long-term goals
- ii. Supporting, strengthening and expanding the arts and culture sector including consideration of the twilight economy
- 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
- v. Rich building heritage with collections of valuable listed buildings, often disjointed by infrastructure and other changes that have adversely affected the setting and coherence of the town
- vi. Activation of the river and creating a rich, diverse offer alongside it, based on recreation and leisure, including an audit of existing green space
- 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

Work to prepare the draft Town Centre Strategy to date has included a thorough interdisciplinary baseline assessment, the findings of which will be summarised in a range of documents - baseline appraisal, heritage baseline report, transport baseline report, market assessment and four strategies covering green and open spaces, lighting, movement and community infrastructure. These all form the evidence base for the draft Town Centre Strategy and when all work is completed in due course, that evidence will be made available as background information via the council's web site, sitting alongside the draft strategy.

The Maidstone town centre's challenge is set out below along with a summary of progress and proposed next steps. The key challenge is to positively embrace future growth and create a distinct identity for the town centre as an exemplary sustainable, safe and joyful place to live, do business and visit, make the best of the town centre's wonderful built, natural and community assets including heritage complexes of national significance, the River Medway and vibrant resident and interest groups and recapture its vitality, modernise and strengthen its resilience so that it continues to be a great place to live, work in and visit.

The process so far has included extensive research and engagement with a wide range of stakeholders; it has enabled a better understanding of challenges and potential routes to sustaining and improving the town centre and at the same time served to demonstrate that further research, exploration of options for the future and targeted engagement would be helpful before a draft Strategy is formulated for wide public consultation.

Missions and Objectives

In April 2023 the Executive considered and agreed three Missions to underpin development of the Town Centre Strategy. These have been the backbone of the development of key workstreams to date and consequent strategy work covering movement/transport, green and open space, lighting and community infrastructure.

The Missions are:

Mission 1 – Become a county town for the future

Mission 2 – Re-connect beautiful, sustainable and historic places

Mission 3 - Guarantee well-being for all

The draft Town Centre Strategy will propose the overarching objective for each mission and what we are setting out to achieve.

Mission 1 - Become a county town for the future. The objective is for Maidstone to be Kent's most prosperous Town Centre; work has been undertaken to inform options that could

- Strengthen the retail core as a diverse, active, safe and inclusive daytime and night-time destination.
- Create new employment and business opportunities including those which allow residents to learn new skills and businesses to form and grow.

- Respond to the planned increase the number of people living in the Town Centre and ensure that it can provide for their everyday needs. This reflects the decisions already made by the Council and reflected first in the Local Plan adopted in 2017 and the subsequent Local Plan Review. The Local Plan Review expects in the region of 2,500 new homes to be provided in the town centre by 2038. These are to come from several identified sites within the town centre including opportunity sites with existing adopted policies at Len House, Maidstone East, Maidstone Riverside, Maidstone West and Mote Road (a total of 1,716 new homes), as well as more generally from the town centre as a broad location (789). Also of relevance is residential development on the periphery of the town centre. Development is already underway along the eastern riverside at Springfield with further development planned on the library site and Invicta Barracks is an established allocation for a further 1,300 homes. This creates opportunities for the town in terms of activity and potential spend and challenges in terms of the need for local services and creating a place with a good quality of life.
- Expand educational opportunities within the Town Centre, including higher education.

Mission 2 – Re-connect beautiful, sustainable and historic places. The objective is that Maidstone’s streets, spaces and places celebrate the Town Centre’s rich heritage and to help the Council achieve its goal to be carbon neutral so that the town flourishes over the long term. Work has been undertaken to inform options that could

- Enhance the visibility and interpretation of the rich heritage of the town centre including the potential for the whole of the town centre from All Saints to Sessions House to work as one connected historic environment and exemplifying pride of place.
- Make it safer, quicker and more accessible to walk, wheel and cycle to and around the town centre.
- Ensure that the town centre is easy and desirable to visit from within the borough, county and beyond.
- Utilise current and future technologies to transform today, ready for tomorrow.

Mission 3 - Guarantee well-being for all. The objective is for Maidstone to be a source of pride for residents and a place that supports their physical and mental wellbeing through actions that could

- Enhance the river Medway as a destination and route.
- Transform streets and spaces to ensure a healthy and enjoyable environment in a warming climate.
- Provide best-in-county health services which cater for all Maidstone’s communities.

- Support Maidstone's vibrant art and community group.

Link to UK Shared Prosperity Fund

The UK Shared Prosperity Fund was introduced with effect from 2022/3 for the period to 2024/5 to support the UK Government's commitment to level up all parts of the UK by delivering on each of the four parts of their strategy i.e.

- Boost productivity, pay, jobs and living standards, especially in those places where they are lagging.
- Spread opportunities and improve public services, especially in those places where they are weakest.
- Restore a sense of community, local pride and belonging, especially in those places where they have been lost.
- Empower local leaders and communities, especially in those places lacking local agency.

The primary goal of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund is to build pride in place and increase life chances across the UK. This aligns with Levelling Up White Paper missions, particularly: 'By 2030, pride in place, such as people's satisfaction with their town centre and engagement in local culture and community, will have risen in every area of the UK, with the gap between the top performing and other areas closing'.

Maidstone has been awarded £1,199,253 through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to spend by March 31st 2025 and of this £417,003 has been allocated to projects associated with the Town Centre Strategy; this included £20,817 towards the appointment of consultants to develop a greening and lighting strategy for the Town Centre. £396,186 was allocated for the period 24/25 to deliver projects in the town centre on lighting and public realm. In addition, £111,298 was allocated for projects focussed on the creation and improvement of green spaces in the town centre within the same period.

This totals £507,484 to deliver projects from the lighting and green and open spaces strategies in 2024/25. This is a short time frame for delivery and the Council will receive funding in April 2024, which must be spent by March 2025. As the funding is allocated and agreed, the Council can spend in advance of receiving funding, and in order to ensure that all projects are delivered by the March 2025 deadline, the period between late 2023 and early 2024 will be spent prioritising, commissioning work, undertaking any feasibility works and designing schemes. A separate report is being presented to PIED PAC on 7 December 2023 on the lighting and green and open space strategy and associated project priorities for funding.

Key Workstreams to date

To articulate how the three Missions could be achieved, work has been undertaken so far through a series of workstreams to inform translation of the Missions into practical actions through identification of deliverable projects. These workstreams are

- Movement
- Green and open spaces
- Lighting
- Community infrastructure.

The aims to date for the Movement and Community Infrastructure Strategies are summarised below. The Green and Open Space and Lighting Strategies are set out in the separate committee report.

Movement Strategy

The proposed aim is for Maidstone town centre to be highly accessible to the boroughs' residents and visitors offering high quality public realm which connects people, goods, and services. The transport network will offer a safe and pleasant environment which supports sustainable and active travel. It will also embrace future travel innovations to capture the benefits offered, including low carbon and low emissions, to reduce the impact vehicle traffic on people and its historic buildings. The Movement Strategy will consider all types of movement through the town centre and puts forward proposals to improve provision for walking, wheeling, public transport, motor vehicle access including looking at better management to limit congestion and impacts on air quality and enhance the look and feel of the public realm, arrangements for deliveries and servicing, car parking and consideration of potential future needs to ensure that the town centre is capable of adapting to and embracing new technologies. It is recognised that post-covid, vehicle traffic amounts and patterns within Maidstone, as with other towns, appear to have changed and this may provide opportunities to enhance the pedestrian and cyclist movement experience.

Draft work has been shared with Kent County Council as the transport and highway authority. Our dialogue has been productive and covered both taking a strategic approach to adapting the town centre transport systems to support our long-term strategy to 2050 and collaboration to address detailed changes over this 25+ year period at specific locations. While it is appreciated that much further work is needed to model and design changes this will need to be considered in the context of the overall transformational aims for Maidstone town centre to accentuate its role as the county town, emphasise its heritage assets, accommodate significant residential growth, diversify town centre uses to enhance prosperity and achieve excellent environmental quality and connectivity. We recognise that the Movement Strategy for the town centre will also need to be aligned with the Maidstone Integrated Transport Strategy. This will be subject to review commencing in 2024 and the scope for this was considered by the Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development Policy Advisory Committee on 6th September 2023.

Community Infrastructure

The borough's population is growing. Between 2011 and 2021 the number of residents increased by 13.3%; growth is forecast to continue and is associated with the need for significantly more housing including in and around the town centre. Complementary community infrastructure is needed to provide the venues for services for residents, including health and to lift the cultural, arts and leisure offer of the town centre for the wider population too. Achieving this will

diversify the land and building uses in the town centre, strengthen the town centre economy and build its resilience for the future.

The draft strategy is still being developed but initial findings envisage the introduction of new health and education provision and adaptive re-use of existing buildings to become arts and creative maker spaces. The latter would build on the latent capacity in the creative sector in the borough. In the development of the draft strategy there have already been productive conversations with key partners including the Integrated Care Board (ICB) and West Kent Health and Care Partnership (WKH&CP), Mid Kent College (MKC), Kent County Council, the local arts forum, voluntary sector and churches network. It is encouraging to see appetite for working with MBC to secure new and improved community infrastructure.

We recognise that the ICB are currently developing a new Kent and Medway Estates Strategy and that the WKH&CP are doing the same for their area and that any revised or additional provision of services and the associated health estate in the town centre would need to align with the ICB's strategy. The need for an additional GP practice has already been established and provision could be made at Maidstone East; the potential need for an early treatment centre to complement existing primary care services has also been identified and the council will continue to use its best endeavours to facilitate this being established. There are also early indications of the potential for MKC to develop its offer for performing and creative arts students in the town drawing on experience of similar development in Medway.

Engagement to Date

Since We Made That consultants were employed in December 2022, officers have worked with them to undertake data collection and analysis to develop a comprehensive, detailed understanding of the town centre. This included initial scoping of work (stage 1) and a review of social, economic and environmental issues and engagement with key stakeholders (stage 2). This 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.

In mid-2023 a town centre user group was formed with attendees from town centre wards. Several walkabouts have also been held to look at key sites and areas of change - these were held with Cabinet, members of the town centre user group and with officers. These walkabouts have continued as the accompanying strategies have been developed, allowing further exploration of lighting and heritage, for example. Two local business engagement workshops were also held to explore business needs.

Officers have also met with key stakeholders to get a greater understanding of different organisations issues in relation to the town centre. Overall, there has been support in principle for the creation of a strategy with some specific areas of challenge or particular interest, for example:

- Mid Kent College is keen to investigate space for arts, as they are seeing

increased demand for performance studies. Interest in greater support for the arts space has been echoed by voices in the faith, arts and event sectors.

- The Environment Agency is supportive of projects that enhance biodiversity and greening. Projects need to ensure wildlife corridors are maintained and any projects proposing lighting along the river need to include an impact assessment on fish.
- Historic England is particularly supportive of the aims to improve the area around the Archbishop's Palace and All Saints Church and improved connectivity to the rest of the town centre.
- Voluntary sector representatives welcomed the acknowledgement of the challenges for residents in the town centre and were keen to support engagement. They also welcomed the support for arts, but suggested there could be a start-up/support space for small charities who need space in the town centre.

NEXT STEPS

At this stage, it is important to highlight that having got this far in preparing a new Town Centre Strategy and learning more about issues as this work has progressed, we are now at the stage of reviewing work against the "must get right issues", in order to ensure we have sufficient information and evidence and have thoroughly considered everything. It is important that we get things right.

The following sets out some of the areas that we have already identified where more work is required before a draft centre strategy can be prepared and is ready for public consultation.

The town centre economy: it is recognised that before and since covid, our town centres nationally have been changing and so have our working and shopping habits, with increased flexible and home working and more online shopping. Town centres need to be flexible, to change and adapt. While work to date has yielded knowledge of changes in the retail, office and other economic sectors relevant to the town centre further work is required to provide a deeper dive into the impact and consequences of both historical and anticipated future changes.

This includes:

- Looking further into retail change for the core of the town centre and retail located currently on the west bank of the river Medway including consideration of change to our spatial retail policy
- Further consideration of the consequences of and options for responses to any future contraction in retail floorspace in the core of the town centre
- More consideration of the actions required for diversification of economic uses and activity for sectors where significant potential has been identified including for the introduction of creative and maker space and expansion and strengthening of the town's cultural offer.

Creating high quality town centre living; many people already live within Maidstone Town Centre and implementation of decisions already made for new

homes will lead to significant growth in the town centre residential population over the lifetime of the town centre strategy. We need to further consider how new homes and spaces can be better designed and community infrastructure planned and delivered to provide high quality, sustainable and viable places to live both for our new and established town centre residents. Further work includes:

- A “Big Conversation” with councillors using case study-based learning to develop greater understanding of the viability of town centre residential development and translation of how the principles of good sustainable design can be achieved, including construction methodology considerations, in the context of Maidstone town centre.
- Further collaboration with providers of community infrastructure and services including the Integrated Care Board (with strategic responsibility amongst other things for health provision) and health care providers e.g. the Kent Community Health Foundation Trust and Primary Care Networks to secure the services that residents need.

Development of our current workstreams this will include:

- Heritage – Maidstone has a wealth of heritage assets, but these are not always used to maximum effect; the All Saints and Brenchley Gardens/Museum areas, for example provide heritage anchors to the town and these areas and their connectivity with the town centre require further consideration. The development of a heritage strategy would complement the town centre strategy to bring the town’s heritage into greater focus and unlock potential funding opportunities.
- Leisure and Hospitality – licensing regulation policy needs to be considered, along with recognition of changing behaviour patterns among younger people. We need to engage younger people to seek their views on what functions they see the town centre providing in the future. We also need to recognise and consider the evolving cultural mix.
- Infrastructure, including Community Infrastructure – is vital to making a place work. A lot of work has already been undertaken to consider the infrastructure needs of residents, workers and visitors, but now is a good time, as covered above, to re-visit this issue to ensure the draft town centre strategy fully captures these needs. This will be complemented by consideration of infrastructure to support economic activity, including power and water.
- Creative and culture – work has already been undertaken to consider our creative and cultural sectors; however further work is needed to look into this in greater detail, for example is there demand for maker space in the town.
- Transport - as part of the work on movement and residential development it has become clear that we need to review our town centre parking strategy. There is also a need to focus attention on improving use of our urban traffic control system to investigate/assess more precisely how we

maintain suitable traffic circulation while contemplating changes in capacity at specific junctions and improvement in provision for sustainable travel.

Stakeholder and public engagement; we will

- Build on and sustain engagement with businesses, landowners, public sector partners including Kent County Council, Kent Police, health and housing providers and community networks e.g. the churches network. After Cabinet's consideration of this update report we will also update these stakeholders.
- Engagement will be developed particularly with young people and seldom heard communities so that we capture their views, ideas and aspirations for the future Maidstone town centre.

Opportunities for member participation and engagement; these will include:

- Continuation of the town centre user group; the composition of this group will need to be reviewed after the election in May 2024 and arrangements will be made for regular monthly updates.
- Participation in workstream specific topics open to all members; in the short term these will include:
 - discussion of the future of retail and economic diversification for the town centre
 - workshops concerning the delivery of town centre homes and a great place to live.
- Business as usual consideration of recommendations to be made to the Cabinet via the policy advisory committees and overview and scrutiny committee.

The anticipated timings for the next steps during 2024 are set out in the following table, where shading signifies expected timescales for work to be undertaken and an expectation that the draft Town Centre Strategy will be ready for wider public consultation in late 2024. It should be highlighted that this is not an exhaustive list of every task but includes some key actions that are proposed. Engagement will occur throughout the preparation of this important work.

Next Steps in 2024	January – June	July - December
Town centre economy - including retail, employment and the west bank of the Medway		
High quality living - including residential viability, design and community infrastructure		
Heritage – including preparation of a heritage strategy		
Creative and culture - including looking at demand for maker space		
Leisure and Hospitality – including considering licensing and engaging young people		
Transport and Movement - including preparing a new town centre car parking strategy and investigating the urban traffic control system		
Engagement - including stakeholder and member engagement		

We also need to consider how complementary improvements could be made for the evolution and management of activity in the town alongside development and regeneration, for example this might include through review of licensing policy and enforcement. Longer term custodianship of the town, for example through establishing a Maidstone town council, could also be a consideration.

Numerous committees and Executive have considered the preparation of the draft Town Centre Strategy to date. There have also been walkabouts of the town centre during the day and after dark with members; an all councillor briefing has been held and discussions with Cabinet and ward members, as highlighted in the body of this report. 7.2 The matter was considered by the

Planning Infrastructure and Economic Development Policy Advisory Committee on 7 December 2023, with support expressed for the report recommendations.

Alternatives considered and why rejected

Option 2 - that the recommendations set out in the report are supported, subject to amendments to the next steps.

The impact of this is that the recommendations to date have been developed from the information analysis and discussions that have taken place with key stakeholders. Any amendments to the next steps would need very careful consideration with respect to resources needed and delay the publication of the consultation.

Option 3 – Do nothing

Much work has already been undertaken to prepare a consultation draft Town Centre Strategy, including numerous consultations informally with key stakeholders. Doing nothing more at this stage would reflect badly on the reputation of the Council and could also lead to a loss of potential future funding opportunities from outside bodies.

These options were rejected the agreed recommendations received cross party support from the Planning, Infrastructure and Economic Development Policy Advisory Committee.

Background Papers

None

I have read and approved the above decision for the reasons (including possible alternative options rejected) as set out above.

Signed: 

Councillor Paul Cooper, Deputy Leader of the Council

Full details of both the report for the decision taken above and any consideration by the relevant Policy Advisory Committee can be found at the following area of the [website](#)

Call-In: Should you be concerned about this decision and wish to call it in, please submit a call-in form signed by any three Members to the Proper Officer by: **5pm on 8 January 2024**