

Development of the Maidstone Town Centre Strategy

Final Decision-Maker	Policy and Resources Committee
Lead Head of Service	Alison Broom – Chief Executive
Lead Officer and Report Author	Phil Coyne – Interim Director, Local Plan Review
Classification	Public
Wards affected	All

Executive Summary

Maidstone Town Centre is the social and economic heart of the Borough, providing employment, leisure, retail and business/professional service facilities throughout the Borough and beyond, as part of its role as the County Town of Kent. The Town Centre and the wider urban area are also home to a very significant residential population. However, in recent years the town centre, like many others around the country, has experienced some challenges as a result of changes in retailing patterns, a shift in the nature of demand for offices, viability challenges in the delivery of new housing and difficulty in ensuring that important infrastructure keeps pace with the needs of resident communities, businesses and visitors. Again, in common with many other areas, these issues have been exacerbated over the last 18 months by the impact of the COVID19 Pandemic. This report is for the purpose of discussion around the preparation of a Town Centre Strategy which will be focused upon a 30 year vision to embed new investment in jobs, infrastructure, housing, leisure and culture within a framework which will seek to establish Maidstone as an exemplar of urban sustainability.

Purpose of Report

Discussion

This report makes the following recommendations to this Committee:

1. That feedback arising from this Committee be used to inform a further report to the Policy and Resources Committee with a more specific proposal on the scope and timing of the Town Centre Strategy.

Timetable

Meeting	Date
Strategic Planning and Infrastructure Committee	9 November 2021
Economic Regeneration and Leisure Committee	16 November 2021
Communities, Housing and Environment Committee	30 November 2021

Development of the Maidstone Town Centre Strategy

1. CROSS-CUTTING ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

Issue	Implications	Sign-off
<p>Impact on Corporate Priorities</p>	<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 <p>The Town Centre Strategy will contribute to all of these objectives by promoting good growth in the town centre which will impact positively on both the local and regional economies, whilst providing new homes and jobs within a greener, more legible environment supported by improvements to infrastructure - including sustainable transport and community services.</p>	<p>Interim Local Plan Review Director</p>
<p>Cross Cutting Objectives</p>	<p>The four cross-cutting objectives are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heritage is Respected • Health Inequalities are Addressed and Reduced • Deprivation is reduced and Social Mobility is Improved • Biodiversity and Environmental Sustainability is respected <p>We envisage that a specific focus for the Town Centre Strategy will be around protecting and celebrating Maidstone's heritage and protecting and enhancing biodiversity, for example through the establishment of green networks throughout the town.</p> <p>Initial thinking includes creating a Strategy which will also seek to take a new approach to the connectivity between inward investment and employment/training opportunities for local people which, coupled with integrating health and</p>	<p>Interim Local Plan Review Director</p>

	wellbeing objectives and infrastructure into our whole approach which will help to tackle health inequalities.	
Risk Management	Already covered in the risk section.	Interim Local Plan Review Director
Financial	Provision has been made for stage one of the costs of preparing the Town Centre Strategy within the Council's agreed allocation of the Recovery and Renewal Funding (£176k); the medium term financial plan will identify further funding for future stages of work. These costs will need to be reviewed regularly as work progresses.	Section 151 Officer & Finance Team
Staffing	The scale and breadth of this work will require contributions and support from service experts across the Council, including at leadership and management level. It is also proposed that a project manager be appointed and that the Interim Director for the Local Plan Review will provide expert consultancy support and play a co-ordinating role.	Interim Local Plan Review Director
Legal	The Council's Strategic Plan (2019-2025) vision of "a vibrant, development prosperous, urban and rural community at the heart of Kent where everyone can realise their potential" is underpinned by 4 priorities including the borough being a "Thriving Place", "Embracing Growth & Enabling Infrastructure" and "Safe, Clean and Green". Best value is a statutory framework that ensures that councils are required to plan, deliver and continuously improve local authority services. Each local authority has a duty to "make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness". The Council's Strategic Plan demonstrates compliance with the	Planning Team Leader

	<p>statutory duty and this report goes towards achieving that objective.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>There are no consequences arising from the recommendation that adversely affect or interfere with individuals' rights and freedoms as set out in the Human Rights Act 1998. In the formulation of the strategy and in the exercise of its functions in delivering the strategy, the Council will have to have due regard to its public sector equality duty in s.149 of the Equality Act 2010.</p>	
Privacy and Data Protection	No impact identified at this stage.	Policy and Information Team
Equalities	We recognise the recommendations may have varying impacts on different communities within Maidstone. An Eq.IA will be completed alongside the strategy.	Equalities and Communications Officer
Public Health	We recognise that the recommendations will have a positive impact on population health or that of individuals.	Public Health Officer
Crime and Disorder	An integral aspect of the Town Centre Strategy will be the creation of a physical and social environment which helps to discourage crime and antisocial behaviour.	Interim Local Plan Review Director
Procurement	No impact currently identified but as the Strategy is developed and projects are taken forward the appropriate procurement process will be undertaken as necessary.	Interim Local Plan Review Director
Biodiversity and Climate Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An integral aspect of the preparation of a Town Centre Strategy will be to include climate adaption measures in order to increase green space, reduce pollution, enable active 	Biodiversity and Climate Change Manager

	<p>travel, increase pedestrian permeability, and to provide for the planting of trees and the encouragement of green walls to improve biodiversity and aesthetic enhancement.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support green jobs, businesses and residents to prepare for the impacts of climate change, encouragement of circular economy business practices, and the enablement of electric vehicle infrastructure and sustainable travel. 	
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2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

- 2.1 In common with town centres across the country, Maidstone Town Centre has experienced change over the last decade as a result of changing consumer trends within the retail sector together with structural changes within many aspects of the office and employment sectors. Over the last 18 months, these challenges have been accentuated and exacerbated by the COVID-19 Pandemic and there are further risks arising from the potential impacts of post-Brexit economic rebalancing. Whilst, as members will be aware, the Council and other agencies have worked hard to provide support to both the businesses and residential communities during the pandemic, it is also now necessary to look at the recovery and 'reimagining' of the town in the short, medium and long term. For this reason, this report proposes a comprehensive Town Centre Strategy which would be capable of quickly building upon recent interventions and reinforcing these with a series of complementary strategies and actions designed to transform Maidstone Town Centre between now and 2050 in line with a new Town Centre Vision.
- 2.2 The Town Centre Strategy will be designed to establish, and provide clarity around, the Council's long-term vision for the Town Centre and to develop a comprehensive and multi-faceted strategy and delivery plan to achieve this. The work will be underpinned by core principles which reflect the vision for both the County Town at the heart of Kent and a borough with vibrant and prosperous urban and rural communities where everyone can realise their potential and fulfil their aspirations.
- 2.3 The Strategy will help to create an ambitious overarching vision which in turn will guide investment by ourselves and others in regeneration, development, provision of infrastructure, and the use of our town centre spaces. In the short/medium term the strategy will guide the provision of support to town centre communities in responding to the impacts of the COVID19 pandemic and a post Brexit economy. In addition, it will seek to address the management of potential change resulting from the relaxation of planning rules around the transition of business premises between uses.

- 2.4 It is proposed that central to the approach will be the reinvention and renaissance of Maidstone Town Centre as an exemplar of sustainability with a strong focus around arts, culture, leisure and the visitor economy. This will assist in creating a place where people want to live, feel safe, and which places an equal emphasis upon a town centre which is relevant to, and to which all of the borough's residents can relate. Development of the strategy will be led by MBC and include engagement with the public, businesses and wider stakeholders including our public and community sector partners, landowners and investors.
- 2.5 Also central to the approach will be the prioritisation of the natural environment to create a healthier and a more sustainable town centre for the benefit of residents, visitors, businesses, urban wildlife and the ecology of the borough. An increased focus on urban planting and green spaces will help to reduce the impact of vehicle emissions, improve air quality and dampen traffic noise, as well as helping to address increasing urban temperatures as a result of the changing climate.

Scope of Strategy

- 2.6 The Policy and Resources Committee have given initial consideration to the scope of the strategy as set out below and feedback is now invited from this Committee. The scope currently envisaged includes:
- The reaffirmation of Maidstone as the county town of Kent through physical regeneration, cultural renaissance and the further development of diverse and high-quality employment, retail and leisure opportunities.
 - Consideration of future land/building uses and the achievement of high-quality and sustainable design that respects and celebrates Maidstone's heritage, whilst improving the quality and character of the town, its environment and its functionality.
 - Cross-cutting principles to ensure that the town centre is resilient to the effects of climate change and is a flagship of the Council's aspiration to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030.
 - A phased approach which continues to build upon current post pandemic recovery work, but also identifies short, medium and long term projects and interventions, including those around key factors such as environment and community safety.
 - Integration of the Council's commitments to a Maidstone Borough that works for everyone, incorporates reductions in deprivation and health inequalities and brings improvements in social mobility.
 - Ensuring the town centre and the wider urban area can continue to play a significant role in meeting the borough's housing need through the enablement of development, investment and support for the delivery of quality homes across the housing market to develop sustainable communities.
 - Tackling education and skills differentials across all sectors of the community, in order to ensure that local residents are equipped to compete for employment and training opportunities resulting from investment and reinvestment.
 - Promoting Maidstone as a 'smart town' by bringing together the use of new and emergent technologies and data capture techniques in tackling

a range of issues from traffic and air quality, to the efficient use of buildings and spaces and the ability of all stakeholders to reach target audiences more easily.

What will the strategy include?

2.7 Our Town Centre Strategy needs to comprise of a number of interrelated, interdependent and complementary workstreams; initial thinking is set out below and again feedback from this Committee is invited:

- A clear and ambitious vision
- A transport movement and infrastructure plan designed to facilitate the well-managed movement of traffic with minimum impact on pedestrian safety and air quality, together with safe and legible pedestrian routes throughout the town centre, attractive low carbon public transport options and cycle routes based on logical desire lines.
- A site assembly and implementation framework designed to assist strategic acquisitions by the Council and other partners, together with relocation strategies to ensure that investment and jobs are protected and opportunities for growth are fully exploited.
- An inward investment strategy based around a proactive approach to identifying investors, developers and end-users in order to ensure the realisation of the overall strategy.
- An economic development and visitor economy plan based around the current economic development strategy, and seeking to secure reinvestment from existing stakeholders in the town, along with the provision of opportunities for new investment in diversifying Maidstone's visitor offer through development in arts, culture, events and leisure opportunities.
- A sustainable town plan designed to ensure that all aspects of the town's transport system, built and natural/semi-natural environments make a positive contribution to the achievement of the boroughs 2030 carbon neutrality target.
- A housing and community plan to ensure that the town's housing stock is of a good standard and of a sufficiently broad nature in terms of both type and tenure to provide for existing and future residents.
- A skills and inclusive growth plan to ensure that residents from throughout the borough are equipped with the skills to compete for employment and training opportunities arising from the strategy, and that the skill base and training infrastructure across the borough becomes an integral part of Maidstone's inward investment offer.
- A smart town plan to ensure that technology and data capture is harnessed in the context of the easy movement of vehicles and public transport, improvements in air quality, and the ability of the business community and other stakeholders to maximise dwell time and spend capture in the town centre.
- A marketing and communications strategy designed to manage community business and stakeholder engagement in the process, whilst simultaneously marketing the town to investors, developers, occupiers and visitors.
- A plan for the Council's role in investment and direct delivery.

- 2.8 At the appropriate point, consideration will be given to the preparation of a new Development Plan Document (DPD) if it is felt that this is necessary to enable the more effective and efficient delivery of key projects or other elements of the Strategy. Equally, and dependent upon the timing and content of new guidance anticipated around the national planning system, it may be more appropriate for the Town Centre to provide a key focus for the Borough's first Local Plan prepared under the new system.
- 2.9 The Town Centre Strategy will be the key to achieving the Council's recently adopted Economic Development Strategy and action plan (agreed by this Committee in September 2021), in particular Priority 5: Destination Maidstone town centre – which highlights the need to reimagine Maidstone's town centre as a vibrant, mixed use destination and modern county town and proposes actions to:
- Boost local consumer demand and confidence by attracting footfall, tourists and spending back to the town centre
 - Support a thriving creative and cultural business base and visitor economy offer in Maidstone town
 - Repurpose the town centre as a cultural and leisure hub befitting a modern county town
 - Explore how Covid-19 has impacted and accelerated trends already underway pre-pandemic and coordinate a package of support and investment to re-imagine our town centre as a thriving economic hub

3. GOVERNANCE

Political Leadership

- 3.1 At the outset, political leadership of the strategy will be via the Policy and Resources Committee. As the strategy develops and projects are identified, it is anticipated that these will be managed via the appropriate service committees and reported back to Policy and Resource Committee as appropriate. This approach will need to be adapted in the context of the already agreed principle of changing the Council's governance system to a Cabinet structure from May 2022. The details of the new Constitution are currently being drafted and yet to be agreed.
- 3.2 Whilst many of the activities which will be pursued as part of the Town Centre Strategy will be cross cutting between service committees, of specific relevance to this committee is the reflection of the priorities in the Economic Development Strategy – not only for the town centre specifically but also concerning priorities to be open for business, a greener and more productive economy and the promotion of inclusive growth. These are reflected in the draft scope set out above including the aim for the town centre to be a flagship of the Council's aspiration to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030 and production of a skills and inclusive growth plan to complement regeneration work and to ensure that residents from throughout the borough are equipped with the skills to compete for employment and training opportunities.

- 3.3 Some examples of the types of projects and roles which are likely to emerge under the remit of this committee would be;
- The establishment of an ambitious strategy to promote and attract new investment to the town centre.
 - The identification of opportunities to protect and enhance existing employment infrastructure.
 - The creation of opportunities to increase the 'added value' of the town centre employment base.
 - The promotion of new facilities, events and opportunities to broaden the arts, cultural and leisure base of the town centre.
 - Options around the introduction and role of 'Smart' technologies.

Stakeholder Engagement and Management

- 3.4 It is proposed that as an early action, work begins with elected members in the design of a governance framework to enable structured work with members on both strategic and town centre community matters and with our partners. This could include formation of a multi-agency Town Centre Partnership Board to work alongside the Council in developing and coordinating the strategy. Members views on this are invited.
- 3.5 It is also proposed that at both development and implementation stages, the strategy will include a comprehensive programme of community and stakeholder engagement in order to ensure the broadest possible input and influence from across the borough.

4. RESOURCES

- 4.1 The initial resources for this strategy were discussed and agreed at Policy and Resources Committee on the 20th October 2021; £176k has been allocated from the Recovery and Renewal Fund and consideration will be given to subsequent stages of the strategy work through the medium-term Financial Strategy. Resources will be monitored and reported in further detail as the project progresses.

5. AVAILABLE OPTIONS

- 5.1 Not applicable as this report is for discussion purposes only.

6. PREFERRED OPTION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.1 Not applicable as this report is for discussion purposes only.
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7. RISK

- 7.1 The development of a Town Centre Strategy contributes to the mitigation of a strategic risk around achieving MBC's Strategic Plan. This risk arises due to economic restructuring, the accentuation of adverse trends by the pandemic and the pressures for services arising as a consequence of a growing residential population in the borough as a whole and specifically in and around the town centre.
- 7.2 As part of the governance framework for the strategy, risk registers will be compiled, monitored and managed for both the overall Town Centre Strategy and its component workstreams. These risks will be contained within the established risk appetite for council activities.
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8. NEXT STEPS: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION

- 8.1 The discussion at this committee is part of similar discussions with other service committees which will inform a further report to the Policy and Resources Committee.
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9. REPORT APPENDICES

None.

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None.