

Maidstone Town Centre Strategy

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

Executive Summary

This report updates the Policy and Resources Committee further to previous reports that the committee has considered around the proposed Maidstone Town Centre Strategy, including feedback on discussions in relation to this topic at service committees in the November cycle of last year.

Based upon the above, the report now seeks the committee's agreement to the updated scope of the strategy, a potential governance structure that will commence in the next municipal year, and a process of engagement to commence in parallel with the new governance structure.

Purpose of Report

Decision

This report makes the following recommendations to this Committee:

1. That the Committee agrees the updated scope and core workstreams of the Town Centre Strategy as set out in appendices 1 and 2 respectively.
2. That the Committee approves the proposed governance structure at paragraph 2.5.
3. That the Committee agrees the principles of the proposed engagement strategy described in paragraph 2.13 and within appendix 3.

Maidstone Town Centre Strategy

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 <p>The Town Centre Strategy will contribute to all of these objectives by promoting 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 and pedestrian friendly environment.</p>	Interim Local Plan Review Director, Philip Coyne
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>A specific focus for the Town Centre Strategy will be around protecting and celebrating Maidstone's heritage and promoting biodiversity.</p> <p>The Strategy will also seek to take a new approach to the connectivity between inward investment and employment/training opportunities for local people which, coupled with investment in health infrastructure will help to tackle both social mobility and health inequalities.</p>	Interim Local Plan Review Director, Philip Coyne
Risk Management	Already covered in the risk section.	Interim Local Plan Review Director, Philip Coyne

Financial	Provision has been made for the costs of preparing the Town Centre Strategy within the Council's agreed budget and medium term financial plan. These costs will need to be reviewed regularly as work progresses.	[Section 151 Officer & Finance Team]
Staffing	It is intended that the costs of preparing the proposed strategy in 2022/23, including staff, will be contained within the budget envelope agreed by Full Council in February 2022; this includes a share of the £1m top slice of New Homes Bonus. The scale and breadth of this work will require time support from across the Council, including at management level. It is also proposed that a project manager be appointed (also previously approved by this committee) and that the Interim Director for the Local Plan Review will coordinate the work.	Interim Local Plan Review Director, Philip Coyne
Legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Depending on the Committee's chosen approach, varying levels of Legal input may be required and should be sought at the relevant milestones in the project. Any future statutory document will need to be progressed in accordance with the relevant statutory and regulatory requirements that govern it. 	Cheryl Parks, Mid Kent Legal Services (Planning)
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.	Policy & Information Manager
Public Health	We recognise the recommendations may have varying impacts on the health of the population or individuals within Maidstone and health impact assessments will be carried out as appropriate.	Public Health Officer
Crime and Disorder	An integral aspect of the Town Centre Strategy will be the creation of an environment which helps to discourage crime and antisocial behaviour.	Interim Local Plan Review Director

Procurement	The development of the strategy is likely to require specialist knowledge and expertise; commissioning will be undertaken in accordance with the council's processes including those for procurement.	Interim Local Plan Review Director
Biodiversity and Climate Change	The Town Centre Strategy is in line with MBC commitment to support residents and business to lower their carbon footprints, enhance biodiversity, adapt to the impacts of climate change such as from flooding, support green job creation, and reduce pollution.	Biodiversity and Climate Change Officer

2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

2.1 Reports concerning the Town Centre Strategy were presented to this committee in September and October of last year. These led to discussions around the principle of an ambitious Town Centre Strategy for Maidstone. This Strategy would be designed to establish and provide clarity on the Council's long-term vision for the town centre, complemented by a comprehensive delivery plan to achieve this. This work would be underpinned by a set of 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.

2.2 The strategy would seek to guide regeneration, development, infrastructure provision, the use of our town centre spaces and, in the short / medium term, 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. Integral to the strategy would also be the proactive management of potential change resulting from the relaxation of planning rules regarding the transition of business premises between uses.

2.3 Central to the approach of the strategy would be:

- the re-invention and renaissance of Maidstone town centre as an exemplar of sustainability,
- a strong focus around heritage, arts, culture, leisure and the visitor economy,
- creating a place where people want to live and feel safe,
- an equal emphasis upon the town centre 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.

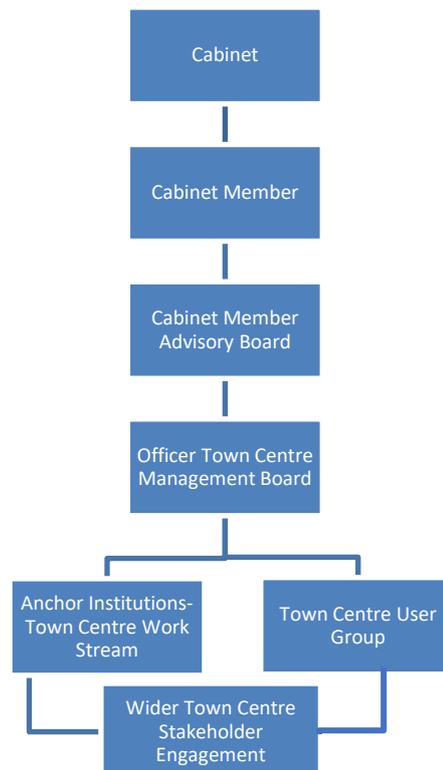
2.4 The committee instructed officers to take reports to the November 2021 cycle of service committees for feedback around the scope and key workstreams of the proposed strategy. The overall scope and key workstreams have now been updated for further consideration by this committee and are contained at appendices 1 & 2. However, for reference, a summary of key topics raised at service committees is provided below:

- *Recognising the various levels of service provision that the town centre provides to different user groups*

- *Recognition of the "town centre community"*
- *More focus around heritage*
- *Catering for all age groups*
- *Efficient maintenance of the town centre*
- *Maximisation of places and spaces*
- *Role of evening economy*
- *Importance of cultural events*
- *Potential for greater further education/higher education in the town centre*
- *Potential for a bigger theatre*
- *Potential role of lighting strategy in the town centre*
- *Fully exploiting river frontage opportunities*
- *Quality of retail frontages*
- *How we use the markets*
- *Issues raised by residential PD conversions in commercial/evening economy area*
- *The importance of governance, and of the council being seen to lead the strategy, including the role of town centre members*

Proposed Governance Arrangements

2.5 The proposed governance arrangements for the strategy and related work are set out below and reflect the decision already taken by the council to move from a committee system of decision making to an Executive model in May 2022.



Political Leadership and Member Engagement

2.6 It is proposed that post May 2022, executive political leadership and oversight will be provided by the new Cabinet - with component parts of the strategy and work programme falling under the purview of the appropriate

Cabinet Member for the purposes of day-to-day decision making. This would be supported by quarterly update reports to Cabinet.

2.7 Councillor workshops will be arranged at key points in the strategy development process to enable all members to contribute views, ideas and feedback.

Day to Day Management

2.8 In terms of management governance, it is proposed that this should be provided through an officer project board, chaired by the Chief Executive, and with the operational lead taken by the Interim Director for the Local Plan Review. The Board would comprise workstream leads for the various activities together with temporary co-optees for one off work areas as appropriate. It would be open to attendance by cabinet member (s) to ensure good communication between managerial and political leadership.

Stakeholder Communication and Engagement

2.9 Due to the variety of important roles which the town centre plays it is essential that work on the strategy engages a wide spectrum of key stakeholders. The proposed scope of this work is attached appendix 3.

2.10 The key aims of this engagement will be:

- To raise awareness of the strategy
- To ensure transparency
- Provide the basis of evidence-based decision making
- To work in partnership with and gain feedback from local organisations and businesses
- To gain feedback from local people and others who use the town centre on what they would like to see in its future
- To obtain feedback from those who do not use the town centre and the reasons for this
- To ensure that all sections of the community and wider stakeholders can access the consultation
- To ensure wide engagement and an appropriate cross section of community involvement
- To co-design where possible
- To test spatial ideas and options to see if they successfully address the community's aspirations
- To test draft proposals and plan for consultation with stakeholders and the community

2.11 It is proposed to establish a town centre user group to act as a source of ideas and a sounding board as the strategy and action plan are developed. This would include elected members from the wards in the immediate vicinity of the town centre, ensuring cross party participation – the details of which will be developed after the local elections in May 2022.

Anchor Institutions

2.12 It is proposed that an Anchor Institutions Group be established comprising representatives of key public/quasi-public 'anchor' organisations. Amongst other things, this group would have the potential for invaluable input to the vision for the town centre, the Town Centre Strategy and the delivery plan.

Communication and Engagement Plan

2.13 It is proposed that a comprehensive programme of ongoing community and stakeholder engagement be undertaken to ensure the broadest possible input and influence from across the borough. This will be augmented by an equally broad visitor and investment marketing campaign designed to enhance our economic development, visitor economy and inward investment work. This work will be subject to regular review and reported back as part of updates to the cabinet.

3. AVAILABLE OPTIONS

Option 1:

3.1 Do Nothing. This committee could choose a non-interventionist approach and simply monitor how the town centre recovers from economic and structural change resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit, and propose interventions only when this is clearer.

Option 2:

3.1 This committee could choose to follow a statutory planning approach and prepare a Development Plan Document for the town centre which would form part of the Council's Local Development Scheme.

Option 3:

3.2 This committee could choose to take a project-based approach, relying upon a number of key investment and infrastructure projects to form the basis of wider growth

Option 4:

3.3 This committee could take a strategy approach, with project development and commencement waiting until the strategy is adopted to steer an overall programme of work.

Option 5:

3.4 This committee could choose to take a "hybrid" approach which develops and delivers projects in parallel with preparing the strategy.

4. PREFERRED OPTION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 The preferred option is Option 5. This approach will enable early action in continuing to pursue recovery-based work, progress already adopted

opportunity sites, and identifying/developing business cases for and progressing new projects and key infrastructure needs such as sustainable transport, health, education and inward investment.

- 4.2 This approach also enables early intervention and the gathering of market intelligence in order to position the Town Centre to take advantage of investment, relocation or third-party funding opportunities that may arise from post covid/ post Brexit economic restructuring. The approach also provides the basis for future statutory documents such as a development plan document or even a future local plan with a prime focus around the town centre and its' environs.
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5. RISK

- 5.1 As part of both the Officer Town Centre Management Board and individual projects, risk registers will be established, maintained and monitored in the normal way.

6. CONSULTATION RESULTS AND PREVIOUS COMMITTEE FEEDBACK

- 6.1 This report references and outlines previous consultation with service committees. In addition, the report proposes a comprehensive engagement strategy going forward.
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7. NEXT STEPS: COMMUNICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISION

- 7.1 If approved, the report will result in the establishment of a governance and reporting framework as detailed in sections 2.5 and 2.8 above. Project or programme development arising from the report will be managed within the remit of the agreed framework.
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8. REPORT APPENDICES

The following documents are to be published with this report and form part of the report:

- Appendix 1: Scope of the Strategy
 - Appendix 2: Strategy Content
 - Appendix 3: Engagement and Communication Strategy
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