

Full Council 19th April 2023

Briefing note – Motion on Town Centre Strategy

The purpose of this briefing note is to provide context for members' consideration of the Motion concerning Town Centre Strategy development on Full Council's agenda for 19th April 2023.

The Motion is

Town Centre Strategy

The Council is currently preparing a new Town Centre Strategy to guide the development of Maidstone for the next 10/30 years. As the report of 4 April 2023 to the Economic, Regeneration and Leisure Policy Advisory Committee stated, all party consensus is essential to this project as it will clearly span multiple administrations over that time. Whilst a number of subject stakeholder groups have been established there is one key group missing. There is no formal stakeholder group set up for the representatives of the residents most closely affected, those in the current wards of Bridge, East, Fant, High Street and North. This can be addressed by establishing a formal stakeholder group of the Councillors for these areas. The needs of residents close to the Town Centre are of a different nature to those who only visit periodically, it is where residents go for local shopping needs as well as their local pubs and restaurants and for local leisure and sports needs. It is a Town Centre for where they live on a daily basis rather than visit as a destination.

It is therefore resolved that

1. The Council continues with the Town Centre Strategy on the basis of obtaining all party support; and
2. A Consultation Stakeholder Group of Town centre Councillors for the current wards of bridge, Fant, High Street and North be established so they can represent the needs of the local communities in and adjacent to the Town Centre area.

Background

An update report on the development of a Town Centre Strategy was presented to the Economic Regeneration and Leisure Policy Advisory Committee on 4th April 2023 and subsequently to the Executive on 18th April 2023. This followed consideration of scope, political governance, managerial arrangements and procurement of a professional team to enable delivery of the strategy on several occasions by the Policy and Resources Committee in 2021 and 2022 – which included consultation

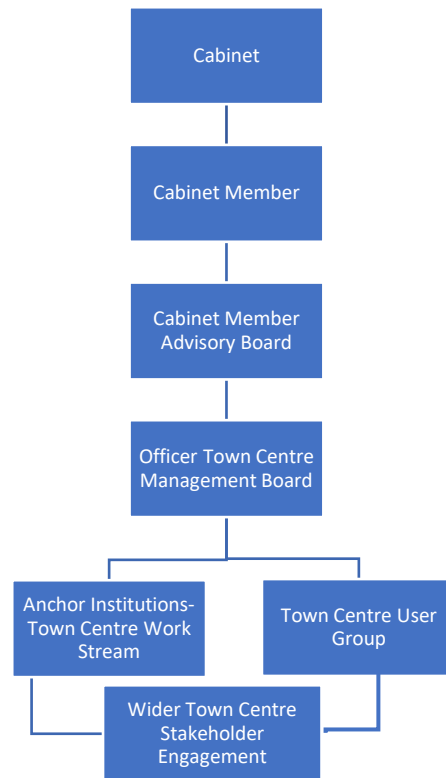
and feedback from the other three service committees in place at the time. This reflects the considerable investment of time and effort in seeking and responding to the views of members across the political spectrum.

In the April 2023 update report several key challenges and “must get right” issues were identified. These included reference to the importance of “Political buy-in and cross-party **engagement** with politicians with short-, medium- and long-term goals”. This is consistent with the long-held aspiration to make every endeavour to secure input and as far as practical achieve consensus in terms of the content of the Town Centre Strategy. It was stated that this will be achieved through the work of our professional team “We Made That” by means of 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.

In earlier reports proposed arrangements for governance were set out; this was followed by consultation with all the council’s service committees in place at the time during the November 2021 committee cycle and culminated in a decision by the Policy and Resources Committee on 23rd March 2022. All parties at the time were represented on this Committee. Amongst other things the report sought the committee’s agreement to a potential governance structure that would commence in the next municipal year, and a process of engagement to commence in parallel with the new governance structure. The Committee agreed the proposed governance structure and the principles of the proposed engagement strategy contained in the report.

Governance and engagement arrangements in place

The governance arrangements agreed are shown in the diagram below. Some of the terminology subsequently changed; the Constitution adopted in May 2022 uses the term Executive rather than the Cabinet and Policy Advisory Committees rather than Cabinet Advisory Boards although the role is similar and place in the governance system is the same.



In addition, the report proposed, and it was agreed 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/Cabinet Member Advisory Board, Officer Town Centre Management Board, Anchor Institutions Town Centre Work Stream, Wider Town Centre Stakeholder Engagement and Town Centre User Group and the Cabinet Member for the purposes of day-to-day decision making. This would be supported by quarterly update reports to Cabinet. Reports have been presented less than quarterly in October 2022 and April 2023 reflecting key milestones in the project and the work needed to reach these points.
- The approach of the Town Centre Strategy engagement strategy would be to achieve
 - 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

- The key aims of this engagement were
 - 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
- 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
- Councillor workshops would be arranged at key points in the strategy development process to enable all members to contribute views, ideas and feedback

In practice the following actions have been taken

- Political Leadership and oversight have been provided by the Executive
- Before reports have been considered by the Executive, they have been subject of pre-decision consideration by the Economic Regeneration and Leisure Policy Advisory Committee
- Managerial leadership has been provided through an officer project board, chaired by the Chief Executive, and supported by a project manager; due to a range of work commitments operational leadership has been undertaken on various workstreams by the Directors of Regeneration and Place and Strategy Governance and Insight rather than as originally envisaged as being by the Interim Director for the Local Plan
- The Maidstone Anchor Institutions Group was established in Spring 2022; it has met to consider the use of UK Shared Prosperity Fund resources which are being focussed on the town centre and has

- considered the approach to Town Centre Strategy at its two subsequent meetings on 9th November 2022 and 13th March 2023
- Stakeholder engagement took place to inform the brief for the Town Centre Strategy professional team in September 2022; facilitated by Mutual Ventures this workshop looked at the challenges and opportunities in Maidstone Town Centre across five themes and asked attendees to come up with possible actions to address these. The event was attended by more than 50 representatives from local businesses, the voluntary and community sector, faith and arts and heritage-based organisations.
 - Four themed workshops for stakeholders were held in March 2023 covering Health and Well-Being, Accessibility and Active Travel, Community and Vibrant Place
 - [Walking Workshops \(Members & Officers\)](#); all (14) members from Bridge, East, Fant, High Street and North Wards were invited to attend one of two walking workshops in the Town Centre. The first session on 15th February was attended by three Councillors; the second session on 9th March was attended by four Councillors. The aims of the sessions were to understand what the ward members consider to be key areas for improvement and change in the Town Centre to feed into the development of the Town Centre Strategy. This was then followed up by an hour session in Maidstone House to further develop and discuss ideas.
 - A Town Centre user group has not yet been established; the views of ward members have been captured by means of walking workshops and the views of the public captured to inform challenges and aspirations (see below)
 - The views of the public have been captured via MBC's [Resident Survey – Summer 2022](#) (as part of this survey we asked people to tell us what they wanted Maidstone Town Centre to be. We received 77 comments from events and 214 were received through the Council's engagement platform, a total of 291 comments. [Community Safety Survey – September 2021](#) - respondents were provided with a free text box and were asked to tell us about any areas in the borough where they feel unsafe 638 comments were received; 559 (88%) related to the town centre. [Budget Survey – November 2022](#); 47 comments relating to the town centre that were submitted as part of this survey. The information collected has been shared with our professional team to inform the analysis of the current position, the challenges and what the strategy needs to focus on improving.

Further planned engagement

- **Business Owners** - focus groups with commercial businesses in the Town Centre are being planned for May/June 2023
- Public engagement including at a physical location in the Town Centre on the draft strategy is due to be undertaken by We Made That in June/July 2023.
- **Stakeholder Summits - in** person events which aim to build on the previous town centre event in September 2022, to inform stakeholders on the development of the masterplan and engage participants in a creative discussion with propositional thoughts. Attendance will be by invite only to include relevant stakeholders from previous events. They are due to happen in July and will be run by We Made That

Provisions in the Constitution concerning consulting ward members

This is covered in the Member/Officer protocol where the key points of direct relevance to the Motion are

- whenever the Council undertakes any form of consultative exercise on a local issue the Ward Members should be notified at the outset of the exercise – this means for example when consultation is conducted on the Town centre Strategy then ward members will be advised
- Officers may only attend meetings called by Ward Members in an official capacity if this attendance is approved by a Chief Officer/Head of Service – this means that if ward members wished to meet collectively concerning the Town Centre Strategy and invite officers then there is provision for this to happen

It has also been a matter of practice for officers to discuss issues that have an impact on a particular ward(s) greater than others to discuss them with Ward Members as appropriate. This is reflected in our report template which reminds officers to consult with ward members as required before an agenda is published.