

JOINT PLACE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE AND POLICY AND RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE IN-DEPTH STUDY 2018/19

TOPIC: 'RE-IMAGINING THE TOWN CENTRE, IN THE CONTEXT OF THE VISION FOR SOUTHEND 2050'

FRAMEWORK FOR SCRUTINY / SCOPE OF PROJECT:

This project is about reimagining the town centre of the future rather than dealing with the issues of today. At the Southend 2050 Councillor workshop in June 2018 Members reflected a collective priority around the town centre and considering its function and form in a 2050 context. This shared focus has resulted in this joint scrutiny committee in-depth study into Southend's town centre in direct relationship with the Southend 2050 work.

Town Centres have historically been known as a place to shop and sometimes socialise. Over recent years this has shifted with increased demand, and therefore provision, of coffee shops, restaurants, bars and eateries. The 2008 economic downturn converged with technological changes, significantly changing people's retail habits. Collectively these have changed who uses the town centre, how, when and why, with users now often looking for an experience which has led to increases in events, arts and culture, and 'occasions' to attract footfall.

It is important to note the role of town centres, and influences on them, differ with geographical location. In the case of Southend being a coastal economy close to London the town centre cannot be easily compared to Chelmsford for example.

Both Grimsey Reviews are included as part of the evidence base. Bill Grimsey, previous MD of Wickes and CEO of Iceland, undertook his first review of town centres in 2013 and published a second in 2018, prompted by the work of Mary Portas in 2011. These are intended to consider an alternative future of the High Street, recognising the structural changes impacting the retail industry and the opportunities to reinvigorate town centres. He has also authored a book "Sold Out" about the High Street and retail in particular.

The reviews make a series of recommendations to Government, Councils and those involved with town centre management, including the recommendation to **establish a town centre commission for each town centre under strong, established leadership through the local authority, with a defined remit to build a long term (20year) vision/strategy for their unique place, ensuring that the vision is underpinned by a comprehensive business plan**. Some of the reviews' recommendations are already in place in Southend and this project is the Council's response to the call for town centre commissions.

It is proposed to use the Southend Central area Action Plan (SCAAP) planning policy definition/map of the town centre initially recognising that, over the course of the project, this may change as the group envisions the town centre of the future.

It is important to note that the Local Plan (through to 2038) is in development and it will be important to link this project with that work as far as possible so as to maximise resources, engagement and outcomes.

In the context of the Southend 2050 Vision the project will:

- (i) Reimagine and explore what the future of the town centre might be. This will consider the purpose/function of the town centre, who it serves/could serve and its future in regards to:
 - Potential implications of the use of the town centre changing over time on its use, physical layout and environment;
 - Its look and feel - how people experience it; and
 - Its role in achieving shared outcomes in relation to community, skills, culture, health, housing.
- (ii) Consider the role of the Council (specifically) and partners (generally) in leading change as well as responding to it
- (iii) Identify the aspects of the town centre of the future that the Council can directly influence and those which partners have greater influence over (for example the future role of retail) so as to deliver the reimagined space and activity, and prioritising subsequent interventions
- (iv) Establish a framework to support the town centre's evolution ensuring a vibrant and attractive town centre at all stages of change
- (v) Establish perceptions and truths about the town centre and consider its future promotion to visitors, residents and investors
- (vi) Consider the resilience of the town centre through different scenarios and potential changes

Exclusions:

The town centre is a microcosm of the whole borough and as such a broad range of issues could be considered in relation to this project. In order to avoid divergence and keep the project to timetable the following matters will be dealt with via the specified processes which are already underway and therefore will not constitute a core part of the project:

- Transport and parking – this is being considered through the Access and Movement Strategy which will be considered by Cabinet in September 2018.
- Homelessness – There is considerable work in place that the Council currently commissions, largely from third sector partners. From Autumn 2018 this work will grow at pace as the Council deploys additional funding secured from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's Rough Sleeper Initiative. Additionally the recent publication of the national Rough Sleeper Initiative (August 2018) requires the progression of a local rough sleeper strategy which will be progressed through our local Housing Strategy which goes to Cabinet in November. Other homelessness work is being progressed through our local implementation of the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017) which came into force in April, with additional powers coming on

line in October.

- Community Safety – this has recently been considered by Scrutiny and additional budget put in place to increase community safety team at the Council. Overseen by the Community Safety Partnership.
- Better Queensway – this is a live project progressing through procurement according to the agreed process so it is not appropriate to consider this beyond the impact that additional homes etc will have on the town centre
- Air Quality – Low Emission Strategy being considered by Cabinet Sept 2018 as part of the Air Quality Action Plan which will then be monitored through an Air Quality Steering Group.
- Street cleansing – this is managed through the MPR
- Impact of current planning applications – these will be considered through a development control process and there is a need to avoid pre-determination.

A 'parking lot' will also be established for matters which arise which do not fit within the scope so that a record of them may be kept and looked at separately outside or following the project or part of other corporate work.

Target date:

April 2019

MEMBERSHIP:

Councillors: K Robinson (Chair), B Ayling, K Buck, N Folkard, J Garston, I Gilbert, D McGlone and D Nelson

Officer support:

Officer support will be provided to the project from a range of services across the organisation, set out below, and will draw on additional expertise as required.

Service areas:

Economic growth and regeneration, town centre management, planning, strategic planning, strategic housing, business rates, ICT, policy and engagement, democratic services, culture, tourism and property services

Reference Group:

It is proposed that a Reference Group will be established to draw on the expertise, experience and ideas of a diverse group of people connected with town centres. The Reference Group will be involved as the scope of the project is set, a mid-way conference, and at the end before the report is approved. They may also participate in other workshops and activities. The group's suggested role is to sense check proposals, provide expert/sectoral advice, feedback and challenge.

The Reference Group will be made up of:

- BID Representative
- Commercial Property Agent
- University of Essex Economics Dept. Representative
- Local creative arts representative sourced through Focal Point Gallery
- Community/Third Sector Representative
- Digital Sector Business / Town Centre Business
- Resident
- National Think Tank Representative
- British Retail Consortium

Method:

The project will be creative and innovative in its approach and the methodology may include:

- Understand the national position regarding town centres
- A workshop from an industry expert
- Visit(s) other town centre(s)
- Town centre conference – reference group as Q&A panel, think tank keynote and workshop key questions.
- Stakeholder consultation including groups who do not use the town centre
- Through the Local Plan process there will be a first round of consultation autumn 2018 which may include workshops about the town centre. It will be important to synchronise this project with that so as to maximise resources and share results.

It will be important through this process that the project considers, and engages with, people who will still be using the town centre in 2050 and beyond, capturing the views of different potential user groups.

SOURCES OF EVIDENCE

The evidence base will include:

- 2050 vision and evidence base
- SCAAP
- Business Improvement District (BID) Business Plan
- Destination Southend (Tourism Strategy)

- Economic Growth Strategy
 - Skills Strategy
 - Digital Strategy
 - Landownership
 - Staff town centre workshop (May 2018) feedback
 - Sunrise project evidence base
 - South Essex Town Centre Study (Planning)
 - Vacancy rates
 - Information about existing town centre projects
 - Business Rates policy / Discretionary Rate Relief
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- Grimsey Review 2 <http://www.vanishinghighstreet.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/GrimseyReview2.pdf> / Grimsey Review <http://www.vanishinghighstreet.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/GrimseyReview04.092.pdf>
 - Southend BID business plan 2018-2023 - http://southendbid.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/20094_SOUTHEND_RENEWAL_BROCHURE-D21_WEB-SPREADS.pdf
 - British Council Creative Hubs (role of sector in town centres) - <https://creativeeconomy.britishcouncil.org/media/uploads/files/HubsReport.pdf>
 - Digital High Street report - https://thegreatbritishhighstreet.co.uk/pdf/Digital_High_Street_Report/The-Digital-High-Street-Report-2020.pdf
 - Healthy high streets - https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/699295/26.01.18_Healthy_High_Streets_Full_Report_Final_version_3.pdf

Scrutiny process is structured to add value and is supportive of the challenges already set to be delivered, but has limited resources, which need to be focused on providing the front line service and the priority outcomes for the Council.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

To make appropriate recommendations to the Council

This review links to all of the Council's Corporate Priorities

Town Centre Scrutiny Project

Indicative Programme:

2018

September:

1. Convene Reference Group – review ToR
2. Baseline and benchmarking evidence base / national trends.
3. Evidence review (1)

October

4. Scrutiny (8th Oct)
5. Industry workshop
6. Visit(s)
7. Evidence Review (2)

November

8. Visit(s)
9. Evidence Review (3)
10. Launch consultation (aligned with Local Plan)

December

11. Possibility Thinking Workshop with Reference Group

2019

January

12. Town Centre Conference
13. Reference Group feedback and input
14. Conclude consultation (aligned with Local Plan)

February

15. Consultation Response Analysis and feedback
16. Draft report outline and initial recommendations – any additional evidence needed to reach conclusions?

March

17. Reference Group review draft report
18. Draft report

April

19. Final report to Scrutiny