

Reimagining the Town Centre: Joint Scrutiny Project 2018/19

MARCH 2019

Place and Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committees Joint Scrutiny Project



Introduction from the Chair

Town centres up and down the country are facing the challenges of changing retail trends, digitisation, socio-economic shifts and cuts to local government budgets. This, however, is not the first time that high streets and town centres have had to adapt to changing circumstances. Over the course of this project we have heard how the retail sector specifically and town centres more generally have evolved over time and this is yet another transition point.

Through the Southend 2050 conversation started over the summer of 2018, the Council has heard how important the town centre is to its residents, students, visitors and businesses – the features they value and the aspects they would like to change. Some of these are current issues which are already being addressed through a range of interventions. Others articulated a longer term ambition for the town centre and the role it will play in the future. This has therefore been the starting point for this piece of work – who will the town centre serve in the future and how?

I would like to express my thanks to my Councillor colleagues who formed the project team. This has been an in-depth piece of work requiring a significant time commitment, assimilation of a myriad of information and courageous conversations about a bold future for our town centre. I would also like to thank those who have come on this journey with us including the reference group, witnesses, officers and those who have hosted visits from us. I am grateful for all the time and contributions made to assist us shape this report.

Cllr Kevin Robinson

Chair, Place Scrutiny and the Joint Scrutiny Working Group

March 2019

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1. Recommendations

The recommendations resulting from this project are set in the context of Southend 2050. The working group has therefore agreed a set of outcomes for a reimagined town centre and a number of recommended actions to help achieve these which have been mapped against the five Southend 2050 Ambition themes and divided into short and medium-long term actions. It is important to recognise that some actions have a longer lead-in time so while they may be completed in the long term they may require work to start in the short to medium term.

There is one overarching recommendation to which all others are related:

Recommendation: That the short term recommendations are adopted and implemented while the medium-long term recommendations are incorporated into a vision and approach to strategic, coordinated implementation. This approach should include a framework for prioritisation on the basis of impact, influence and investment return.

Theme	Recommendations	Short	Med - Long
Outcome 1 – The town centre is animated by day and by evening			
Active & Involved	1.1 That the events application process is reviewed with a view to simplification	✓	
Active & Involved	1.2 That an approach to actively managing and curating busking is explored	✓	
Pride & Joy	1.3 That dedicated performance space(s) are explored with the option for them to be curated by local arts organisations. This should include a covered piazza for year-round activity		✓
Opportunity & Prosperity	1.4 That the ends of the side streets, where they meet the High Street, are pedestrianised (where they aren't already), covered and given an identity with pop-up cafes, entertainment space etc		✓
Pride & Joy	1.5 That a broad range of public art is used innovatively to animate space on a temporary or permanent basis (which could include digital, sound, light, use of blank walls) and s106 and CIL contributions explored to (co)fund this		✓
Opportunity & Prosperity	1.6 That temporary and permanent use of vacant buildings is explored for use such as a comedy store, arts and entertainment venue, digital supervene and/or maker spaces		✓
Pride & Joy	1.7 That a suitably experienced and qualified organisation is commissioned to work with the Council and Southend BID to plan and implement a coordinated approach to animating the town centre and its entrance to the north	✓	
Pride & Joy	1.8 That greater emphasis is given to historic architecture through lighting, trails and addressing buildings which detract from it	✓	✓
Outcome 2 – The town centre offers a range of experiences and reasons to stay			
Opportunity & Prosperity	2.1 That opportunities for more and better quality employment space (non-retail) are actively pursued and integrated into the town centre		✓
Safe & Well	2.2 That the Council's policies and financial roadmap actively support more housing in the town centre through the development of new buildings, repurposing of existing and the introduction of further floors above current buildings	✓	✓

Pride & Joy	2.3	That existing retail is supported through initiatives such as a shop front scheme	✓	
Connected & Smart	2.4	That Southend's digital capacity is exploited to try to attract retailers trialing concept stores using new technology	✓	
Pride & Joy	2.5	That culture and leisure are key occupiers for new and existing space in the town centre, including the potential for the Thames Estuary Experience		✓
Pride & Joy	2.6	That the opportunities offered by big screens are exploited with more programmed for the existing screen and sites for further screen explored	✓	✓
Pride & Joy	2.7	That the principle of creating a 'Cultural Development Zone' in the town centre is explored as an area where policy is supportive of temporary and permanent cultural space, normal restrictions relaxed and investment is targeted	✓	✓
Active & Involved	2.8	That the public realm of the town centre is redesigned with seating / space to dwell designed-in and anti-social behavior designed-out	✓	✓
Active & Involved	2.9	That a unit is taken-on on a trial basis in the High Street as part of the Civic/public sector campus for front-facing and some back-office services	✓	✓
Outcome 3 – The town centre provides an environment where people want to be				
Connected & Smart	3.1	That a new approach to public realm is employed and invested in which uses quality materials of a resilient and easily maintainable nature and which enhance the side streets to the High Street drawing people down them	✓	✓
Active & Involved	3.2	That arrival in Southend is made more welcoming with improved wayfinding, including in car parks, and the areas outside Southend Central and Southend Victoria being improved and with clearer direction to the High Street	✓	
Pride & Joy	3.3	That the coastal identity of Southend is reflected in the public realm with the introduction of water features, fountains, play space, public art or other form		✓
Active & Involved	3.4	That more green space which is well maintained is introduced to the town centre, exploring the potential for a linear park, public square and green walls		✓
Active & Involved	3.5	That innovative space to play, both physically and cognitively, is prioritised in the public realm, public art and developments in the town centre		✓
Connected & Smart	3.6	That routes and permeability for sustainable travel are further integrated into the town centre including walking, cycling and electric and emerging technology		✓

Connected & Smart	3.7	That digital technology is an overt and accessible part of the offer of the town centre	✓	
Outcome 4 – The town centre is understood and well communicated				
Opportunity & Prosperity	4.1	That the future of the town centre is predicated housing, community and experience rather than retail-led regeneration while continuing to support the retail sector		✓
Pride & Joy	4.2	That a unique selling point which is authentic to Southend is established and used at the heart of a campaign to promote the town	✓	
Opportunity & Prosperity	4.3	That a ‘heatmapping’ exercise is undertaken to better understand people flows and use of the town centre	✓	
Opportunity & Prosperity	4.4	That a baseline and approach to implementation be established		✓
Opportunity & Prosperity	4.5	That a zoning approach is taken to the town centre through planning policy, asset management and development and that this should incorporate the side streets as well and the High Street		✓
Outcome 5 – The Council leads in relationship				
Opportunity & Prosperity	5.1	That the Council leases and purchases key buildings as appropriate and employs its CPO powers as necessary to create the space for an evolved town centre		✓
Opportunity & Prosperity	5.2	That a landlord and agent forum is established as the arena for discussion about strategic development and partnerships	✓	
Opportunity & Prosperity	5.3	That the Council leads and brokers conversations in relation to co-investment, match-funding and new partnerships		✓
Pride & Joy	5.4	That an individual is identified as a cultural ambassador for the town to open new conversations and promote the town’s offer	✓	
Opportunity & Prosperity	5.5	That the baseline and heatmapping data are used as the basis for a conversation with town centre retailers about opening hours and responding to demand	✓	
Active & Involved	5.6	That more opportunities for volunteering in the town centre are identified through existing partnerships	✓	

A ✓ in both columns indicates an ongoing or phased approach which starts in the short term but with delivery in the medium to long term.

2. Background

The Southend 2050 conversation, which was started in summer of 2018, has sought the views and input of residents, visitors, students and businesses alike to understand what they think Southend-on-Sea should be like in 2050 and what steps are needed now, and in the coming years, to help achieve this. The role of the town centre, the need to address current issues and the importance of its evolution to ensure a vibrant and thriving heart of the borough have been a key feature of the feedback to date. As a result the Place, and Policy and Resources Scrutiny Committees agreed to undertake a joint in-depth project for the 2018/19 year at their meetings in July 2018¹. This was agreed full Council on 19th July 2018² and the scope of the project then agreed at scrutiny committee meetings on 8th and 10th October respectively³. The full scope can be found [here](#)⁴ and the main focus on the project is extracted below.

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

¹ Minute 112 of Place Scrutiny Committee Meeting on 9th July 2018 and Minute 146 of Policy and Resources Scrutiny on 12th July 2018

² Minutes 175 and 178 refer

³ Minutes 339 and 370 refer respectively

⁴ <https://democracy.southend.gov.uk/documents/s27573/Draft%20Project%20Plan.pdf>

The scope also identified a number of aspects as being out of scope for the project. This was not a reflection of their importance but rather a recognition of the context for the project being the longer-term ambition for the town centre and that in the short term a number of the challenges are being addressed through a range of measures. These exclusions were:

- **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.

3. Southend 2050 and Policy Context

The Southend 2050 Ambition provides the context for this scrutiny project. This is an ongoing conversation which is currently captured in an ambition, roadmap and set of outcomes for the next 5 years based on the feedback and conversations had to date. In the same way that much of the feedback relates to the town centre directly, with specific aspirations as to what it should and shouldn't offer, as well as indirectly, such as valuing green space, so the Southend 2050 outcomes relate to the town centre indirectly and directly, with a specific outcome focusing on it:

We have a fast-evolving, reimagined and thriving town centre, with an inviting mix of shops, homes, culture and leisure opportunities

The project has looked at the town centre through this lens and it has been used to shape and inform its development.

The Southend 2050 Roadmap identifies a number of key projects with milestones in coming years and which will significantly contribute to the identified outcomes. As before some of these relate to the town centre and the scope of the scrutiny project directly and indirectly and therefore provide further context to the project:



To give a flavour of the conversations had and ambitions for Southend a set of statements have been produced to help articulate what Southend 2050 means to different people. This feedback from the 2050 conversation to date has been considered as part of the project and is captured briefly below.

Theme	2050 Conversation feedback
Pride and Joy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● We visibly celebrate our heritage and culture ● I feel inspired by the arts, culture and attractions that are available year round in Southend ● Our town centres and public spaces are clean, attractive, thriving, and reflect our success ● Everyone looks after the place
Safe and Well	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● My home suits my needs and is in harmony with the area ● We have creatively met housing need while enhancing the character of the area
Active and Involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Southend is known for its warm welcome ● Southenders get together regularly – there are plenty of good places to do so ● We are developing Southend together – everyone who wants to can be involved to make this happen ● Young people feel invested in the future ● There is no divide between young and old
Opportunity and Prosperity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● There is a good balance of quality retail, residential and social space in our town centres ● Innovative and easily accessible start-up opportunities are helping new businesses to thrive and develop ● It's easy to do business here – bureaucracy is minimal and overheads are affordable
Connected and Smart	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lots of opportunities to be in open spaces ● Technology/digital connectivity and inclusion ● Easy connectivity with minimal barriers, however I choose to travel

There are a number of other key policies and investments which underpin and support the delivery of the Southend 2050 ambition and the Council's activities, and which relate to the evidence considered by the project team and the resulting recommendations:

- Southend Central Area Action Plan (SCAAP)
- Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy (2018-2028)
- New Local Plan – in development
- Better Queensway Regeneration
- Forum 2 Development
- Seaways Development
- Local Transport Plan 3
- Sunrise (European funded project)
- LGF bid – S-CATS
- TRIPS

4. Approach

Just as Southend 2050 is a conversation so the scrutiny project has been, with equal emphasis on the process of gathering evidence and the debate had as a result of it, and debate not just between members of the project team but with witnesses, officers and the reference group. Hearing the views of Youth Council members was also important in capturing the ideas and feedback of the next generation.

This approach has varied from traditional scrutiny projects, seeking to complement and reinforce the way in which the shared 2050 ambition is transforming how things are done and shifting the focus to outcomes.

Section 3 of this report sets out the relationship between the 2050 Ambition with this project and this has been interwoven into the approach to the project.

The 2050 Ambition has five themes so evidence roundtables were held for each of these themes with a mix of external specialists and experts alongside Council officers from different disciplines. Information considered at these sessions included examples and case studies of other town centres, relevant local and national policy, local data and trends, and ideas of what might be possible. Exploration of these stimulated debate, questions and ideas from the project team and those attending the sessions, providing different perspectives, challenges to pre-conceived ideas and identifying aspects around which most, if not all, could coalesce.

The challenges faced by town centres generally, and Southend specifically, were also discussed. While the project scope excluded some of the current challenges (due to there already being work underway so seeking to focus the project on the longer term reimagined town centre) it is vital that others are overcome so as to achieve a vibrant, diverse and thriving town centre of the future. This included the challenges of the long, linear nature of the High Street with too much retail space which is also in the wrong configuration and size; the latent potential of the town – recognising its role as a local centre, a centre of education and a visitor destination; the diffuse land ownership and the limited extent of the land owned by the Council; the perception and practical application of legislation and policy; and the messaging about the town centre – both in terms of awareness of what it offers and the civic pride it does, or doesn't, engender.

Recognising it is very easy to lose long-term ambition to discussion about immediate challenges faced by town centres, and the potential restrictions of possible recommendations, a Possibility Thinking workshops was held early in the process, facilitated by Traverse, to set a tone of ideas, opportunities and aspiration. This used prompts and concepts from other locations and encouraged the project team to draw and map out what those might mean for Southend town centre.

5. Evidence Gathering

As set out in **Appendices 1 and 2** a wide range of sources were used to understand the opportunities for a reimagined town centre and the different factors which should be taken into consideration when developing an approach to it.

The project heard about a number of towns nationally and internationally which are responding to the challenges in different ways. The findings showed that town centres are not changing beyond all recognition but instead are making adaptations, each with a local flavour, with the introduction of more housing, improved public realm, reductions in the volume and size of retail space, new look work space such as maker spaces and food and beverage offer. But also the spectre of a suggestion that eating and drinking might be peaking in some locations and should be an important facet of vibrant town centres but not the focus of change. There are innovations in the delivery of change in town centres, such as modular additions on top of existing buildings, or new mixed-use buildings which historically might not have been considered conducive to residential accommodation, the local character reflected in unique selling points (USP) which is then translated into social infrastructure and multi-functional public realm.

“High Streets are...where
commerce and community meet.”

**Ministry of Housing Communities
and Local Government**

December 2018

During the project it was useful to reflect on the timescales which can be involved when implementing a vision for a town centre which has assets, resources, community and commercial among the factors to be considered. During the visit to Chelmsford it was commented on that the Bond Street development in the city centre, which opened in 2016, was first set out in the 1984 local plan – the same

timescale as now to 2050. Delivering that vision first articulated in 1984 required a plan for implementation, which in this case included land assembly, commercial milestones and a mindset that was focused on what could be delivered. Reflecting on this and other case studies considered during the project the team concluded that that just because such things can seem daunting and be difficult to implement doesn't mean they aren't the right things to do.

The following provides a short summary of the key discussion points and conclusions reached so as to shape and inform the outcomes and recommendations.

Outcome 1 – The town centre is animated by day and by evening

The role of temporary and permanent activity, driven by a culture-led agenda, was an integral part of discussion throughout the project. The principle that this can be used to activate public space, regardless of the time of day, reoccurred throughout the project and various case studies showed how spaces have been created in different places to enable this. It was also recognised that public art, music, events, pop-up activity and the like were a draw and a reason for people using the town to come again and to stay longer. Further, bold art and events can drive self-perpetuating promotion for a place via social media if they feature in the Instagram, vlog and social media posts of those visiting and subsequently capture the imaginations of those viewing the posts.

The project heard that dedicated spaces to encourage this, beyond those already designated for bookings in the town centre, could be curated by the local arts community, reflecting the wealth and diversity of the cultural and creative sector in Southend. A covered piazza or stretch of the high street could provide year-round space for this and be the

catalyst for a ‘zone’ of restaurants, cafes, galleries and other cultural outlets around it. The current events application process was felt to be a deterrent to individuals and organisations wishing to perform or plan an event in the high street so is an opportunity lost. However, there was also a note of caution about ensuring activity is safe for participants and audiences, and of a quality which further develops pride in Southend and repeat visitors.

“The sections that particularly resonated with me were the calls for better use of public realm. I very much agree with the 6PM-ish dead zone, where it can feel very intimidating to be in the town centre, especially alone.”
Southend Youth Council Member

The town centre has a very definite day economy and a separate night economy and can be seen to struggle in the transition between the two with shops closing 5.30-6pm leaving a quiet period before the evening activities animate certain parts of the town centre. These quiet periods can be intimidating for those walking through the town centre and are a missed opportunity for more trade, more activity and attracting different audiences and user groups. It is also a time of day considered by the Purple Flag and one which should be looked at as an opportunity to address concerns while exploiting latent potential.

Animating vacant buildings was also linked to this discussion recognising that the Council is not the landowner for much of the town centre, and predominantly highway rather than buildings. Therefore this would require engagement with landowners and agents which is challenging given the diffuse landownership pattern. A forum for engagement about temporary use of vacant premises as well as the longer term implementation plan for the town centre was a suggested mechanism to support this.

Outcome 2 – The town centre offers a range of experiences and reasons to stay

A common theme throughout the project from all witnesses, case studies and evidence, was the acknowledgement that town centres are no-longer driven by retail. However, the retail offer does still serve a local community and is part of the reason why people will use a town centre, but less frequently the sole driver for a visit. Town centre users are more likely to be attracted to a town centre or high street for the totality of the experience that it offers, be that as a space for community, the food and drink offer, culture and leisure activities, and the quality of the environment which wraps around it all. The diversification of the town centre and the quality, rather than volume, of the offer is key. The project team considered how, in the current context of a long, linear high street, this might manifest itself, and notwithstanding the opportunity to physically change the shape of the high street, discussed how policy, investment and property/asset management could be used to support a 'zoning' of the town centre to create related 'quarters' around a certain use or theme, such as a residential zone, retail zone, sustainability zone or cultural development zone.

The experience of the town centre and experience led uses are an increasingly significant part of the draw to town centres and can be an illustration of local identity and character. The project team's visit to the escape rooms in the High Street, EscapeLive, demonstrated how space above retail units can be used differently and add another dimension to the town centre offer. The learning from this visit was that innovative, new experience-led activities work well together, clustering to create an enhanced offer and critical mass that attract people to the town centre for an extended period of time. A result of this is believed to be linked trips, with customers of these experiences shopping in the town centre, which they wouldn't have otherwise done if they weren't there for the other activity(s).

The digitisation of retail saw online retail account for 21.5% of the market at the end of 2018 which is inevitably having an impact on the sector. On the one hand there is the increase in people using stores for click and collect and the resulting opportunity for impulse purchases in store, and on the other the reducing need for as many, and as large stores with larger retailers being able to consolidate their activity around more populated centres while the internet fills the gaps. Technology can be implemented as a form of public art in the shape of big screens, such as that already at the Forum, where blank surfaces offer the opportunity for other forms of art and local identity to be shown. Several sites in the town centre were considered to have walls where such screens could be installed, including the railway bridge. The project heard that it also presents an opportunity for differentiation, particularly in the case of Southend where smart city aspirations are significant. Globally, in store retailing is starting to use digital to provide customers with a different experience, which may be trying on clothes virtually or building recipes using different items. Utilising the

"There is already too much retail space in the UK and that bricks and mortar retailing can no longer be the anchor for thriving high streets and town centres. They need to be repopulated and re-fashioned as community hubs, including housing, health and leisure, entertainment, education, arts, business/office space and some shops."

Grimsey Review 2 2018

technology infrastructure of the town to understand the user base – where they come from, how they shop – to heatmap the town centre and inform retail, and other, investment decisions and opening hours, as well as it being a basis to attract trial digital concept stores. Technology, however, will not be the only factor for the user, the quality and personalisation of the customer service offered will play a significant role in differentiating someone’s experience so they make return visits.

Town centres are still places of employment and commerce, and should continue to be, but increasingly this will not be in retail, and therefore conversations about investment and regulation to allow land and premises to be used differently to create new, high quality employment space are key. This was reinforced by the research of Centre for Cities which shows that weak city centres don’t have enough office space and often the space available is of poor quality. On that scale Southend town centre needs to increase the volume and quality of office space of the right size and configuration to support modern businesses, and the technology to support it. Another aspect of the attraction of commercial occupiers to town centres is the skill base locally as research shows that high-skilled exporters will pay a premium to access benefits offered by city centres. Businesses and the public sector taking up this space is intrinsically linked with the perceived vibrancy, safety and quality of the surrounding area. Employment space should also recognise the different commercial activity which could be attracted into town centres, such as maker spaces, which can be a source of employment, local identity, upskilling and animation - a draw for users engage with the production of items.

Another reason for being, and spending time in the town centre, which was highlighted through the project was the addition of further residential accommodation. During the course of the project the Council agreed its preferred bidder to progress the Better Queensway regeneration with which will lead to an additional c1,200 homes at the north of the High Street and replacement of the existing 441 homes already there. This not only helps to address the housing pressure the borough is facing but will introduce significant footfall, activity and spend power within the town centre. Case studies explored showed similar new housing developments being brought forward in other locations, particularly focused around sustainable locations such as transport interchanges where associated parking provision was much reduced, or in some cases nonexistent. Other examples showed how additional homes can be sympathetically and innovatively included above existing buildings and structures, including the addition of modular homes added as additional floors to existing blocks. During the walking tours of the town centre the project team identified a number of locations which they felt homes could be added, including the travel centre which offers the potential to be redesigned to incorporate housing above. The introduction of more town centre homes was felt to be vital, however this needs to be in balance with the rest of the town centre, recognising there is a finite amount of space available.

“high-skilled, knowledge-based jobs are increasingly located in successful city centres because of the benefits on offer compared with other parts of the country. This has sparked a revival in city centre living, as the most vibrant city centres once more offer the lifestyle that residents — specifically young professionals — are looking for.
Centre for Cities, City Space Race

Outcome 3 – The town centre provides an environment where people want to be

As previously mentioned, the environment, in its broadest definition, of the town centre was consistently referred to in case studies, policy exposition and input from external specialists. With a desire for ‘experiences’ driving peoples’ decisions on where they spend time and money, the importance of factors such as quality, perception of safety, sense of community and wellbeing all have a direct effect on the economic and social vibrancy of a place.

“The public realm of our town centres is critical in creating successful and prosperous places. It offers the connective space for activities to draw people and it forms the social spaces we crave. Public realm will always offer what online retailing cannot: a social experience and the opportunity to meet others in a well-tempered environment, designed to bring urban and natural worlds into a harmonious relationship, capable of sustainably supporting human wellbeing.”

Ben Derbyshire, President of RIBA

The matter of public realm repeated itself through each of the evidence sessions, highlighting the need for it to be of a quality, durability and ‘look and feel’ that enhances the area; of a configuration that not only encourages people to dwell but also assists with wayfinding, supporting sustainable travel; and of the opportunity it presents as multi-functional space. The need to re-surface the High Street on a phased basis and in-line with the regeneration of the area was felt to be important. Case studies and examples were considered where the public realm investment has created multi-use space, designed to deliver a range of outcomes. For example linear parks which introduce greenery to an urban environment as well as colour and a space to play and

dwell. The health and wellbeing benefits of green space are well recorded as well as its impact on air quality and sense of space. Other examples considered the role of public art in creating an environment which tells some of the identity of the place while also being space to play, or a light display to be enjoyed of an evening, or sound or digital display which lead people to explore another part of the town. Similarly it was recognised that lighting has a role to play in ensuring space feels safe of an evening and that this could take the form of public art as well as more traditional lighting. Greening the town centre, creating space to play – physically and cognitively, and innovative use of public art were all agreed as priorities for the town centre; stimulating the senses and inviting people to come and enjoy.

It was considered important that through creating an environment for the town centre that the identity interwoven into it is one which authentic and true to Southend. The juxtaposition of the town centre with the coast, and Southend’s greatest icon, the pier, were felt to be vital to this with the suggestion of the use of water in the high street linking the two intellectually and emotionally, while improved public realm links them physically drawing those visiting the seafront into the town centre and vice versa. Similarly Southend’s heritage was considered something to be proud of an emphasised in the town centre by making more of the architecture seen above shops, drawing the eye upwards through lighting, festoons, heritage trails and the like, while activating blank walls and spaces to make more of them and tell more of Southend story.

Above all it was identified that town centres are about people and creating a space that they not only want to spend time in but care about and take ownership of. It was recognised that the active involvement of residents, employees, students and visitors in the design and creation of spaces, as has been recently done through the Council's **Sunrise** project for part of London Road, is vital if they are to be spaces that people identify with, enjoy spending time in and are proud of to the point that they play a role in maintaining them. This could be people volunteering with Make Southend Sparkle to support the High Street spring clean, or other community and voluntary groups which engage with different aspects of the town centre, or simply individuals making sure that they, and others, put litter in the bins provided. Ownership of the space resulting in small steps and marginal gains.

Moreover it was felt that the role of young people in this was integral to this as not only will it be a

"I think having a piece of public art as a landmark somewhere in the town centre would be a great draw for visitors.

Especially with young people, social media is really important at the moment, how easy it is to show the world you're having a good time can be a motive for visiting a place – it's all about instagramming yourself in front of something novel, a landmark or an experience."

Katie Gardener, Graduate Management Trainee

town centre that they, and generations following them, will use and enjoy, but they have different priorities and expectations to the generations which have gone before them. The Key Cities conference reflected that younger generations will go away for a weekend in the UK in search of an experience, while the 2050 feedback demonstrated their concern for others and the environment.

Outcome 4 – The town centre is understood and well communicated

The case studies and reports considered as part of the project all demonstrated the importance of truly knowing the town centre and being able to tell its story so that its evolution is authentic, and intervention and

investment are based on fact and evidence. Part of the work of the project has been to uncover some of the unknowns about Southend town centre, such as the land ownership along the High Street which has been found to be diffuse with over 270 owners and the Council's primary landholding being the highway and car parks. Having this information is significant in understanding what strategic conversations about land and space might need to look like.

Similarly there is an ongoing need to further understand the current trends as well as being able to predict future ones. The project team heard how technology can be used to support a reimagined town centre; 'heat-mapping' visitor flows, the role and influence of technology on their movements and dwell time, demographics and footfall. Having such information could not only inform the Council's decisions, particularly when overlaid with other data, but could also be used to attract new investors to the town, opening up conversations with those not already in Southend to understand what would attract them to the town while demonstrating to them what the town offers and how it operates. Such data would also be crucial for developing a town centre implementation plan. The

Institute of Place Management study of factors which influence vitality and viability⁵ found 201 factors that affected the performance of town and city centres, demonstrating their complexity and the need to understand them.

Not only is it important to understand the town centre with the support of robust evidence, it is equally important to communicate it. The Southend 2050 conversation feedback highlighted the importance of the town centre to those who responded, both in terms of challenges they wish to see overcome and aspirations for the future. In this context it was felt to be important that a new narrative about the town centre is developed recognising the multiple roles it performs as a local centre, education hub, visitor destination and location for investment. The need for this to be authentic to Southend resonated with the evidence, building on what it's known for, rather than trying to be something it's not.

In developing this narrative and what it means for an implementation plan it must recognise the different dimensions explored through this project, for example that, throughout all the changes, the town centre will continue to have a role in meeting the needs of a local, and growing community. There is a large number of residents who live within walking distance of the town centre and for whom it is the first stop for goods and services, and this will grow with Better Queensway and further housing development. It should also take into consideration that the town centre and high street mean something very different to young people than to older generations, their views and aspirations must be incorporated, attracting young people to live, work, and socialise in the town centre.

Finally, in establishing the town centre's story it must seek to set itself apart from others, identifying and understanding its unique selling point, and in doing so should take learning from this project into account. Evidence received and the 2050 ambition both reflect that people relate to Southend's sense of fun which historically has been associated with the seafront but is interwoven through other experiences. This, coupled with the emphasis through this project on space to play and the role of future generations, could mean it sets out to be the UK's first play-friendly town centre. Similarly culture was also considered to be a key component of the town's development as a growing sector for employment, a key driver of experiences and an attractor and differentiator. Also the relationship between the town centre and education with a significant student population and two major education institutions which it was felt aren't highlighted enough in promoting the town. The project concluded that there are a number of strengths which can and should be played to in this regard.

⁵ <http://www.placemanagement.org/special-interest-groups/managing-places/town-and-city-centresdowntowns/town-centre-policy-and-research/hsuk2020/>

Outcome 5 – The Council leads in relationship

The project team heard that the Council needs to take the lead as the catalyst for change in the town centre, a message repeated by various sources. Multiple witnesses directly referred to the expectation from investors and the development industry that Local Authorities should take the lead in the conversation. That Councils are considered to be in a unique position to lead and coordinate activity around the town centre, more so than any other stakeholder with the breadth of responsibilities, power and different aspects of funding and finance. Powers such as compulsory purchase, responsibilities across the public realm not just for maintenance but for space which encourages healthy and active lifestyles, and the ability to use resources to deliver outcomes which are about more than just financial return. The value of cross-party leadership was also emphasised so as to provide certainty if others are to invest.

It was also recognised that the Council cannot do it alone. It needs the buy-in, support, ideas and investment of time and resources from a range of different stakeholders if a town centre vision and implementation plan are to be meaningfully and successfully delivered. In the case of Southend the Council is not a strategic landowner so has limited direct influence on the use of buildings and the rents paid by occupiers. If the sort of change explored through this project is to be implemented the Council must use its ability to convene, bringing together landowners and agents for strategic conversations about the future development and uses of the town centre, as well as the short term opportunities to animate and activate the space to everyone's benefit. Over the course of two walkabouts of the town centre a number of buildings were felt to be out of keeping with the desired look and feel for the area or identified as 'blockers' to the creation of improved public realm, connectivity or new opportunities.

Similarly the project team felt there was a role for town centre ambassadors; people who would take the lead in garnering the support and telling the Southend story, such as a cultural 'heavyweight' who would be able to lend their weight to the cultural development of the town. Local advocates for community engagement developing new relationships and encouraging participation in co-production as well as a shared sense of responsibility for the town centre, manifested through volunteering and support. Business peer to peer conversations changing the way land, premises and uses are shaped so as to maximise activity and opportunity.

Finally this shared vision and leadership must be communicated clearly and coordinated through an implementation plan which sets out how the vision is going to be delivered, what the priorities are, the desired impact, influences and investment. Such an approach not only ensures that resources are prioritised where they can make the greatest impact but gives confidence locally and further afield.

“The most important questions a developer will ask in looking at a new development opportunity are: is the local authority behind the project, and is there strong meaningful leadership to support its delivery of a number of years to fruition”

David Atkins

Chief Executive, Hammerson

6. Methodology

6.1. Process

The Project Team was agreed to be constituted of Councillors: K Robinson (Chair), B Ayling, K Buck, N Folkard, J Garston, I Gilbert, D McGlone and D Nelson. By agreement with the Chair Cllr Mulroney joined the Project Team on their consideration of the evidence presented over the course of the project.

The project drew on a wide range of evidence from a variety of sources as the Project Team sought to explore and understand what factors might be vital to a reimagined town centre.

The Project Team was supported by a number of officers from across the Council who can be found listed in **Appendix 1**.

Evidence roundtable sessions were held aligned to the Southend 2050 Ambition and themes. These were facilitated by officers with subject specific knowledge while also benefitting from input from external witnesses.

Learning from other places in regards to best practice, the factors considered and journey taken was considered to be an important aspect of the project. This was undertaken through a site visit, a virtual visit and a range of case studies in the context of different themes as set out in **Appendix 2**. The Project Team also made two visits to Southend town centre, one by day, and another by evening, to consider the area through the lens of the project and the different factors at play.

The project commenced following the publication of the Grimsey Review II, reflecting its conclusions around local leadership. This was the first of multiple documents reviewed during the course of the project. Further town centre studies and publications have been issued while the project has been in train, such as the Timpson Review and Centre for Cities: City Centres Past, Present and Future February 2019. These have also been considered, recognising the stage of the project's development at the time of publication. The Government also published its plan to support town centres in the autumn of 2018. The £675m Future High Streets Fund opened its call for Expressions of Interests 26th December 2018 and closes 22nd March 2019. The extensive research and engagement undertaken by this project should be used to support an application to the fund and as a basis for engagement with other facets of the Town Centre package such as the Town Task Force when it is established spring 2019.

An overview of all the evidence sessions held and attended can be found in **Appendix 1**.

6.2. Reference Group

A Reference Group was established in line with the project scope agreed in October 2018. The group members were selected to represent a broad mix of stakeholders, expertise and experience in relation to the town centre. The reference group was constituted of representatives of the following organisations and sectors: Southend BID, University of Essex, Citizens Advice Bureau, Commercial Property sector, Culture and Creative sector, digital sector, and a resident, in line with the requirement of the scrutiny committees.

The initial project scope was shared with the Reference Group for comment at the start of the project and a meeting held to discuss the project and its approach with Reference Group members. At the start of 2019 a mid-project summary was shared with the Reference Group to review the evidence received to date and the emerging messages. At the end of the project a copy of the draft report was shared with the group to consider the recommendations made and for final review. At this point the report was also shared with the Youth Council so as to be able to take their views into account before finalising the report.

Members of the Reference Group were also invited to attend a number of the evidence sessions held during the project's span including a meeting to consider the Government's consultation on planning reform, a presentation from Centre for Cities, the Key Cities Town Centre conference and the Local Plan consultation event for the town centre.

The Project Team expressed their thanks to the reference group members for their time and contributions.

Appendix 1 – Summary of Evidence

Evidence	Date	Attendees
Overview & Grimsey Review	18/10/2018	<p>Cllrs Robinson, Ayling, Buck, Folkard, D Garston (for J Garston) and D McGlone and Arscott (observing)</p> <p>Officers: Emma Cooney, Tim Row</p>
Reference Group Meeting & Consideration of planning consultation: <i>Planning Reform - Supporting the high street and increasing the delivery of new homes</i>	13/11/2018	<p>Cllrs Robinson, Jones (for Cllr Gilbert), Ayling, Nelson, Folkard, McGlone</p> <p>Reference Group Members: Southend BID, University of Essex, Citizens Advice Bureau, Sorrell Property Agents, Revive Digital, town centre resident</p> <p>Officers: Emma Cooney, Tim Row, Claire Victory, Chris Burr</p>
Centre for Cities Presentation	3/12/18	<p>Rebecca McDonald and Anthony Breach (Centre for Cities)</p> <p>Cllrs Robinson, Ayling, J Garston, Folkard and McGlone</p> <p>Officers: Emma Cooney, Chris Burr, Tim Row</p>
Chelmsford Visit	3/12/18	<p>Stuart Graham and Spencer Clarke (Chelmsford City Council)</p> <p>Cllrs Robinson, Folkard, McGlone, Ayling and Garston</p> <p>Emma Cooney, Tim Row, Paul Jenkinson</p>
Possibility Thinking workshop	4/12/18	<p>Rob Francis (Traverse)</p> <p>Cllrs Robinson, Buck, Nelson, Folkard, Gilbert, McGlone and Mulroney</p> <p>Officers: Emma Cooney, Tim Row</p>
Virtual Visit to Altrincham	7/12/2018	<p>Martin Ledson (Trafford Council)</p> <p>Cllrs Robinson, McGlone, Folkard and Ayling</p> <p>Officers: Emma Cooney, Tim Row, Chris Burr</p>
Evidence Session 1: Pride and Joy	17/12/2018	<p>Cllrs Robinson, Buck, Gilbert, J Garston and Mulroney</p> <p>Officers: Scott Dolling, Emma Cooney, Tim Row</p>
Evidence Session 2: Safe and Well	21/1/2019	<p>Cllrs Robinson, Folkard, Nelson, McGlone, Gilbert, J Garston and Mulroney</p> <p>Marcus Wilshire (IBI)</p> <p>Officers: Tim Holland, Simon Ford, Carl Robinson, Drew Jones, Mark Murphy, Tim Row, Emma Cooney, Jeremy Martin</p>

Evidence Session 3: Active and Involved	23/1/19	Cllrs Robinson, Gilbert, Folkard, J Garston, McGlone and Mulroney Alison Dewey (Southend BID), Dennis Baldry (Southend BID), Ross McGrane (Little Smash Comedy) Officers: Krishna Ramkelawon, Paul Jenkinson, Kamil Pachalko, Emma Cooney, Tim Row
Key Cities Conference	29/01/2019	Emma Cooney; Alison Griffin
Local Plan Consultation	5/2/2019	Cllrs Robinson, JGarston, Folkard and Mulroney Officers: Emma Cooney, Tim Row
Town Centre Walkabout and visit to Escape Live (Day)	5/2/2019	Cllrs Robinson, J Garston, Folkard and Mulroney Officers: Emma Cooney, Tim Row
Evidence Session 4: Opportunity and Prosperity (1)	5/2/2019	Cllrs Robinson, J Garston, Folkard and Mulroney Steven Norris (Lambert Smith Hampton) Murray Foster (Southend Business Partnership) Officers: Bridgette Cowley, Chris Burr, Marzia Abel, Alison Dewey, Alan Richards, Tim Row, Emma Cooney
Evidence Session 4: Opportunity and Prosperity (2)	5/2/2019	Cllrs Robinson, McGlone, J Garston, Buck, Folkard, Gilbert and Mulroney Tim Johnson (Cushman & Wakefield) Officers: Emma Cooney, Marzia Abel, Alan Richards, Tim Row, Chris Burr
Evidence Session 5: Connected and Smart	07/02/2019	Cllrs Robinson, Ayling, Gilbert, Folkard, McGlone and Mulroney Officers: Peter Geraghty, Neil Hoskins, Nick Corrigan, David Cummings, Katie Gardener, Emma Cooney, Tim Row
Town Centre Walkabout (evening)	18/02/2019	Cllrs Robinson, Nelson, Folkard, McGlone and Mulroney Officers: Emma Cooney, Carl Robinson, Tim Row

Appendix 2 – Location Case Studies

Throughout the project a range of locations undertaking activity in relation to their town centres were explored as case studies. The consideration of each location varied; some as illustrations of a particular aspect of town centre investment and intervention, others were more in-depth to understand their focus, approach to planning town centre change, mix of interventions, funding and impact. This has provided a rich mix of ideas, provocations and debate to support this report. These were:

- Almere, Netherlands
- Altrincham
- Barnsley
- Basildon
- Bournemouth
- Bude
- Camden
- Chelmsford
- Great Yarmouth
- Hemel Hempsted
- Hull
- Kings Cross
- Kingston
- Lambeth
- Lisburn
- Newbury
- Newport
- Norwich
- Nuneaton
- Streatham
- Stevenage
- Slough
- Superkilen, Copenhagen, Denmark
- Worthing
- Woking