

Public
Key Decision - No

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Title/Subject Matter: Overview and Scrutiny Market Towns Task and Finish Study

Meeting/Date: Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Performance and Growth) – 6th April 2022
Cabinet – 21st April 2022

Executive Portfolio: Councillor R Fuller - Executive Leader of the Council & Executive Councillor for Housing and Economic Development & Councillor S Bywater – Executive Councillor for Community Resilience and Well-Being

Report by: B Buddle, Democratic Services Officer (Scrutiny)

Ward(s) affected: All

Executive Summary:

Overview and Scrutiny Members held an away day in June 2021 to consider the issues facing the District and the Council to identify themes for investigation by Overview and Scrutiny during the year. Input was provided by the Managing Director and the Strategic Director (Place). On the basis of data presented on the day and detailed discussion on Members' experiences, a number of potential areas were identified for investigation. These were then grouped into coherent themes for investigation. One of the themes was Market Towns. This report deals only with this study.

A focussed study methodology was devised. It identified a study plan with the purpose of which being to examine:

- The impact of the 'new normal' on high streets;
- Economic Development in relation to Market towns and key service centres, and
- Creating community resilience for the future.
- Impact of changing working practices on local services
 - Working from Home – Changes to lunchtime trade
 - Shop local / Think Local
 - Online shopping
- Impact of furlough ending
- Signposting residents and businesses to self-serve at www.wearehuntingdonshire.org

- Supporting local businesses.

The report summarises the evidence submitted, the discussions that took place and the actions agreed that address the Terms of Reference.

Recommendation(s):

The Cabinet is

RECOMMENDED

- a) to formally recognise the work of the Council's Economic Development Team for the support that they have provided businesses across the district during the pandemic and recovery from it;
- b) to identify support and guidance for traders within the district to enable them to identify the right place, the right people, obtain advice and funding opportunities for their business;
- c) to co-ordinate with town and parish councils as well as local groups, to encourage self-promotion of their towns and villages, as well as opening communication and dialogue within and between local communities;
- d) to explore visitor opportunities within the district for short tourist experiences;
- e) to conduct research to identify residents within the district who are excluded from current dialogues, and to identify reasons for this;
- f) to investigate and identify further funding opportunities available to the Council and local businesses to aid continued growth;
- g) to encourage local trading bodies to exert their influence in supporting businesses within the district and to discourage promotion of businesses in neighbouring areas; and to ensure enforcement powers can support this where appropriate, and
- h) that the findings of this study be incorporated into the Community Strategy implementation plans.

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 This report contains the background, justification, process, conclusions and recommendations arising from a task and finish study on the general theme of Huntingdonshire's market towns.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Overview and Scrutiny Members held an away day in June 2021 to consider the issues facing the District and the Council to identify themes for investigation by Overview and Scrutiny during the year. Input was provided by the Managing Director and the Strategic Director (Place). On the basis of data presented on the day and detailed discussion on Members' experiences, a number of potential areas were identified for investigation. These were then grouped into coherent themes for investigation. One of the themes was Market Towns. This report deals only with this study.
- 2.2 The Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Performance and Growth) appointed a Task and Finish Group (The Group) comprising Councillors B Chapman, S Corney, D Dew, A Roberts and T Sanderson. The Group appointed Councillor D Dew as its Rapporteur.

3. METHODOLOGY

- 3.1 The Group's first task was to complete a study plan. In doing so, the purpose of the study was confirmed to be to examine:
- The impact of the 'new normal' on high streets;
 - Economic Development in relation to Market towns and key service centres, and
 - Creating community resilience for the future.
 - Impact of changing working practices on local services
 - Working from Home – Changes to lunchtime trade
 - Shop local / Think Local
 - Online shopping
 - Impact of furlough ending
 - Signposting residents and businesses to self-serve at www.wearehuntingdonshire.org
 - Supporting local businesses.
- 3.2 The first step was to review the latest data. The Impact Assessment for Huntingdonshire 2021 was reviewed. It was decided that the study would then proceed by identifying and examining case studies from which lessons might translate to Huntingdonshire. It was also agreed to interview practitioners with the same purpose in mind. Any lessons would be filtered through Members' knowledge and experience of their wards and of the whole District.

3.3 The case studies were:

- Saffron Walden;
- Hebden Bridge;
- Frome;
- Stockton on Tees;
- Bedford;
- Margate;
- Settle;
- Belper, and
- Carlisle.

The Group were fortunate to be able to interview Anna Bradley-Dorman and Cheryl Greyson from Ramsey Neighbourhood Trust. Cheryl has considerable expertise as the holder of a PhD in marketing while also being a practitioner. She works for University Peterborough and has offered to assist in any follow up work that takes place as a result of the study.

3.4 The following sections contain the Group's findings and conclusions.

4. **UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT**

- 4.1 During the planning phase of the study Members were made aware that initiatives intended to promote the market towns already existed. These included the Future High Streets Fund and the Towns Fund. Members, therefore, decided not to focus on retail, but instead to look at how they might add value to these initiatives. This decision was reinforced during the investigation when it was established that there are relatively few empty retail units in Huntingdonshire's Towns. Furthermore, evidence from other case study towns suggested that attempts to influence markets can lead to the creation of a number of similar businesses and this is unlikely to be sustainable in the medium and longer terms.
- 4.2 Work was carried out by the Council to identify the impact of Covid-19 on areas around the district. The negative impacts outweighed the positives and helped to identify areas for the study.

Highest Impacts; green (positive), red (negative)

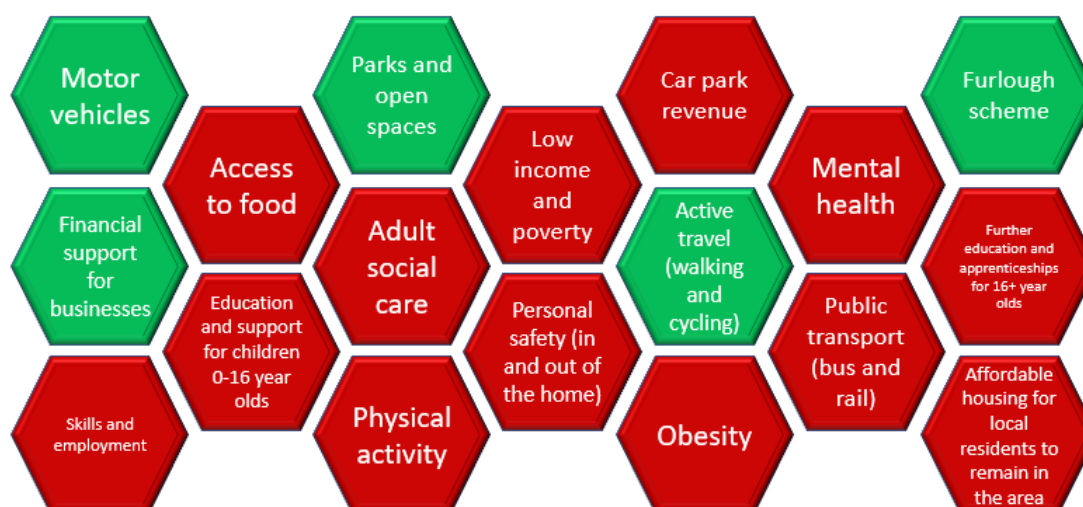


Diagram showing highest impacts across the district.

- 4.3 A study by the University of Sheffield suggests city centres stand to lose £3bn in 2022 because significant numbers of people are working from home. The study goes on to indicate that some of this spending will be realised in the residential areas where these workers live. One of the challenges Huntingdonshire has traditionally faced is outward migration to work. The change reported by the University of Sheffield represents a real opportunity in terms of the local economy. However, the dangers of social isolation are also recognised. The aim of making retail and social enterprises sustainable within 15 minutes' walk or cycle ride resonates with the Council's strategic objectives and will help alleviate social isolation. It also has clear environmental benefits.
- 4.4 Huntingdonshire benefits from being at the intersection of the three interconnected economies of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough as defined in the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Local Economic Recovery Strategy (LERS). Having recognised the positive position in which the District is located, the Group has reached a number of conclusions that indicate how the Council might proceed. In the course of the study, notes have been made of the data that is required to inform future decisions in this field and these are set out.
- 4.5 LERS identified objectives in its goal to make a leading contribution to the UK's recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic with interventions being prioritised for each phase to deliver the highest impact on the relevant objectives. Specific objectives relating to the study include:
- Business and People: Ensuring high quality advice and coaching to support growth
 - Place: Increasing footfall in town and city centres
 - Place: Reopening and adapting retail, tourism, hospitality and leisure.

5. FINDINGS

- 5.1 The study findings coalesce around two distinct themes. The first is the focus on events and experiences and the second is community engagement. Both themes have resonance with the Council's strategic framework. In the course of its work the Group tested its findings against and drew on experiences in Ramsey. In the course of an interview, Discover Ramsey expressed its appreciation of the recent input provided by the Council's Economic Development Team. External funding for the Team is coming to an end and the Group is of the view that the Team's work should be formally recognised.

Case Study Lessons

- 5.2 The Group has examined several case studies and benefited from expert opinion. Some ideas that would be beneficial to Huntingdonshire have been identified. Stockton on Tees has a strong strategy which has been nationally recognised. A key theme is linking town centres with river frontages. This has strong resonance with all of Huntingdonshire's market towns. A vision might look something like this:
- 5.3 The Towns connect High Streets with waterways. They will create unique attractions in the heart of the town centres, which will form an exciting future. Ideally, the walk from the High Streets to the waterways will be uninterrupted. Waterside parks are open, with spaces for families, market spaces and opportunities for cafes and kiosks. Squares and will be open, flexible spaces for community large-scale events for people of all ages to enjoy.
- 5.4 A crucial point is street trading. This should be facilitated in market towns, in the riverside areas and in the routes between them. It is recommended that the Council reviews its street trading and consents arrangements, and the terms for trading in the riverside areas. An important lesson from Stockton is, in summary, the Council should seek to help those who are interested to find the right location, obtain planning advice, receive support in recruiting the right workforce and identify funding opportunities for businesses. A further opportunity to help traders is found in the LERS, which identifies an Objective of ensuring they have high quality advice and coaching to support growth.
- 5.5 It is important to state that the intention of the recommendation in the last paragraph is not to promote street traders at the expense of permanent town centre retailers. The event focus is crucial here. Street traders can add to the sense of events that attract the public and permanent traders have opportunities to take advantages of the attracted footfall. As such, this report's recommendations are intended to complement the Council's other local economy initiatives.
- 5.6 Members have discussed this in a local context. They are aware of a trend for street trading, particularly by food vendors, to take place in the District's

industrial estates. The above recommendation is therefore extended beyond the town centre and riverside areas to other such areas.

Events/Experiences

- 5.7 There is increasing realisation that people are choosing experiences rather than retail opportunities when deciding what to do with their disposable income. Indeed, this is explicitly referred to in the LERS Place Objective of reopening and adapting retail, tourism, hospitality and leisure. This trend has been recognised in Ramsey and work has successfully been undertaken to exploit and build on it.
- 5.8 Given the success of the work in Ramsey, it is important to learn lessons. As has been said there has been a focus on experiences. This covers town centre events to promote economic activity, but it also has connections with the wider tourism agenda. Once alerted to it, this theme became one that cropped up throughout the Group's investigations.
- 5.9 Promoting events has significant potential. An example from Ramsey is their Dine Out event, where food vendors come into the town to provide additional refreshment options and local businesses join in by adding outdoor seating to their premises. To put events and experiences into a conceptual framework, the Group has applied the lenses of tourism and marketing. The Group has recognised that in "normal" times; that is, without Covid related restrictions, Cambridge experiences what might be termed "over-tourism". Building on this situation, the Group has been advised there could be significant benefit in building on the District's close proximity to Cambridge. It is suggested that focussing on shorter experiences of half a day, one day or two days could be fruitful. This would work well with the events that are staged.
- 5.10 The question then is what events would be staged. Experience elsewhere and at other levels has shown that the public sector has not always succeeded at staging events. The lesson from Ramsey is that ideas are generated through interaction between town-based marketing functions and local residents through social media. Further detail on social media appears in the next section. For this section of the report attention is drawn to the potential benefits of **co-ordinating town-based marketing functions**. It is stressed that successful events should not simply be replicated in other towns, but it is important that there is co-ordination between the towns to ensure initiatives are complementary and certainly do not detract from each other.
- 5.11 The Group had originally looked at whether it should include the impact of retail destinations such as Rushton Lakes. Given the more limited scope of the study, it was decided not to go into this in great detail, but this did not mean there were not lessons that could be drawn on. It is understood that it staged a promotion that enabled visitors to have their photographs taken at the entrance. Members took this to reinforce the value of staging events.

- 5.12 Turning to wider tourism and marketing, the Group has discussed the kinds of activities that might be suited to Huntingdonshire and work with the recommendations in this report. Members recommend that focussing on local heritage and the environment would be the District's strongest attractions. They would also facilitate the kinds of activities that can be undertaken in a half day, one day or two days. It might be added that these would be in locations that would be ideal for hosting events. The Group has not had time to do much work in this area so it is suggested that it should be examined in greater detail by the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Panel in the new Municipal year. The following is a starting point:
- a. Heritage
 - b. Local points of interest
 - c. Waterways
 - d. Open spaces
 - e. Walks
 - f. Historical figures
 - g. Historic environments

Community Engagement

- 5.13 The Group has looked at the features and advantages of internet initiatives that allow local traders to display their products, share information about themselves and facilitate selling and local delivery. Examples are ShopAppy.com and Click It Local.
- 5.14 Discover Ramsey has established its own social media presence. It has used this presence to create a dialogue with residents and businesses. Perhaps more importantly, it has helped to promote a dialogue between residents. The first advantage of this is that residents are able to communicate publicly about the kind of events they would want to see staged. The details of events then grow organically through dialogue, and it is thereby promoted amongst residents. In time a further benefit is realised as residents and businesses start to answer individual enquiries rather than relying on organisers. It is likely, however, that some sort of moderating function will need to be retained. It is suggested that this finding corresponds with the aim in the Community Strategy of engaging with local communities and of supporting those communities to communicate. It should, therefore, be supported.
- 5.15 An important lesson here concerns the need to be aware to the fact that some groups might be excluded from the dialogue or for whatever reason do not participate. The Group therefore recommends that data is compiled on the groups that participate and importantly those that do not. Steps can then be taken to involve excluded groups, for example, by connecting to a youth town council.
- 5.16 The Group has not ignored retail and other similar businesses. There is, in fact, an important associated point to make. There have been recent reports that people are returning to shop more locally in smaller quantities more often. The establishment of locally based communications channels

would be an ideal way for community businesses and shops to communicate with customers. The Group has been informed of an example of a café that co-ordinated with local walking groups to provide them with an offer in the café after walks have been completed. Again, the role of events is noted as are the themes of combatting social isolation, exercise and local trade.

- 5.17 In summary, the features of social media that are proven to succeed include:
- a. Create a local brand
 - b. Show a sense of community spirit and pride
 - c. Residents self-promote
 - d. Engagement and buy-in from community – they then become brand champions
 - e. Images are key
 - f. Organic reach ensures engagement with local community
 - g. Share lifestyle content – implied/secondary link to local businesses
 - h. Be realistic about what is achievable and relevant – not investing in newer channels just because they are trendy
 - i. Create 'insta' attractions for residents and visitors to self-promote.

External Support and Funding

- 5.18 The Group is conscious that external funding for economic development will shortly end. Research has therefore been undertaken into other opportunities that might support some of the recommended areas of activity. The High Streets Heritage Action Zones is now closed for applications, but Historic England have a range of [open grants schemes](#).
- 5.19 Historic England's programme of [work with historic high streets](#) is wide ranging, and includes research, the regeneration of 67 successful high streets and an associated cultural programme. In addition to providing direct benefits to High Streets Heritage Action Zones, lessons are learnt that will be of benefit to other places that are planning to place heritage at the centre of their regeneration projects.

Lessons will be disseminated in a number of different ways:

- A range of [publications](#), including advice and guidance
- [High street focussed webinars](#) to support the sharing of good practice and advice on a variety of topics relevant to preserving the historic environment
- A free online [Historic Environment community](#) which anyone can join. Members can pick up news, ask question in the forums, promote local work and make new contacts. There have been some recent discussions on high streets within this group

5.20 The Group recommend these sources as a starting point for further investigations.

Additional

5.21 The recommendations in this report together with the other initiatives that have been referred to represent a significant package. Through their discussions, Members have come to the view that the Council should try to ensure the advantages sought are not undermined. They are aware of instances of other retail locations outside of the District being advertised in Huntingdonshire. It is recommended that trading bodies such as Huntingdon Bid should be encouraged to use its influence to discourage it. In addition, in this context the Council should confirm that it will use its enforcement powers were this is appropriate.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 The study has concentrated on building on the local strategic framework to build resilience within the District's communities and to address issues identified in the latest Impact Assessment. It can be seen that the recommendations contribute towards the following impacts:

- Support for businesses;
- Access to food;
- Parks and open spaces;
- Active travel (walking and cycling) by encouraging and enabling the promotion of social / community activities and shopping within 15 minutes of residents;
- Mental health.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 In summary, it is RECOMMENDED that

- a) the work of the Council's Economic Development Team be formally recognised for the support that they have provided businesses across the district during the pandemic and recovery from it;
- b) support and guidance be identified for traders within the district to enable them to identify the right place, the right people, obtain advice and funding opportunities for their business;
- c) town and parish councils as well as local groups, be encouraged to self-promote their towns and villages, as well as opening communication and dialogue within and between local communities;
- d) visitor opportunities within the district for short tourist experiences be explored;

- e) research be conducted to identify residents within the district who are excluded from current dialogues, and to identify reasons for this;
- f) further funding opportunities available to the Council and local businesses to aid continued growth be investigated and identified;
- g) local trading bodies be encouraged to exert their influence in supporting businesses within the district and to discourage promotion of businesses in neighbouring areas; and to ensure enforcement powers can support this where appropriate, **and**
- h) the findings of this study be incorporated into the Community Strategy implementation plans.

7. BACKGROUND PAPERS

- Notes of meetings of the Market Towns Task and Finish Group.
- Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Local Economic Recovery Strategy (LERS)
- COVID-19 Impact Assessment for Huntingdonshire District Council
- Local Economic Recovery Strategy (CPCA)
- Community (Transition) Strategy

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