

TOWN CENTRE INITIATIVES
(Report by the Town Centre Initiatives Working Group)

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 At its meeting held on 13th February 2007, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Support) decided to establish a working group to investigate the purpose, cost and achievements of the Town Centre Initiatives across the District. The suggestion for the study had originated from Councillor J D Ablewhite, a member of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery).
- 1.2 The working group comprised Councillors K M Baker, A N Gilbert and R J West and met on a number of occasions over the ensuing months. Councillor J D Ablewhite was also appointed to the working group as a result of his interest in the matter but he was unable to attend any of the meetings.
- 1.3 Discussions have been held with the relevant District Council officers nominated to attend the Town Centre Partnership's Board meetings and interviews arranged with the individual Partnership Chairmen and Town Centre Managers. The working group is also grateful for the support provided to them during the study by the Sustainable Economic Development Section, which is responsible for liaising with the Partnerships.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 Town Centre Initiatives have been established in the market towns of Huntingdon, St Neots, St Ives and Ramsey for a number of years. Their creation arose from a review of the Council's Economic Development service in the last decade prior to which the Council had employed a single Town Centre Manager to look after the interests of all four market towns. A decision then was made to devolve the money used to fund the post to the individual Partnerships so that it could be used to target specific local schemes and enable the Partnerships to set their own priorities to reflect the individual characteristics of each of the towns.
- 2.2 St Neots was the first of the Partnerships to be established in November 1997, with Huntingdon and St Ives following shortly thereafter. The Ramsey Partnership was the last to be set up, with its launch taking place in 1999.
- 2.3 The formation of the Town Centre Initiatives coincided with a movement nationally towards the establishment of town centre organisations to address a growing decline in town centre trade and with a view to enhancing the character and vitality of the towns. Professional groups such as the Association of Town Centre Management and Association of Market Towns have been set up to disseminate good practice and lobby government on town centre issues.

3. MEMBERSHIP AND STRUCTURE

The working group found that all four of the Partnerships encourage a wide local membership usually comprising town and district councillors, local businesses and retailers (both national and independent), members of the local community and other stakeholders in the town.

Huntingdon and St Ives Partnerships have become companies limited by guarantee and St Neots is in the process of following suit while Ramsey remains an unincorporated association. All of the Partnerships have a board of directors that meets on a monthly basis, with the exception of St Neots that meets bi-monthly. A number of sub-groups have also been established to undertake particular projects which report directly to the board of directors.

The working group was advised that each Partnership has an elected Chairman and has appointed a Treasurer and Secretary. Each employs a Town Centre Manager to undertake project work, co-ordinate the Partnership's work and provide a point of contact for general enquiries. All four of the Town Centre Managers are employed on a part time basis.

A constitution containing membership rules, an elections procedure and accountancy requirements has been drawn up by each of the Partnerships, under the guidance of the Legal and Estates Division of the District Council. Each constitution is tailored to meet the Partnership's own organisational needs and has been worded widely to encompass the Partnership's range of activities and the type of work that they undertake.

4. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

- 4.1 Each of the Partnerships share a common aim of improving the town centres. This is being achieved successfully by a variety of means including the promotion of the towns, improved communication, enhancing the physical environment, creating community pride and promoting local trade.
- 4.2 Each of the Partnerships has produced its own business plan which is reviewed and updated on a regular basis. An action plan of three or five years duration has also been developed for each Partnership, outlining projects and activities that will be completed over that period. The plans highlight the Partnership's own priorities and objectives for each of the market towns. In compiling the action plans, advice is sought from relevant officers within the District Council who seek to ensure that the priorities and objectives accord with the Council's own corporate objectives.

5. FUNDING

- 5.1 The working group was advised that the District Council gives each of the Partnerships an annual grant of £19,200. In addition, the District Council provides direct officer support at Head of Service level at board meetings to advise on matters of policy and procedure and the monthly board meetings and annual general meetings are serviced by the Democratic Services Team. Additionally, the Sustainable Economic Development Section provides continuous support and advice to the Partnerships and acts as a general point of contact for them. On average, the total cost of officer support

amounts to £6,975 per annum for each Partnership with around £600 worth of printing being donated by the Council to each Partnership.

- 5.2 In the current financial year, a forecast of the total financial support provided by the Council, which includes grants, officer time and printing, to the Partnerships is as follows:-

| | FORECAST SUPPORT £ |
|------------|-------------------------------|
| St Neots | 28,126 |
| Huntingdon | 26,300 |
| St Ives | 25,350 |
| Ramsey | 26,426 |

- 5.3 The working group was advised that although the District Council grant is largely used to cover the Town Centre Managers' posts, other money is generated by the Partnerships through membership fees, business sponsorship and a number of fundraising activities. Grants from the respective town councils are also sought by each of the partnerships on an annual basis.
- 5.4 In seeking to identify other potential means of funding, the working group was advised that the establishment of the Partnerships has enabled each to apply for financial support from other sources which the District Council does not have access to.
- 5.5 Over the last two financial years, each partnership has accrued the following additional income above the amount provided by the Council.

| | 2005/06 | 2006/07 |
|------------|----------------|----------------|
| St Neots | £21,366 | £51,417 |
| Huntingdon | £59,528 | £42,543 |
| St Ives | £22,611 | £14,154 |
| Ramsey | £8,899 | £5,348 |

- 5.6 The additional income generated is largely used to assist with other operational and project costs or to assist in arranging special events and promotions.

6. THE WORK OF THE PARTNERSHIPS

- 6.1 The Partnerships are involved in delivering a wide variety of events and activities in each town, with a view to enhancing the local economy and encouraging visitors. Examples that have been held across all four market towns include the following:-
- The co-ordination of special markets such as Farmers Markets, Normandy Markets, Continental Markets and Christmas Markets
 - Production of town publications
 - Organising festivals
 - Producing town guides
 - Compiling local business directories
 - Hosting members network events

- Staging public consultation meetings on matters concerning the town
- 6.2 In addition, the working group found that communicating and networking with partners and stakeholders is key to the existence and success of the Partnerships. The Partnerships present an opportunity for those with a stake in the future of the towns to influence their direction and work together towards the achievement of common aims.
- 6.3 A common thread running through the discussions with the Partnership Chairman and Town Centre Managers was the question of finance. The Partnerships are dependent upon the annual grant made available by the Council without which they would be unable to fund the employment of Town Centre Managers. The Partnerships rely heavily on voluntary and in-kind support, both from board members and the Town Centre Managers, all of whom tend to work in excess of their contracted part time hours. It was apparent to the working group that uncertainty over funding is an issue for the Partnerships and can detract from their concentration on achieving their aims and objectives.

7. GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS AND PERFORMANCE MONITORING

- 7.1 The working group found that each of the Partnerships have their own performance monitoring systems in place, largely via the board meetings. It is a legal requirement for each partnership to minute their board meetings, produce an annual set of accounts, develop action plans and set performance indicators, with progress reviewed periodically and at their annual general meetings. The working group was satisfied that the Partnerships are complying satisfactorily with these arrangements and are able to demonstrate that a transparent and accountable system is in place.
- 7.2 The working group was informed that a Town Centre Liaison Group has been established to bring all four Partnerships together on a quarterly basis to share good practice and to exchange information. This meeting is chaired by Councillor J M Sadler and provides a mechanism by which Partnership activities are monitored via the submission of project progress reports.
- 7.3 Additionally, monthly meetings are also held between the Town Centre Managers and the Sustainable Economic Development Section to discuss current issues and initiatives for each of the towns.

8. CONCLUSIONS

- 8.1 Members of the working group wish to extend their appreciation to Chairmen of the Partnerships, the Town Centre Managers, and the District Council officers for their helpful assistance during the course of the review.
- 8.2 The working group is firmly of the belief that the work of the Partnerships is extremely beneficial to the District, providing good value for money and adding significant value to the local economy. The working group is satisfied that appropriate monitoring mechanisms are in place and that all partnerships are adhering to good working practices. Clear objectives have been set which

are in line with the Council's corporate objectives and all are working in an open and accountable environment.

- 8.3 Whilst acknowledging that each Partnership is at different stages of their establishment, it is clearly evident that they all have little financial stability, given that the District Council grant is determined on an annual basis. The working group is of the view that a longer term arrangement could bring substantial benefits for the Partnerships by eliminating the annual concern over whether grants will continue in the ensuing year. This will enable the Partnership to offer longer term contracts to the Managers, reduce administration work and enable them to concentrate on pursuing their business plans with greater certainty. Having regard to the valued placed upon the role of the Partnership by the Council, there is little likelihood that grants will be discontinued in the short term. Moreover, it can be seen from paragraph 5.5 above that the Partnerships attract external funding to Huntingdonshire each year which is at least equivalent to the grants made available by the Council. The working group therefore feels that the Cabinet should consider entering into an agreement with the Partnerships to secure the payment of grants over a fixed period with a suitable clause that will enable the Council to terminate the arrangement if it is felt that a Partnership is no longer acting broadly in line with the Sustainable Community Strategy.

9. RECOMMENDATION

- 9.1 The working group therefore

RECOMMEND

- (a) that the District Council enter into an agreement with individual Partnerships for a period of five years to pay a grant annually updated for inflation, based on the existing level of support and with a suitable break clause to enable the agreement to be terminated in appropriate circumstances; and
- (b) that the District Council continue to provide officer support as outlined in this report to the Partnerships.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Year End Accounts for all Partnerships for the 2006/07 financial year
Articles of Association/Constitutions/Memorandums of Association for all Partnerships
Previous Town Centre Liaison Group Minutes
Partnership Publications – Huntingdon Live, SuggeStlves, Priorities and Ramsey Matters
Town Centre Managers Job Descriptions
Partnership Membership Lists

Contact Officer: Miss H Ali, Democratic Services Officer
☎ 01480 388006