

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Title/Subject Matter:	Our Role In Supporting the Prosperity and Vitality of the Market Towns
Meeting/Date:	Overview & Scrutiny Panel (Economic Well-Being)
Executive Portfolio:	Councillor T D Sanderson – Strategic Economic Development and Legal
Report by:	Head of Legal & Democratic Services
Ward(s) affected:	All

Executive Summary:

The Council Programme Group comprising the Chairman & Vice Chairmen of Council, the Deputy Executive Leader and Leaders of Opposition Groups and Independent Councillors considered a request (raised by a Member) that Mr Bill Grimsby from 'Action for Market Towns' should be invited to address a Council meeting. It was suggested that the subject of his address could then potentially be one that the Council might wish to debate.

The Group considered that it was important for the Council to have the opportunity to discuss 'the vitality of the market towns', but were of the view that it would be more productive if the content of the debate could then be used to steer the appropriate Overview & Scrutiny Panel to take forward the subject for a potential study. In these circumstances, it was agreed that the presentation by Mr Grimsby would be better directed towards the Panel undertaking the study work rather than the Council.

In the event, Councillor T D Sanderson, Executive Councillor for Economic Development and Legal led a debate at the Council meeting held on 30th April 2014.

Recommendation(s):

It is recommended that a representative from 'Action for Market Towns' be invited to give a presentation to a future meeting of the Panel.

This page is intentionally left blank

1. WHAT IS THIS REPORT ABOUT/PURPOSE?

- 1.1 The Council Programme Group considered that the content of the debate on 'the prosperity and vitality of the Market Towns' held at the Council meeting on 30th April 2014 should give direction to a potential Scrutiny Study on the subject.
- 1.2 It also was suggested by the Group that Mr B. Grimsby from 'Action for Market Towns' should be given the opportunity to address Members as a preliminary to the undertaking of any detailed study. Given the pressure on Council meeting time, it was agreed that it would be best for Mr Grimsby to address the forum most likely to take forward the subject as a potential study. The relevant Overview & Scrutiny Panel was suggested for this purpose.

2. WHY IS THIS REPORT NECESSARY/BACKGROUND

- 2.1 An extract from the minutes of the meeting held on 30th April relating to the debate item is enclosed as Appendix A. For context, a copy of Councillor Sanderson's introductory statement is reproduced as Appendix B.

3. OPTIONS CONSIDERED/ANALYSIS

- 3.1 A number of issues were raised by Members during the debate which can be summarised as follows -
- Planning policy including enforcement action to maintain appearance of town centres and particularly market squares, 'living above the shop' schemes
 - Promotion of weekly and special markets
 - Varying car parking charges at certain times/freeing up land for car parking
 - How to encourage investment by the private sector
 - Generation of positive news stories to overcome perceived negativity
 - Potential to extend guided bus
 - How to encourage creation of social hubs, restaurant quarters
 - How to encourage rural transport to enable those living in villages to visit the towns more often.

4. WHAT ACTIONS WILL BE TAKEN/TIMETABLE FOR IMPLEMENTATION

- 4.1 It is for the Panel to decide how or if they wish to take the study forward. The range of issues which arose during the Council debate indicates how broad the potential study might become. To maximise use of time and resources, the Panel might need to consider whether it should focus on particular elements of the debate rather than cover those matters over which they would have limited influence or about which the Council has existing recent policy.
- 4.2 As it may be advantageous to seek guidance and advice from 'Action For Market Towns' before scoping the remit and purpose of the Study, it is proposed that arrangements be made for a presentation to be held in advance of a future meeting of the Panel. In the light of the content of the presentation, the ensuing meeting could develop and scope any potential study.

BACKGROUND PAPERS Council Minutes 30th April 2014	CONTACT OFFICER Christine Deller, Democratic Services Manager Contact: 01480 388007
---	---

APPENDIX A

Councillor T D Sanderson, Executive Councillor for Strategic Economic Development and Legal introduced the debate by referring to the supporting information that had been circulated to Members and by describing how towns in Huntingdonshire were performing in comparison to those elsewhere. Councillor Sanderson drew attention to the various projects which either had been recently completed or were on-going in town centres due principally to private sector investment. Despite a positive picture, Councillor Sanderson highlighted issues which still required to be addressed, the various mechanisms that enabled the Council to promote and encourage the vitality of the town centres and the role of individual Councillors in supporting their town centres. The full text of Councillor Sanderson's address is appended in the Minute Book.

Councillor R Harrison opened the debate by describing the restaurant quarter around the Market Square which had contributed to the new vibrancy of St Neots town centre and positively improved the town's night time economy. He was disappointed, however, that the "Old Falcon" Hotel on the Market Square remained an "eyesore". Councillor Sanderson reported that he was aware that enforcement action was being taken against the owners of the Hotel and was hopeful of an improvement in the appearance of the building in the short term.

Turning to Huntingdon Town Centre, Councillor M G Baker reported that he was aware of the negative perception of the town on social media influenced by high car parking charges and the reduction in size and offer of the twice weekly market. He contended that the District Council could contribute more to the vitality of the town by, for instance, extending free car parking after 3 pm and ensuring that the Cromwell Museum remained opened to visitors.

In terms of car parking, Councillor Sanderson pointed out that fees and charges were an important component of a balanced budget. He also was of the opinion that free car parking would not necessarily lead to an increase in footfall in town centres. Councillor Sanderson reported that support for the Cromwell Museum had been provided by the Town Council and confirmed that the District Council continued to have a good working relationship with Churchmanor Estates who had contributed to much of the new development in the town.

Returning to St Neots, Councillor S M Van de Kerkhove drew the Council's attention to the recent decision by the Development Management Panel to give planning consent for a key/shoe repair kiosk in the Tesco car park at Barford Road, Eynesbury which, in his opinion, could lead to difficulties for three established businesses in the town centre. Councillor Van de Kerkhove also contended that the town had been "swamped" by new development without there being sufficient infrastructure in place which had contributed to severe traffic congestion in the town.

Whilst wishing to see all town centres thrive, Councillor Sanderson had no knowledge of the planning application to which the Councillor had referred so undertook to investigate the reasons why it had been supported by the Development Management Panel. The Executive Councillor also indicated his willingness to discuss with Councillor Van de Kerkhove, ways to generate and encourage the interests of the private sector in investing in the town.

Referring to the new Sainsburys development in Huntingdon and the intention of the store to vacate its existing premises, Councillor M F Shellens requested some indication as to which retailers might take their place in the town centre as a way to generate some positive news stories. Councillor Shellens also called for a restriction on out-of-town developments to avoid losing vibrancy in town centres. Other than the expectation that Waitrose would relocate to Chequers Court, Councillor Sanderson was unable to announce which retailers might move into Huntingdon but he was hopeful of

good and positive announcements soon. In terms of the proposed new Morrisons store in St Ives, Councillor Sanderson did not anticipate that this would impact upon the vibrancy of that town centre.

Councillor B S Chapman drew the Council's attention to the contribution it had made to the opportunity to open a new cinema in St Neots by allocating land for leisure and by generating private sector and partner interests in the town. He also mentioned recent improvements by the District Council in One Leisure which together with other partner contributions totalled an investment of £5m in the town. Although well placed in terms of its farmer and continental markets, Councillor Chapman considered that there were further opportunities to develop the potential of markets across the District.

Members were reminded of the content of a recent article in the Hunts Post which had indicated the Executive Leader's support for tourism in Huntingdonshire and in this context Councillor S Greenall mentioned the Cromwell Museum and Wilkinsons Gate in Huntingdon town centre. Councillor Greenall suggested that the Council should aspire to create social hubs rather than just concentrate on attracting new shopping outlets. The evolution of the restaurant quarter in St Neots was excellent in this respect. Councillor Sanderson reminded the Council that it had not been able to influence the decision on the erection of the "gate" and that online shopping had inevitably had a detrimental impact on High Streets. Councillor C R Hymans reminded the Council of the increase in visitors and trade generated by the guided bus in St Ives and questioned whether these benefits might assist Huntingdon if the guided track was further extended to the town. In terms of night time economy, Councillor Hyams was of the view that Huntingdon fell short in this respect. In reply, Councillor Sanderson was able to announce that the former "Level Two" nightclub might re-open in the near future. Notwithstanding the outcome of these discussions, however, Councillor Sanderson recognised that it was difficult for Huntingdon to compete with Cambridge and Peterborough in terms of evening entertainment although he was aware that the offer in St Ives appeared to be better in this respect.

On a related subject, Councillor P G Mitchell suggested that whilst there were opportunities to attract funding from development for youth and community facilities in rural areas, it proved to be more difficult to ensure sufficient funds were available for continuing maintenance. Councillor Sanderson indicated that he would give the matter some consideration.

Councillor P D Reeve drew the Council's attention to the level of investment by the Town Council in Ramsey which had resulted in successful Christmas lights, youth and market events. He invited the Executive Councillor to visit the town to view the projects which were underway and being supported but spoke of his frustration at the level of business rates which, in his view, were damaging to small businesses and the reluctance on the part of the District Council to make available land in their ownership for car parking to the rear of the doctor's surgery which might encourage greater numbers of visitors and shoppers to the town. Councillor Reeve welcomed the suggestion of a meeting with the Executive Councillor to address a series of issues which he was keen to discuss. In terms of the land ownership matter, Councillor J A Gray, Executive Councillor for Resources, urged Councillor Reeve to contact him to enable the potential use of the land to which he referred to be considered.

In welcoming the cinema development at St Neots, Councillor D A Giles urged Members to move away from the traditional view of shopping and whilst accepting the increasing preference for shopping online, remained of the view that there still was a place for a variety of shops in the town. Councillor Giles also drew attention to the disparity in parking charges between St Neots and Huntingdon, the length of time it appeared to take to address deteriorating buildings in the Market Square and need to discourage car drivers from accessing car parks via the town centre. Councillor R S Farrer added that the proximity of St Neots to Bedford had had an impact on the extent

to which the town centre might develop adding that the planning process certainly had a part to play in this respect.

Councillor Mrs D C Reynolds concurred with the views of Councillor Hyams in respect of the impact of the guided bus on the town but pointed out that this had also raised other issues by offering free car parking close to the town centre and by causing congestion on Harrison Way. Councillor Mrs Reynolds urged the Executive Councillor to consider enforcement action against the owners of the Robin Hood Public House which also appeared to have been abandoned.

On a similar theme to Councillor Greenall, Councillor J P Morris considered that town centres should be viewed as social hubs and be made more attractive to young people by varying car parking charges at certain times and by providing good quality and clean public conveniences. He also pointed out that “living over the shop” housing schemes encouraged residential use of town centres and helped to prevent them from emptying after shops had closed.

On a related subject, Councillor T V Rogers reminded the Council that fifty per cent of the population of the District lived in a rural environment and that it was vital to improve rural transport to assist visitors and shoppers to access town centres. At this juncture, Councillor D M Tysoe advised Members of the extent of the support lent to transport schemes by the District such as “dial a ride” which assisted those more elderly and vulnerable residents. Councillor Sanderson also undertook to respond to Councillor I C Bates on whether any research was underway to identify those village shops/post offices which were crucial to life in rural villages such that initiatives might also be developed to seek to protect and support the vitality of village and community life.

In general terms, Councillor Harrison urged the Council to recognise the good quality of life in Huntingdonshire and the reasons why residents might have chosen to live in the District’s towns despite the absence of facilities found in cities. Whilst he acknowledged that the Council and agencies should continue to work in partnership to improve the towns, he called on Members to support the achievements of the District Council in improving the towns and to acknowledge that they lived in an excellent place.

Councillor R B Howe paid tribute to the role of Ramsey in terms of its importance to neighbouring villages and the fact that it was respectable, well managed and clean. He contended that it was Members’ responsibility to ensure that the town continued to thrive and receive support through the infrastructure under the District Council’s control. Councillor Howe offered to assist the Town Council in developing a strategic plan to continue the work to revitalise the town.

The Council was reminded by the Executive Leader, Councillor J D Ablewhite, that it remained a District Council priority to provide pivotal support for the local economy and to maintain the vitality of towns, such as St Ives, as the hub of rural communities. However, it was equally important to meet the needs of rural villages by developing links to the towns and using these means to increase footfall. He urged Members to support the campaign to attract visitors to Huntingdonshire and think positively about what the towns could offer. Whilst the planning process would inevitably influence the progress of some issues, he was confident that by working with partners, local groups and other local councils, the District could develop master plans for all its town which could really make a difference to their future.

The Chairman thanked all those who had contributed to the discussion and those visitors in the public gallery who had attended.