

Meeting: EXECUTIVE
Portfolio Area: Environment & Regeneration
Date: 12 JULY 2016

Agenda Item:

7

REVIEW OF TOWN CENTRE MANAGEMENT IN STEVENAGE

KEY DECISION

Author – Zayd Al-Jawad Ext. 2257
Lead Officer – Zayd Al-Jawad Ext. 2257
Contact Officer - Zayd Al-Jawad Ext. 2257

1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 Following the return of the town centre management responsibilities to the Council, a review of the current working arrangements and potential alternative approaches has been undertaken.
- 1.2 The key ambition is to establish a strategic approach to the management of the town centre. To support the retailers and improve the perception of the town centre, acting as an important bridge through the town centre regeneration period while providing an improving and aspiring town centre.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That the new criteria detailed in paragraph 4.1 be applied when assessing applications for stalls, pitches, seating and A-boards in the town centre, which will initially decrease the town centre income budget, but should recover.
- 2.2 That a new position of part time Town Centre Manager (TCM) be established for a 2 year fixed term, with the responsibility for town centre income budget. The role to be funded from existing reserves for 2016/2017.
- 2.3 That a growth bid of £29,000, £14,500 for 2017/2018 and £14,500 for 2018/2019, be approved to cover the cost of the TCM for the second year.
- 2.4 That these arrangements be reviewed after 18 months (January 2018).
- 2.5 That the Town Centre income budget is reduced by £6,250 in 2016/2017 to reflect the operational changes identified in paragraph 4.9. The 2017/2018 Town Centre budget will be reviewed during the 2017/2018 budget setting exercise.

3 BACKGROUND

Introduction

- 3.1 The land within the town centre of Stevenage, principally Queensway, Town Square and the Forum along with the Westgate Shopping Centre and the Market are viewed as the town centre. Management fell to Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) in the 1980s as the development corporation was wound up. There have been various arrangements for the management of the public spaces along Queensway and the two squares.
- 3.2 At the start of 2016 SBC took back the town centre management function, including the promotion of it which had, up until then, been carried out by a separate organisation.
- 3.3 Retailers and leisure operators provide the draw to the town centre, products and services for our residents and businesses along with a significant number of jobs. The town centre is no longer fully meeting the needs of the residents of Stevenage, with some choosing to go elsewhere. In resident, business and Member discussions, the state of the town centre is a regularly raised concern.

4. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION AND OTHER OPTIONS

Current situation

- 4.1 The recent loss of Marks & Spencer in 2015, along with the imminent loss of BHS and the opening of Debenhams at Roaring Meg retail park in 2017 poses further and continuing pressures on the town centre. The town centre offer is predominately value orientated retailers, along with a good range of clothing, footwear, jewellery and stationary retailers. Other than Tesco's, there is a very limited food retailing offer in the town centre. Queensway south and Market Place are the primary restaurant areas. The Plaza provides the only town centre pub offer. There is a concern that much of the town centre closes at 5.30pm, as it does not provide a wide enough range of eating and drinking establishments.
- 4.2 A combination of short, medium and longer term solutions will be required to support the town centre in its day to day functions and reduce the loss of trade to other destinations.
- 4.3 A strong and successful town centre is needed to not only better serve existing residents but also maximise the attractiveness to potential new residents and investors to the town centre. This would support the work and ambitions of Stevenage First for Stevenage Central.

Strategic goals

- 4.4 SBC wants to support the existing retailers and users of the town centre while encourage new retailers and users to come to an improving and aspiring town centre. SBC, with the appointment of a TCM, will look at positive measures to stimulate the town centre to help it to grow and continue to improve.
- 4.5 SBC along with its partners in Stevenage First are committed to reinvigorating the centre of Stevenage so that it once again meets the aspirations of its people and makes provision for the opportunities they seek. This includes developing the town as a destination town centre, with a combined retail, leisure and residential offer.
- 4.6 The Future Town Future Council (FTFC) programme identifies the strategic aim '*To create a vibrant town centre where people want to live, work and play.*' Considering this, against the functionality of town centre, consideration should be given for short, medium and long-term solutions.
- 4.7 Due to its design, the first impressions of the town centre do not highlight the Town's strengths. From the bus and train stations visitors are met with a concrete walk-ways over dual carriageways or into a concrete bus station. From a private car, the sea of surface car parks and service yards is an initial detraction the town centre struggles to overcome. In time the comprehensive regeneration plans for the town should address these issues.
- 4.8 Following a review of the current arrangements and the strategic aspirations for the town centre, potential proposals affecting three core areas: Event and Promotion; Relationships; and Maintenance and Infrastructure have been noted below.

Events and Promotion

- 4.9 Footfall is paramount to existing and potential retailers alike. The town centre can suffer from unfaltering perceptions and a diminishing number of draws that pull people to the centre. As a short-term quick win to support existing retailers and improve the perception of the town, new events, licences and services will only be approved where they:
- drive footfall and improve the perception of the town centre or
 - perform a civic function.
- 4.10 Stalls, street pitches, pavement seats and A-boards should be seen as drivers of footfall but only be permitted where they expand an existing provision or bring in a new complementary use. The current quality of the stalls, which were inherited from the previous TC management company, is low and detracts from the town centre offer. The existing stalls and pitches are currently managed within the Estate team, who organise licenses and collect rent.
- 4.11 New pitches should be granted where they are of sufficient quality to improve the town centre and to drive footfall along Queensway between the two

squares. Pavement seating will be permitted outside food and drink units where it does not obstruct the footways. A-boards should only be used outside of Primary and Secondary retail frontages, with no more than one per unit and no further than 3 metres from the edge of the unit.

- 4.12 In the medium term, live music areas (see Appendix 2) located in the north-west corner of Forum square can provide entertainment and busking opportunities, increasing dwell time in the square and adjoining shops. This would link in to the new seating that the Regeneration team is proposing for the square. Expanding and improving the stalls with a wider range and higher end offer can be explored (see kiosks in appendix). Linkages with North Herts College to bring pop-up 'Harts Kitchen' and 'Harts Salon' to vacant town centre units should also be considered. This would improve the town centre offer and increase footfall and have the potential for new start-up businesses to become established.
- 4.13 A coordinated and clear programme of events should be actively promoted to local residents and those passing through the town centre such as workers and students.
- 4.14 Currently there are a number of events such as Stevenage Day, the Christmas Lights switch on and a few others that draw people into the town for a specific event. These are now managed internally within SBC and existing budgets, with some limited promotion of these singular events. The Westgate Centre runs a small number of child-friendly events during some of the longer school holidays, which is promoted only on their own website. There are also a number of events and performances at Stevenage Arts and Leisure Centre (SALC), which again are marketed independently from that of the town centre.
- 4.15 A series of 3 professionally run markets along with a Christmas Market have been commissioned for 2016. These markets will have white stalls and uniforms, serving a selection of complementary products to the existing town centre offer. The stalls will be placed at both the Forum and Town Squares to encourage footfall between the two.
- 4.16 In the short-term it is proposed to bring together all of the promotion in a coordinated way. All events in the town centre, Westgate and SALC will be promoted in through a single point of contact in SBC's Communications Team. Promotion will include weekly events items on SBC's Facebook and Twitter and be commented on in the 'Stevenage News' column in the Comet newspaper. Better communication links and promotion should be established with the major employers near the town including the SBC, BTC, Airbus, Hertfordshire County Council and MBDA along with North Herts College.
- 4.17 The TCM will work with London Communication Agency and other appointed consultants to promote a coordinated vision for the town centre, highlighting the strength of the current offer and physical improvements that are happening in the town centre.

- 4.18 Discounted parking strategies should also be considered where they can be shown to support the town centre.
- 4.19 In the medium term, public relation companies could be employed to develop more comprehensive promotion strategies that involve a wider group of Stevenage's residential and business populations. Events that target children and draw families to the town centre will increase footfall and help improve the perception of the town. Other ideas could include giving away cotton bags with 'I ♥ Stevenage' branding on.
- 4.20 Over the longer-term the redevelopment of the town combined with a more coordinated and active support for the town centre, should result in self-sustaining increases in footfall and improved perceptions.

Relationships

- 4.21 Managing and supporting the existing and potential retailers is a vital function for any town centre seeking to grow and improve its offer. Retailers often face common (to each other) but different (to other business) issues. More often than not, the principle lead from town centre retailers is the store manager who may have to negotiate with their head office more than engaging with the Council. A single first point of contact from the Council can direct, support and advise local retailers, supporting them in their continued business. The single point of contact can better understand what draws people to the town centre and encourage new retailers to consider Stevenage.
- 4.22 Currently this is not being provided, as quick resource this report recommends the appointment of a 2 year fixed term part time Town Centre Manager. The role will be to lead on the support and relationship building for the town centre business; advise on the impact for the strategic regeneration redevelopments that will affect the town centre; and support in setting the strategic direction for the Events and Promotion / Maintenance and Infrastructure for the town centre. The role would be available to candidates with a proven track record of supporting and improving town centres.
- 4.23 The TCM will review the short-term proposals in this report including those covering the promotion of the town centre and to further explore the medium term measures identified
- 4.24 It is important for this role to continue as the regeneration and change in the town gathers pace over the medium to longer term. The role could grow to a full-time position potentially paid for by the town centre redevelopment.

Maintenance and infrastructure

- 4.25 One of the principle concerns about the perception of the town centre is its physical appearance, along with the reducing number of stores. Currently there is a £60,000 per year maintenance budget which includes lighting, the pond and the footways. There is a further £173,710 for cleansing.

- 4.26 In 2014 and 2015 there were a series of public realm improvements in the town centre, which focused on repairs, street furniture, play spaces and trees. The Regeneration Team are looking at a second phase of the town centre public realm improvements which include improvements to the square by the Westgate entrance and options for Forum Square. The improvements to the squares are scheduled for 2016/2017.
- 4.27 The TCM could look at the replacement of the existing way finding signs (see Appendix 3), which are prominent but generally in a bad state of repair with upside down maps, missing parts and letters, as part of that project. The Regeneration Team have initially costed this at £70,000. The current signs detract from the appearance of the town centre and fail to promote any of retailers that are a draw to the town, such as Primark, Next, TK Maxx or H&M.
- 4.28 Also in the short-term a review of the windows, spandrel panel and canopies along Queensway should be considered with possibly a design competition for potential improvements. These are key features of the town centre and will remain so but their current condition (see Appendix 5) detracts from the appearance of the Town. Much of the work review work was conducted in 2013 and could be updated within existing budgets. The competition would improve the profile of the centre while funding for the improvements would need to be explored with SBC, current landowners and the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP).
- 4.29 During the medium term, an approach to temporary uses and the opportunities from the regeneration works can be explored. Construction works, side hoardings, construction traffic and changing vacant spaces present challenges and opportunities. Temporary pop-up spaces such as the award winning POP Brixton (see Appendix 7) and Roof East in Stratford roof top bar, urban park and cinema on the top floor of a car park (Appendix 6) show some possible options in the town centre, before exploring what to temporarily do with Lytton Way.
- 4.30 Also in the medium term consideration should be given for investing in higher quality stalls for flower sellers and fruit and vegetables (see Appendix 1) which would improve the appearance of the Town and increase the range of goods and services available.
- 4.31 Over the long term, once these short and medium term improvements have been carried out, the focus of infrastructure funding for the town centre will shift to be predominately maintenance based and linked to the wider town centre regeneration.

Monitoring of Outcomes

- 4.31 An annual report will be presented to the Executive in September 2017 which will reflect on the performance of the first year of the programme, including number of business engaged with and delivery of the short and medium term goals.

5. IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Financial Implications

- 5.1.1 The position of the proposed Town Centre Manager (TCM) would be for an initial 2 year fixed term period, part time (half a week / 18.5 hours) which including recharges would be approximately £29,000 per year. There is currently £30,156 in the Town Centre reserves which will cover over 1 year of the TCM role and this report is seeking approval for growth bid for £29,000, £14,500 for 2017/2018 and £14,500 for 2018/2109, to fund the second year.
- 5.1.2 It is proposed to allocate any remaining income including any underspend to the TCM as a budget for promotion and investment in the town centre.
- 5.1.3 It is not proposed to alter the existing maintenance or cleansing budgets, or the 10% management fee for Estates. However the expected £36,500 (7 stalls) income is expected to significantly change, with a reduction of 75% if the new criteria for stalls are applied from Quarter 3 16/17 onwards.
- 5.1.4 There is a further £5,000 budgeted income from the commercial site hire and pitches and £2,300 for the seating licenses. At present the pitch contracts have not been renewed, but there is expected to be a further £7,500 from the seasonal markets.
- 5.1.5 This could result in a fall from £39,300 to £33,050 for the 2016/2017 budget and a fall from £39,300 to £23,925 in 2017/18. It is expected that this will recover over time as number of stalls recovers.

5.2. Legal Implications

- 5.2.1 None

5.3. Equalities and Diversity Implications

- 5.3.1 Equalities and Diversity issues will be considered across the programme as part of the development of the specific projects and deliverables. Furthermore an Equality Impact Assessment will be carried out on the new Corporate Plan to ensure that objectives and activities that support the plan comply with the Equality Act 2010.

5.4 Policy Implications

- 5.4.1 The proposals support the Future Town Future Council programme; especially strand 6 - Town Centre Regeneration.

5.5 Risk Implications

- 5.5. A risk log will be managed by the proposed TCM, but the inherit risk is not doing anything and allowing the town centre to further deteriorate. The

proposed Town Centre Manager will ensure that risks are identified, mitigated where possible managed appropriately in line with the Council's Risk management processes.

5.6 Human Resources Implications

5.6.1 A job description and person specification will be drafted and job evaluation undertaken in conjunction with recognised trade unions for the new post proposed

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Future Town Future Council priority

Appendix 2 - TfL Managed busking

Appendix 3 - Existing and potential town centre way finding signs

Appendix 4 - Existing glass panels on Queensway

Appendix 5 - Potential new town centre stalls

Appendix 6 - Roof East, Stratford

Appendix 7 - POP Brixton

Appendix 1 - Future Town Future Council

Stevenage Central	
Ambition	To create a vibrant town centre where people want to live, work and play.
Business Benefits	A new vibrant Central Stevenage community. Quality retail, office and leisure offer. New homes in the town centre. Accessible hub for public services in the town centre. Stevenage is a destination of choice.
Quick wins	Stevenage Central framework launched July 2015. Land assembly with the acquisition of The Plaza and 2 Town Square. Procurement of developer commenced Public realm improvement phase 1 completed.
Key projects	Appoint development partner. Deliver a public services hub shared by public agencies. Redevelop Stevenage Railway station. Improve the public realm in the town centre. First phase of a mixed use development in the town centre underway by 2020.

Appendix 2 - TfL busking spots <https://tfl.gov.uk/corporate/about-tfl/culture-and-heritage/busking#on-this-page-1>



Appendix 3 - Existing and potential town centre way finding signs



Appendix 4 - Existing glass panels on Queensway



Appendix 5 - Potential new town centre stalls.



Appendix- 6 Roof East - Stratford



Appendix 7 - POP Brixton

