

Report to: Overview Committee



Date of Meeting 12th November 2020

Document classification: Part A Public Document

Exemption applied: None

Review date for release N/A

Our Towns deferral: Recovery and redundancy focus

Report summary:

This report sets out the requirement to postpone completion of the Our Towns Study.

Recommendation:

That members note the reasons for deferring the completion of the Our Towns Study to focus on redundancy response, emergency C-19 grant allocation and economic recovery.

Reason for recommendation:

Context:

The intention behind commissioning the Our Towns study [[Cabinet report](#)] was to undertake a comprehensive analysis of our towns in order to identify investment and funding opportunities, planning policy options, site specific improvements and feasible projects to help create better places.

The process of gathering data for the Our Towns Study was in progress in December 2019. An inception meeting of the Project Steering Group was then held on the 15th January 2020.

A draft copy of the Our Towns project brief was circulated and a number of actions agreed. This included Economic Development leading a mapping exercise and the collation of wider data and evidence. This was to be made available for review by the Project Group in April and commissioning of the work would follow.

Alongside this getting underway, a meeting was to be arranged with Cllrs Hartnell, Hookway and our Deputy CEO to agree the focus and remit for a High St TAFF to complement the work.

The data gathering was then delayed by the urgent redundancy response requirement at Axminster Carpets following their closure in February with the loss of almost 90 jobs.

Our response was to quickly develop, organise and employ a redundancy response network of relevant employment, skills, training and education providers, support agencies and advisors to offer help to all affected staff through a series of drop in workshops.

This response was well received. Regretfully, it was quickly followed by the collapse of Flybe and the loss of almost 1,000 high value jobs. We worked with ECC and DWP to quickly deliver a large scale Jobs Fair on the 10th March at Exeter Corn Exchange.

With the onset of C-19 and the unprecedented impact of lockdown on our businesses, Economic Development were then directed towards development and delivery of our emergency grant programmes, coming to a close at the end of August.

As the country entered steep recession, unemployment has increased dramatically and Economic Development have remained in triage mode. Our focus now is recovery planning and more widespread redundancy support to an increasing number of affected businesses and residents. We are also preparing our next wave of business support and discretionary grant funding allocation after the announcement of the new national restrictions from November the 5th.

Members will be aware that a detailed overview of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economy of the District, the initiatives that have been undertaken to mitigate this and those that are planned to support to recovery has been reported to Cabinet on the 28th October, 2020 [Report: [Covid-19 Economic Response and Recovery](#)].

Deferment:

The economic landscape has changed so dramatically since the beginning of the year, any prior retail/commercial use demand data will need to be comprehensively updated. Moreover, changes to the planning system are now proposed at such scale that a fresh re-examination and approach to explore town centre redevelopment and regeneration will be required.

We need to ensure that any work that is commissioned is able to respond to this new economic landscape and to seize any opportunities presented by centrally funded initiatives aimed at reinvigorating the High Street and town centre centres more generally.

The brief for this work needs to be recast to ensure that it does not quickly become outdated and that it contributes to wider recovery planning across East Devon. As economic turbulence subsides and reliable baseline demand, footfall and projection data can be developed, our aim is that the town centre assessment can form part of the evidence base for informed policy in the development of the new Local Plan.

We are aware the Heart of the South West Place Group are to commission a Future Towns Study to be completed early next year. This will focus on the economic role, challenges and opportunities for smaller towns in the HotSW area in the context of the Local Industrial Strategy and Government initiatives. In updating the Our Towns project brief, the findings of this work will be considered alongside the One Public Estate funded Thriving Towns Studies for both Axminster and Exmouth. We are also commissioning High St footfall data and business surveys as part of our Reopening High Streets Safely Fund (RHSSF) programme and will ensure this data informs the brief when it can be revisited.

The reality of our current response and recovery work focus is that we cannot currently give an anticipated date for resumption of the Our Towns Study. It will be included as an aspiration in our 2021/22 Service Plan.

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Portfolio(s) (check which apply):

- Climate Action
- Coast, Country and Environment
- Corporate Services and COVID-19 Response and Recovery
- Democracy and Transparency
- Economy and Assets
- Finance
- Policy Co-ordination and Regional Engagement
- Strategic Planning
- Sustainable Homes and Communities

Financial implications:

To be completed by Finance.

Legal implications:

To be completed by Legal.

Equalities impact Low Impact

If choosing High or Medium level outline the equality considerations here, which should include any particular adverse impact on people with protected characteristics and actions to mitigate these. Link to an equalities impact assessment form using the [equalities form template](#).

Climate change Low Impact

Risk: Choose a risk level; Click here to enter text on risk considerations relating to your report.

Links to background information

Cabinet Report: 27th Nov, 2019. [Our Towns Study: Understanding East Devon Towns](#)

Cabinet Report: 28th Oct, 2020. [Covid-19 Economic Response and Recovery](#)

Link to [Council Plan](#):

Priorities (check which apply)

- Outstanding Place and Environment
- Outstanding Homes and Communities
- Outstanding Economic Growth, Productivity, and Prosperity
- Outstanding Council and Council Services