

**Report to:** Cabinet

**Date of Meeting:** 27 November 2019

**Public Document:** Yes

**Exemption:** None

**Review date for release** None



**Subject:**

**Our Towns Study: Understanding East Devon Towns**

**Purpose of report:**

The purpose of this report is to secure approval to commission a comprehensive analysis of our towns and to identify investment and funding opportunities, planning policy options, site specific improvements and feasible projects to help create better places.

**Recommendation:**

- 1. To commission appropriate external expertise to carry out the Study and work with the council and local stakeholders to implement recommended actions.**
- 2. To allocate a sum of up to £50,000 to fund the study from the Business Rate Pool funds already accrued by the council and required to be used for economic purposes.**
- 3. To delegate authority to the Deputy Chief Executive to finalise the study specification and tender selection in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Economy and two members of the Overview Committee nominated by the Chair of the Overview Committee and thereafter to carry out the project.**

**Reason for recommendation:**

The council lacks detailed and consistent intelligence concerning its towns, their centres and their importance to surrounding communities in our coastal and rural areas. This was an observation by the LGA's Peer Challenge Team and has been an issue when developing, often at short notice, bids for external funding.

Overview Committee and its proposed High Streets TAFF will work with, advise and be informed by the 'Our Towns' Study. The study will also include local stakeholder involvement to ensure that this is a shared rather than top down approach.

Informative findings and practical action recommendations will be key to the study. Individual reports for each town will be produced for council and local use. A series of evidence based recommendations for tailored town focused policies will be provided. The study will also result in a number of feasible and costed project proposals and

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	recommended interventions specifically designed to help support and improve our towns as distinct places and local economies.
<b>Officer:</b>	Richard Cohen Deputy Chief Executive 01395 571552
<b>Financial implications:</b>	The is a request for an additional budget of £50k to be funded from monies gained through the 100% rate pilot scheme in 2018/19 where the Council still retains in a reserve £450k deemed for use on economic activity; through supporting new or protecting existing activity
<b>Legal implications:</b>	There are no legal implications requiring comment
<b>Equalities impact:</b>	Low Impact
<b>Risk:</b>	Low Risk
<b>Links to background information:</b>	There are a number of documents and links identified in this report. As well as East Devon and Greater Exeter studies for the purpose of town planning policy development, research and evidence on towns is also extensive outside East Devon and nationally.
<b>Link to Council Plan:</b>	This Study was identified as a priority for the council's Economy Service at the joint meeting of Overview and Scrutiny Committees on 5 Sep 2019.  The emerging Council Plan 2020-24 identifies key themes for delivery of place, economic growth, productivity and prosperity.  Furthermore the council is committed to advancing a carbon neutral agenda and the alleviation of poverty. Promoting more sustainable and prosperous communities is an important element of the council's commitments for the future.

## Report in full

### 1. Background

- 1.1 East Devon's towns are rich, multi-faceted places made up of a physical environment and the communities that live within that. However, it is clear that we, the District Council, do not know enough in detail about how our towns function, especially how to predict and respond to the future challenges and opportunities that our towns will face. Even a basic town centre health check which is common place elsewhere, is not something that exists consistently across our towns. As a result, we have no meaningful baseline against which to judge change over time and the comparative wellbeing of our towns.
- 1.2 There are three key elements that we wish to explore for each of East Devon's towns within this study:
  - High street and town centre wellbeing, threats and opportunities
  - Wider town functionality – a broader view that considers demography, resilience and self-sustainability,

- Relationship of each town to its surrounding hinterland and village communities

- 1.3 To determine the best outcomes in terms of local intelligence and prospects for successful interventions in each town, the project will not only need to employ external professional expertise (research and mapping, property and land value, local economic assessment, spatial and public realm design etc.) but also engage with local stakeholders including town councils, Neighbourhood Plan teams, voluntary groups and local business representatives.
- 1.4 An important part of the project will be to identify not only intelligence and opportunities for each of our towns but also an objective assessment of prioritisation between towns and the degree to which each town is in a position to effectively embrace and deliver improvements.
- 1.5 Some high street retailers have struggled to compete with increases in online retail and to attract strong levels of footfall outside of the peak season. Small retail representatives report worsening vacancy rates and are calling for transformative town centre regeneration. Mounting evidence suggests that the future of town centres is increasingly not retail driven. This study will capture key intelligence about the performance of the high streets and centres of the district's towns. The objective is to have a baseline of information against which to monitor future performance and identify practical interventions to enhance the success and value of different town centres to their communities, businesses and visitors. An outcome will also be stronger council policies and more informed and persuasive bidding for external funding.
- 1.6 An emerging priority for the council's new leadership is how to support our towns as a whole to become more self-sustaining. This needs a whole town approach that looks beyond the high street alone and considers the broader economy of our towns that exist away from the centre of town. At the forefront of this is a desire to see the generation of improved economic performance and the development of new local employment and business development capacity.
- 1.7 Our labour market is characterised by low levels of unemployment and good qualification levels though we still experience lower than average wages and low workforce productivity as well as a large flow of workers travelling out of the district to work in places such as Exeter, Mid Devon and South Somerset. Sustainability of our towns is a growing desire and reducing private vehicle usage and out-commuting are an ambition for our Council. The council would like to see towns that offer greater economic opportunities as well as a more diverse and resilient offer in each town so that our towns' residents and surrounding smaller communities can access locally available affordable homes, shopping, services and culture.
- 1.8 If the district council, partner organisations and town communities themselves are to be informed about how our towns function and how we might intervene and invest to make our towns better places with stronger local employment then the district council needs a level of understanding and evidence that it currently lacks.

## **2 Current Position – Existing Evidence**

- 2.1 A number of previous town centre and retail studies have been commissioned to inform Local Plan policy development and most recently as part of the evidence base for the emerging Greater Exeter Strategic Plan (GESP). The following comprise the main

background documents to the initial Town Centre Health Check element of this work and include:

- East Devon Retail Needs Study and Town Centres Health Check (2007)
- East Devon Retail Study Update (2011)
- Exeter & West End of East Devon Retail & Leisure Study (Dec 2016)
- Greater Exeter Town Centre and Retail Study (Dec 2018)

Up to a point these are useful but they also follow a quite traditional format to meet planning policy requirements. However, increasingly the role of retail is diminishing in terms of its value and importance to town centres and the communities of our towns. Their centres need to be repurposed and reinvented in ways that recognise the persistent decline of retail trade and the increased role of 'experience' and community provision.

There is also a broad range of established national thinking and research into towns and the study will tap into this resource while identifying the particular aspects of each of our towns. Examples of wider study work include:

<https://placemanagement.org/research/multifunctional-centres/>

<http://www.vanishinghighstreet.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/GrimseyReview2.pdf>

[https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/5.33%20Town%20Centre\\_04\\_web.pdf](https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/5.33%20Town%20Centre_04_web.pdf)

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/766844/The\\_High\\_Street\\_Report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/766844/The_High_Street_Report.pdf)

<https://www.centreforcities.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Whats-in-store.pdf>

The success and resilience of our towns into the future is less informed by traditional studies and classifications that currently exist to inform town planning processes. Our previous retail studies have served the purposes for which they were commissioned but did not go far beyond the agreed indicators advised for policy development. Retail is less important to the wellbeing and attraction of our commercial and social spaces.

Previous studies covering East Devon have been useful in identifying which towns have a stronger comparative retail sector presence but are limited in their capacity to identify and explore the causal factors behind the decline our high streets have experienced, and more so what our towns will look and perform like in the future. Furthermore, studies for the purpose of informing planning policy are not of themselves a mechanism for project delivery or development. The 'Our Towns' Study will explore the 'DNA' of East Devon towns, engage with those communities and propose practical actions and projects to support them.

### **3 Proposal**

- 3.1. The project specification will reflect the detail advised in this report and the process that will be used to commission and progress the study. The council will use formal tender procedures to commission suitably qualified professional consultancy. Bids will be invited and responses received will be compared on a balance of price and quality. Selection will be carried out through the Project Steering Group.

- 3.2. In terms of a cost for the project we expect that the cost will be in the tens of thousands of pounds but this will need to be tested in the tendering process. The proposal is for a sum of up to £50,000 to be allocated. This is a significant piece of work and will involve time spent not just on research and analysis but also on local engagement and work with our own elected members as well. A priority of this project and its expenditure is to generate a better informed intelligence base and project pipeline with a view to attracting external and private funding that will be well in excess of the project cost itself.
- 3.3. The council has funds accumulated from its participation in the Devon-wide Business Rate Pool. This fund is restricted for use for economic purposes and this use of the funds is both appropriate and also an effective basis on which to make informed decisions about the investment of the remainder of the Business Rate Pool Fund as well as other council owned funding such as Commercial Investment Fund and applications for external funding.
- 3.4. Investment from the Fund into this study will also improve the council's chances of attracting third party investment on a multiplier basis into improving the prosperity and wellbeing of our towns.
- 3.5. Our towns matter and if the council is to effectively support them, it needs to use its resources in an informed and cost effective way. The council is proposing a detailed study to advise where, what and when our interventions might be. The robust evidence and feasible project and implementation plans following from this work will make for persuasive funding bids to third parties, encourage investors and increase the council's own confidence in making investment decisions.
- 3.6. As well as comparing the economic health and resilience of the district's main town centres (Honiton, Axminster, Seaton, Ottery St Mary, Exmouth, Sidmouth, Budleigh Salterton and Cranbrook), the work should demonstrate a clear understanding and a compelling picture of these places - how each town works as a place, it's people, demography and culture. From this we want to explore what specific changes and interventions might be pursued, be it by the council, through identified Government funding programmes and by the towns themselves.
- 3.7. We want the work to go beyond a focus on local business, jobs growth and planning to provide a blueprint for each town to take stronger ownership of their future, and testing the capacity and willingness of each place to embrace and participate in change.
- 3.8. The work will capture baseline performance indicators and advise on and identify practical policy and deliverable projects. This means the wider assessment will make specific recommendations for new, evidence based policy and will also identify feasible place-making and local economic improvement opportunities or interventions within each of our main towns.

## **4 Next Steps**

- 4.1 Subject to Cabinet funding approval the project brief will be finalised by the Steering Group and then publicised to invite proposals from appropriate external expertise. The Project Steering Group will agree the final specification of the study and serve as a selection panel and be consulted regularly throughout the study period. The Portfolio Holder for Economy and two member nominees for by Chair of Overview Committee will form the Steering Group along with key officers. In addition, project progress will be

reported to Overview Committee not least to ensure that there is a synergy with the proposed High Streets TAFF.

- 4.2 We envisage that the 'Our Towns' Study will take some 4 months to complete with final reporting around April 2020 but will be able to confirm in agreement with the Steering Group the exact timing and other project detail as an outcome of the selection and commissioning process.