

REPORT TO: OVERVIEW WORKING GROUP

DATE: 7 FEBRUARY 2017

TITLE: UPDATE ON HARLOW TOWN CENTRE

PORTFOLIO HOLDER: CLLR TONY DURCAN PORTFOLIO HOLDER
REGENERATION & ENTERPRISE

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RECOMMENDED that:

- A** The Overview Working Group notes the contents of the report.
- B** An update report is provided to the Overview Working Group in six months' time.

BACKGROUND

1. Regeneration and a thriving economy is a priority for the Council and supporting improvements and redevelopment to the town centre is a key objective in achieving this priority.
2. A report titled Revitalising Harlow Town Centre was presented to the Overview Working Group on 10 March 2016 and detailed the current and future activity in supporting an improved town centre.
3. It was agreed at the Overview Working Group meeting in March 2016 that a further report would be provided to give an update on progress.

CONTEXT AND STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE

4. Harlow has a declining town centre which suffers from an ageing infrastructure, poor physical environment and lack of inward investment. The current state and perception of the town centre is failing to attract diverse and high-quality retail and leisure outlets as well as newer and more affluent residents within the wider catchment which is, in turn, perpetuating decline.
5. Evidence suggests that Harlow has an affluent catchment population spanning an estimated shopping population of 246,800. However, the town

centre is not capitalising or benefitting from the available catchment and is losing out to neighbouring competitors.

6. According to the UK Shopping Venue Annual Rankings (2015-2016) out of the top 200 UK retail venues, Harlow saw the biggest fall of all venues following the closure of Marks & Spencer in 2015 and the lack of significant regeneration.
7. Harlow's location and connectivity to London and Cambridge (and further afield) means the town is in a unique position to attract both national and international employers and a skilled and diverse workforce. Harlow has a key role to play in achieving the economic potential of the London Stansted Cambridge Corridor and as a sub-regional centre and is a key focus for both housing and economic growth, playing a complementary role to London and Cambridge.
8. The corridor contains major public, academic and private sector assets which can deliver growth potential for the UK. Harlow's importance and role in the corridor is further evidenced by the growth of the Enterprise Zone, the decision of Public Health England to locate to the town and numerous housing development schemes being promoted in Harlow and its environs.
9. The town centre is therefore of great importance in enabling Harlow to continue to play such a role in the future success of the corridor. A healthy town centre is fundamental to Harlow's role as a growing sub regional centre of economic activity, attracting new business and higher income earners to the town.
10. A vibrant town centre provides an inward investment incentive to companies (and their employees) seeking to invest in Harlow and provides a competitive advantage to other locations they may be considering. A successful town centre can be an important factor to a company when it considers whether it will be able to retain its staff during a move. They often consider the quality of life aspect of a town to potentially persuade employees and their families to relocate.
11. There is an increasing need for the town centre to demonstrate that it is a high quality centre of opportunity. Permitted Development Rights have made conversion from office to residential accommodation very easy, and several office blocks in the town centre have already been, or will shortly be converted. The town centre is currently in a poor position to encourage high quality residential and mixed-use redevelopments. This is creating negative conditions for regeneration and discourages future investment.
12. It is therefore imperative that the Council can seize opportunities that support existing and future investment and development to lead regeneration and

revitalisation of the town centre.

THE OPPORTUNITY

13. In order for the Council to provide leadership and encourage positive and sustainable redevelopment, a clear vision and strategy is needed to focus priorities and partnership working.
14. A draft Harlow Town Centre Strategy is being developed to shape the Council's role in town centre regeneration and redevelopment. The strategy will enable positive dialogue with partners in both strengthening communication and collaboration and appropriate private sector investment.
15. To support both the development of the Town Centre Strategy and updated Local Plan, key studies have been commissioned. These will provide the evidence base in determining the future retail requirements across the district and a framework to guide future town centre regeneration and interventions based on market intelligence and future forecasts and trends.
16. Following an appraisal of the town centre, the Council's appointed consultants have investigated a number of intervention scenarios that provide regeneration opportunities. Feedback has made it clear that regeneration of the town centre cannot be achieved if solely driven by retail and leisure. Current and forecast retail market conditions are such that any redevelopment within a town centre environment should offer mixed-uses, including residential accommodation.
17. The consultants draft findings have identified nine areas of intervention or opportunity. However, a limited number of these are within the Council's ownership and therefore control. The area around Post Office Road, Post Office Road car park, has been identified as a potential redevelopment opportunity for the Council.
18. The main shopping area and general environment deteriorates towards the north end of the town centre and the area lacks significant attractions and resident population required to drive footfall and activity.
19. A high quality, mixed use redevelopment at the Post Office Road car park site would open up the town centre, rebalance the existing shift that has occurred towards the southern end and send a strong signal to both the retail/leisure and investor markets.
20. Developments such as the Enterprise Zone, Public Health England relocation and the recent announcement of the creation of a 'garden town' north of Harlow, will see significant growth in terms of residents and employees and provides an opportunity for the town centre to attract much needed

investment.

21. The information and evidence gained to date, in particular the current work being undertaken by consultants (including soft market testing), suggests that the right conditions exist for a development brief for Post Office Road car park to be produced, taken and advertised as an opportunity for developers.
22. The soft market testing and ad hoc contact received from developers and others has demonstrated that there is an opportunity for a mixed use redevelopment at the site. This view has also been expressed by the Homes and Communities Agency.
23. Discussions with potential developers have confirmed that in order to achieve successful regeneration and provide a step-change development in the town centre, there are a number of factors that need to be addressed. These include:
 - a) A clear planning framework (e.g. Local Plan / Town Centre Area Action Plan);
 - b) Site availability;
 - c) Flexible housing policy;
 - d) Public realm improvements; and
 - e) Improved connectivity to the town's station.
24. It is proposed that the £1 million town centre regeneration reserve funding should now be utilised to bring forward development at Post Office Road (and support wider regeneration of the town centre), by supporting the development and procurement process and in upgrading and replacing some of the existing poor public realm and connectivity issues.
25. Ring fencing this funding to address some of the physical improvements required creates the opportunity to utilise this as match funding which alongside developer contributions, will provide a much improved and wider public realm and will achieve better value for money.
26. There are already a number of redevelopment schemes proposed for a several areas in the town centre. However these proposals are confined to existing footprints and the assumption that there will not be any significant regeneration of the town centre. This has made the private sector investment cautious and opportunities to significantly redevelop have been under estimated.

27. The Post Office car park proposal will signal the Council's commitment and investment in the town centre and will encourage private sector investment and development.

CURRENT PROGRESS

28. In parallel to the long term regeneration of the town centre, a number of schemes and activities have been progressed and achieved throughout the past year.

PHYSICAL IMPROVEMENTS

29. Work has been taking place to deliver a range of public realm improvements, this has included:

- a) New totem-style pedestrian signage has been installed throughout the town centre;
- b) Updating high-ways and car parking signs improving accessibility between the north and south of the town centre;
- c) Removal of three large brick planters in Broad Walk and increasing the street furniture in the area;
- d) New lighting at the Bus Station in Terminus Street, with new lighting to be installed early 2017 in West Square and Broad Walk;
- e) The unused flagpoles at Market Square have been removed.

30. Funding from the Council's Capital Programme will deliver a range of improvements, which include:

- a) Replacing lamp columns throughout the town centre with new columns and LED lights;
- b) Installing new cycle racks;
- c) Additional lighting at Terminus Street;
- d) Installation of WiFi in Market Square and Terminus Street.

Scoping work is currently taking place with tendering and delivery taking place throughout 2017.

SURVEY

31. In August 2016 a short survey with members of the public took place, which asked four questions:
 1. Have you visited Harlow Town Centre before?
 2. What do you like about the Town Centre/What do you look for when visiting a town/shopping centre?
 3. What do you dislike about the town centre/What puts you off visiting a town/shopping centre?
 4. What would you improve in the town centre/What would encourage you to visit Harlow town centre?
32. The majority of respondents felt strongly that the retail and leisure offer of the town centre, although liked, needed to be improved. In particular the quality of the retail offer. For those who disliked the retail offer, the majority of comments centred on too many charity and discount stores such as pound shops.
33. There was a general feeling that the town centre is functional, meeting the basic needs and expectations of residents and visitors. However many remember what the town centre from some years ago and compared it accordingly.
34. The results of the survey provided an insight into the views of a wide range of users and confirmed the need for regeneration.

PARTNERSHIP PROJECTS

35. The Council has partnered with Phoenix Resource Centre, Harlow Enterprise Hub and Harlow College to create a Digital and Creative Technology Hub in the town centre. The Phoenix Digital and Creative Hub will provide a range of support and services focusing on developing the digital and creative sectors, improving entrepreneurialism amongst residents in the growing industry.
36. The Hub will provide access to a range of state of the art equipment and services, bringing diversity to the town centre offer and support in promoting the town centre as more than just a shopping destination.
37. As a pilot project, the Hub will provide an opportunity to explore and develop other projects and services that can be delivered from a town centre location, helping to redefine and revitalise the town centre environment.

38. Harlow College students have been commissioned to produce new wraps for the red plant pots in Market Square. Students have been asked to produce and develop designs that can be permanently exhibited around the large pots celebrating Harlow as well as promote the diverse skills and expertise existing within Harlow's young people. This project will form part of the Market Square improvement scheme taking place in 2017.
39. The Council has also partnered with Harlow College who have agreed for their construction students to undertake the refurbishment work of 21 The Rows, with the intention of creating a pop-up unit for a range of temporary uses (open to the commercial, public, community and voluntary sectors).
40. Following an approach from Harlow Art Trust, the Council facilitated the installation of a sculpture in Playhouse Square. Chief, by Nick Turvey has been made available to Harlow Art Trust on a 10-year loan to form part of the town's public sculpture collection.
41. Following this successful partnership, work will continue to explore opportunities for the town centre to host further sculptures on a similar loan arrangement. This will support in promoting the town centre and Harlow's art and cultural diversity.
42. Recognising the limited ownership, Officers continue to work in partnership and maintain dialogue with the various land owners across the town centre in particular the managing agents of the Harvey Centre and The Water Gardens.
43. Most recently work took place to increase activity in Market Square and between November and December 2016, the area played host to the Christmas Lights Switch On, Coca-Cola Christmas Truck Campaign and a fun fair and Christmas market.
44. The Coca-Cola Christmas Truck attracted large crowds to the north end of the town centre, offering much needed footfall from a large geographic area and the four week fun fair boosted activity in the area of the festive season. Both visitors and businesses were positive towards the events and welcomed the activity in the area.

MARKET SQUARE

45. As part of the works to replant trees within Market Square, following inspection of the decking and playground a number of defects and failures were found causing concerns over the remaining lifespan of the scheme. It should be noted that the trees and playground were only ever conceived as a temporary initiative (three – five years), prior to future development proposals

coming forward.

46. Following discussion it has been agreed to re-profile the original Town Centre Public Realm Improvements capital programme project to address the defects and deliver an improved open space scheme in Market Square.
47. Through re-profiling the budget, this will enable the following:
 - a) Removal of decking;
 - b) Removal of playground equipment and street furniture;
 - c) Removal of soil and irrigation system from planters;
 - d) Making good the paving etc;
 - e) New playground and sports equipment installed;
 - f) Planters re-installed in new layout with new olive trees;
 - g) New street furniture installed.
48. Architects have been commissioned to produce a scheme for Market Square. However, due to the integration of East Gate and Market Square it is difficult to treat them as separate spaces. The capital funding available is sufficient to deliver improvements to Market Square but not East Gate, therefore some funding from the £1 million town centre regeneration reserve will also be used to enhance the Market Square scheme to incorporate East Gate.
49. Additionally an application for match funding has been made to Table Tennis England to support in the installation of permanent table tennis tables in Market Square (as well as the Town Park, The Stow and Bush Fair).
50. The overall aim is to create flexible open space, providing both play and sport equipment encouraging members of the public from all ages, offer an environment to rest and relax as well as host a variety of events and activities including traditional and specialist markets.

FUTURE KEY ACTIVITY

51. As well as various improvements taken place and in the pipeline as highlighted in this report, a further key focus for 2017 will be engagement and communication.
52. A new town centre forum will be established, open to everyone with an

interest in improving the town centre. The aim of the forum will be to bring together partners and the community to update on town centre activities and developments but also understand the appetite to redevelop a Town Centre Partnership with the ability to deliver.

53. Harlow Town Centre suffers from a perception of under investment and full of empty shops. However, the reality is that the town centre is developing, increasing its offer and receiving investment.
54. To maintain investment and create a change in the perception of Harlow Town Centre promotion and activities will be co-ordinated, demonstrating the positive changes taking place. Events will also be planned and held in conjunction with the 70th Anniversary celebrations during 2017.

PRIVATE SECTOR DEVELOPMENTS

55. The Council is continuing to monitor and engage with private sector landowners and investors at all levels.
56. Addington Capital (owners of the Harvey Centre and adjacent land between Broad Walk and West Square) have published proposals for a major mixed use development scheme. The scheme currently in development will see the demolition of buildings between Broad Walk, East Gate and West Square to create a new residential and retail area. The scheme has the potential to encourage and provide a catalyst for further major regeneration in other areas of the town centre in private ownership
57. The Council is working with Addington Capital and their consultants to understand the proposals and explore the wider opportunities, e.g. adjacent public realm.
58. With the closure of Marks & Spencer in Broad Walk, Addington Capital purchased the vacant unit and has successfully completed a major sub-division and refurbishment of the unit, subsequently letting seven of the eight units.
59. The high quality refurbishment and reconfiguration of the unit took just over 12 months from purchase to having the first unit occupied and saw lettings to five new retailers to the town. This is an example that with the right conditions occupiers are willing to invest in the town centre.
60. Work has also progressed with their new leisure scheme, named The Terrace, with a new multiplex cinema and restaurant opened in late 2016 with further restaurant units anticipated to open throughout 2017.
61. Following the sale of Terminus House and Market House, proposals were

submitted advising the council that the existing office use would be changed to residential use.

62. Council Officers have made contact with the developers and continue to try and maintain open dialogue to understand the extent of development proposals and the impacts on the town centre environment.

CONCLUSION

63. Since the last report significant progress has been made in understanding the Council's role in supporting and delivering regeneration of the town centre.
64. Over the next three to six months the priorities for the Council will be to:
 - a) Develop a brief for development at Post Office Road car park to advertise as an opportunity to developers;
 - b) Progress and deliver capital programme project, including Market Square improvements, 21 The Rows and street lighting;
 - c) Develop a town centre strategy in conjunction with the Local Plan process, building on studies undertaken to date; and
 - d) Continue to work in partnership and with the private sector to secure sustainable town centre redevelopment.
65. The initiatives and activities highlighted in this report enable the Council to lead, encourage and influence investment and development sending a strong signal of commitment and aspiration to existing partners (landowners, businesses, residents and visitors) as well as future partners especially in terms of market investors, the retail and leisure sector and new users of the town centre.

IMPLICATIONS

Place (includes Sustainability)

A vibrant and thriving town centre is crucial to the growth and regeneration of Harlow. The development of the Town Centre Strategy will feed into the Local Plan and together with the capital programme interventions and partnership building with private sector interests will, collectively, provide a solid foundation of Council intent and certainty of purpose that Harlow and Harlow Town Centre will flourish

Author: **Graeme Bloomer, Head of Place**

Finance (Includes ICT)

The Council has already earmarked £1million to help stimulate and plan for the regeneration of the Town Centre. The proposals set out in this report will be funded by utilising the earmarked funds and will be drawn down at the appropriate time subject to the works being undertaken. Any further investment requirements in the project will be evaluated and subject to normal Cabinet approval processes as they arise.

Author: **Simon Freeman, Head of Finance**

Housing

Outlined in the body of the report.

Author: **Andrew Murray, Head of Housing**

Community Wellbeing (includes Equalities and Social Inclusion)

Included in the report.

Author: **Jane Greer, Head of Community Wellbeing**

Governance (includes HR)

It is necessary to promote, influence and engage with the private sector to ensure the redevelopment of the Town Centre is achieved that is beneficial to Harlow as a whole. The Council will need to be mindful that the dialogue does not make a developer or a partner think that the Council is entering into negotiations to contract with them or give an indication they are a preferred partner that may lead to a breach of the public procurement rules.

The project will require on-going legal advice at each stage to ensure the Council's compliance with its obligations under statute and legal practice.

Author: **Brian Keane, Head of Governance**

Background Papers

[These are papers referred to in the preparation of the report that are not attached as appendices but that are available for public or Councillor study.]

Revitalising Harlow Town Centre – Report to Overview Working Group (10 March 2016)

Venuescore 2015-16 : [UK shopping venue annual rankings from Javelin Group \(Executive Summary\)](#).

Glossary of terms/abbreviations used