

3 APRIL 2019

ALDERSHOT TOWN CENTRE STRATEGY

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 In September 2018 the Policy and Projects Advisory Board considered a report on the potential Aldershot Town Strategy and provided comments. Since that time there have been a number of developments in terms of the progress of the Council in delivering the key sites, further reports including one by the Institute of Place Management that featured Aldershot and new Future High Street Funding. This report provides:

- an update on these developments and identifies the key elements that will be addressed in the Aldershot Town Strategy.
- Provides a transitional plan to direct the short-medium term activity to sustain the Town Centre
- Highlights the governance and engagement issues relating to the development of the Aldershot Town Centre Strategy

2. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

2.1 The regeneration of our town centres is a Council priority. In autumn 2015, Rushmoor Borough Council engaged extensively with residents, businesses and local organisations to create a **long-term vision and masterplan** for the town centre. This was set out in the [Aldershot Town Centre Supplementary Planning Document \(SPD\)](#), which was published in early 2016.

2.2 The SPD identified a number of **key sites** that the council considered important to the regeneration of Aldershot. These included:

- The Galleries shopping centre site
- Union Street East and the former Marks and
- Spencer site
- Aldershot Rail and Bus Station

2.3 In 2017, the council recognised that in order to see the regeneration of the town centre delivered, it would need to step in and step up to take a more proactive, **interventionist approach** (economic viability and diverse ownerships of site). This interventionist approach included bidding for – and securing funding to help towards the key schemes of The Galleries and Union Street. In early 2018, the council secured **£8.4 million** for both schemes from the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government and Homes England.

- 2.4 Over the last 18 months, as part of its active approach, the council has been negotiating to **buy a number of key properties in Union Street**, committing its own money to fund these purchases, with the aim of assembling the sites ready for redevelopment and regeneration. Because of the **complex nature of these negotiations** and the fact that these sites had a number of **different owners**, this has taken time. But we are now in a position where we have secured most of the land we need.
- 2.5 We have also worked to bring forward others sites such as the **bus station** site next to the station, which received planning permission in December. We have also secured LEP funding to improve the railway station site. In addition funding was secured from the LEP to establish a games development hub in the Old Town Hall building, which supports an **emerging market sector** while also introducing **employment footfall** into the town centre – important to its future success.
- 2.6 These projects are poised to move forward significantly during 2019 with consultation and submission of planning applications on the two main sites Galleries and Union St East and building works to Aldershot Town Hall being undertaken with opening of the Digital Games Development hub in the second half of 2019. In short the Council has made significant progress on delivering the objectives in the SPD. However since 2015/16 the acceleration of technology with the advent of 5G, increased importance of digital and clean energy e.g. need for EV charging points means that there are aspects of the revitalisation of the town that were not in sight at the time the SPD was developed and now need consideration. An expression of interest was submitted to EM3 LEP on 21 February for development of a “Digital/5G Aldershot” feedback has been received from the EM3 LEP that while they but this meets their strategic aims the proposal requires further development to define and plan the approach.
- 2.7 In recognition of the disruption that the major projects were likely to cause the production of a ‘retail plan for Aldershot Town Centre’ was proposed, and subsequently identified as a Council priority as part of the 2018/19 Council Plan. At the end of 2017, informal advice was sought from specialist retail consultant *Time Retail*, who suggested approaching a number of consultants who were not simply retail focused. Site visits and follow-up meetings with both *Cushman & Wakefield* and *CBRE* at the start of the year provided useful and consistent advice. Key themes from the discussions included:
- Don’t rely on retail - the outlook is so uncertain
 - Retail uses should focus on ‘experience and convenience’
 - Consider town centre uses in relation to lifestyles, not simply retail
 - Consolidate retail uses in the heart of the town
 - Contract the town centre and diversify uses
 - Agree Aldershot’s unique selling point (USP) e.g. family friendly
 - Try to create the conditions for incubator businesses to grow - start with meanwhile uses and see what develops.

There was a clear consensus that, *any plan the council developed needed to look beyond a ‘retail plan’ to a wider ‘town centre strategy’.*

- 2.8 In May 2018, the LGA published a handbook for council leadership entitled, 'Revitalising town centres'. The paper suggests that 'revitalising a town centre involves coordinating a range of activities, possibly over many years', and provides a useful self-assessment checklist of 'success factors' to help gauge current and future processes in strategy development and the delivery of town centre improvements.
- 2.9 The following month, 'The Grimsey Review 2' was published. This paper entitled, 'It's time to reshape our town centres', led by retail guru Bill Grimsey, provides a list of 25 recommendations to do just that. Whilst a number of them are directed at central government e.g. replacing business rates with a new tax, many are suggestions at local level.
- 2.10 During 2018 while the Council has continued to progress its key projects challenges to Aldershot and to the retail market nationally have continued to intensify. The Wellington Centre is facing significant challenges to retain important tenants and has seen the closure of a number of High Street brands during 2018 e.g. Superdrug. Overall vacancies including the Galleries are now 16% in the primary shopping frontages and 26% in the secondary frontages. In order to sustain the centre there is a need for a strategic approach to diversify uses within the centre beyond its traditional retail base and consider further the consolidation of the centre. There may also be other opportunities to increase footfall through utilising the Town's heritage and focused leisure and tourism promotion. In seeking to develop an alternative approach to the Town Centre, the Council has not yet clearly defined the USP for Aldershot. In response to these changing challenges the Council intends to bid for Future High Street Funding. A background paper on understanding Town Centre Uses is included at Appendix 1 and a copy of the Future High Street Funding Expression of Interest is included at Appendix 2.
- 2.11 There are significant issues that affect all the key elements of the Town Centre in particular car parking. A study is in the process of being commissioned and a strategy for the town needs to be developed swiftly once this evidence is available.
- 2.12 The recent High St Report published by MHCLG highlighted that in their view there was not a clear vision for Aldershot and that engagement and leadership required further development. We would question aspects of this conclusion given the work to establish the vision as part of the SPD and ongoing engagement with Aldershot Community Together. However following the extensive consultation relating to the development of the SPD and despite communication about the progress of individual projects the connection of those projects to the vision and the vision itself appears to have been lost in the public consciousness. Given the changing challenges, the slightly unwieldy vision and need to redefine the USP for the Town Centre a fresh look at the vision and how we brand and market the Town is required. Similarly while there has been significant engagement on delivering community events the engagement in the overall regeneration of the Town Centre has diminished. The Town has a substantial Nepali community that has not yet been fully engaged in the

regeneration of the Town Centre. This community contributes significantly to its business and vibrancy and it is important that the opportunities from their involvement are realised. Section 3 below includes initial proposals to address these concerns.

2.13 The SPD, in addition to identifying the key sites also set out six key themes which given the above remain appropriate and relevant:

- A revitalised town centre offer
- Town centre living
- A family friendly town centre
- An improved cultural offer
- Investing in streets and spaces
- Affirming the Victorian heritage

2.14 The key themes underlie a lengthy vision statement. Given the changes that have occurred, the ongoing challenges to the Town Centre outlined above and the evidence of a number of studies it is perhaps time to revisit the Town Centre Strategy to:

- take a stock take of progress,
- assess how far the current projects will achieve the overall objective of regeneration of the town centre in light of changing circumstances
- review the extent of retail and leisure space required, and the development of alternative uses.
- consider the role of heritage, culture and tourism
- ensure the contribution and potential of Nepali business and culture to enhance Aldershot is recognised and included in the regeneration
- develop digital/5G offer and links to clean energy and car parking/access
- define the USP(s) for the Town/Centre
- develop the approach to car parking, access and transportation
- identify further strategic interventions that are required to ensure that the different elements of the approach deliver the overall objective.
- Put in place an overall project plan and project management arrangements to ensure that we are managing the elements as a cohesive whole and identifying clearly the inter-dependencies
- develop engagement strategy
- Create a sharper overall vision and refocus branding and marketing

3. TRANSITION PLAN

3.1 It is important to ensure that we have an effective strategy in place and to recognise that the proposed schemes will provide a major boost to the town centre economy in the longer term. However the proposed redevelopment of two major sites right in the heart of Aldershot – the Galleries, Arcade & High Street car park site, along with the Union Street East site, with potentially works also occurring to the Wellington centre – means the town centre will undergo significant disruption throughout the period of building works. Therefore a short-medium term plan to help sustain the health of the town centre in the meantime

and maintain vibrancy as much as possible through this period of transition has been developed and will start to be implemented from April 2019 (Appendix 3). This also provides the opportunity to explore the potential of different approaches and to lay foundations for the long term success of the projects underway. This transition plan focuses on means of increasing footfall and vibrancy through:

- Events
- Ongoing activities that draw people into the centre
- Experimenting with how to encourage and develop independent businesses in the town centre
- Engaging retailers, stakeholders and the public better

4. GOVERNANCE, CONSULTATION & ENGAGEMENT

4.1 Proposed governance arrangements for the development of the strategic review are outlined below:

- A report was taken to the Policy & Project Advisory Board on 19 September asking Members to provide their views on a potential town centre strategy and transition plan. This has now been split into a longer term Town Centre Strategy and an updated transitional plan. It is proposed that this group will continue to provide Regenerating Rushmoor and Cabinet with their advice when required on the proposed approach and plan.
- At an officer level, it is proposed that there is a small project team established to take forward the strategy. The strategy will sit as an item within the 'Regenerating Rushmoor' programme, with progress reported through the Regenerating Rushmoor Team.

4.2 An "Aldershot Taskforce" Chaired by the Leader will act as a core Stakeholder Group. This group will help shape the strategy and help enable consultation with the wider Aldershot residents and stakeholders. A programme of consultation and engagement will be established to ensure retailers, town centre businesses, residents, and other key stakeholders have the opportunity to feed into the strategy.

4.3 In addition to their engagement in the Taskforce more detailed and direct engagement concerning the content will be needed with the Rushmoor Development Partnership, London & Cambridge (Wellington Centre), Shaviram (Galleries scheme), Grainger plc (Wellesley) and Savills (West End).

4.4 Existing town centre businesses were briefed at the November 'Business & Retailer Forum', with a bespoke workshop event proposed for the new year to generate ideas and buy-in. Regular meetings should continue. A longer term approach to transform our engagement and develop this group to be led by the retailers/businesses is required and should form part of the revisions to the strategy.

4.5 Access to residents views will be sought in person at Aldershot Community Together and Aldershot Civic Society meetings, with a number of social media

forums, (including 'Historic Aldershot Military Town' Facebook page), also used. This will be in addition to the wider programme of engagement developed with all stakeholders.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Once the Aldershot Town Centre Strategy has been established, any budgetary implications will be identified and a paper will be submitted to CLT and then Cabinet at the appropriate time. Funding for a number of elements of the Transition Plan are included in the agreed budget for 19/20. Any further funding will be sought through the usual budget processes.

6. RECOMMENDATION

6.1. Policy and Projects Advisory Board is asked to:

- (i) provide their views on the proposed focuses of the Aldershot Town Centre Strategy.
- (ii) note the finalised transition plan.
- (iii) provide their views on the approach to governance, consultation and engagement.

TIM MILLS

HEAD OF ECONOMY, PLANNING & STRATEGIC HOUSING

Contact: Tim Mills Head of Economy, Planning and Strategic Housing Ext: 8542

List of appendices:

1. Understanding Town Centre Uses
 2. Future High Street Funding Expression of Interest
 3. Transition Plan (Updated March 2019)
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