

Wiltshire Council

Cabinet

21 June 2022

Subject: Update on the Wiltshire Towns Programme

Cabinet Member: Councillor Richard Clewer, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Military-Civilian Integration, Economic Development, Heritage, Arts, Tourism, and Health and Wellbeing

Key Decision: Non Key

Executive Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns have resulted in a significant impact on high streets and town centres across the UK. Although the challenge of vacancy has been apparent for a number of years, this decline in the high streets was attributed to a number of factors including:

- a historic reliance on a shrinking retail offer which is vulnerable to changing consumer habits such as opportunities for online shopping and out of town retail
- long term empty units/high levels of occupant turnover and a shrinking retail offer driven by the rise in on-line shopping; absentee landlords; mixed quality redevelopment and conversions into living space; and, in some instances, problems of anti-social behaviour.

After the first Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, one study judged that close to half of Britain's retail businesses carried a significant risk of failure. Chain stores are shutting, shopping thoroughfares are more gap-toothed than ever, and the huge malls which once symbolised modernity are now struggling. Many town centres now find themselves in economic shock.

In light of this challenge and recognising the contribution of these sectors to Wiltshire's economy, Wiltshire Council allocated £1M a year between 2021-2025 to support activity on the high street, providing meaningful and transformational support to grow businesses, support employment and transform Wiltshire's high streets to meet the needs of the local community. Wiltshire Council's business plan enshrines our commitment to creating and supporting vibrant town centres.

This paper updates on activity to date and plans for the future to support the creation of viable high streets which meet the needs of the community and can adapt for the future.

Proposal(s)

That Cabinet:

- Note the contents of this report and the progress on the Wiltshire Towns Fund to date
- Delegate authority to the Corporate Director for Place, and Head of Economy and Regeneration, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Economic Development, to implement the activities described
- Delegate authority to the Corporate Director for Place, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Economic Development, to develop and submit potential business cases to the Levelling Up capital programme.

Reason for Proposal(s)

To provide an update on activities undertaken through the Wiltshire Towns Programme and confirm planned future activities necessary to support town centres to recover and respond to ongoing economic challenges.

Terence Herbert
Chief Executive

Wiltshire Council

Environment Select Committee
21 June 2022

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Cabinet Member:	Councillor Richard Clewer, Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Military-Civilian Integration, Economic Development, Heritage, Arts, Tourism, and Health and Wellbeing
Key Decision:	Non Key

Purpose of Report

1. To update Members on the activity that has taken place under the Wiltshire Towns Programme
2. To update Members on planned activity under the Wiltshire Towns Programme and agree the proposed delegated authority provisions to enable the Council to develop the programme and related Levelling Up bids

Relevance to the Council's Business Plan

3. The Wiltshire Towns Programme is critical to delivering on the Council's Business Plan priority to have vibrant, well-connected communities. Working with and supporting local businesses is important for developing a strong, thriving and sustainable local economy across Wiltshire which supports the delivery of wider priorities. Delivering investment into the market towns throughout the county helps meet the priorities of the Council's Business Plan 2022-32, including:
 - a. Empowered People
 - b. Resilient Society
 - c. Thriving Economy
 - d. Sustainable Environment
4. Vibrant high streets safeguard resident access to services, allowing them to shop locally reduces carbon impact and supporting high street businesses will support Wiltshire's economy, with retail within the top 3 sectors contributing to Wiltshire GVA (approximately 10%).

Background

5. The Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns have resulted in a significant impact on high streets and town centres across the UK. Although the challenge of vacancy has been apparent for a number of years, this decline in the high streets was attributed to a number of factors including:

- a historic reliance on a shrinking retail offer which is vulnerable to changing consumer habits such as opportunities for online shopping and out of town retail
 - long term empty units/high levels of occupant turnover and a shrinking retail offer driven by the rise in on-line shopping; absentee landlords; mixed quality redevelopment and conversions into living space; and, in some instances, problems of anti-social behaviour.
6. After the first Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, one study judged that close to half of Britain's retail businesses carried a significant risk of failure. Chain stores are shutting, shopping thoroughfares are more gap-toothed than ever, and the huge malls which once symbolised modernity are now struggling. Many town centres now find themselves in economic stagnation
 7. Despite the cessation of Covid restrictions, the closure of the Covid-19 Grants Scheme and removal of the ongoing government support means that businesses are facing an increasingly uncertain future. This situation is exacerbated by the rising cost in living and energy bills driving a 35% fall in retail spend in April 2022.
 8. Retail supports approximately 20,000 jobs in Wiltshire and is a top 3 sector by employment and specialisation. The overall impact is larger as this does not include services, leisure (including food and drink), or tourism businesses which are located on the high street and are also affected.
 9. In light of this challenge and recognising the contribution of these sectors to Wiltshire's economy, Wiltshire Council allocated £1M a year between 2021-2025 to support activity on the high street, providing meaningful support to grow businesses, support employment and transform Wiltshire's high streets to meet the needs of the local community.

Town Centre Economic Strategy

10. Wiltshire Council has recent experience with high street renewal and has sought to use that experience to develop programmes across our towns.
11. The Government has identified best practice research for town centres which has been used to inform the strategy for Wiltshire. In particular, officers have considered research from the Institute of Place Management that identified factors where partners and stakeholders could have most influence and impact:

"In 2014, the Institute of Place Management identified 201 factors that influence the vitality and viability of the high street or other, traditional, retail agglomerations, like town centres. Over the summer we have updated this work as part of the development of the High Streets Task Force and identified 36 new factors that researchers had found also impact upon the performance of high streets/town centres. From crowd funding to hipster stores, the last five years have seen some changes on our high streets. All these factors will be influencing the decision making of local place leaders and partnerships, therefore all 237 factors have been reviewed by a panel of experts in place management to establish:

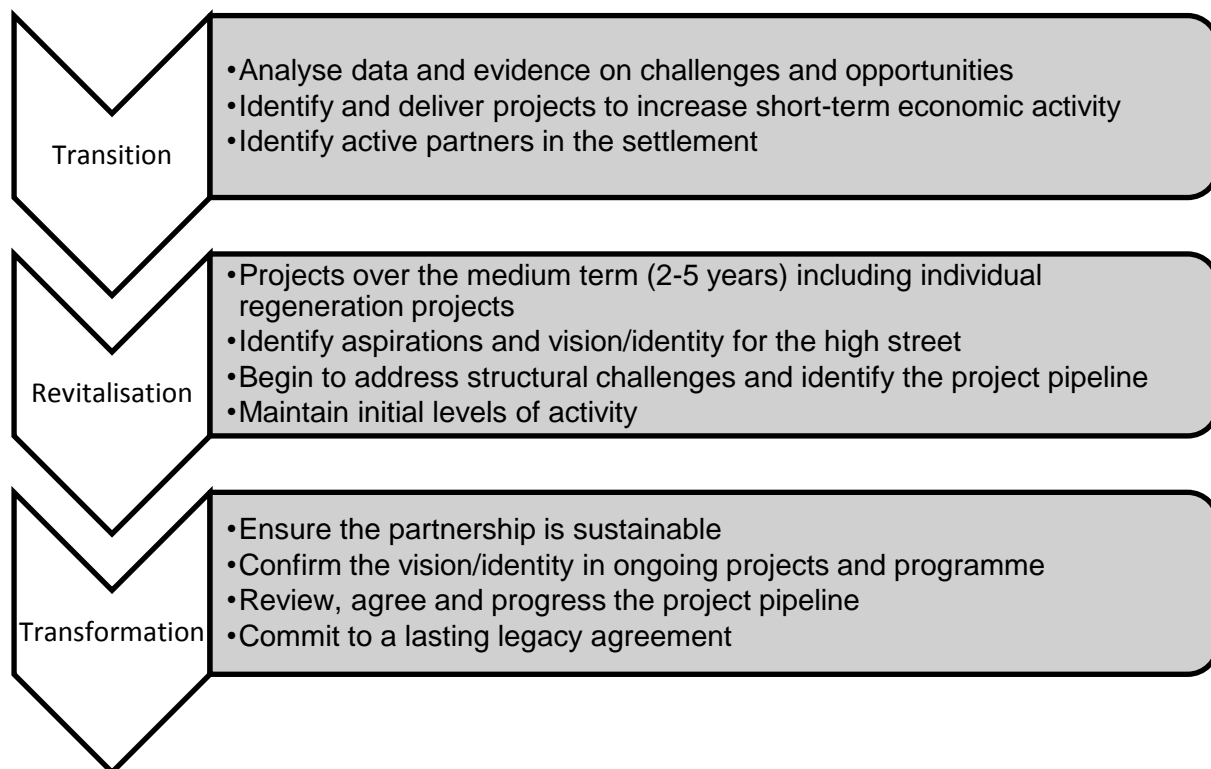
1. How much influence each factor has on the vitality and viability of town centres/high streets? In other words, **what matters?**
2. How much local control there is over each factor? In other words, **what can you do about it?**

By calculating a score for each factor, based on both influence and control this has enabled the High Streets Task Force to identify the Top 25 Priorities that local place leaders and place leaders should be focusing on, in their quest for vitality and viability and to have sustainable high streets that meet the needs of their catchment communities.”

12. Those 25 factors have been considered and grouped into meaningful workstreams to support planning across Wiltshire’s town centres. These workstreams have been matched to aims for the Wiltshire Towns Programme as follows in Item 1

TH	Management	Experience	Retailers	Physical	Programme
IPM 25 Factors	Experience Appearance Necessities Walking Accessible Safety/Crime	Activity Place Marketing Markets Experience Appearance Non-Retail Offer Retail Offer Innovation	Retail Offer Anchors Merchandise Attractiveness Barriers to Entry Adaptivity	Necessities Walking Accessible Recreational Space Liveable Redevelopment Functionality	Vision and Strategy Data and Analysis Place Management Networks and Partnerships Functionality
AIM	Ensuring the existing aspects of the town centre are well managed and maintained	Driving a quality experience for residents and visitors Delivering new experiences to drive consistent footfall	Supporting small-medium Wiltshire businesses to access the high street and its opportunities.	To reduce vacant or space in town centres and deliver sustainable mixed-use centres which attract residents and visitors	Build an understanding of local high streets, and developing sustainable models of place leadership

13. Alongside these priorities, experience suggests that rebuilding the high street means striking a balance between dealing with immediate challenges and planning for the longer term. Officers have developed a cyclical model that supports moving from short term activity generation to longer term strategic programme, working as follows:



14. These factors and strategies will guide partnership working with town councils and high street businesses to develop action plans, projects and strategies for each of our high streets, responding to the circumstances and needs of the local community.

Main Considerations for the Council

15. Alongside the strategic research above, officers have undertaken the following activity:

- a) **Footfall Data:** Officers are developing the provision of data on footfall in settlements to support assessment of impact of high street activities and understanding of where support is required. Supporting understanding of current consumer behaviour.
- b) **Town Centre Spaces:** Officers are providing short-term support to create appealing high streets, through provision of facilities, green spaces, street dressing, to provide safe spaces for residents to return to the high street.
- c) **Digital Training:** Fewer than 20% of Wiltshire's high street businesses have a social media presence, meaning that marketing of town centres is lower than competitors. Officers have established a scheme to provide training for businesses on creating and maintaining a digital presence as well as data on the effectiveness of their online activity.
- d) **What's on in Wiltshire App:** Officers are working to develop the What's on in Wiltshire App, a platform to bring together events and activities that will attract visitors into one convenient location, supporting residents and visitors to easily find events that interest them across a multitude of settlements.

Activity going forward:

16. Given the research undertaken above and with developed understanding of the current plans of town councils, officers have developed the following proposals for activity. These proposals will provide transformational support for Wiltshire's town centres, building on a "what works" ethos to increase vibrancy and economic vitality.
17. Officers will work with town councils to develop Action Plans that identify necessary activities to support the high street through the length of the programme. Action plans will be formed through a series of engagements to run through the baseline information/evidence already collected and develop planned activity in line with the strategy above.
18. Officers will extend provision of visitor heritage trails through apps and story-telling to provide free and informative activities for visitors, connecting local people to their town centres and the history of their local area.
19. The funding for 2022/23 is allocated as follows and draws on an Earmarked Reserve carried forward. The EMR was created as there was less activity than planned in the third quarter 2021/22 as resources were diverted onto the new grant scheme to support business in response to the Omicron variant

Vibrant Wiltshire	Funding to support new businesses opening on the high street and existing businesses to upgrade their offer and become more resilient.	500,000
Business Support	Support for businesses in receipt of grants to access good advice and ensure business plans are robust and tested	50,000
What's on in Wiltshire App	Events app with supporting marketing activity to support residents re-accessing the high street	80,000
Heritage App expansion	Increasing performance of heritage app and expanding county wide	80,000
Master-planning	Work to develop masterplans for principle settlements	50,000
Pipeline Development	Funding to support developing a pipeline of projects to support further bidding activity, with particular consideration for workspaces	150,000
Staffing, monitoring and evidence	Resource to support the programme across the number of settlements and manage projects, monitor progress and develop evidence on what works	100,000
Generating Activity Programme	Fund for TCs to bid into to create activity on the high streets, looking at events, marketing and promotion, supporting new businesses and increasing the access for the local community.	300,000
Wiltshire Visitor Promotion	Campaign to promote Wiltshire as a destination to our residents and catchment area and bring footfall back to the high street	150,000

Generating Activity Programme

20. To increase capacity and support immediate work to encourage people back to the high street, officers are working with town councils to develop and fund activity generation plans to:
- Drive footfall and spend to town centres
 - Reach a wider catchment, with a focus on new audiences and inclusion
 - Support an increased retail, community and social function that encourages visits during the day and evening.
 - Support perception of the town centre as a place that will create a convenient and attractive destination for both local residents and visitors
 - Extend the visitor season for town centres – providing support through quieter periods.
21. Through the allocation of support under activities in the Town Centre dressing programme (item 15b) and the proposal for the Generating Activity programme (item 20), town centres will receive the following allocations for the first phases of this programme.
22. Additional support will be available directly to businesses, and further allocations will follow as towns build on best practice and the most effective interventions.

Indicative allocations:

Town	Shop Numbers	Employment Measure	Proposed Activity Generation Allocation	Existing Allocation (population based)	Total
Salisbury	452	45075	30000	15000	45000
Trowbridge	283	21925	30000	15000	45000
Chippenham	244	21340	30000	15000	45000
Devizes	212	11450	20000	10000	30000
Warminster	191	19485	20000	10000	30000
Melksham	127	11295	20000	10000	30000
Marlborough	160	10095	20000	7000	27000
Calne	90	5250	10000	10000	20000
Corsham	81	9145	10000	10000	20000
Westbury	80	4490	10000	10000	20000
Royal Wootton Bassett	109	8145	10000	7000	17000
Bradford on Avon	87	7175	10000	7000	17000
Amesbury	82	8885	10000	7000	17000
Malmesbury	79	8340	10000	7000	17000
Pewsey	59	3130	10000		10000
Cricklade	29	1610	5000		5000
Tidworth	29	2043*	5000		5000
Tisbury	26	1831*	5000		5000
Ludgershall	23	1620*	5000		5000
Mere	23	1285	5000		5000
Wilton	21	2465	5000		5000

Downton	12	845*	5000	5000
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23. Alongside this, officers will work to agree a promotional scheme that focuses on generating additional visits and spend to our towns and high streets, and restoring consumer confidence, as well as visitor industry rebuilding and safeguarding for a stronger future.

The campaign would focus on the following priorities:

- To encourage locals to visit Wiltshire towns and high streets.
- To drive additional visitors and spend, achieving a ROI
- To improve sector productivity by increasing visits to our towns and high streets during key off season and shoulder season periods.
- To provide a campaign platform that Wiltshire tourism and hospitality businesses can get involved with via a 'Residents Campaign' initiative, that builds longer-term demand.

Latest consumer tourism research indicates that visitors are likely to take a short break or visit places that are local to them but are often reluctant to do so because of lack of product knowledge and consumer confidence. Therefore, using geo targeting this campaign will intend to focus on a local audience.

- Local audience – who live in, or within a 30–45-minute drive, of Wiltshire
- For digital activity the audiences will be split into two categories to sit in line with potential interests; a younger adult audience focussed on those with interests in high street shopping and days out, culture/food/drink; and a family-focused audience consisting of adults over 30, highlighting family-friendly activities and experiences across the county.

Vibrant Wiltshire

24. Given the challenges on the high street, a number of retail units have become empty in the previous months, some as a direct result of the impact of Covid-19 and some for other reasons, including as a result of the ongoing evolution of consumer spending habits. The proposed Vibrant Wiltshire fund identifies that these empty retail units may be re-occupied on a short-term basis to stimulate the economy and encourage footfall to the area.

25. It is proposed that Wiltshire Council establishes a Vibrant Wiltshire fund to support high streets to meet the needs of their communities by delivering transformational change to the county's town centres and help to curate thriving places where people want to live, work and visit.

26. The programme will support the development of currently underutilised or vacant spaces located in Wiltshire market town centres. The focus will be on bringing new types of uses into the area, strengthening and diversifying the current High Street offer. Attracting independent businesses within the creative, food and drink and digital sectors will be a priority. The package of interventions will boost levels of footfall and bring vacant units and heritage properties back into use, creating new jobs and the conditions for people to want to spend time and money in the high streets.

27. If successful the programme will safeguard and enhance the High Street environment, increase the number of businesses and new jobs in the area with a focus on providing opportunities for residents in adjacent communities.

28. The Vibrant Wiltshire programme will have two different grant options:

a. **High Street Business Start Up Grant**

This grant will provide funding to businesses looking to open in a currently empty retail unit in the high streets.

The aim of the grant is to bring empty retail premises back into use and the grant range is anticipated at £2,500 to a maximum of £10,000. Exceptional circumstances will be considered.

b. **Business Diversification Grant**

The recent Covid-19 crisis has demonstrated how important it is for a high street business to be able to adapt and diversify to survive.

The crisis has encouraged many businesses to think about how they might diversify in the future both to react to difficult times but also to capitalise on new opportunities.

This grant will be available to high street businesses and is anticipated to provide a range of funding from £500 to £10,000. Applicants will need to set out a clear proposal in a simple application form, describing the activity they want to undertake, what they require funding for and evidence that they have sought to establish best value through quotes.

29. The fund will seek to support businesses that can prove viable and are willing to commit to the high street over the longer term and provide a return on investment.

Project Pipeline Development and Levelling Up

30. Where high streets are most significantly exposed to a decline in retail, it will be necessary to plan for and encourage multi-use spaces that maintain community facilities while being commercially viable. Under the Towns Programme, officers will work to develop town centre masterplans for settlements where sensible, based on a combination of challenge and opportunity.

31. In addition, to successfully bring in capital funding for transformative schemes, a project pipeline is required that would allow officers to adapt to short bidding windows and any forthcoming opportunities. Under the banner of the Wiltshire Towns Programme, we propose providing support to develop the pipeline, including resourcing for green-book business case development.

32. Within this workstream, work is ongoing to develop submissions for Levelling Up Round 2. Noting that Wiltshire remains low priority for investment in this funding, this approach will prioritise existing developed projects capable of meeting the deliverability criteria.

Strategy Development

33. Officers will consider a number of workstreams that will link the high street to its wider economic or spatial impact including:

- a) Public Art and the High Street

- b) Design and the High Street
- c) A Wiltshire Food and Drink Strategy (including the Wiltshire Marque and shop local/low carbon produce)
- d) Evening and Night-time Economy
- e) Workspaces on the High Street

These strategies may be progressed as projects emerge.

Overview and Scrutiny Engagement

34. The Environment Select Committee will receive a briefing on the Wiltshire Towns Programme in June 2022.

Safeguarding Implications

35. There are no direct safeguarding implications associated with the proposal.

Public Health Implications

36. Within the factors to be considered with towns, walking and accessibility are high priorities to deliver vitality. Alongside developing action plans that address these questions, town centre action plan development will have regard to air quality requirements and recent research and best practice on Healthy High Streets, and will engage with the Public Health team for project and strategy development.

Procurement Implications

37. Procurement advice will be sought as projects are progressed.

Equalities Impact of the Proposal

38. Each of the projects as they are shaped will undertake an equalities impact assessment as they progress.

Environmental and Climate Change Considerations

39. The goals of the Wiltshire Towns Programme are well aligned with the climate strategy, in that an improved offer and experience of town centres and high streets will support an increase of local people using their local centre, and reducing the need or desire to travel elsewhere for retail and leisure.

40. Projects for which funding is proposed to be allocated will have environmental benefits. These impacts will be considered as proposals are developed.

Risks that may arise if the proposed decision and related work is not taken

41. If work on the Wiltshire Towns Programme is not progressed, Wiltshire's town centres may see further decline in spend and footfall, with resultant business closures. Some towns may lose a critical mass of retail and see wide-spread decline, resulting in long-term vacant units on the high street, unemployment and lack of facilities for the local population. Residents needing to travel further afield for retail and leisure will increase carbon emissions and costs.

Risks that may arise if the proposed decision is taken and actions that will be taken to manage these risks

42. Activities undertaken as part of the Wiltshire Towns Programme may be ineffective, particularly in the context of the rising cost of living. Ongoing monitoring of footfall data will take place to assess the effectiveness of activities and any not having the desired impact will not be supported further.

Financial Implications

43. £1m per annum has been allocated to the Wiltshire Towns Programme between financial years 2021/22-2024/25. There has been less activity than planned in the third quarter 2021/22 on the Wiltshire Economic Programme as resources were diverted onto the new grant scheme to support business in response to the Omicron variant. As recommended in the Qtr 3 Revenue Budget Monitoring report (£0.723m) underspend against Wiltshire Towns Recovery budget has been transferred to an EMR for the initiatives described above.

Legal Implications

44. Consideration will be given to legal implications as projects are developed. Projects will build on existing learning from grant schemes developed through Future High Streets Fund and the Covid-19 Grant Programme to ensure full compliance is maintained.

Workforce Implications

45. This function will be undertaken within Economy and Regeneration. Recruitment is ongoing for existing posts within the Regeneration service and capacity will remain under review.

Options Considered

46. Option to not progress with the Wiltshire Towns Programme. Given the contribution of retail, hospitality and leisure to Wiltshire's wider economy, lack of support could result in substantial economic decline.
47. Option to include or prioritise other projects. Officers have engaged with the High Streets Task Force and What Works centre to understand the best options for supporting town centres. Local leadership and activity generation are identified as critical for long-term vitality. However as above, should interventions fail to impact positively on footfall, they will be reviewed and not progressed.

Conclusions

48. Considering the value of retail, hospitality and leisure to Wiltshire's wider economy, and the advice from the High Streets Task Force and Institute of

Place Management, officers have developed a programme to provide long-term resilience for Wiltshire's town centres and high streets.

49. Further development will be undertaken with town partners, such as town councils and businesses, to establish plans and support project delivery for long-term vitality.

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