

**Update on the Wiltshire Towns Programme and related activity  
including web-app development**

**Executive summary**

Town Centres continue to face a challenging landscape, with retailers vulnerable to changing consumer habits such as online shopping and out of town retail provision.

Retail supports approximately 29,000 jobs in Wiltshire and is in the top 3 sector by employment and specialisation. This figure does not include accommodation and food services activities, or other businesses which are located on the high street.

In the 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 through the Wiltshire Towns Programme. The scheme has been designed to provide 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 provides an update on activity taken to date under the Wiltshire Towns programme including the development of the heritage app and work undertaken to develop an events platform web-app.

**Proposal**

That the committee:

- a) Note the contents of the update

**Reason for proposal**

To provide regular updates on support for town centres.

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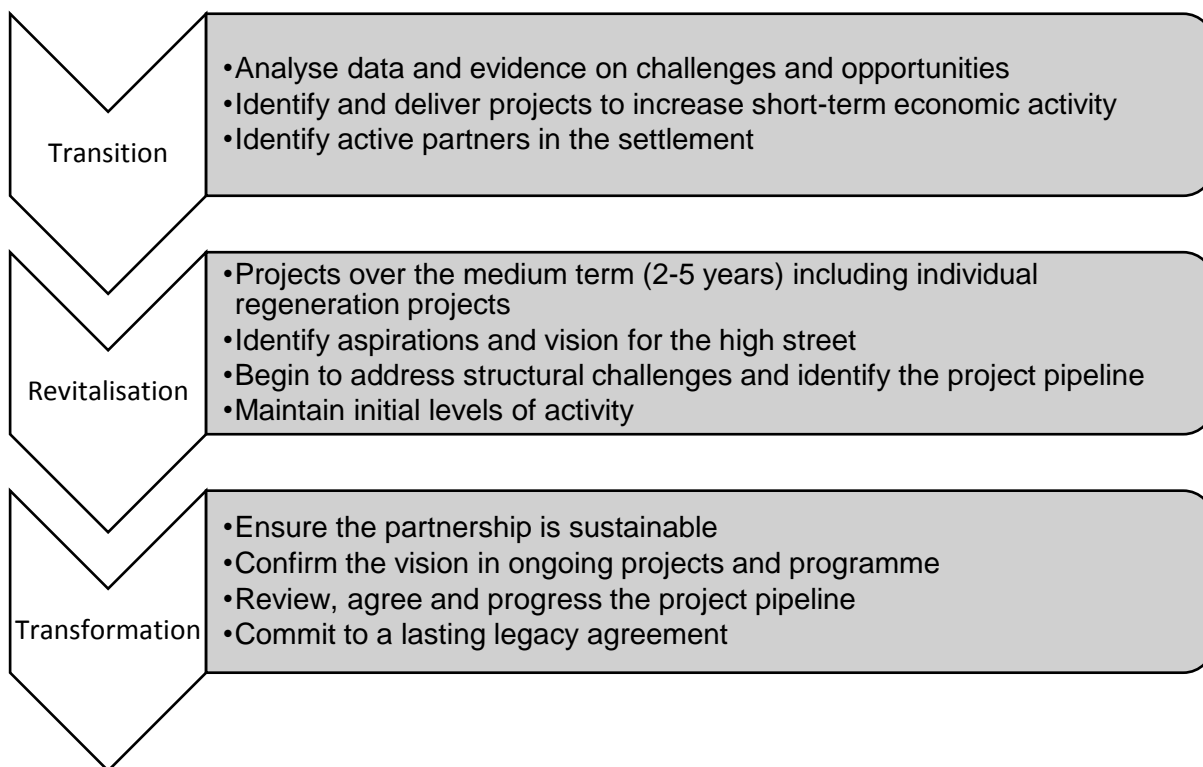
# Update on the Wiltshire Towns Programme and related activity including web-app development

## Purpose of report

1. This paper provides an update on activity undertaken to date through the Wiltshire Towns Programme.

## Background

2. Town Centres are facing a challenging landscape, with a historic reliance on a shrinking retail offer, vulnerable to changing consumer habits such as opportunities for online shopping, which was accelerated by the economic shock of Covid-19, and out of town retail provision.
3. Retail supports approximately 29,000 jobs in Wiltshire and is the top sector by employment and specialisation. This does not include accommodation and food services, or other businesses located on the high street which are also affected.
4. 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 through the Wiltshire Towns Programme, 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.
5. The first report to this committee in June 2022 set out the projects established under the Wiltshire Towns Programme and the rationale behind the activity. An update was delivered to the committee in June 2023.
6. Wiltshire Council has worked with the best-practice evidence from the Institute of Place Management and High Streets Task Force, that identifies a move from retail-led town centres to experience-led town centres. The activities under the programme seek to respond to this trend, **creating vibrant experience-led high streets with a unique selling point.**
7. The primary objectives for the Wiltshire Towns Programme activities are:
  - Drive footfall and spend to town centres,
  - Reach a wider catchment, with a focus on new audiences,
  - 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.
8. The programme seeks to move from responding to an economic shock to setting strategic plans for the future, working with town councils and active partners in the town through the following cycle:



9. The programme has been recognised and acknowledged by the Institute of Place Management and the High Streets Task Force and was featured at a regional IPM/High Streets Task Force Roadshow, where the Programme Lead was invited to be a speaker and panel member, sharing good practice with other local authorities, BIDs, DLUHC representatives and other Place focused stakeholders.

10. Monitoring of the programme is supported by footfall data. See outcome section below for current position.

### Main considerations for the committee

11. The activities identified under the Towns Programme are as follows:

Vibrant Wiltshire	Funding to support new businesses opening on the high street and existing businesses to upgrade their offer and become more resilient.
Business Support	Support for town centre businesses to access support and grants with respect to energy efficiency measures for their premises.
Explore Wiltshire Trials App expansion	Increasing performance and scope of heritage trails app to extend county wide for various types of town centre trails (not limited to heritage theme).
Explore Wiltshire Events Web App	Events website accessible on multiple device formats with supporting marketing activity to support residents re-accessing the high street and encourage visitors to Wiltshire.
Master-planning	Work to develop masterplans for principal settlements.
Pipeline Development	Funding to support developing a pipeline of place & capital projects to support further bidding activity.
Staff Resource	Staff resource to support the programme across the number of settlements and manage projects.

Generating Activity Grant Programme	Fund for Town Councils 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.
Wiltshire Marque	Development of a Wiltshire Marque to support food and drink producers and increase awareness of what's on offer in Wiltshire.

**An update on each of these workstreams is given below.**

12. Vibrant Wiltshire: The Vibrant Wiltshire scheme opened in January 2024. This scheme builds on the learning and development undertaken through the Future High Streets Funding for Trowbridge and has resulted in 43 applications at the time of writing with 29 approved to date, with overall 54% of the budget committed. The programme will pause over the summer with a relaunch in September with a comms plan that includes the council's business newsletter and social media.
13. Business Support: The Business Support programme has been refocused to respond to the Cost of Doing Business challenges, the need to transition to Net Zero and the Cost of Energy. The programme will seek to provide practical advice and capital grants to high street businesses to help address their energy costs and give financial support to make the necessary changes. This scheme is anticipated to launch in mid-2024.
14. The Explore Wiltshire Trails app: This recognises one of the key marketing strengths for Wiltshire's towns which is their landscapes, heritage assets, and community history. It also helps visitors enjoy themed events across a town centre through associated trails, sights and events. The app provides free activities for people to use while visiting our towns with the aim of increasing dwell time within towns. The app can be used by town councils and their partners, such as local museums, to create year-round and seasonal trails, as well as other special promotions by towns. It also allows local communities to be involved in developing trails.
15. The first 11 towns are now live on the app, two more nearing publication and a third in production at the time of writing. Latest data (Feb 24) confirms the app has been installed 4150 times with 2972 place downloads there have been 2926 sights visited and 5479 sights viewed, 1332 trails have been viewed, 753 hunts viewed and 2172 challenges viewed.
16. Explore Wiltshire Events Progressive Web App: After a market engagement exercise which was followed up with internal stakeholder engagement, the decision to work with the supplier of the Explore Wiltshire trails app was taken – this enabled efficiencies to be made, whilst maintaining quality, by using the same Place Experience Platform Content Management System behind the Explore Wiltshire trails app. To maximise search engine optimisation, and provide the greatest accessibility across desktop/laptop/mobile devices the platform has been developed as a progressive web app.
17. Early feedback highlighted the concern of overlap between this platform and its alternatives. In response, the emerging cultural strategy [Have your say on Wiltshire's emerging Cultural Strategy 2024-2030 - Wiltshire Council](#) was asked to consider the importance of this provision. Promotion and information regarding

events was consistently raised as a challenge through the survey and workshops. 38% of respondents identified “not enough information about what’s on” as a barrier in the survey, and the workshops identified that small places and small events struggled to gain the profile of larger events and activities, and that Wiltshire needed to do more to raise the profile of our cultural activities.

18. The site is now live, and a marketing plan being implemented to raise the profile of the platform. Events can be found by type, date, time and place, searching with a filter or on a map, and event details can be added to a device calendar via the event listing. For event hosts there is the facility to include links to the host website or booking platform and tag content with event type and amenities available. The site has links to the Explore Wiltshire trails app and also the Connecting Wiltshire website.

19. Data will be available to report on visitor numbers to Explore Wiltshire Events, visitor numbers to a specific event page and bounce rates (visitors that leave the webpage without engaging in the content).

20. Master-planning and Pipeline Development: This work seeks to provide shovel-ready schemes for funding applications, bringing plans from concept to project stage. A number of towns are at different stages, with some having identified schemes through Neighbourhood Plans. The initial priority is to ensure that all principal settlements have active investment propositions. A new Trowbridge Investment and Regeneration Plan will be prepared in 2024/2025. The Chippenham One Plan has been through a consultation process with The Chippenham Avon Project being the first scheme from the One Plan to be progressed, which is now subject to consultation locally. The Westbury Library and High Street Business Case is being developed and the team will look to bring forward projects in other market towns as opportunities arise starting with a design and costs for the Devizes Canal Footpath linking to the Assizes Court.

21. Activity Generation Grants: Activity Generation Grants were offered to town councils in Years 1 and 2 of the programme and the offer is to be repeated for Years 3 and 4. The sums offered are based on an evidence metric of premises numbers and employment measures set out in previous reports to this committee. Activity Generation Grants, support town councils to boost footfall and facilitate events which build support for the high street. Support and guidance have been offered to help town councils identify interventions and projects to apply the funds to, despite this there have been challenges getting the funding out to every town council eligible.

22. In the 2023/24 year there was an emphasis for the larger towns to use a proportion of the funding allocation for strategic projects, to provide a focus on moving from the stage of transition through to revitalisation and transformation. These are some examples projects funded from in 2023/24:

- Major Event concept development and Bid writing,
- Place development next steps following and responding to the place partnerships and place plan work streams,
- Delivery of town community events,
- Update town branding using unique identity as the foundation of all marketing.
- Town tourism strategy delivery and marketing,

- Visitor feedback and evaluation process,
- Public Realm and Visitor Experience projects,
- Feasibility study consultant costs,
- Revenue items for delivery of Public Realm proposals,
- Contribute to the cost of public consultation for public realm projects,
- Survey of local businesses following closure of the Chamber of Commerce,
- Preparation work to set up a new town guide and formulate a strategic plan,
- Funding towards a summer sport and/or music event on the High St,
- Business case for large active travel/accessibility project,
- Consultant to provide strategy to enhance and support existing businesses.

23. Wiltshire Marque: The project scope has been developed in consultation with existing offers, food and drink suppliers and business support providers – the Wiltshire Marque will create a Wiltshire brand identity, support the marketing of Wiltshire produce and provide support to local producers. Following a procurement exercise a partner has been selected to deliver the concept and stakeholder meetings are now in progress to define the offer, including compliance parameters, marketing proposals and launch of the Marque, which is on proposed to be in Autumn 2024.

24. Staff resource: Resourcing of this programme had been challenging in the initial year, but good progress was made during 2023 and in 2024 to date. With the ambitious scope of the programme, resourcing will be monitored, particularly in response to forthcoming staffing changes and challenges faced in external procurement of services. Rescheduling of projects within the programme has been necessary and resourcing will be monitored on an ongoing basis.

### **Outcomes to date**

25. 13 market town events supported through the WTP funding. Over 100 short- and long-term Town Council-led initiatives funded that directly contribute to high street vibrancy.

26. WTP has added capacity, resilience and engagement across 22 towns. Best practice and case studies on vibrant high streets and town centres disseminated.

27. To date 29 empty units have been taken up by local businesses, creating vibrancy, jobs and improving the local economy. The scheme continues to make a difference across our towns.

28. The trails app is leading to added trips and visits in Wiltshire, with over 3000 sights visited since the app launched last year.

29. In most of our market towns footfall has now risen above pre-covid levels which is a significant achievement. Footfall across our Principal Settlements is starting to raise to pre-covid levels, with further monitoring required over the next few months to establish emerging trends. Benchmarking activity with similar towns to start over the summer.

## **Conclusion**

30. The Wiltshire Towns Programme provides long-term resilience for Wiltshire's town centres and high streets informed by advice from the High Streets Task Force and Institute of Place Management, which they have acknowledged and promoted as good practice.
31. Continued development will be undertaken with town partners, such as town councils and businesses, to establish plans and support project delivery for long-term vitality.