

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

Executive summary

Town Centres are facing a challenging landscape, with 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, partially driven by the economic shock of Covid-19.

Retail supports approximately 20,000 jobs in Wiltshire and is a top 3 sector by employment and specialisation. This does not include services, leisure (including food and drink), or businesses which are located on the high street and are also affected.

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.

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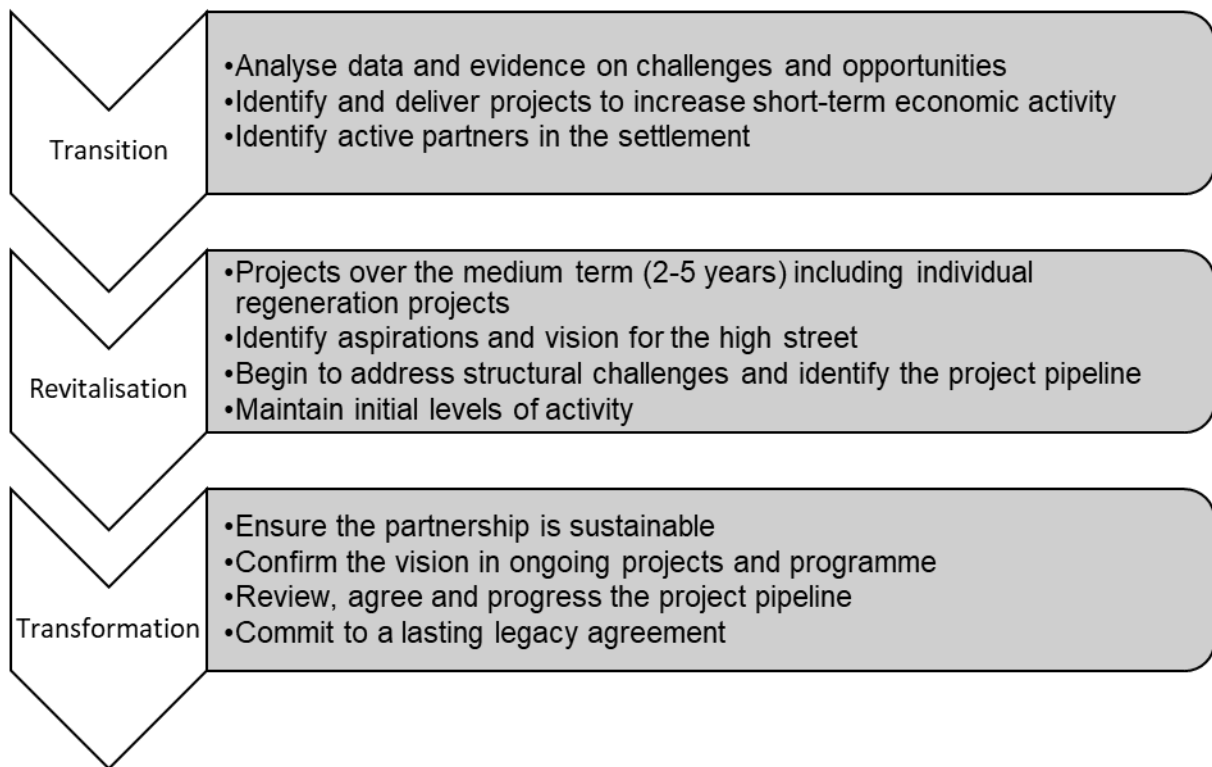
Update on the Wiltshire Towns Programme and related activity including web-app development

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 which is vulnerable to changing consumer habits such as opportunities for online shopping and out of town retail, partially driven by the economic shock of Covid-19.
3. Retail supports approximately 20,000 jobs in Wiltshire and is a top 3 sector by employment and specialisation. This does not include services, leisure (including food and drink), or businesses which are located on the high street and 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 previous report to this committee in June 2022 set out the projects established under the Wiltshire Towns Programme and the rationale behind the activity.
6. In summary, 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 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:



8. 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.

Main considerations for the committee

9. 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 businesses in receipt of grants to access good advice and ensure business plans are robust and tested.
What's on in Wiltshire App	Events app with supporting marketing activity to support residents re-accessing the high street.
Heritage App expansion	Increasing performance of heritage app and expanding county wide.
Master-planning	Work to develop masterplans for principal settlements.
Pipeline Development	Funding to support developing a pipeline of projects to support further bidding activity, with particular consideration for workspaces.
Staff Resource	Staff resource to support the programme across the number of settlements and manage projects.
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.

Wiltshire Marque	Development of a Wiltshire Marque to support food and drink producers and increase awareness of what's on offer in Wiltshire.
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An update on each of these workstreams is given below, with the requested apps update at the bottom.

10. Vibrant Wiltshire. The Vibrant Wiltshire scheme to support new businesses is expected to open later this year. This scheme builds on learning and development undertaken through the Future High Streets Funding for Trowbridge and is scheduled to coordinate with that programme.
11. Business Support. The Business Support programme is being 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 to high street businesses in addressing their energy costs and support to make the necessary changes. This scheme is anticipated to launch in Autumn 2023.
12. Master-planning and Pipeline Development: This work seeks to provide oven-ready schemes for funding applications. A number of towns are at different stages, with some having identified schemes through Neighbourhood Plans.
13. The initial priority is to ensure that all principal settlements have active investment propositions. Salisbury Central Area Framework and the refreshed Trowbridge Masterplan established the projects being delivered through the Future High Streets Schemes. The Chippenham One Plan is currently out for consultation, seeking to bring plans from concept to project stage for further funding bids. The team will then look to bring forward projects in other market towns as opportunities arise.
14. Staff resource: As identified by ESC, the resourcing of this programme has been challenging. Recruitment for a programme lead took longer than expected, with a Senior Development Officer appointed to lead the programme in January. The scheme is now catching up to programme, and this will be monitored on an ongoing basis.
15. Activity Generation Grants: In line with diagram 1, the first priority of the Towns Programme is to increase short-term activity. As such, Activity Generation Grants were offered to town councils based on an evidence metric of premises numbers and employment measures set out below. Activity Generation Grants will be supported throughout the programme, supporting town councils to boost footfall and facilitate events which build support for the high street.

Town	Shop Numbers	Employment Measure	Proposed Activity Generation Allocation
Salisbury	452	45075	30000
Trowbridge	283	21925	30000
Chippenham	244	21340	30000
Devizes	212	11450	20000

Warminster	191	19485	20000
Marlborough	160	10095	20000
Melksham	127	11295	20000
Royal Wootton Bassett	109	8145	10000
Calne	90	5250	10000
Bradford on Avon	87	7175	10000
Amesbury	82	8885	10000
Corsham	81	9145	10000
Westbury	80	4490	10000
Malmesbury	79	8340	10000
Pewsey	59	3130	10000
Cricklade	29	1610	5000
Tidworth	29	2043	5000
Tisbury	26	1831	5000
Ludgershall	23	1620	5000
Mere	23	1285	5000
Wilton	21	2465	5000
Downton	12	845	5000

16. Projects funded in the 2022/23 year include:

- Street scene and town centre dressing,
- Wayfinding strategies and improvements,
- Finger posts and other town centre signage,
- Shop local scheme promotion,
- Communication via noticeboards, maps, street signs,
- Marketing and promotion through printed and online media (including short films),
- Resources for Coronation and Christmas events,
- Community engagement and surveys of business,

17. To access the funding, Town Councils were asked to complete an Action Plan and identify costed measures to drive footfall. A number of Town Councils had existing action plans which were accepted, and some smaller councils struggled to complete full action plans. This learning has supported adaptations to the programme going forward.

18. As we seek to move from responding to an economic shock to setting strategic plans for the future, the Activity Generation Grant this year incorporates a strategic element as follows:

- a) The Generating Activity Intervention element is available to fund short-term interventions, for example events, marketing and promotion, increasing accessibility for the local community and providing support to new and existing businesses.
- b) The Strategic Development and Delivery element is available to fund the identification of medium- and long-term measures, through strategy development and subsequent implementation of associated deliverables identified in the strategic plan(s). The incorporation of a strategic funding approach will ensure a lasting legacy from the programme.

19. Wiltshire Marque: The project scope is being developed in consultation with existing offers, food and drink suppliers and business support providers. The scope is due to be agreed by Autumn 2023.

Update on Apps Proposals

Heritage Trail App (Explore Wiltshire)

20. The Heritage Trail app recognises one of the key marketing strengths for Wiltshire's towns – their landscapes, heritage assets, and community history. The Heritage Trails app will highlight these stories and provide a free activity for people to use while visiting our towns with the aim of increasing dwell time within towns. The app is intended to be adaptable to allow seasonal trails and other special promotions by towns. It also allows local communities to be involved in developing trails.

21. The first tranche of 5 towns will launch by the end of June, with the remaining 5 being added over the summer. This will be supported by a communications programme which, alongside the app, will be subject to ongoing monitoring for impact and uptake.

22. Spend thus far is £22,000 and the app was allocated an overall £80,000 budget at Cabinet in June 2022.

23. In assessing return on the investment, the project initiation process considered similar models being used in other places.

24. The results for local discovery apps cited range from a 7% to 30% increase in footfall. The results specifically on trail apps also showed a wide range of results, but all saw an increase in participation. In particular for economic returns, one trail on one weekend alone saw 1200 participants, whereby 80% of participants spent over £10 and nearly 10% spent over £50, over a month generating a spend of over £40,000. We recognise that new trails will likely create higher impact and are working with town councils to ensure that new content is uploaded as above – seasonal trails and special promotions.

25. We are currently procuring footfall data and will be able to monitor impact directly.

What's on in Wiltshire

26. Following a market exercise, the scope of this work was reviewed, and engagement has taken place with other marketing bodies to identify best practice.

27. To maximise search engine optimisation, the What's On platform will be developed as a progressive web-application, maximising its impact. A route to market for suppliers for this work has not been identified due to the prevalence of advertising-based models and further early market engagement is therefore required. Market engagement is due to conclude by August 2023.

28. As above, this programme has an indicative £80,000 budget and the results for local discovery apps cited range from a 7 to 30% increase in footfall. We recognise this is likely dependent on the existing level of marketing in a settlement and its available catchment area.

Conclusion

29. 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.

30. 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.
