

Appendix D: Maidstone Town Centre Strategy

Introduction

Maidstone Town Centre is the Social and Economic Heart of the Borough, providing employment, leisure, retail and business/professional service facilities for communities throughout the Borough and beyond as part of its role as the County Town of Kent. The Town Centre and the wider urban area are also home to a very significant residential population. However, in recent years like many others around the country, the Town Centre has witnessed some decline because of changes in retailing patterns, a shift in the nature of demand for offices, competition for inward investment from other locations, viability challenges in the delivery of new housing and difficulty in ensuring that important infrastructure keeps pace with the needs of resident communities, businesses and visitors. Again, in common with many other areas, these issues have been exacerbated over the last 18 months by the impact of the COVID19 Pandemic.

To continue the Council's work in securing the early recovery of the Town Centre, and to prepare a programme for longer term regeneration and renaissance, it is now proposed that the Council should take the lead role in the preparation of a comprehensive and ambitious Town Centre Strategy. This strategy would be focused around a 30-year vision to attract and embed new investment in jobs, infrastructure, housing, leisure and culture within a framework which will seek to establish Maidstone as model of urban sustainability.

The Town Centre Strategy will be based around a number of key projects, including those with the scope to bring about social, economic and environmental transformation, and will be designed to reflect the Council's long-term aspirations for the Town Centre. The delivery plan will comprise a multi-faceted and multi-agency programme of works designed to achieve this. The work will be underpinned by core principles which reflect the vision for a contemporary County Town sustaining its position as the Business Capital of Kent and at the heart of both the county and Maidstone borough enabling vibrant and prosperous urban and rural communities where everyone can realise their potential and fulfil their aspirations.

The Strategy will help to guide investment, regeneration, development, provision of infrastructure, the use of our town centre spaces and, in the short/medium term the provision of support to town centre communities in responding to the impact of the COVID19 pandemic and a post Brexit economy. This work will also seek to manage potential change resulting from the relaxation of planning rules around the transition of business premises between uses.

Central to the approach will be the reinvention and renaissance of Maidstone Town Centre as a centre of excellence for urban sustainability with a strong focus around arts, culture, leisure and visitor economy, creating a place where people want to live, feel safe, and which prides itself upon being a town centre which is relevant to all of the borough's residents and to which all of the borough's residents can relate.

Scope of Strategy

The scope of the strategy will include:

- The reaffirmation of Maidstone as the county town of Kent through physical regeneration and new infrastructure, cultural renaissance and the further development of diverse and high-quality employment, retail and leisure opportunities.
- Consideration of future land / building uses and the achievement of high-quality and sustainable design that respects and celebrates Maidstone's heritage, whilst improving the quality and character of the town, its green and blue infrastructure, and its permeability and functionality.
- Cross-cutting principles to ensure that the town centre is resilient to the effects of climate change and is a flagship of the Council's aspiration to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030.
- A phased approach which continues to build upon current post pandemic recovery work, but also identifies short-, medium- and long-term projects and interventions, including those around key factors such as environment and community safety.
- Integration of the Council's commitments to a Maidstone Borough that works for everyone and incorporates reduction in deprivation and health inequalities and improvement in social mobility.
- Ensuring the town centre and the wider urban area can continue to play a significant role in meeting the borough's housing need through the enablement of development and investment, together with support for the delivery of quality homes across the housing market to develop sustainable communities.
- Implementing emerging borough wide policies for inclusive growth which aim to tackle education and skills differentials across all sectors of the community to ensure that local residents are equipped to compete for employment and training opportunities resulting from investment and reinvestment.
- Considering how Maidstone could become a "smart town" by bringing together the use of new and emergent technologies and data capture techniques in tackling a range of issues ranging from traffic and air quality, to the efficient use of buildings and spaces and the ability of all partners to reach target audiences more easily.

What will the strategy include?

The strategy will comprise a number of interrelated, interdependent and complementary workstreams:

- Production of a Master Plan to guide future development of the town centre and investment in infrastructure
- A site assembly and implementation framework designed to assist strategic acquisitions by the Council and other partners, together with relocation strategies to ensure that existing jobs and investment are protected.
- Drawing on the Maidstone borough Integrated Transport Strategy development of a detailed transport movement and infrastructure plan designed to facilitate the well-managed movement of traffic with minimum impact on pedestrian safety and air quality, together with safe and legible pedestrian routes throughout the town centre, attractive public transport options and cycle routes based on logical desire lines with business cases for key infrastructure elements.
- An economic development and visitor economy plan based around the current economic development strategy and seeking to secure reinvestment from existing stakeholders in the town, and the provision of opportunities for new investment in diversifying Maidstone's visitor offer through development in arts, culture, events and leisure opportunities.
- A sustainable town plan designed to ensure that all aspects of the town's transport system, built and natural/semi-natural environments, make a positive contribution to the achievement of the boroughs 2030 carbon neutrality target.
- A housing and community plan to ensure that the town's housing stock is of a good standard and of a sufficiently broad nature in terms of both type and tenure to provide for existing and future residents.
- A smart town plan to ensure that technology and data capture is harnessed in the context of the easy movement of vehicles and public transport, improvements in air quality, and the ability of the business community and other stakeholders to maximise dwell time and spend capture in the town centre.
- A proactive approach to inward investment based around the identification of investors, developers and end-users in order to ensure the realisation of the overall strategy.
- A marketing and communications strategy designed to manage community business and stakeholder engagement in the process, whilst simultaneously marketing the town to investors, developers, occupiers and visitors.

At the appropriate point, consideration will be given to the preparation of a new Development Plan Document (DPD) if it is felt that this is necessary to enable the more efficient delivery of key projects or other elements of the Strategy. Equally, and dependent upon the timing and content of new guidance anticipated around the national planning system, it may be more appropriate for the Town Centre to provide a key focus for the Borough's first Local Plan prepared under the new system.

Political Leadership

It is proposed that the Policy and Resources Committee should take the lead role in terms of political oversight of the strategy and that post May 2022 executive political leadership will be provided by the Cabinet.

It is also proposed that this should be supported through an officer project board, chaired by the Chief Executive, and with the operational lead taken by the Interim Director for the Local Plan Review. The Board would comprise the workstream leads for the various activities.

Stakeholder Engagement and Management

It is proposed that as an early action work begins with elected members in the formation of a multi-agency Town Centre Partnership Board to work alongside the Council in coordinating the strategy.

It is also proposed that at both developmental and implementation stages, the strategy will include a comprehensive programme of community and stakeholder engagement in order to ensure the broadest possible input and influence from across the borough.

Resources Needed

Town Centre Strategy	21/22	22/23	23/24
Stage 1 – establishing vision and scoping of Issues, options challenges – establishing what our town centre strategy needs to address	20	50	0
Stage 2 - finding the way forward/solutions producing a credible draft masterplan for consultation and adoption	20	200	0
Stage 3 – consultation and adoption		15	
Stage 4 – initial period of delivery	15	60	70
Staff Resource (excluding establishment)	65	115	115
TOTAL	120	440	185

The approach set out here does not include the creation of a Development Plan Document. To do so now or at a point in the future would require

resources to update the technical evidence base and to fund the statutory processes required for plan adoption. With respect to the evidence base the Town Centre Strategy would partly meet this requirement with the spatial aspects feeding into a future Local Plan; there would be additional requirements for example to update housing, employment and transport evidence to varying degrees. It is difficult to estimate the cost of this in a vacuum from the remainder of work being required for the Local Plan itself; the cost of a town centre housing market assessment for example is estimated at £20k. Employment and transport work has been incorporated into the proposition for the town centre strategy and may need to be updated. The cost of the necessary statutory assessments prior to examination including for habitat regulations and sustainability appraisal would, at current costs, be in the region of £60k. The costs of examination would be in the region of £115k.

Resources supply

Resources Available

Source	Amount £'000
Sense of Place Project	22
S106s	270
Total	292
Shortfall	453

Potential sources for the balance

- Recovery and Renewal un-ringfenced resources
- Underspend from 2020/21