

The Retail Support Initiative Update and Town Centre Health Check

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Purpose of the Report

To provide an update for Members on the retail sector in the three principal towns; Area East, report on the operation of the Retail Support Initiative (RSI) during 2017/18 and approve the operating criteria for 2018/19.

Public Interest

Supporting and helping to improve the retail offer in the towns and villages across Area East.

Recommendations:

- (1) To note the report
- (2) To approve the updated operating criteria of the RSI scheme for 2018/19

Background

Retail Support Initiative

Most members will be aware the RSI was originally set up in 2006 (following a pilot which started the previous year in Wincanton & Bruton). For many years it has proved to be an effective way of supporting and engaging with a wide range of retail and service outlets across the Area. Throughout this period regular performance reports have been brought back to this Committee.

Members have previously considered expanding the eligibility to provide cross sector support for small businesses in Area East. Whilst the merit of widening the criteria was supported, it was also recognised that this could not be achieved within the limited budget, without diluting the benefit to the retail sector, because a large number of businesses employing 5 or less would have been eligible. As a result, the focus of supporting retail/service sector businesses operating in town centres/villages has continued.

A number of revisions were made to the scheme for 2012/13 and these included:

- The inclusion of farm shops and 'exceptional' support for projects, which add to the viability of town/village centres (loyalty schemes or similar)
- Inclusion of grant assistance towards half the actual payment due for business rates for new businesses (which do not compete with another business) in their first 2 years of trading

The scheme continued to operate on a similar basis until Autumn 2014 when a 'top-up' scheme for Wincanton was implemented - this had been approved at the Area East Committee in July 2014. The only subsequent change was in June 2016 when £300 previously available for business improvement was removed from the Wincanton

'top up' scheme to give more focus on shopfront improvement.

Operation of Retail Support Initiative during 2017-18

Appendix 1 shows a breakdown of the 6 grants awarded during 2017/18.

11 RSI information packs were sent out during the year with some of this interest still current which may convert to applications in the future.

The scheme of delegation limit is £1,000 (in line with other grants and the Council's scheme of delegation). Grant requests can be considered at any time in consultation with the Chairman and Ward Member(s). Applications for amounts over £1000 are considered by Area East Committee.

A combination of face to face visits and email are used to remind businesses about the scheme annually and a leaflet drop will be undertaken in the main towns during the Summer.

A copy of the eligibility criteria approved in June 2017 is attached at Appendix 2 - this is unchanged apart from the eligible units for the Wincanton top-up which have been amended to reflect changes in unit occupancy and could be applied to any unit which has been vacant for six months providing it meets the other RSI requirements. It is therefore suggested that this operating criteria is rolled forward for 2108/19. In early 2019, once the strategic proposals for Wincanton town centre are available and the new Area Plan is in place, it can be reviewed again.

As part of our more general monitoring of our principal retail centres, we undertake shop occupancy surveys. Members will be aware that the high level of void units in Wincanton was a factor in Wincanton becoming a corporate priority. The table below shows the most recent shop surveys conducted in Wincanton, Castle Cary and Bruton, with details of the number of shops open and empty units within the towns.

Town	Date	Number of open retail units	Number of closed retail units
Wincanton	April 2018	72	15
Castle Cary	April 2018	54	6
Bruton	April 2018	27	4

The graph at Appendix 3 shows retail unit occupancy trends since February 2015 in the 3 market towns.

Another indicator of the state of our towns is obtained via car park monitoring. This is a 'snapshot' of car park usage on the days surveyed and is only a crude indicator as it does not take account of local factors such as Berry's bus passengers who use Memorial Hall Car Park but are less likely to generate any meaningful town centre footfall. The most recent car park monitoring information and trends are attached at appendix 4.

Financial Implications

The remaining budget at the end of April 2018 is as shown in the table below:

	Revenue element	Capital	Wincanton 'top-up'
Unallocated budget 2017/18 as at 31 March 2018	£4819.00	£1212	£9000

The current budget to date is shown in the table below:

	Revenue element	Capital	Wincanton 'top-up'
Unallocated budget 2018/19 as at April 2018	£9125	£1212	£10000

Implications for Corporate Priorities

A strong economy which has low unemployment and thriving businesses

Other Implications

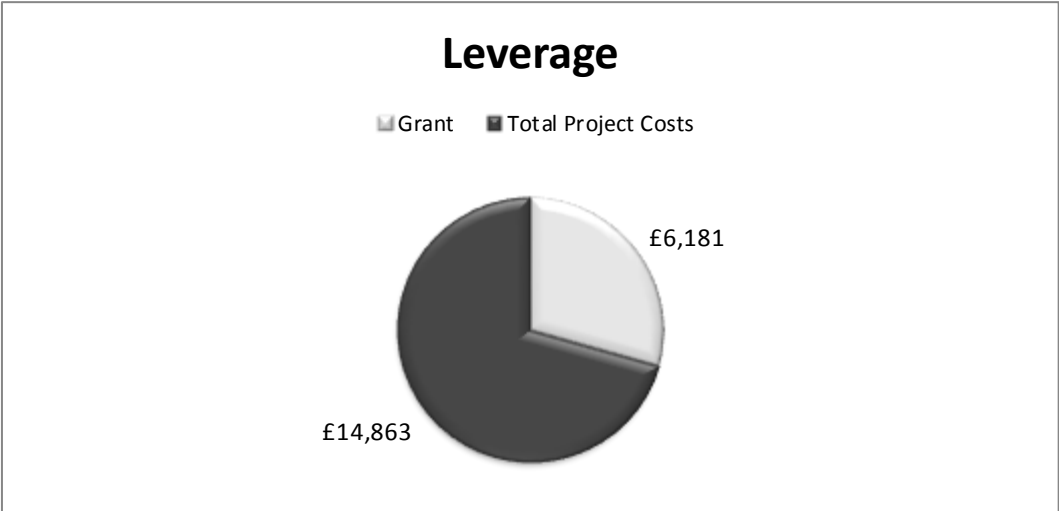
Included within the Area Development Plan

Background Papers:

Area East Committee Agenda and Minutes July 2014 and June 2017

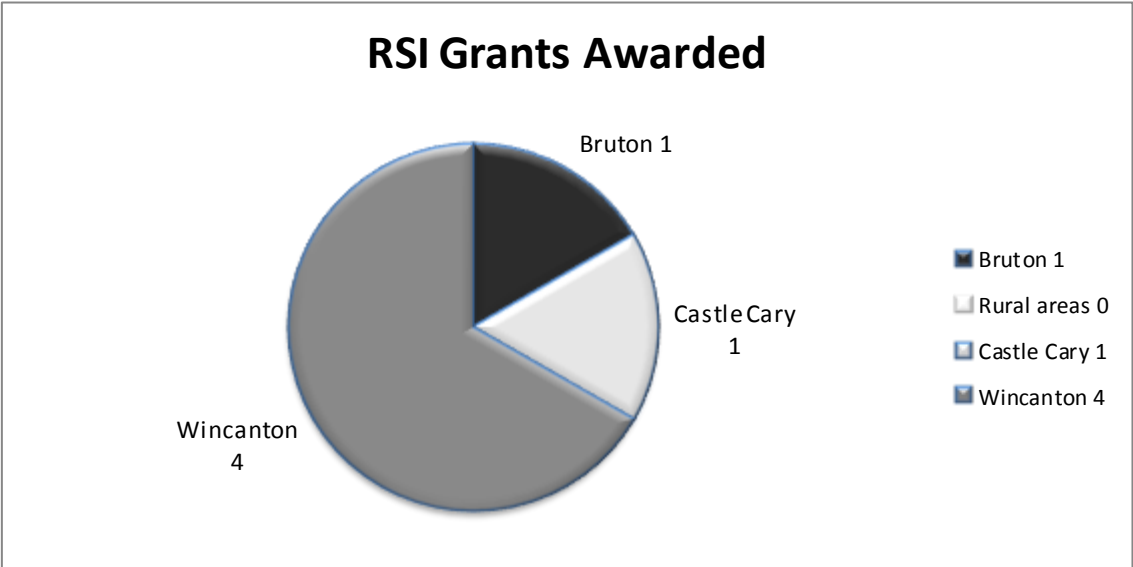
Retail Support Initiative 2017-18

The graph below shows the proportion of grant against overall scheme costs:



During the period April 2017 to March 2018, 5 grants were awarded under delegated powers and 1 awarded at Committee.

From April 2017 to March 2018, 4 grants were awarded to businesses in Wincanton, with 1 grant in Castle Cary and 1 in Bruton. No grants being awarded to other rural areas.



Retail Support Initiative

Proposed operating criteria 2018/19

Percentage contributions cannot exceed 50% of costs and **no** retrospective applications are eligible (i.e. in respect of works that have already been commissioned/started).

Applications over £1000 will be considered by Area East Committee on a monthly basis. Amounts up to £1000 may be considered at any time as a delegated grant in consultation with the Chairman & Ward Member(s).

Area-wide grant levels: **£1,500 to a maximum 50% of project costs as follows:**

Eligible costs:

- Shop-front improvements, if they enhance the High Street
- Business rates assistance – a contribution to the amount payable for new businesses (which do not compete with another business) in their first 2 years of trading
- Exceptional projects which add to viability of towns/villages

Wincanton top-up

In addition to the area-wide scheme, the 'top-up' scheme for Wincanton also offers:

- Maximum grant £1,000 for businesses wishing to move into one of the eligible units in the town **which have been empty for at least six months prior to receiving an application.**

The following units are now occupied/undergoing refurbishment; one has taken advantage of the Wincanton 'top up' scheme.

3 Market Place – formerly The Red Lion
13 Market Place – formerly Boots Chemist
1-3 High Street – formerly Brocks
Unit corner of Carrington Way
6 High Street – formerly Chicken Grill/Yummy Yummy

Grants are only available to proprietors/owners with one business/premise and will not exceed 50% of project cost.

Process

Applications for grants are assessed and recommendations made on the basis of a fully completed application form and 2 'like for like' quotes. Self-help/DIY schemes may complete the application form and supply a project budget with supporting information.

All grant recipients must accept that the grant may be used for publicity purposes by the District Council. Payment of the grant is done retrospectively, for a completed programme of works on the basis of receipted invoices. Exceptionally officers, in consultation with the Chairman, may release partial payments where there is clear justification for doing so.

The existing assessment and current scoring mechanism favours businesses:

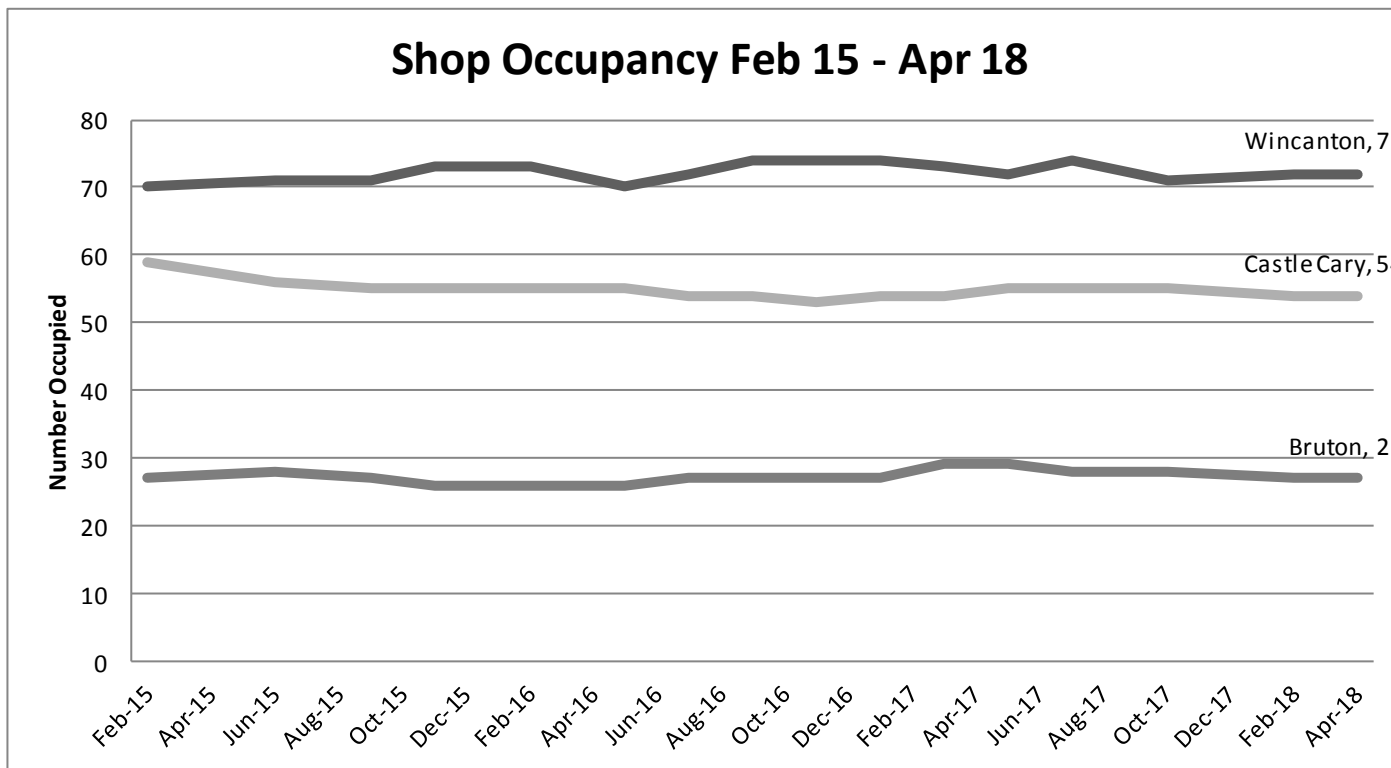
- Employing more than 2 people
- In prominent places
- Key rural stores/Post Offices
- Retailers

The award is subject to the following standard conditions:

- The grant award may be used by SSDC for promotional/publicity purposes
- Grants are paid for approved works/purchases on production of receipted invoices
- Awards are subject to a summary of the benefit of the scheme being supplied
- Applicants will normally be expected to draw down the grant within 6 months of the offer and if not will have to inform us of the reason(s) for the delay. If there is a valid reason, officers can provide a 6-month extension, but beyond this the grant would either be withdrawn or referred to Area East Committee to be reaffirmed
- That appropriate consents are obtained
- Works requiring listed building/planning consents or building regulation consent will be required to be signed off by the appropriate officer prior to the release of funds
- If, within 3 years of a grant award the business ceases to trade, the District Council reserves the right to reclaim the grant on the following basis: year one –100%, year 2 – 75%, year 3 – 45%

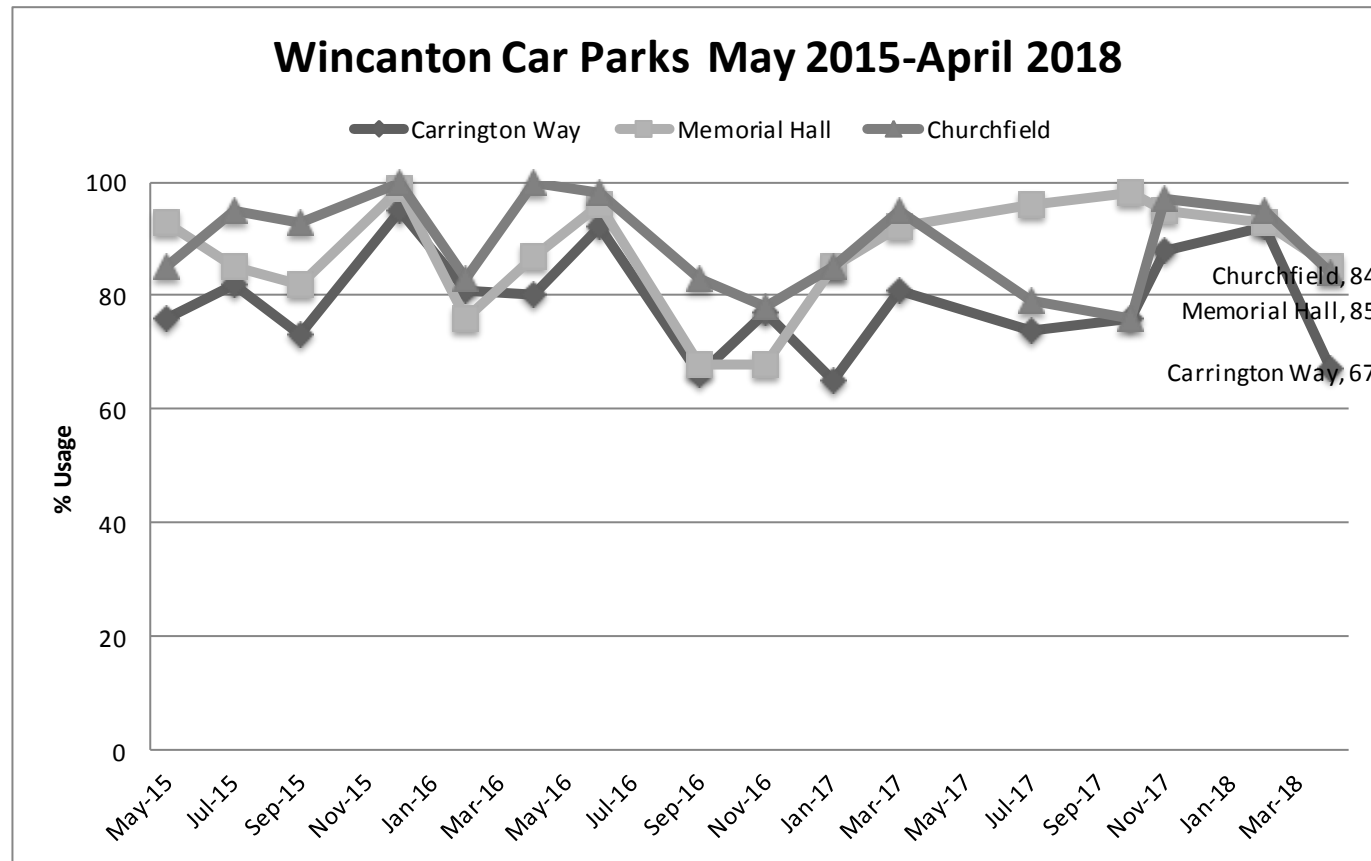
Shop Occupancy Trends

The graph below shows the shop occupancy trends since February 2015:

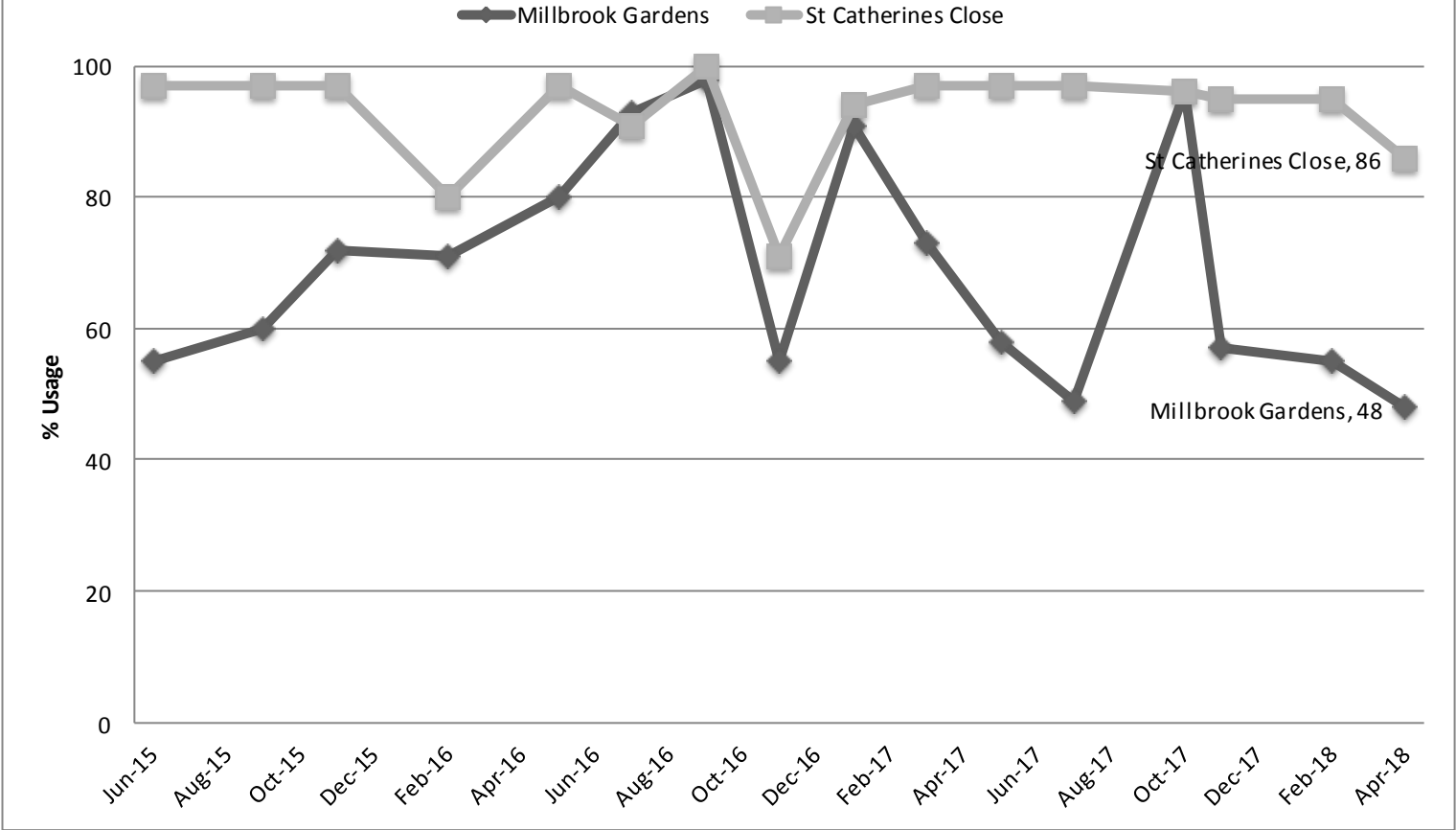


Car Park Trends

The charts below show the car parking trends in Wincanton, Castle Cary and Bruton since January 2014:



Castle Cary Car Parks Jun 2015 - April 2018



Bruton Car Parks Jun 15 - Apr 18

