

Wincanton Town Centre Strategy

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Purpose of the Report

To approve revisions to the draft Wincanton Town Centre strategy following public consultation.

Public Interest

The Town Centre Strategy sets out a vision for Wincanton Town Centre which will provide the basis for the Council's future activity and investment in the town.

Recommendation

That Members approve:

- (1) The revisions to the town centre strategy as summarised below and in Appendix 1.

Background

Members will be aware that there has been a long held local aspiration to regenerate Wincanton town centre and whilst there have been several previous initiatives, these ceased many years ago. There continues to be some legacy benefits to the town but more recent proactive initiatives such as the Neighbourhood Development Plan (led by the Town Council) have had a much broader basis than town centre regeneration.

In 2013, in response to requests from councillors to encourage an anchor retailer to come to the town, experienced in-house staff prepared a confidential scoping report which considered the reasons the town was weaker than it might be, together with possible options for development. At the time the economic downturn meant that national chains were cautious about any portfolio expansion. This work was revisited in 2017 when a further approach was made to commercial agents to determine the appetite amongst retail users to come to Wincanton town centre.

In 2017 it was recognised that, whilst there were some signs of encouragement with a number of new 'lifestyle' businesses opening, Wincanton had the highest proportion of vacant units of town centres in South Somerset, this provided the justification for the District Council's Strategic Regeneration Board to approve funding for consultants to develop a strategy for the town centre.

Following a competitive tender Chilmark Consulting were appointed in May 2018, to develop a strategy to deliver positive change. They engaged with many stakeholders through the process, including Town Council, community organisations with a town centre presence, landowners, businesses (individuals and the Chamber of Commerce). The views and ideas shared during this process have informed the draft strategy which Area East Committee approved for consultation in December 2018.

Public consultation

The public consultation ran for ten weeks from January 2019, the consultation strands included:

- Two well publicised 'drop-ins' attended by around 130 people
- A 'bite-sized' A3 format summary & response sheet delivered to all town centre businesses
- Secondary school tutor group participation using above 'bite-sized' format
- Presentations to key organisations such as the Town Council, Chamber of Commerce
- Encouragement of individual on-line and hard copy replies through press and social media
- Informal/anecdotal feedback

Overall, it is estimated that around 250 people engaged in the consultation.

A breakdown of completed questionnaires, which is shown at Appendix 2, indicates support for the strategy.

The table below sets out the sources of the completed questionnaires received:

Drop-in	27
King Arthur's School	12
Individual	18

Although the number of formal responses was comparatively low, with 57 received, written responses were generally well considered and key comments are similar to the wider feedback received through the other consultation strands. The feedback received shows the main areas of concern as:

- Loss of car parking
- Charging for use of public car parks
- The level of proposed residential development
- Need to enhance the retail offer
- Limited number of events/markets
- Limited mix of uses

The comments received through the consultation together with a review of the deliverability of some elements have informed the suggested revisions to the plan.

Amendments by section

The draft strategy offered a combination of indicative concept proposals and solutions for the town centre and flexibility about how these might be phased. As a result of the consultation, the evolving position with several sites/properties and pipeline initiatives, a number of revisions to the draft strategy are proposed. The changes, together with an explanation, are set out at Appendix 1 together with a summary of the proposed revision to the strategy. The section below provides an overview of the main changes.

Vision

The vision of a well-used and vibrant town centre with thriving niche retail offer and other town centre uses, attracting daytime and evening uses was generally well received through the various consultation strands. A suggestion is to modify the final bullet point of the vision slightly, to read:

'Will create a convenient and attractive destination for both local residents and visitors utilising the unique assets of Wincanton Town Centre and the surrounding area'.

Strategy

The strategy aim of encouraging footfall by promoting a wider range of town centre uses stands. The consultation identified the preservation of service sector businesses alongside further promotion of the town as an artisan/niche destination. Responses in this section were wide-ranging with requests for clothing and technology retailers, sporting facilities and the tailoring of any residential developments to appeal to different market sectors such as young professionals and older people.

Development Options

One of the proven ways to boost footfall within town centres is to create a range of opportunities including town centre living. The strategy takes a long term and flexible view of the town centre but there has been review of indicative development proposals having investigated the medium term deliverability and viability. As well as preserving flexibility for the future, the revised approach better respects historic curtilages and structures; it also accords with much of the feedback to public consultation. This theme was one of two themes which generated the greatest consultation comment and a suggested approach by site is set out at Appendix 1.

Public Realm

There were four locations identified for public realm improvements, two of which had been included in the Neighbourhood Development Plan previously. The aims of creating qualitative improvements to the pedestrian environment and reducing vehicle speeds both received support through the strategy consultation but localised concerns were also raised. The detailed design of each location will need to be respectful and creative to address the aim of improving the pedestrian experience in a historic town centre, whilst preserving the High Street's status as a route diversion for the A303 (when closed).

Complementary Initiatives

The draft strategy includes suggested initiatives such as more town centre events and markets to increase the visitor (and resident) offer, drawing visitors to the town centre from the A303 and nearby attractions such as the racecourse. The draft document also recognises that any changes to car park management within the town needs to be managed carefully to avoid diminishing the appeal of the town centre (and conform to SSDC's Car Parking Strategy). The draft strategy included establishing a brand identity for the town around its niche and artisan offer but this could also be developed to targeted marketing to attract new business investment plus a package of support for new and existing businesses

If Members are minded to accept the proposed changes which are presented following liaison with Chilmark Consulting, the Strategy will be revised and the updated document will be circulated to Members and key stakeholders.

Action Plan

The final section of the draft strategy contains an Action Plan and performance monitoring. The intention is that this will be expanded into a Delivery Plan which will be considered at the first meeting of the Wincanton Programme Board. The Delivery Plan will detail and prioritise the initiatives and schemes, together with lead in time and resourcing required to implement over the coming 12 months. Medium term interventions for years 2-5 will also be included although these may be adapted to respond, as appropriate, to evolving circumstances within the town centre. Progress will be tracked through performance measures which will also be incorporated within the Delivery Plan.

Supplementary Consultation

As part of the preparation for Area East Committee, over the last month, an overview of the feed-back from the consultation has been shared with Area East councillors and Wincanton Town Council.

Some Area East councillors reiterated strong support for an anchor retail presence in the town centre, something which can be accommodated within, the draft strategy as it seeks to strengthen the retail offer. Although contact had been established with the main agents acting for retail operators within the last six months, renewed approaches have been made to several agents which act for national multiples over the last few weeks and verbal update will be provided about this at the meeting. A viable anchor retailer would be encouraged into the town centre; if edge of town/out of town sites were to be submitted these would require robust sequential site testing in line with national 'Town Centres First' policy.

A verbal update will also be given from the second feed-back session, with the Town Council, which is scheduled for 8 July.

Wincanton Programme Board

The Wincanton Programme Board will be established in accordance with the Full Council resolution of May 2018, with the remit and membership as set-out in the relevant Council Report paragraphs of 6.6 to 6.16, which are summarised below. Wincanton Programme Board will be responsible for managing, directing and delivering the broad aims of the Town Centre Strategy. The board will operate with a degree of decision making and financial delegation in order to move the programme forward efficiently and to also create clear accountability. The main aims of the board are:

- To ensure the delivery of the Wincanton Town Centre Strategy
- To work with the Stakeholder Group to ensure that clear messages are given and feedback is received and circulated to all partners engaged in the regeneration process.

The Terms of Reference for the Wincanton Board would mirror those in place already in Yeovil and Chard, draft Terms of Reference for the Wincanton Board are attached at Appendix 3. Based on the other Boards, Membership of the Wincanton Programme Board would comprise:

- Area East Chair
- Leader of the Council
- At least one member from each of the political groups in and around the town (including a ward member for the town)
- Lead Director
- Chief Executive
- A limited number of key delivery partners

Again, similar to the Boards established in the two other programme towns it is suggested that a Stakeholder Group is formed to:

- Act as a forum for sharing ideas in relation to the progression of projects and potential regeneration opportunities.
- Provide specialist business advice and share specialist knowledge with the Board
- Help to ensure that clear messages are given and feedback is received and circulated to all stakeholders engaged in the regeneration process (some information may be commercially sensitive and subject to a confidentiality agreement).

Financial Implications

There are no detailed financial implications resulting from this report besides officer time however, it should be noted that implementing proposals contained in the draft Delivery Plan requires a significant financial investment. The draft Delivery Plan with year one costing and provisional sums for years 2-5 will be presented at the first Wincanton Regeneration Programme Board.

Council Priority Implications

The Wincanton Town Strategy is one of the Priority Projects listed in the Council Plan

Carbon Emissions & Climate Change Implications

Providing local access to a range of activities and services reducing the need to travel which therefore reduces carbon emissions.

Equality and Diversity Implications

Consultation with groups representing protected characteristics will be undertaken as part of the public realm design consultations.

Background Papers

Wincanton Town Centre Strategy draft
Area East Committee Agenda & Minutes December 2018
