

MID SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL

COMMITTEE: CABINET	REPORT NUMBER: MCa/18/04
FROM: CABINET MEMBER WITH RESPONSIBILITY FOR ECONOMY	DATE OF MEETING: 4 JUNE 2018
OFFICER: LEE CARVELL – CORPORATE MANAGER, OPEN FOR BUSINESS	KEY DECISION REF NO. CAB30

STOWMARKET VISION FOR PROSPERITY NEXT STEPS

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The *Vision for Prosperity* (VfP) work is intended to kick-start a resurgence in Stowmarket and its surrounding area, coordinating services and responding to the needs of the community. This work is a priority as set by councillors within the recently updated 2018/19 priorities.
- 1.2 During the VfP consultation (October 2017) there were a lot of comments made about a lot of issues, but the majority of interest was in the town centre itself. In short, the perception is that the town is under-performing as a retail and leisure venue. Consequently, the reputation of the town is weak which hinders positivity in residents and in potential investors in the area.
- 1.3 This report is seeking endorsement for the draft VfP documents that respond to the issues raised in public consultation, and for a budget commitment for projects that begin to deliver some of the solutions and interventions to address these.

A. Recommendations

Members are recommended to:

- a. Review the draft “VfP Action Plan” and draft “VfP All-Issues Response” and endorse for publication. It is recommended that the Cabinet Member for the Economy in consultation with the Strategic Director should be granted delegated authority to approve any updates/amendments prior to publication.
- b. Allocate a total of £550k from the Growth & Efficiency Fund as follows
 - £200,000 to
 - o investigate the Council’s options for branding and marketing Stowmarket, and
 - o explore the feasibility/deliverability of a Stowmarket town centre regeneration project
 - £250,000 to be made available in a grant scheme for shop improvements in Eye, Needham Market and Stowmarket.
 - £100,000 to be made available in a grant scheme for works to improve the experience in Eye, Needham Market and Stowmarket for mobility impaired users. and agree that the Cabinet Member for Communities and the Cabinet Member for Economy in consultation with the Strategic Director should be granted delegated authority to agree the details of the grant schemes.

- c. Consider how and when the VfP response is presented to the public beyond the release of the document (to be available online and copies in prominent places). It is recommended that a drop-in event is conducted with partner organisations, and appropriate publicity, to be held on 16th of June as part of Stowmarket's Civic Day.

2. Financial Implications

- 2.1 It is recommended that a total of £550k funding is allocated from the Growth & Efficiency Fund as follows
- £200,000 to
 - o investigate the Council's options for branding and marketing Stowmarket, and
 - o explore the feasibility/deliverability of a Stowmarket town centre regeneration project
 - £250,000 to be made available in a grant scheme for shop improvements in Eye, Needham Market and Stowmarket.
 - £100,000 to be made available in a grant scheme for works to improve the experience in Eye, Needham Market and Stowmarket for mobility impaired users.
- 2.2 It is envisaged that grant criteria will require a match-funding element so as to amplify the impact of spending.
- 2.3 It is anticipated that there may be business cases developed to deliver additional projects that arise from the VfP, but these will be subject to their own individual reports and consideration in the future.

3. Legal Implications

4. The intervention rate, terms and conditions of the grant scheme will be developed in consultation with partners, and agreed under delegated authority to the Cabinet Member for the Economy in consultation with the Strategic Director. The progress and outcomes of the grant scheme will be reported back to Cabinet as part of the broader performance reporting.

5. Risk Management

- 5.1 The report links to the following risks in the Councils' Significant Risk Register:

Risk Description	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation Measures
<p>Failure to develop the local economy and our market towns to thrive – Risk 2b</p> <p>2c: If we do not engage with communities of Stowmarket to develop a 'Vision' which is then supported by a programme of projects, activities and initiatives (including regeneration) which will deliver the vision, we may not realise</p>	Likely	Bad	<p>We have worked with Town Councils, steering groups and partnerships to develop the Vision. This output is one such project that directly responds to the concerns of communities.</p> <p>Development of the Open For Business Strategy, Suffolk tourism strategy; Promotion of area to attract new business; Increased commercial awareness and relationship building with our businesses</p>

the economic potential of our largest market town.			will assist in successful delivery of a suite of projects.
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5.2 Other project risks:

Risk Description	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation Measures
Not to proceed with a regeneration/development project based on viability without public funding support.	Likely	Bad	<p>A feasibility study will consider financial, economic, social returns on investment. The overall economic and social benefits for regeneration will be weighed against not providing support for regeneration.</p> <p>The budget will be spent to understand the risk of major regeneration and so in the event that feasibility/deliverability cannot be demonstrated, the budget will have been invested wisely. Conversely, if it can be shown that there is a viable/deliverable project or projects the investment will be even more well spent.</p> <p>Appropriate publicity of findings and options (in due course) will ensure that expectations are managed.</p>
MSDC cannot deliver this project within budget and within the agreed timescale	Unlikely	Medium	
The legacy of a failed regeneration project in 2010 is still in many minds, and there is an expectation that the VfP will revive that scheme, or instigate a new one.	Unlikely	Low	
Establishing a brand, shared ownership of delivery against VfP. Getting the collective buy-in.	Likely	Bad	
			Ensure partner buy-in and involvement throughout the branding/marketing exercise to instill ownership.

<p>Failure to address accessibility issues – impact on town centre vitality. – impact on town centre appeal, operator confidence and investment decisions.</p>			<p>An improved aesthetic and more accessible town centre offer will promote the area to attract new business and footfall. This will ensure Stowmarket continues to offer day-to-day services and shopping opportunities in an attractive and inclusive environment.</p>
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6. Consultations

- 6.1 The VfP consultation was undertaken in October 2017, as the culmination of significant priority work undertaken and managed by the OfB Team. Over 400 response comments were received, as well as numerous conversations taking place with the public, Members and Officers. A specific effort was made to engage with young people through work with Stowmarket High School. The overwhelming issue was that the town centre requires significant investment.
- 6.2 Given the collaborative approach to the VfP with partner organisations, the draft documents have been shared with partner organisations to review them and make comments. The documents may be considered a ‘Stowmarket response’ and not just a District Council publication.
- 6.3 The VfP is not a stand-alone document, but an ongoing umbrella approach to advance change and intervention in the Stowmarket area. Therefore, it is anticipated that the feasibility work conclusions commissioned by this report will encourage significant further public display/engagement activity demonstrating potential schemes/options. This will be considered in future reporting.

7. Equality Analysis

- 7.1 This project will help to improve access for those with impaired mobility and improve the inclusiveness and vitality of the town centre.

8. Shared Service / Partnership Implications

- 8.1 It is recommended that a select working group is established to take forward this initial work (composed of Suffolk County Council, Stowmarket Town Council and Mid Suffolk District Council – for example one Officer and one Member from each, plus a chairman and OFB team as admin support).
- 8.2 The Town Councils and Mid Suffolk Disability Forum can help to design the grants scheme.

9. Links to Joint Strategic Plan

- 9.1 The 2016 MSDC Joint Strategic Plan (JSP) sets out the direction of the Council for the next four years. Further, 2018/2019 priority refinement has just taken place in support of the JSP, of which VfP is included.

- 9.2 The JSP articulates three priority areas: Economy and Environment, Housing and Strong and Healthy communities which will be delivered under five key strategic outcomes. The following key strategic outcomes are linked to this project:
- Further develop local economy and market towns to thrive
 - Property investment to generate income and regenerate local areas
 - Targeted grants and funding to support community capacity building
 - Continued support for Health and Wellbeing outcomes that prevent interventions

10. Key Information

- 10.1 During the VfP consultation and events (concluding in October 2017) there were over 400 comments made about a lot of issues, but the majority of interest was in the town centre itself. In short, the perception is that the town is under-performing as a retail and leisure venue. Consequently, the reputation of the town is weak which hinders positivity in residents and in potential investors in the area.
- 10.2 The recently-approved Open For Business Strategy both supports and underpins the VfP work. Our renewed approach to engaging with businesses will ensure that the needs of users and operators are built in to any investments to deliver the necessary economic conditions for regeneration projects and interventions to maximise their success.
- 10.3 The next stages of the VfP project include the publication of documents that respond in detail to the issues raised, and set out the approach and actions for change. As there are developing projects, it is recommended that delegated authority is granted to approve any amendments prior to publication so as to ensure it is as up to date as can be.
- 10.4 Members are invited to consider how and when the VfP response is presented to the public beyond the release of the document (to be available online and copies in prominent places). It is recommended that a drop-in event is conducted, and that the Stowmarket Civic Day on the 16th of June would be an ideal opportunity.

VfP All-Issues Response Document

- 10.5 The public consultation event has wholly led the development of this document – addressing the points that are concerning to local residents and businesses. Although the majority of responses concern ‘small issues’ such as parking enforcement, youth behaviour and littering, and none of the responses were considered ‘transformational’ in nature, despite nearly half of responders favouring ‘radical change’. There were no new issues raised in the consultation, and as anticipated, the town centre appearance and ‘experience’ were the most commonly raised issues. However, it is important that these issues are addressed and responded to.
- 10.6 The comprehensive reply means that subsequent VfP actions to be focused without diverting resources to smaller issues. The document is attached in appendix 1.

VfP Action Plan

- 10.7 Alongside the lengthy “All-issues response” above, an “Action Plan” of commitments/deliverable projects (not aspirations) has been prepared. This a much shorter document that is all about positivity, progress, action and delivery. The Action Plan may be considered a culmination of many projects that collectively demonstrate the strong leadership, as well as the commitment to providing quality services by the Council and all of its delivery partners. The Action Plan is attached in appendix 2.

Regeneration Options investigation – Growth and Efficiency Fund application

- 10.8 Stowmarket does not have the reputation or importance to attract a market-led regeneration project. The Council must lead any major regeneration project. It is considered that information from the previous regeneration scheme in 2010 will be out of date, and without the specialist, up-to-date knowledge of funding options and market trends that is held by regeneration consultancies, any potential scheme undertaken will be at a much greater risk of failure.
- 10.9 It is recommended that the previous regeneration plans of 2010-2013 are NOT revived. Since that time there have been significant changes to the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, to policies and processes, but more significantly there have been national changes in retailer demands, shopper habits and the expectation of town centre users. A single-development scheme is also considered to be a higher risk, as if it were to fail again there could be another 10 years of inaction: therefore a group of projects is preferred to ensure delivery and growth. Lastly, the previous scheme is not considered to be of a sufficient aspirational scale to make it genuinely attractive to a cautious market; it would *evolve* Stowmarket but would not *transform* it.
- 10.10 It is recommended that Cabinet commits £200,000 from the Growth & Efficiency Fund for feasibility work should be secured, and for marketing and promotion. The money would be released in stages with each “gateway” being delivered and successful before further funds are released. The stages could include:
- The appointment of a temporary Officer to assist in VfP work (specific job role as opposed to generic officer role is attractive to regeneration professionals)
 - Engaging a regeneration consultancy partner to:
 - assess market conditions and advise Council regarding funding, process, partnership models, and other aspects of delivering major regeneration
 - develop a suite of concept ideas
 - undertake viability and feasibility work up ideas to stage 1 options
 - Engage with stakeholders to establish preferred model
 - Market testing and fine-tuning
 - Stakeholder and public engagement
- 10.11 Additional funding will be sought from savings and efficiencies, investment by partner organisations, and from other projects that complement the VfP work, including significant officer time to ensure the project is successful.
- 10.12 With regard to marketing/branding, the VfP consultation yielded no significant existing “character” or role that Stowmarket has that could be the basis of its marketing angle. Therefore, it is an opportunity to create a new identity. The Museum of East Anglian Life is already building its offer around Suffolk’s food production which could be one option to explore for Stowmarket more generally. The procurement of marketing/branding services may be approached through partners and provide additional opportunities such as the use of the University of Suffolk’s marketing course students. The appropriate procurement methods will be used to secure any such services. The marketing would include a logo, strapline, colour scheme and other brand identifiers. The appointed consultants will be asked to advise on a programme of promotion works that reinforce the brand. The Council must commit to using the branding in its range of functions and duties to ensure it is effective.

Grant Schemes

- 10.13 A fund of £250,000 is sought to deliver a shop front improvement grant scheme to make Eye, Needham Market and Stowmarket town centres more attractive to users through repairs, maintenance, painting and building improvements. A similar scheme has been run in Stowmarket in the past. The HERS (Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme) was focused on the conservation/restoration of historic fabric, as it was instigated and part-funded by English Heritage. This scheme does not need to be so focused and can be broadened out, such as to include modern assets, non-retail uses, streetscape/public realm etc if desired.
- 10.14 A further fund of £100,000 is sought to deliver a grant scheme to make Eye, Needham Market and Stowmarket town centres more accessible to persons with impaired mobility. The 2017 Mid Suffolk Disability Forum report highlighted a number of concerns around wheelchair access in Stowmarket, and some simple/cost effective amendments that could be made to street furniture to make it more navigable to people with a range of disabilities. This includes basic repairs and maintenance, but also works such as adding a contrasting band to the black bollards, more/clearer signage, and highlights on the nose of steps. Some of these recommendations are already being progressed via Stowmarket Town Council, the District Council and other members of the Mid Suffolk Disability Forum, but more funding being made available will accelerate the implementation of works.
- 10.15 The intervention rates, grant allowance values, terms & conditions and monitoring/reporting mechanism for the schemes can be drafted once the funds are agreed in principle. The details can be drawn up in consultation with all relevant Council services and partner organisations to ensure it is appropriate. The grant schemes details may be approved under delegated authority.
- 10.16 Although it could be desirable, it is not practical to extend the fund to all shops across the District as the fund is unlikely to be effective if it is spread too thinly. While there are undoubtedly benefits of improved access and aesthetic quality anywhere, the cumulative impact of several interventions in the town centres has much larger overall benefit. However, should take-up of grants be slow, this may be reviewed.

11. Conclusion

- 11.1 The VfP project has sparked some initial interest and with the proposed actions we can capitalise on the momentum. By addressing both day-to-day irritant issues as well as establishing a strong action/intervention plan it will demonstrate leadership and commitment to the population of Stowmarket and its surrounding area.
- 11.2 A number of these activities (branding, regeneration background work) can be commenced prior to more long-term interventions such as major regeneration, as VfP is a suite of continued actions, not a stand-alone document.

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Appendices

Title	Attachment
Draft VfP All-Issues Response	APPENDIX A
Draft VfP Action Plan	APPENDIX B