

High Streets Town and City Centre Commission

Review of Report of the Town and City Centre Member's Working Group (October 2014)

General Conclusions

1. Each Town, City Centre and High Street in the Borough would benefit from having in place a Plan that sets out a Vision for its future.
 - Each of the regeneration areas in the borough now have a strategic plan that sets out a vision for its future:
 - Chester One City Plan 2012 – Undergoing mid-term review
 - Chester Dashboard 2019
 - Ellesmere Port Town Centre Masterplan 2019
 - Winsford Town Centre Masterplan 2019
 - Northwich Vision 2011
 - Weaver Square Masterplan 2018 – undergoing review
2. Our Local Communities and Businesses are central to the future survival of our high streets, town and city centres.
 - Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) have been established in the borough to provide support to businesses and local communities:
 - CH1 Chester BID – established in 2014 and re-balloted in 2019 (84% yes)
 - West Chester Commercial BID – established in 2017
 - Northwich BID – established in 2014 and re-balloted in 2019 (77% yes)
 - Other areas have been reviewed for BID potential
3. Our Town and City Centres must be viewed as “Community Hubs” and not just places where we shop.
 - The Local Plan (Part Two) adopts a more flexible approach than previous Plans in relation to changes of use within town centres. This will be kept under review as part of the Local Plan review process and there may be further changes at a national level in terms of allowing temporary and / or permanent changes of use without requiring planning permission.
 - The Annual Monitoring Report 2019 shows that most centres have experienced an increase in vacancy rates since 2014.
 - During the Highstreet Recovery phase for Covid 19 the Alfresco policy has been reviewed and relaxed to encourage business survival. Further review will take place in the autumn to recognise the ongoing challenge to the high street.
4. Local Innovation and Creativity needs to be encouraged and supported in our Town and City Centres through our Localities and Regeneration Teams.
 - Since the restructure, the area Regeneration and Locality teams have worked closely together on several projects including:

- Chester Highstreet Heritage Action Zone
- Chester Supertrees
- Winsford Whole Place Approach
- Winsford Town Park
- Winsford Town Centre Masterplan
- Winsford FHSF bid
- Barons Quay development
- Northwich Weaver Square Masterplan
- Stanney Lane and Sutton Way Boulevard
- Ellesmere Port Town Centre S106 Improvement works
- Ellesmere Port Hub development
- Ellesmere Port FHSF bid and HSTF work
- COVID 19 Town Centre Recovery Plan
- The teams have established joint working groups.

5. As a Local Authority we have a central role to play in supporting our Town and City centres.

- The regeneration and locality teams work jointly with other internal colleagues across departments to support the high streets and facilitate the work of the area regeneration boards.
- Each of the strategic plans set out for the town and city centres in the borough are implemented and supported by us as a local authority and they are used as the framework for future projects.

6. Each high street, town and city centre is unique and as such the measures we adopt to address any underlying issues need to be shaped accordingly to meet those individual circumstances.

- Each regeneration team and board have individual visions and plans which are specific to the needs and unique circumstances of the town/city centre they are based in.
- Set out below are examples of specific town/centre focused initiatives.
 - Chester High Street Heritage Action Zone
 - Northwich Townscape Heritage Initiative
 - Winsford Future High Street Fund which is underpinned by PRAGMA retail market assessment (April 2020) and soft market testing.
 - Ellesmere Port Whitby Road Shop Scheme
 - St Michaels Centre – Big Heritage visitor attraction
 - Barons Quay – diversification of uses to include leisure-based operators/ F and B
 - Northwich Now Festival
 - Chester Unlocked Festival 2017
 - Cine-window Winsford
 - Action Transport Theatre
- Funding opportunities to support new initiatives have been maximised

7. Night-time Economy - In aiming to transform the night time economy in our Town and City Centres action is now needed to deliver a broader offer.
 - Storyhouse has diversified the night-time economy in Chester, and will be further enhanced with Northgate Phase 1
 - Chester first secured Purple Flag Status in 2018 which was renewed for a second year in 2019
 - Chester Safe Space trial which provided first aid facilities on Saturday and popular nights in the city.
 - Northwich are currently applying for Purple Flag Status.
 - Northwich BID have established a night-time economy stream of work.
 - The planned restructuring of Winsford Town Centre over a long-term investment programme will seek to address the Night-time economy.
 - Covered in Ellesmere Port framework document and High Street Task Force Actions – recent addition to night time economy has been Club 3000 bingo

8. Property Ownership – As a Local Authority we should be able to help to identify owners of high street properties that are a cause of concern or interest.
 - Northgate Phase 1
 - Winsford Town Centre acquired
 - Weaver Square acquired
 - Ellesmere Port Public Sector Hub
 - Ellesmere Port Whitby Road Shop Scheme
 - Rows Conservation Management Plan

9. Car-parking – Car Parking Policy needs to be guided by local circumstances to complement and enhance the attractiveness of our high streets and town centres. This might cover issue like charging, provision of long and short stay parking and signage.
 - Cheshire West and Chester Parking Review Consultations 2016-17
 - Northwich Parking Strategy and Action Plan 2018
 - Chester Parking Strategy and Action Plan 2017
 - Ellesmere Port Parking Strategy and Action Plan 2017
 - Helsby and Frodsham Parking Strategy 2018
 - Tarporley Parking Strategy 2019

10. Business rates – Business rates should be administered to offer the maximum level of flexibility to help support small businesses and independent retailers.
 - Business Rates Relief Scheme established for small businesses and retailers who occupy business premises with a rateable value up to £12,000.
 - Chester Heritage Action Zone projects coming forward include rate relief for vacant units in partnership with Place for Arts and University of Chester. Potential role out of approach to other areas across the Borough

11. Markets – Markets are a complicated issues and can greatly differ in terms of their size, quality and offer; in recognising the needs of local residents and visitors our role as the Local Authority is to provide assistance the first step is to undertake a detailed analysis of demand to obtain a better understanding of customer's needs, this is being addressed through a specific report on our market Towns is now being undertaken by Cheshire West and Chester.

- Chester Market has been reconfigured and repurposed with a variety of food and drink and longer hours to boost the evening economy – nominated for Britain's Favourite Market
- New market is being built in Chester Northgate Phase 1.
- Revised market offer being developed in Northwich as part of Weaver Square masterplan.
- Relocation of Winsford market has been proposed as part of the FHSF bid. If the bid is successful the market would be co located with a range of other uses to create a more vibrant social venue.
- Ellesmere Port Market highlighted in Framework document as a main project, also part of Future High Street Fund Bid and an action from High Street Task Force. Also recently highlighted for potential living wall as part of Total Environment Team joint working with Regen Team.

Recommendations

1. Recommend that each Town and City Centre in the Borough has in place a plan that sets out a vision for its future. Our role as a Council is to offer help and assistance to ensure this happens.

- Each of the regeneration areas in the borough now have a strategic plan that sets out a vision for its future:
 - Chester One City Plan 2012 – Undergoing mid-term review
 - Chester Dashboard 2019
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2. Recommend that we encourage and provide support to businesses and local communities that wish to establish a Business Improvement District (BID) or are willing to take on the management of local assets on the high street to help meet local needs.

- Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) have been established in the borough to provide support to businesses and local communities:
 - CH1 Chester BID – established in 2014 and re-balloted in 2019 (84% yes)
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- Other areas have been reviewed for BID potential

3. As a Council and in context of the challenges facing our high streets, we must ensure our town and city centres are not recognised only as places where we shop. We recommend that this broader view of our town and city centres and the need for greater flexibility is reflected in the detail of our Local Plan and other policy areas we have responsibility for across a range of services, including policy on car parking, markets, licencing and council owned assets.

- The Local Plan (Part Two) adopts a more flexible approach than previous Plans in relation to changes of use within town centres. This will be kept under review as part of the Local Plan review process and there may be further changes at a national level in terms of allowing temporary and / or permanent changes of use without requiring planning permission.
- The Annual Monitoring Report 2019 shows that most centres have experienced an increase in vacancy rates since 2014.
- During the Highstreet Recovery phase for Covid 19 the Alfresco policy has been reviewed and relaxed to encourage business survival. Further review will take place in the autumn to recognise the ongoing challenge to the high street.

4. The recent restructuring of Council Services that has established a Places Strategy Service together with a Localities Service, provides an opportunity to strengthen a place-based approach to how the Council serves local areas across the Borough. We recommend both Services take up the findings and conclusions of this working group to ensure an integrated service and multi-agency approach is put in place to support town and city centres.

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5. The Council's Cumulative Impact Policy for Chester is helping to prevent a proliferation of fast-food takeaways, bars and clubs. Other Towns Centres should also be able to benefit from such a policy we therefore recommend this approach be rolled out across the Borough where appropriate.

- The Cumulative Impact Policy for Chester was reviewed in accordance with guidance and the Council decided to maintain the Special Policy in December 2018, where it was agreed to review on a regular basis to assess whether it is needed any longer or should be amended.

6. Recommend that where Business Improvement Districts or similar business and community-based groups are in place their views will be given weight and taken into account in the formation of Council policy that impacts of the Town and City centres, such as local car parking policies.

- Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) work closely with Cheshire West and Chester and are a key player in policy decision making. BID representatives sit on each of the regeneration boards and an integrated approach has been taken with the joined-up response to COVID-19 in the high street.
- There is council representation on all BID boards.

7. Recommend the four Regeneration Boards consider the findings, conclusions and recommendations of this report in shaping future proposals for their Town and City Centres.

- The findings and recommendations from this report were taken into consideration by the regeneration boards.
- The Regeneration Boards have been engaged in each area's town centre master planning process and funding bids.