

HAMBLETON DISTRICT COUNCIL

Report To: Cabinet
12 March 2019

From: Scrutiny Committee

**Subject: POLICY REVIEW – PROMOTING ECONOMIC VITALITY, INCLUDING MARKETS
– FINAL REPORT**

All Wards

1.0 SUMMARY:

1.1 Between September 2018 and January 2019 the Committee undertook a review of the Council's key priority within the Council Plan, namely 'Driving Economic Vitality'. A particular focus of the review was to consider the vitality and viability of the district's market town, including its markets. This report sets out the Committee's findings, conclusions and recommendations.

2.0 INTRODUCTION:

2.1 Driving Economic Vitality was considered an appropriate topic for review as this is a key priority within the Council Plan. The purpose of this priority is to promote growth of the local economy; to support economic growth through planning; to enable businesses to set up and grow; to provide business friendly services; to establish links with education; to maximise private sector investment in the district and to improve market town vitality and viability.

2.2 The Committee as a whole undertook the review pursuant to the following terms of reference in order to determine whether the District Council's plans, policies and practices were effective:

- to examine whether the measures of success identified within the Council Plan under this key priority are being achieved; and
- to examine how the Council's Vibrant Market Towns project is contributing to the work to promote the growth of the economy, specifically in relation to the markets.

3.0 EVIDENCE

3.1 The following witnesses attended meetings of the Committee to give evidence, namely:

- Helen Kemp, Director of Economy and Planning, Hambleton District Council (HDC);
- Nicole Patterson, Business and Economy Manager (HDC);
- Peter Cole, Vibrant Market Towns Project Officer (HDC);
- Julia Robinson, Northallerton Bid; and
- David Shields, Welcome 2 Yorkshire

3.2 The Committee also reviewed the following documents in detail:

- Council Plan;
- Vibrant Market Towns Investment Plan 2017-2022;
- responses from a survey undertaken with businesses, stakeholders, Town/Parish Councils.

4.0 FINDINGS

- 4.1 Based on the written and oral evidence presented, the Committee made the following observations:

Vibrant Market Towns Investment Plan

- 4.1.1 The Vibrant Market Towns Investment Plan was seen as a key document to support Hambleton's market towns and their hinterlands. It was designed to contribute to work to promote the growth of the economy, one of the key themes of the authority's economic strategy. A full investment plan had been developed for each market town, which included common and individual opportunities. It was also recognised that the Vibrant Market Towns project had links with other Council strategies including the Local Plan; Car Parking Strategy and the Commercial Strategy. Measures were proving successful and the investment plans had been subject to review. It was noted that a detailed work programme had been agreed working within existing resources and timescales.
- 4.1.2 The Committee recognised that the Vibrant Market Towns project was aimed at improving and enhancing the economy and that each project plan for each market town had output and outcome measures to enable the project plans to be assessed. Some of the measures included monitoring the footfall within each town and assessing WiFi usage data. It was recognised that there would be seasonal variations with regard to the footfall data and that specific events and markets, such as farmers' markets and Christmas markets, would also affect this data. The Committee noted that footfall indicators could assist in identifying how many people were visiting the market towns, but did not necessarily translate into how much money was being spent. Information was also provided by traders which assisted with measuring this indicator.
- 4.1.3 Officers advised the Committee that, as the scope of the review identified, this was a key priority within the Council Plan and it included several key projects which would help to deliver the priority. For example, the Treadmills project was a major development. The funding agreement for connections on Zetland Street had been agreed and would improve the road layout, pedestrian access and signage, which in turn would make Northallerton the town more vibrant, with benefits for the night-time economy. This was a big investment and Lidl and Everyman Cinema had been announced as part of the development.
- 4.1.4 With regard to improving market town vitality and viability, the Committee was advised that there were lots of small projects being undertaken. Statistics on the number of visitors was being collected. It was noted that it would be a further 6 months or so before sufficient data was collected to provide any meaningful analysis.
- 4.1.5 Improving signage within and around the market towns, e.g. at Easingwold, would hopefully encourage people to stop and visit the market towns, and also encourage visitors to contribute to the local economy, e.g. by visiting the variety of shops and cafes available within the towns. Progress on this initiative was currently being monitored and, as with the collection of other data, at least 6 months data would be needed before meaningful analysis could be undertaken to assess what benefits these initiatives were having in the towns.
- 4.1.6 The Committee was advised that the Vibrant Market Towns project was a collaborative project. The District Council worked with local businesses and other stakeholders (e.g. Northallerton BID and other business networks) to improve the market towns' vitality and vibrancy. Business engagement was vital. The District Council had various initiatives in which businesses were invited to participate. These included lunch and learn initiatives; breakfast briefings; training sessions (e.g. digital training and effective window dressing), as well as window display competitions.

- 4.1.7 The Committee was informed that there is a Government Future High Streets Fund which is available to improve the high street offer. The District Council intended applying to the Fund for financial assistance to improve the high street offer in its market towns. Expressions of interest were to be submitted by March 2019. The funding application would set out the District Council's vision for its high streets and town centres and suggest specific improvements that would contribute to that overall vision.
- 4.1.8 The Committee was also informed there had been a number of community led projects, such as the spring clean in Bedale, which helped with the vibrancy of the market towns. This was an initiative that could be encouraged across all the market towns.
- 4.1.9 It was noted that 'Google Digital Garage' training was a new initiative which provided online training for new and existing business, and was intended to help businesses with their online marketing. The District Council had successfully obtained external funding for this project. The launch takes place in April 2019 and will use 'digital champions' to help improve the use of technology.

Empty Shops

- 4.1.10 The Committee expressed its concern about empty shops within the market towns. It noted it was sometimes a challenge to attract new businesses into these empty properties, and often the factors were outside the control of the Council. Clearly, however, successful businesses contributed to the success of the high street and the market towns. The Committee commented that empty properties were not aesthetically pleasing to visitors. Window wrapping is an initiative which had been introduced to help with the visual aspect of the high street. However, it was noted that properties that had prospective tenants could not be wrapped.
- 4.1.11 With regard to empty retail premises, the Committee asked what action could be taken, as part of the Vibrant Market Towns initiative, to encourage the use of empty premises. Officers informed the Committee that empty properties on the high street were a key concern. This issue was being examined to see how it could be improved. Officers informed the Committee that Hambleton District Council was performing well compared to the national average for empty retail properties. The national average was 12.7%. Although Hambleton had fewer empty properties than the national average (evidence was presented in the table below) it was something the Council was looking to improve further.

Retail Vacancy Rates

National	12.7%
Northallerton	6.9%
Stokesley	9.6%
Thirsk	10%
Easingwold	10.8%
Bedale	11.6%

- 4.1.12 The Committee enquired whether the modest size of some of the empty units might discourage businesses from taking up possession. The Committee wondered how this could be addressed. The Committee was informed that pop-up shops were encouraged for these types of units. Pop-up shops test the market and if traders are successful then they will consider staying longer and renting the property for the longer term.

4.1.13 The Committee expressed concern about the impact on the high street of internet and on-line shopping. It was noted this was a problem facing businesses and town across the country. It was noted that the District Council was looking at ways of engaging with businesses to give them a greater on-line presence (e.g. digital training). There had also been radio campaigns with TFM to address this issue. These new initiatives were being monitored to test their effectiveness.

Markets

4.1.14 The operation and success of the markets within each market town was of particular interest to the Committee. It was noted that the District Council was responsible for operating the markets in Northallerton and Thirsk, and that the Town Councils in Bedale, Easingwold and Stokesley were responsible for operating the markets within those market towns.

4.1.15 The Committee acknowledged that some markets were more successful than others. Farmers' markets were seen as a particular draw and it was noted that farmers' markets were a regular feature in Stokesley and Easingwold only. It was also suggested that the type of produce and goods available on the markets could affect their success or otherwise. It was also suggested by the Committee that the variety of retail outlets within each market town may affect the success of the market. For example, a good variety of retail outlets, cafes and restaurants encouraged visitors to visit a market town, and a strong and complimentary market was part of that offer.

4.1.16 The Committee asked whether the expansion of Northallerton Market, which had traditionally been sited between Zetland Street and the Town Hall, but in recent years had expanded to the south, had had a positive effect. Officers informed the Committee that the market had expanded due to trader availability and currently there were over 40 regular traders. The market was moved with the agreement of North Yorkshire County Council. The Market was primarily moved because Traders had suggested the new area would provide a better trading proposition. This was found to be the case and the general view was that moving the market had been a positive step, although it was recognised that new and more varied traders needed to be encouraged to take up possession (across all the markets) to ensure their continued vibrancy.

4.1.17 In respect of farmers' markets the Committee asked if there was any possibility that the Market in Northallerton could be re-established. The Committee felt this would improve the offer in the town. The Committee was advised that the farmers' market had previously tried to operate alongside the regular Northallerton market. However the organisation responsible for farmers' markets felt this detracted from its offer and that it needed to be a stand-alone market, it is about finding the right location and time for a separate stand-alone market. It was noted that the District Council remains in contact with the farmers' market organisers to try to explore opportunities to re-introduce farmers' markets. The Committee suggested this might be of particular benefit in Northallerton and Thirsk. The Committee suggested that officers continue to engage with the organisers to try to reinstate farmers' markets.

Other Issues

4.1.18 The Committee was presented with an analysis of responses received from a survey undertaken with stakeholders, Town Councils, etc. Over 60 emails had been distributed but only 15 responses had been received. Common issues were highlighted in the responses, namely business rates and car parking.

- 4.1.19 It was acknowledged that the District Council operated a Business Rates Relief scheme and that it was up to the businesses themselves to apply for relief. It was recognised that the District Council informs businesses of the support available through its e-bulletins. However, it was suggested that communication regarding the scheme could be improved and that small businesses needed to be made aware of the support available to them.
- 4.1.20 Various issues regarding car parking had been raised. It was acknowledged that the issue of car parking was the subject of a separate Car Parking review by the District Council.
- 4.1.21 It had also been suggested that dedicated coach parking in Northallerton would be of benefit. However, it was recognised that the lack of coach parking was not necessarily a barrier to visitors. There was no evidence that coach parties increased actual revenue. Coach parties contributed to the footfall but this did not necessarily equate to more spending. The Committee heard evidence from 'Welcome to Yorkshire' to support that view.
- 4.1.22 The Committee asked whether Planning Policies provided sufficient flexibility for change of use of commercial premises. The Committee was advised that this was a planning matter and that all applications were considered on their own merits. However, planning policies did allow for changes in use in appropriate circumstances.

Tourism

- 4.1.23 David Shields, of 'Welcome to Yorkshire', informed the Committee that tourism was an important part of the economy and that Yorkshire was a major attraction. Hambleton market towns offered good food and drink establishments and good independent food retailers. It was suggested that day visitors needed to be converted into staying visitors and this would entail identifying what attracted visitors to the area, such as events and festivals. In order to increase footfall visitors needed a reason to visit. If there is a buoyant visitor element this would help the market towns and their businesses. It was acknowledged that there were various marketing campaigns already established but they perhaps would benefit from being refreshed. There were knock-on opportunities flowing from major events taking place within the District. This was not just about the events but about the legacies they bring. David Shields' suggested that tourism should be seen as an economy driver within the district. Good working relationships existed with the Northallerton BID and the Business and Economy Team at the District Council. Further opportunities for working together could be explored.

Northallerton Bid

- 4.1.24 Julia Robinson, Northallerton BID Manager, outlined the role and remit of the Northallerton BID. The BID aims to work with partners to promote Northallerton's high street offer. Businesses within Northallerton subscribe to the BID to access their services. The BID works closely with the Business and Economy team at the District Council. Julia Robinson suggested that communications between the BID and the District Council could be improved to avoid any confusion by local businesses.
- 4.1.25 The Committee recognised that the District Council works closely with 'Welcome to Yorkshire' and the 'Northallerton BID'. The Committee suggested there were potential areas where more collaborative working could be advantageous, e.g. in the promotion of local events. The Committee noted the District Council continues to explore areas for collaborative working within existing resources.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS:

- 5.1 The Committee acknowledged that the key corporate projects under this Council priority were being delivered. It also acknowledged that smaller projects and initiatives were being implemented and delivered to support the vibrancy and vitality of the market towns, and the wider objectives and performance indicators set out in the Council Plan. It was accepted that in order to assess the success or otherwise of some of the smaller initiatives, such as counting footfall and window wrapping, a further period of time would be needed in order to collect and analyse the data.
- 5.2 The Committee accepted that the District Council, working alongside stakeholders, businesses and traders, was working towards building more vibrant towns, and that it would take the commitment and willingness of everybody involved to make this a success.
- 5.4 The Committee acknowledged that there was an issue regarding empty shops and noted there were initiatives underway to encourage new traders into the market towns, and also to improve the visual aspect of the town centres and high streets, this making them more attractive to both businesses and visitors. Figures showed that the number of empty shops was below the national average of 12.7%.
- 5.5 The Committee recognised that the success of markets within each market town varied, as they were individual markets in different towns with a variety of stalls in operation. Farmers' markets do not operate in each of the market towns and it was suggested that officers continue to engage with the organisers to reinstate the farmers' markets in Northallerton and other market towns.
- 5.6 The Committee identified tourism as an important part of the economy and noted that 'Welcome to Yorkshire' worked closely with the District Council to enhance the district's offer to visitors. It was recognised that it would be beneficial to encourage day visitors to stay for longer periods and in the first instance this might involve ascertaining what attracted visitors to the area, such e.g. sporting and other events, festivals, bespoke markets, good food and drink establishments and a good retail offer. This information could then be used to consider hosting further events and marketing them accordingly. It was suggested that the District Council may wish to consider refreshing their marketing campaigns.
- 5.7 The Committee noted that the 'Northallerton Bid' aimed to work with partners to promote Northallerton's high street offer and that the businesses within Northallerton worked closely with them to achieve this. It was suggested that closer collaborative working with the District Council could be explored to maximise any potential areas of joint working.
- 5.8 The Committee highlighted the importance of communication with existing and potential new businesses. It was suggested that communication regarding the Business Rates Relief scheme could be improved to increase awareness of the support that is available through the District Council.

6.0 RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 6.1 To recommend to Cabinet that:-
- (1) the Committee endorses the initiatives in delivering the Council's key priority 'Driving Economic Vitality' as detailed within the Council Plan;
 - (2) the Committee supports the continued collaborative working with stakeholders, businesses and traders working towards building more vibrant towns;

- (3) the success of projects identified within the individual Vibrant Market Towns Investment Plans be assessed after six months of their implementation or such other period as appropriate;
- (4) the issues regarding empty shops be monitored and an assessment of the new initiatives to encourage occupation by new traders be provided after six months of their implementation or such other period as appropriate;
- (5) continued communication with market traders and the organisers of farmers markets be undertaken in order to encourage new traders and the reinstatement of the farmers markets within the market towns;
- (6) the opportunities presented by hosting major sporting events and other bespoke events such as festivals and seasonal markets continue to be explored and implemented; and
- (7) continued improvements to communications on the support offered to businesses be explored.

COUNCILLOR MRS C S COOKMAN
CHAIRMAN

Background Papers: None
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