

Medway Town Centres Strategy

Summary Paper for Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Introduction

SQW has been commissioned by Medway Council to refresh the Town Centre Strategy alongside a suite of other strategies (including the Medway 2037, Skills and Employability Strategy, Innovation Strategy and the River Strategy).

SQW presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in January 2022 to present the approach being taken to developing this strategy suite and to seek feedback from Members to inform the drafting process.

Since this time significant progress has been made regarding consultations and in preparing a first working draft of the strategy suite, with a first working draft issued for Medway Council officer review on 11 February 2022.

The Town Centres Strategy was in draft form and authored by Medway Council pre-pandemic. This strategy was intended to secure a new future for Medway's five High Streets and their environs, focusing on placemaking and business support. SQW's role has been to update this Strategy, and develop a detailed Action Plan to guide the implementation of agreed objectives. The Action Plan will focus in particular on the revitalisation and appropriate re-use of empty / derelict properties and the cross-over with Local Plan objectives (e.g. change of use, and town centre master plans).

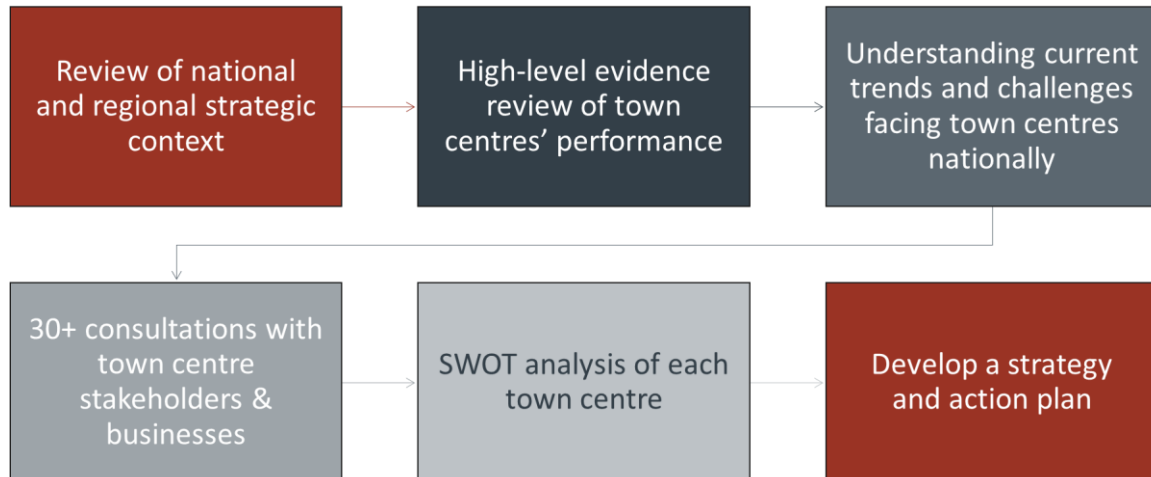
The purpose of this paper is to provide a detailed overview of the draft Town Centres Strategy.

The full detail is contained in the working draft of the Town Centres Strategy which is subject to ongoing consultation with key stakeholders within Medway Council and will be concluded by 31st March.

Feedback from members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee is welcomed to inform the final draft of the strategy.

Our Approach to the Town Centres Strategy

Having analysed each town centre, reviewed the evidence and undertaken engagement with a range of stakeholders within and external to Medway Council, a strategy has been developed comprising of an organising vision, key priorities and a delivery plan. The approach we have undertaken is shown in the diagram below.



Key Messages from Stakeholders

In developing this Town Centre Strategy, a range of engagement has been undertaken with stakeholders actively involved in Medway's town centres. Although there was a wide range of perspectives on the town centres, there were a number of overarching themes:

- Medway's town centres need to think and provide uses and services beyond retail – community, cultural, pop-up/creative, food and drink, leisure and entertainment, workspaces. The old shopping-centric model isn't working any more.
- Community-led initiatives are critical to the success of our town centres – we need to empower and resource these so they are able to help support the vibrancy and vitality of our town centres
- Each of Medway's town centres has a unique heritage and identity that needs to be reflected through the Town Centre Strategy – beyond just focusing on the well-known heritage assets, projects like Chatham Intra are doing a great job of revealing and celebrating Medway's lesser-known heritage
- But, they also need to come together to 'help each other' and promote Medway as a place to live, work, do business and enjoy
- There are important agendas which must be reflected in a new Town Centre Strategy, including net-zero, child-friendly and innovation
- We should celebrate and promote what we are doing well, and reverse the negative reputation some of our town centres have

- Gillingham town centre has experienced a prolonged decline, and immediate action/investment is needed to reverse its fortunes
- Creative industries, arts and culture play an important role already across Medway but there is a real opportunity for these uses to play a more visible role across Medway's town centres, particularly in looking to build upon the legacy of the City of Culture bid
- Business rates are a real challenge for town centre uses, particularly cultural / creative type uses in a high-street setting
- The evening and night-time economy of Medway's town centres needs significant improvement – there is little reason to visit once the shops close and, for example, there aren't many places for university students to go in the evenings in Gillingham and Chatham. There are lots of new homes being planned and built in and near Medway's town centres so it will be important to also deliver the leisure and F&B spaces and places for new and existing residents.
- Medway's town centres feel relatively disconnected from the River – it would be great to see improved links.
- There are a number of organisations already delivering projects, programmes, operating spaces and engaging with communities – they would love to work more closely with the Council to increase their reach and deliver even more

All of this consultation evidence, alongside the evidence collation exercise demonstrated above, has fed into the development of the strategy, and the development of an overarching vision for all of Medway's town centres, and each town centre individually.

Our vision for Medway's town centres

To create a prosperous, attractive, vibrant and sustainable waterfront city centre for Chatham and the town centres of Rochester, Strood, Gillingham and Rainham in a way which embraces their distinctiveness; enables growth for all with no one left behind; provides diverse and high-quality shopping, leisure, living and working environments and experiences for residents and visitors; enables businesses to flourish, create and innovate; Medway's economy to grow and the quality of life to improve.

A role for each of our town centres

Table 1: Our Town Centres' Roles

Town	Identity & Role
Chatham	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be a place and platform for Medway, where Medway's communities, heritage and culture are celebrated. The town should be become an advertisement for Medway, showcasing creative and cultural activities and the strength of our communities. • Connected to the River • Be a fun, child-friendly and safe place, attracting people into the town centre with a series of events and festivals alongside stronger connections to the Waterfront and the Great Lines Heritage Park.

Town	Identity & Role
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be a place where all of Medway's communities can come together, including our students, businesses and residents.
Rochester	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build on it's role as the lead town for the tourism in Medway, becoming a beacon nationally for creative events and promoting the diversity of activity taking place across the area Continue and build on its current events programme, attracting more people into the town in the future and supporting the wider economy across Medway
Strood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build and develop Strood's role, and ensure that future development helps build the town centre Strood should look to embrace its rich heritage, reconnect itself with the riverfront, take advantage of its strong connectivity to London and the competitive advantage this brings to the town, and make the town a more attractive place to live, work and shop
Gillingham	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gillingham is currently in need of the most substantial investment of Medway's town centres to support the vitality and sustainability of the high street. There is a real opportunity within Gillingham to provide for the local community. Community needs and aspirations will be front and centre of identifying creative and innovative uses to re-activate the high street. There are opportunities to diversify and enhance the offer, improve the public realm and fabric of the high street, improve accessibility, make the town centre a safer and more child-friendly place and look to celebrate its military heritage.
Rainham	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rainham currently provides for the local community, and it should continue to do this into the future. However, the precinct currently does not provide for the community and there is a real opportunity to turn this into an exciting space for the community.

How do we get there? Our overarching priorities

To deliver on these visions, we have identified several key priorities have been identified which provide the basis for the delivery plan which follows.

- Support the delivery of improved outcomes for *all* of Medway's town centres
- Take a place-based approach to delivery - revisiting how the Council works internally and with external partners
- Develop a strong vision and narrative that celebrates the individuality of each town centre, but that unites them under a common goal, which directly informs what is delivered
- Balance pragmatism with aspiration
- Support the growth and diversification of businesses in our town centres
- Develop the supporting partnership structures needed to let our town centres flourish
- Make town centres places that everyone can access and benefit from
- Ensure our town centres respond to the net zero agenda and benefit from innovation

Delivery Plan

To deliver on the vision and priorities for our town centres, a delivery plan has been developed. This should be considered as a 'live' document, to be adapted and updated as new projects as developed in partnership with town centre stakeholders and to respond to emerging funding opportunities.

This Delivery Plan includes a combination of nascent, aspirational project ideas along with shorter-term, smaller-scale interventions. This mix of scale and ambition is deliberate: fundamentally resourcing, capacity and funding of delivery partners will be variable and need to be flexible and responsive to challenges and opportunities.

There is a particular focus on interventions focused on land use, activation, partnership working and capacity building with less focus on identifying new major, physical regeneration projects which would require significant capital funding and are almost always longer-term, higher-risk projects. This Strategy deliberately concentrates on activating town centres in the shorter-medium term to initiate, and continue, positive change. This approach is not just about pragmatism: it is also about working to sustainably reuse and re-imagine existing assets, with the embodied carbon savings this approach can bring.

This Delivery Plan also focuses mostly on 'new' projects and interventions. There are many projects and interventions underway which are captured more fully in *Medway 2037* (including projects already funded through the Future High Streets Fund, Levelling Up Fund and other sources). The projects set out in this report focuses on identifying complementary projects to build upon these existing successes.

Further detail on each of the projects, including the rationale, alignment with *Medway 2037*, key partners, timescales, expected outcomes, case studies of best practice and an initial action plan is provided in the fuller Town Centre Strategy document.

Headline Projects & Initiatives

- Fund **two new town centre managers** to actively support the capacity and development of the Town Centre Forums and build relationships with businesses and communities.
- Fund / resource a **dedicated town centre officer** within Medway Council to focus on delivery of overarching projects (bid development, strategy preparation, implementation and monitoring)
- **Build the capacity of the Town Centre Forums** – support with governance, terms of reference and defining responsibilities including their role in relation to supporting the delivery of the Town Centres Strategy and formalising involvement with budgetary decisions (i.e., S.106 spend) and scope for project/initiative instigation with commitments for Town Centre Manager resource

- **Establish a ‘Town Centres Innovation Fund’**, a competitive pot of funding (c.£100-200k) that community groups / entrepreneurs / Town Centre Forums can bid into to either as seed funding for concept and feasibility work, or to support the delivery of small-scale projects
- Support the Town Centre Forums to enter development stage of becoming a **Business Improvement District**, or Districts, (most likely for Chatham and Gillingham)
- Develop a **Meanwhile Use Strategy** for Town Centres with the Council as facilitator – identifying units/spaces and developing a ‘toolkit’ for potential meanwhile use operators
- Develop a **targeted, discretionary business rates relief policy** for meanwhile uses to complement the draft Local Plan’s proposed introduction of a planning policy supportive of meanwhile uses in town centres.
- Concept development work with key stakeholders (Creative Medway, Mid-Kent College, local arts organisations, the Universities at Medway, Local Skills Partnership, Arts Council) regarding the future of arts education in Medway (post-UCA withdrawal) – explore the potential for a distributed, town centres-based model of delivery under a single umbrella spanning multiple awarding institutions working in partnership

Overarching Projects & Initiatives

- Identify **long-term resource for town centre cleaning**, to enable improved cleaning and maintenance routines.
- Liaise with front-line services and new ASB team and work with Kent Police to **tackle ASB and crime** in Town Centres
- Develop an **events and cultural programme** for each town centre, reflecting the heritage and local community – ensure this is fully aligned and coordinated with the work being undertaken with the Culture team at Medway Council (ensuring non-arts events complement more arts/cultural offer).
- Develop a **Town Centres Street Furniture Policy** and increasing cost effectiveness
- Exploring our Town Centres through **QR Codes**, including heritage, events and local information– initial concept development has already taken place; proof of concept seed funding is needed (link to TCs Innovation Fund)
- Work to enhance roll-out of **EV charging points** in strategic locations, including a review of council-owned locations.
- Look for opportunities to **promote sustainable transport use and local transport solutions**.
- Identify opportunities for **retrofitting** existing town centre buildings to enhance their environmental performance – consider developing guidance/toolkit to support existing landowners retrofit and upgrade their properties (including funding signposting), particularly for historic buildings; Council to take the lead in retrofitting its own properties as ‘exemplar’.

- Grow and continue the **promotion of zero carbon business support schemes** that are already available to businesses.
- Undertake a **programme of place promotion** for each of the town centres, advertising their offering and character – consider the role of We Are Medway in supporting TCFs to develop and deliver this

Town Centre-Specific Projects & Initiatives

Town Centre-Specific Projects & Initiatives

Town	Identity & Role
Chatham	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Develop waterfront events programme (community, culture, music etc) to raise profile, encourage increased use of waterfront & build interest. ➤ Research idea and feasibility of establishing a pilot pop-ups/business start-up programme for students and individuals in empty units – link to development of overarching meanwhile use strategy. ➤ Identify spaces with vacant shopfronts / premises to display and/or sell locally produced art – link to meanwhile use strategy ➤ Identify permanent spaces for supporting charity and cultural organisations ➤ Promotion of the night-time economy – review of existing provision, demand analysis, facilitating growth in specific locations
Rochester	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Look to incorporate and build relationships between new communities in Rochester Riverside and the existing town centre. ➤ Focus on connections between Rochester Town Centre and surrounding places – including Chatham Intra & Strood
Strood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Reinstate and develop Strood Town Centre Forum ➤ Identify opportunities for further improving public realm in line with the recommendations of the Strood TC Masterplan. ➤ Ensure the proposed strategic redevelopment site plans complement the existing town centre and do not seek to compete commercially
Gillingham	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Look at extending the current role of the market including attracting bolt-ons (e.g. speciality / themed events) alongside more and new professional traders. ➤ Create a creative arts industries workspace using vacant/underused high street asset(s) – link to business rate relief policy and TC innovation fund ➤ Better enforce and improve signage for vehicular access alongside High Street ➤ Identify a strategy for enhancing Gillingham’s public realm. Opportunities include improvements to Sappers Walk (and referencing the role of the Royal Engineers) and ‘Smiths Square’.
Rainham	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Re-invigorate and develop Rainham Town Centre Forum ➤ Feasibility study to develop precinct into market square to enable events and encourage development of civic meeting space/café culture ➤ Develop a one-stop shop for community services including the library.

Implementation – Suggested Medway Council commitments

- **Strong local leadership and advocacy** – the Council has identified its town centres as one of its central six priorities in its core economic development and regeneration strategy Medway 2037 and it will play a leading role in advocating for and delivering change.
- **Accountability** – Medway Council has established a Town Centres Cabinet Advisory Board bringing together Members and officers to work together in delivering, and monitoring the progress of, this Town Centres Strategy.
- **Medway Council resourcing** – In order to deliver on its aspirations Medway Council will seek to increase its dedicated town centres officer resourcing both to deliver on its own initiatives and support external stakeholders in building capacity to deliver in partnership.
- **Cross-silo working** – Medway Council will instigate cross-silo working with a town centres focused officer working group bringing together multiple services to take a place-based approach to coordination of delivery, ideally linked to the Town Centres Board
- **Effective partnership working** – successful town centres do not rely on top- down delivery by the public sector, but instead are the product of effective partnerships at all stages (design, planning, funding, delivery, operation). Partnership working is embedded in this Town Centres Strategy, including a focus on creating meaningful forums for the exchange of ideas, co-design, development, implementation and monitoring of projects.
- **Capacity building** – the Council recognises that there are a wealth of individuals and organisations which could deliver transformational change in its town centres. However, it recognises that some of these are under-funded and lacking resource. The Council will work to support the enhanced capacity of some of these key stakeholders.
- **Creativity** – Medway is fortunate to be home to so many creative residents, businesses, entrepreneurs and community groups. We want to celebrate and empower these people and help them design and deliver creative, exciting, ‘uniquely Medway’ initiatives to transform their town centres

The successful delivery of these commitments will require Medway Council to secure and allocate sufficient funding and resources within what is a challenging public funding context for all local authorities. This highlights the importance of partnership working, including identifying opportunities for leveraging in private sector funding and support. However, as a minimum these commitments define how the Council will strive to implement its agenda for transformational change in its town centres, recognising that the implementation of this Strategy and its Delivery Plan will need to flexibly respond to changing circumstances in the future.

Key questions

There are a number of key questions that will determine the strategic direction and narrative taken as the town centre strategy is refined and finalised. These questions include:

- What are your views on the overarching vision and ambitions of the Strategy?
- What are your thoughts on the emerging projects & initiatives proposed?
- Have we missed anything?