

## **TOWN CENTRE STRATEGY – NEXT STEPS**

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### **1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update Members on the progress made in taking forward the recommendations agreed by Cabinet on the 14<sup>th</sup> January 2010 in respect of the Strategy for Town Centres, Retail and Commercial Leisure.
- 1.2 In addition the report sets out proposals and options for future actions. These actions include:
- Appraising the vitality of each of the town, district and local centres identified in the Strategy to provide a clear evidence base for progressing any potential actions and investment;
  - Proposals for putting in place a phased programme of centre-specific Action Plans that would be developed in partnership with local traders, residents and shoppers.

### **2.0 BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 Wirral's Investment Strategy aims to deliver a Borough founded on a strong, vibrant economy with high levels of employment. Sustainable town centres, together with a buoyant retail sector, are important elements in delivering the Strategy – for instance, employment in retail across the borough currently totals 12,000 full time equivalents which accounts for 10.8% of all employment.
- 2.2 It is recognised, however, that there are a number of external constraints that need to be considered in respect of supporting the development of sustainable local town centres. Clearly the difficult trading conditions faced by retailers within Wirral are prevalent across the country - The British Retail Consortium Retail Sales Monitor continues to report sluggish growth in retail sales trading and low levels of consumer confidence. National research (LDC, 2010) has shown that empty stores in shopping areas have reached an average of 13%. The report concludes that what is happening is not simply the result of the economic recession but the emergence of significant overcapacity on the market, resulting from factors such as the growth in the use of the internet for shopping, banking, travel and betting. This means that when trading conditions return to 'normal', there will still be too many shops. The report concludes that by 2013 there will be a potential over supply of retail stores of 5%-10%. This sets a very real and changing approach to shopping across the UK and must be considered in strategy development for Wirral.
- 2.3 Taking forward actions to improve the vitality and viability of our town and local shopping centres should be governed by clear policy direction in the form of a vision and strategy and, in line with Planning Policy Statement 4, it is the role of the Council's emerging Local Development Framework (LDF) Core Strategy to set out this vision and town centre strategy.
- 2.4 As a result, as part of the Local Development Framework Evidence Base, a Strategy for Retail, Town Centres and Commercial Leisure was produced by Roger Tym & Partners

(RTP). The RTP study updated a previous 2004 report and assessed the scope for additional retailing in the Borough (drawing on the findings of two household surveys carried out before and after the opening of Liverpool One). One of the main elements of the report – an assessment of the performance of the Boroughs town and local centres revealed that many are showing some signs of weakness with the poorest performing located in the older urban areas of the Borough. Typical problems identified included a high level of shop vacancies, pressure on parking and poor public realm. The recession has had a visible impact on some of Wirral's town centres, resulting in the increased closure of shops, many of which remain vacant and a number of responses to the 'Wirral's Future' consultation raised concern about the decline of local retail centres. The RTP report emphasised that more detailed work would be needed to develop centre-specific strategies, and it concluded that it would be necessary to cost individual interventions and identify potential funding sources, timescales for implementation and lead delivery agencies/partner organisations.

- 2.5 The RTP study was considered by Cabinet on the 14<sup>th</sup> January 2010 and Members agreed an amended recommendation (Minute 261 refers) which agreed that the findings of the Strategy should be used as a material planning consideration and inform the emerging Core Strategy and Investment Strategy Priorities. In addition there were a number of specific recommendations relating to centres in the Borough and the remainder of this report sets out a proposed response to these recommendations. The full text of the Cabinet Minute is reproduced as Appendix A and the following sections refer to the paragraph numbers in the Cabinet resolution as appropriate.

### **3. INFORMING THE CORE STRATEGY**

- 3.1 Several of the actions arising from the elements of the Cabinet resolution on January 14<sup>th</sup> relate to ongoing work in relation to the Core Strategy Development Plan Document. Officers have aligned these actions with the development of progressing the Core Strategy through its various stages.
- 3.2 Point 6 of the 14<sup>th</sup> January Cabinet resolution recommended that the public consultation on the Core Strategy Spatial Options report, (undertaken between January and March 2010), should invite comments on proposed amendments to the hierarchy of shopping centres in the Borough. As noted in point 1 of the 14<sup>th</sup> January Cabinet resolution, the hierarchy put forward for consultation in the Core Strategy Spatial Options Report differed slightly from that proposed by RTP in their report, in that Grange Road West/Oxton Road is proposed for inclusion as part of the wider Birkenhead Town Centre sub-regional centre, rather than as a separate local Centre.
- 3.3 The other element of the 2009 Spatial Options consultation focused on two options recommended by RTP for accommodating future retail growth in the Borough – Policy Option CR1 (Birkenhead Town Centre and Wirral Waters) and Policy Option CR2 Wirral Waters).
- 3.4 In excess of 1000 separate comments were received during the consultation process on the whole document, with 33 separate comments on the proposed changes to the retail hierarchy and a further 45 comments on the options for accommodating future retail growth in the Borough. These have fed into the next, Preferred Options Draft of the Core Strategy, which was approved by Cabinet for the purposes of public consultation on the 23<sup>rd</sup> September (Minute 143 refers) and ratified by Council on 18<sup>th</sup> October. The

Preferred Options Report includes an amended shopping centre network/hierarchy (preferred Option 12) which includes two additional centres – Eastham (Mill Park Drive/New Chester Road) and Greasby – which have been added in response to public consultation and indicates an intention to set out initial priorities for each centre (including upper floor and residential uses) in the Settlement Area policies to be prepared under Preferred Option 2.

- 3.5 Public Consultation on the Preferred Options report commenced on the 15<sup>th</sup> November and ran through until the 7<sup>th</sup> January 2011. The draft Core Strategy is then expected to be issued in the spring of 2011 with a target for adoption by February 2012.

#### **4. PROGRESSING CENTRE - SPECIFIC STRATEGIES**

- 4.1 Point 7 of the January 14<sup>th</sup> Cabinet resolution also recommended that proposals should be developed for a range of local town centres experiencing specific challenges. However, over the past months concerns have been raised about a number of other local town centres. Given the limited funding and resources available to deliver town centre interventions and mindful also of the role of the Core Strategy in setting the vision, strategy and framework for all the shopping centres in the Borough this report therefore outlines proposals for a phased programme for addressing the retail concerns across the Borough.

- 4.2 It is proposed as a first stage that a specific evidence base for town and local centres is assembled in house. This would draw together existing sources of information from the Roger Tym report (both the 2009 and 2004 studies) and elsewhere. Some limited consultation would take place with key organisations such as Wirral's Business Forum, Federation of Small Businesses, the Chamber of Commerce and Local Trader Groups. This work will not only inform the development of the LDF Settlement Area priorities, being progressed as part of the Core Strategy work, but will also support the potential development of centre specific Action Plans (discussed in section 5 below).

- 4.3 The main output for this work would be a document which, for each of the centres listed in the LDF will:
- Set out the key characteristics of each centre including the composition of retail and other uses, vacancy rates, land use change and so on;
  - Consider issues such as accessibility and the role of the evening economy;
  - Present an assessment of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats;
  - Include an initial urban design/environmental quality analysis and
  - Set out planning policy and other priorities for each centre, including the scope for future development;
  - Present policy recommendations for the proposed Settlement Area policies along with recommendations for more detailed work, boundary changes, building on the recommendations in the RTP report and other evidence.

- 4.4 It is anticipated that this work will consider the specific issues raised in relation to points b and c under recommendation 7 relating to specific issues in Prenton and Moreton. This work will be a pragmatic response to the challenges facing each centre, in light of the national context outlined in paragraph 2.2, the circumstances of limited (and decreasing) financial resources and the limited landownership interest of the Council in many centres in the Borough. It is proposed that this work will cover all the centres proposed for inclusion in the network listed under Preferred option 12 of the Core Strategy Preferred Options report with the exception of Birkenhead (including Grange Road West /Oxton Road, and Argyle Street/Market Street) in order to avoid duplication

with the work already undertaken within the context of the Integrated Regeneration Strategy for Birkenhead and Wirral Waters (IRS) (reported to Cabinet on June 24<sup>th</sup> (minute 43 refers) and now adopted as a material planning consideration. The IRS already covers much of the tasks outlined above for Birkenhead and these are being fed into the Core Strategy separately. The proposed development of a transport strategy for Birkenhead Town Centre (funding approved for 2010/11 from the Council's Capital fund) will also provide a wider strategic regeneration context for Birkenhead. There are also on-going high level discussions with major landowners in the town centre to secure the regeneration and renewal of the town centre. The ASDA scheme in Birkenhead is also processing on site which will have significant regeneration benefits for the centre. The list of centres is listed in Appendix B.

- 4.5 In addition to the centres listed in the UDP/LDF Core Strategy, there is a network of smaller parades across the Borough which perform an important neighbourhood shopping role within the LDF Settlement Areas. While it will not be possible, given time and resource constraints to undertake the same level of detailed analysis for these smaller parades, it is proposed that this first phase of work will consider what is needed in terms of a policy approach to support the retention of their local role.
- 4.6 The intention is that this work which is needed to support the development of the Draft Core Strategy, including the Settlement Area policies, will be completed by spring 2011 using in-house resources.

## **5. ACTION PLANS**

- 5.1 The Local Town Centre evidence base work outlined in Section 4 above is intended to provide a basis for the development of more detailed action plans which could then be progressed to identify practical options for supporting the sustainability of town centres. It is intended that in the first instance plans be developed for the centres listed in recommendation 7(a) of the January 14<sup>th</sup> 2010 Cabinet Resolution -
- Hoylake Town Centre
  - New Ferry Town Centre
  - New Brighton (Seabank Road)
  - Seacombe (Borough Road/Poulton Road)
  - Wallasey Village
  - Irby Village
- 5.2 It would be critical for local traders, businesses, residents and partners to be fully involved in this process as many of the solutions will be driven by the private sector with the council playing an enabling and co-ordinating role. Developing Action Plans would allow local residents, traders and agencies to work together to identify options, which would reflect the limited public sector resources available but which could set out actions that could be delivered through partnership working. Whilst driven by the private sector and other partners, the process of action planning would be co-ordinated by the council on a cross departmental basis and could link to existing council services to ensure that their impact is maximised.
- 5.3 However, even with building on existing services and maximising private sector involvement, the development of Action Plans would require in-house staff resources to be identified to progress them. Given the current resource constraints a phased programme of Action Plans has been considered and it is proposed that in-house capacity could be identified to look initially at 3 centres and to begin to bring action plans forward over the next 12 months. Based on the previous Cabinet recommendation,7a

(Appendix A) 6 centres were initially identified and using existing vacancy levels (which are listed in the appendix to the Real Help Now – Empty Shops Funding report elsewhere on this agenda) it is proposed that action plans be prepared initially for Hoylake, New Ferry and Seacombe (Borough Road/Poulton Road). Whilst Laird Street and Birkenhead Oxton Road also have high vacancy rates, options for Laird Street are already being considered as part of the HMRI work. Birkenhead Oxton Road is proposed to be excluded for the reasons set out in paragraph 4.4 of this report – actions will be addressed through the wider Birkenhead Integrated Regeneration Strategy. The remaining three centres in the Cabinet recommendation – New Brighton (Seabank Road), Wallasey Village and Irby village would follow on with further centres then being identified as part of a rolling programme. It is therefore proposed that a phased programme should be considered and that a further report is brought back to Cabinet that sets out options for taking this forward, informed by the completed evidence base.

## **6 CONCLUSIONS**

- 6.1 The Town Centre Strategy has been adopted as part of the evidence base for the LDF's Core Strategy which will set out the vision and policy direction for the Borough's town centres. The Town Centre Strategy provides a performance analysis of the centres, recognises that a number of centres are facing challenges and emphasises that more detailed work is needed to develop centre-specific strategies. This report proposes that action to address these challenges should not be delayed until the Core Strategy is finalised in the Summer of 2011, but that two specific areas of work should be progressed.
- 6.2 The first proposed area of work is to build on the Town Centre Strategy to develop further the evidence base for each of the retail centres. This work is a requirement for the completion of the Core Strategy and should be able to be completed by spring 2011.
- 6.3 The second proposed area of work is to then progress a phased programme of Action Plans for retail centres in partnership with local private sector businesses, residents and other partners and a further report on this work will be brought forward to a future Cabinet meeting.

## **7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1 There are no additional financial implications arising directly from this report. Production of the evidence base will be undertaken using in-house resources. Members are requested to note the following additional funding programmes and that any activity progressed in these areas will maximise linkage and impact:
  - Coastal resort town funding – report considered by Cabinet on the 4<sup>th</sup> November 2010;
  - Empty shops funding – subject to a separate report elsewhere on the agenda for this Cabinet meeting.

## **8. STAFFING IMPLICATIONS**

- 8.1 There are no additional staffing requirements arising from the recommendations of this report. Both the evidence base and action plans will be produced using in-house staff resources from the Corporate Services and the Corporate Community Engagement Team.

## **9. EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES/EQUALITY IMPACT IMPLICATIONS**

9.1 There are no implications arising directly from this report.

## **10. COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS**

10.1 It will be necessary to ensure any recommendations emerging from the study work will have regard to the principles of Secured by Design which are aimed at preventing crime and helping to deliver the sustainability of any improvements or business operating within the area.

## **11. LOCAL AGENDA 21 IMPLICATIONS**

11.1 There are no implications arising directly from this report.

## **12. PLANNING IMPLICATIONS**

12.1 The Town Centres, Retail and Commercial Leisure Strategy has been used to inform the content of the emerging Core Strategy Development Plan Document and the preparation of the detailed evidence base for the 23 Town Centres will provide further information for this Plan and for the LDF.

## **13. ANTI-POVERTY IMPLICATIONS**

13.1 The development of a detailed evidence base and local Action Plans for the Borough's Town Centres will support the delivery of the Council's Investment Strategy which seeks a step change in the level of economic activity in the Borough, increasing employment and reducing worklessness.

## **14. HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS**

14.1 There are no implications arising directly from this report.

## **15. SOCIAL INCLUSION IMPLICATIONS**

15.1 The support of a shopping offer across the Borough that is accessible to all residents will support and promote social inclusion.

## **16. LOCAL MEMBER SUPPORT IMPLICATIONS**

16.1 The report will have implications for all Ward Members.

## **17. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

17.1 Background papers in connection with this report are kept with the Forward Planning team. The full Town Centre, Retail and Commercial Leisure Strategy is available on the Council's website. Previous reports on this subject can be found as follows:  
Cabinet report paper, 14<sup>th</sup> January 2010  
<http://wir06metrognome.admin.ad.wirral.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CLd=121&MId=734&Ver=4>

## **18. RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that:

- 18.1 A detailed evidence base for each of the retail centres identified in the Town Centre, Retail and Commercial Leisure Strategy be produced in order to inform the Core Strategy Development Plan Document and that this be the subject of a further report to Cabinet upon its completion.
- 18.2 Cabinet agree the approach to the production of a phased programme of Action Plan development for the local town centres addressed by the detailed evidence base work.

Kevin Adderley  
Interim Director of Corporate Services

## **APPENDIX A – full text of Cabinet resolution from 14<sup>th</sup> January 2010**

### **Minute 261**

Resolved – That,

(1) Cabinet confirms the designation of Birkenhead as a sub regional centre and supports Options 5 and 6 for meeting future retail and leisure needs in addition to an allowance for growth for existing retail centres across Wirral and recommends to Council that the Strategy for Town Centres, Retail and Commercial Leisure be approved as a material consideration for use by Planning Committee in the determination of planning applications, except for the status of Oxtan Road and Grange Road West, where the recommendations in the report are contrary to the Core Strategy Development Plan Core Document, previously approved for public consultation;

(2) the Council will continue to support proposals for retail development coming forward within existing centres and the new Government Planning Policy Statement 4 retains a clear “Town Centres First” approach to retail development;

(3) in Liscard, for example we have granted Planning Permission for redevelopment of the Cherry Tree Centre and we continue to encourage the owners to implement the scheme;

(4) the findings of the Strategy be used to inform the content of the emerging Core Strategy Development Plan Document;

(5) the findings of the Strategy be used to inform the delivery of Investment Strategy priorities;

(6) in addition, Cabinet requests that as part of the current consultation on the Spatial Options that views be sought on whether any other local shopping areas should be considered for possible inclusion as “local centres” within the LDF Core Strategy;

(7) Cabinet requests further reports be produced –

(a) on the interventions and recommendations made in the consultants’ report in the following areas, following consultation with the centres affected and the local area forums and other local stakeholders as appropriate:

- Hoylake town centre
- New Ferry town centre
- New Brighton (Seabank Road)
- Seacombe (Borough Road/Poulton Road)
- Wallasey Village
- Irby Village

(b) setting out options to deal with the derelict sites identified within the Prenton (Woodchurch Road) centre;

(c) setting out options to address the requirement for additional car parking spaces in Moreton town centre;

(d) setting out options, following consultation with stakeholders, on the issues raised in respect of the secondary shopping areas in Birkenhead including Oxtan Road/Grange Road West, and Argyle Street/Market Street and their consideration as part of Birkenhead Town Centre within the Core Strategy

Development Plan Document.

(8) Cabinet notes the plans already in place to address the issues raised at New Brighton (Victoria Road), West Kirby and Laird Street;

(9) the conclusions and designations of the other centres described in the report are noted and agreed.

## **APPENDIX B**

List of centres to be assessed in the Phase 1 enhance evidence base work (centre categories as proposed on the Core Strategy Preferred Options Report:

### **Town Centres**

Heswall  
Liscard  
Moreton  
West Kirby

### **District Centres**

Bromborough Village  
Hoylake  
Woodchurch Road (Prenton)

### **Local Centres**

Borough Road (Prenton Park)  
Claughton Village  
Dacre Hill  
Eastham (Mill Park Drive/New Chester Road)  
Greasby  
Irby Village  
Laird Street  
Lower Bebington  
New Ferry  
Oxton Village  
New Brighton (Seabank Road)  
New Brighton (Victoria Road)  
Seacombe (Poulton Road)  
Tranmere Urban Village  
Upton Village  
Wallasey Village