

Agenda Item No:

Report To: CABINET

Date of Meeting: 14 March 2019

Report Title: Ashford Town Centre Framework 2019-2025

Report Author & Job Title: Lorna Ford, Head of Corporate Policy, Economic Development and Communications

Portfolio Holder Cllr. Gerry Clarkson
Portfolio Holder for: Leader of the Council



Summary:

With the rise of online shopping and changes in how people use their leisure time, high streets across the country are facing challenging times and decline. In recent years Ashford Borough Council has taken bold steps to support its town centre and is now bucking some national trends with regards to footfall. However, as the scale of the challenge grows and as other centres strongly compete to differentiate and diversify their offer, Ashford needs a clear future direction. The proposed Ashford Town Centre Framework aims to do just that.

It is important that the ambitions in the framework meet the needs and aspirations of local communities and businesses. To ensure this is the case, extensive consultation was undertaken on the future of the town centre from July to October 2018. This report sets out the findings from this consultation which has helped to shape the framework's ambitions and actions.

Key Decision: YES

Significantly Affected Wards: The most impact will be on those wards within the town centre, however given that Ashford town centre serves the whole borough and is a key economic driver all wards are affected.

The Cabinet is recommended to:-

- I. approve the draft Ashford Town Centre Framework 2019-2025 as set out in appendix A;**
- II. approve the use of S106 funds and NNDR retention pool to fund the proposed indicative programme of town centre projects and events as set out in appendix B;**
- III. note the findings from the town centre consultation as set out in appendix C; and**
- IV. delegate authority to the Leader and the Chief Executive, to agree changes to the programme and move resource between projects as and when required.**

Policy Overview:

The Ashford Town Centre Framework sets out a vision and objectives to ensure the success and vibrancy of the town centre for future generations. Responding to the findings from the town centre consultation and the significant challenges facing the High Street, this framework document also sets out an ambitious and exciting programme of projects and activities to be implemented over the next five years.

The framework supports the following objectives of the Council's Corporate Plan 2015-2020:

Priority 1 Enterprising Ashford – A vibrant town centre and a supporting business centre.

Priority 2 Living Ashford – Create a supply of town centre housing to suit emerging new markets.

Priority 3 Active and Creative Ashford – Grow our cultural offer to be a successful and alternative destination.

Priority 4 Attractive Ashford – Strengthen tourism and local heritage offer.

The Town Centre Framework also supports the following policies from the Borough's Local Plan 2019-2030:

Policy SP4 – Delivery of Retail and Leisure Needs.

Policy SP5 - Ashford Town Centre.

Financial Implications:

In recognition of the need to increase investment in town centre activities, an increase in the base budget of £130k has been built into the 2019/20 budget. In addition there is a £70k a year contribution from the s106 agreement for the outlet centre extension. Therefore a total of £200k has been identified as an on-going, annual commitment to animating the town centre.

In addition, the council has benefited from the National Non-Domestic Rate pool proceeds to the tune of £600k with another £300k expected. From the outset the benefits arising from this pool were identified to be used to help strengthen the town centre economy. This funding provides a huge opportunity to plan for the next three years to deliver a comprehensive programme of projects - both capital and revenue. Also available are various sums from s106 agreements – some which must be spent for specific purposes (e.g. open space improvements) and others which are more general in nature (e.g. promoting the town centre). Over the next three years, taking all these sources of funding into account, there is a significant sum available of almost £1.7m to commit to town centre activities and tackle the scale of the challenge the town centre faces. The proposed list of projects and activities to be funded through this pot are set out in appendix B. It should be noted that full project plans have not yet been prepared for all projects and

therefore resources may need to be moved between activities when full project costs are fully understood.

Legal Implications	None arising specifically from this report.
Equalities Impact Assessment	See attached (appendix D)
Other Material Implications:	None
Exempt from Publication:	NO
Background Papers:	Town Centre Consultation: Report of Findings The Resident's Survey 2018
Appendices	Appendix A – Draft Town Centre Framework 2019-2025 Appendix B – Indicative programme of town centre projects requiring funding Appendix C – Findings from the Town Centre Consultation Appendix D – Equality Impact Assessment
Contact:	Lorna.ford@ashford.gov.uk – Tel: (01233) 330314

Report Title: Ashford Town Centre Framework 2019-2025

Introduction and Background

1. The Ashford Town Centre Place Making Board was set up in 2018 to plan, drive and coordinate future schemes and activities in the town centre. It has been supported by four work-streams responsible for engagement, master-planning, project delivery and the impatience team. The draft Town Centre Framework document, attached at appendix A, brings together the efforts of the four town centre work-streams. Whilst the framework includes projects and activities which already have the agreement of the council, it also proposes new initiatives that aim to animate the town centre and improve the cultural offer of the town. These projects are set out with indicative costings in appendix B to this report.
2. In working towards the renaissance of the town centre, all four work-streams have been guided by the following ten principles which are also embedded in the framework document itself:
 - I. Deliver real, qualitative change at pace – don't wait for the 'perfect' masterplan
 - II. Celebrate and consolidate our 'old town', and excite people in the contrasting character of the emerging new Ashford alongside it
 - III. Recognise the key Council role of 'curating' our town centre – 101+ small initiatives will add up to help drive change and build confidence
 - IV. Be brave and determined to be different – be afraid of being the same!
 - V. Recognise that, first and foremost, people want quality experiences
 - VI. Work hard to understand what different generations and different groups of people want – e.g. millennials; grey pounders; young families
 - VII. Temporary, 'meanwhile uses' and activity in public spaces are key points on the roadmap to more permanent solutions
 - VIII. Capture the imagination of the '5%' of creative innovators in the population and use and grow local talent
 - IX. We can achieve more by working with partners and critical friends to harness their skills and capacity
 - X. First impressions matter – get the welcome to our town centre right

Challenges to Ashford Town Centre and the Future High Streets Fund

3. Section 1.3 of the Ashford Town Centre Framework (attached as Appendix A) sets out the challenges that the town centre is currently facing. These are captured under three main themes that reflect the issues raised through the consultation exercises undertaken over the last 12 months. These three themes are:
 1. Ashford Town Centre is predominantly a functional and convenient centre, it lacks a sense of community, distinctive identity and has a weaker retail and cultural offer.
 2. Ashford Town Centre is going through significant change and growth, and is in transition and at a tipping point with the potential to thrive, but also with clear threats.
 3. The accessibility of Ashford Town Centre is challenging for both pedestrians and vehicles.

4. The scale of the challenge facing all high streets across the country has also been recognised by the government and during 2018 a number of initiatives were announced, these included:
 - cutting business rates by a third for up to 90% of retail properties for two years, to provide upfront support for high streets;
 - consulting on planning reform to make it simpler to create more homes, jobs and choice in town centres, and trialling a register of empty shops;
 - setting up a High Streets Task Force which will support local leadership with expert advice on helping local high streets to adapt and thrive;
 - strengthening community assets, including the restoration of the historic buildings that make our high streets special, supporting community groups to use empty properties and providing business rates relief for public toilets and local newspapers; and
 - supporting the transformation of the high street, by creating a £675 million Future High Streets Fund to help local areas make their high streets and town centres fit for the future.

Ashford Borough Council will be submitting a bid to the Future High Streets Fund. This fund aims to renew and reshape town centres and high streets in a way that improves experience, drives growth and ensures future sustainability. Only one bid can be put forward from the Ashford Borough and the government has made it clear that it will not accept bids covering town centre areas that are not facing significant challenges. Projects will need to be co-funded by the public and private sectors on a project basis, or to deliver a local area's wider strategy for the high street.

The fund will contribute between £5-10 million (no more than £25m) to each successful place. The funding is not available for projects that only make a

difference to appearance, but rather how an area is used to achieve a lasting long-term impact. It is intended that the fund can be used for:

- Physical infrastructure;
- Acquisition and assembly of land including to support new housing, workspaces and public realm;
- Improvements to transport access, traffic flow and circulation in the area;
- Supporting change of use including (where appropriate) housing delivery and densification; and
- Supporting adaptation of the high street in response to changing technology.

5. The deadline for expressions of interest is 22 March 2019. The Ashford Town Centre Framework will provide a useful evidence-base to support this bid.

Vision, objectives and priority outcomes for Ashford town centre

6. The vision and objectives set out in the framework have been informed by the extensive consultation that was undertaken and seek to address the future challenges Ashford town centre faces. The framework is structured around an overall vision for the town centre, supported by ten objectives and three priority outcomes to be achieved by 2025, as shown below:

<i>Vision - Ashford town centre is a place where the community meet, share experiences, shop and pursue their interests –a place where people and businesses flourish.</i>	
OBJECTIVES	PRIORITY OUTCOMES
i. An attractive and clean town centre	<i>Ashford town centre has a sense of community and is a place to be proud of.</i>
ii. A safe town centre	
iii. A welcoming place with a civic heartbeat	
iv. A desirable place to live for new and existing residents	
v. A town centre known for its quality experiences that appeal to residents and visitors alike	<i>Ashford is a destination where people choose to socialise, relax and have fun.</i>
vi. Ashford has a vibrant evening and night time economy with a wide variety of places to meet, eat and drink	
vii. A town centre with quality cultural and entertainment facilities	
viii. Ashford has a thriving town centre known for its mix of independent and high street traders	<i>Ashford town centre is thriving and accessible to all.</i>
ix. Ashford town centre is easy to navigate by all and well connected by public transport	
x. Ashford is known for being a 'smart town' , digitally connecting people to	

7. The framework also sets out the actions to be delivered under each of these objectives and measures of success (Key Performance Indicators). The plan will be annually reviewed to ensure the actions are still relevant and a monitoring/impact report will be produced which will be communicated widely to relevant partnerships and reported to Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

Outcome of Town Centre Consultation

8. The Town Centre Framework has been shaped and informed by the findings from the Town Centre Consultation, which ran from July to October 2018 (full findings are attached at appendix C to this report). The consultation was structure around four open-ended questions as follows:
 1. How do we create a buzz about Ashford and make it stand out from the crowd?
 2. How do we create a thriving, fun place to go in the daytime and at night?
 3. How do we create a place that is welcoming and accessible to all?
 4. How can we make Ashford a place we are proud to call home?

The consultation sought responses from residents, local businesses and town centre visitors. Over 1000 comments were received which varied from one word answers through to in-depth responses of several pages regarding a number of issues affecting the town centre. Respondents were able to submit their views in a number of ways including:

- an online consultation tool which encouraged comments and debate
 - an online questionnaire promoted widely via social media and on the council's website
 - Exhibition materials and paper questionnaires were available at the Gateway and at the council offices and questionnaires were also distributed to businesses across the town centre
 - A stakeholder conference involving local businesses, community groups and other partners.
9. Frequently recurring comments related to entertainment and culture, accessibility, safety and general ideas for improvements to the town. Many respondents wanted the council to encourage a variety of entertainment opportunities that are inclusive of all, a mixture of retail so there is something for everyone, as well as making the town more accessible (particularly for those with disabilities or those who use public transport) and feel more safe, especially at night. Other comments included tackling perceptions about aspects of the town, such as vacant retail units, and making the town look more attractive. A summary of the main themes and comments is as follows:

Expanding the offer of the town	Addressing areas for improvement	Creating a community and town to be proud of
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A variety of entertainment, leisure and retail • More events and activities to take part in • The offer of the town should be unique • Supporting local and independent businesses as well as enticing bigger brands • Introduce facilities and events targeted at groups within the borough • Promote events going on in the town 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing actual crime as well as perceptions of crime • Ensuring disabled access is improved and all new buildings are accessible • Improve public transport to reduce traffic making the town easier to visit • Make parking easier free or cheaper particular for people who just want to pop into town • Ensure safety for pedestrians • Make navigation easier with better signage and lighting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create opportunities to meet and socialise with others • Protect green spaces and care for the environment • Ensure housing is well-placed and affordable • Be inclusive of everyone • Ensure the town centre is the heart of the community • Keep going with current projects • Keep the town clean and looking smart • Celebrate Ashford's heritage.

Implications and Risk Assessment

10. There is a risk around the capacity of the officers to deliver such an ambitious action plan. This has been recognised by the Town Centre Place-making Board and an additional £270,000 is being recommended as part of the town centre fund for additional project management resource over the next three years.
11. There is also the risk that residents' expectations have been raised in relation to all ideas being taken forward. There are some ideas not being recommended at this time, such as an ice rink in the town, or that the market cannot currently support, such as Primark coming to the town. The reasons why these ideas have not been taken forward will need to be communicated alongside the results from the consultation.
12. Another recession or economic downturn could also reduce the council's ability to deliver this ambitious programme. The framework will be reviewed on an annual basis to ensure it is still deliverable and resources are being focussed on the right activities.

Equalities Impact Assessment

13. The Equalities Impact Assessment is attached at appendix D. Overall, the assessment shows that the implementation of the action plan will have positive impacts on groups with protected characteristics as defined in the Equalities Act 2010.

14. The action plan includes the implementation of inclusive community led events, and a programme of commissioned events and activities. The overall aim of these events is to strengthen community cohesion and offer a diverse programme to appeal to all residents living in the borough.
15. The framework also addresses current accessibility issues in the town such as uneven surfaces and cobbles in the lower High Street, which are reported to be difficult to traverse for older people, those with certain disabilities and parents with children in buggies and pushchairs. The resurfacing of these areas would result in a positive impact for these groups.
16. It should be noted that the Equalities Impact Assessment considers the equalities issues for the strategy as a whole. Individual projects within the strategy will be subject to future individual assessments.

Consultation Planned or Undertaken

17. The findings from the town centre consultation undertaken between July and October 2018 are set out in the body of the report (see paragraphs 8 and 9).

Other Options Considered

18. Members could chose not to adopt the Town Centre Framework. This could lead to a disjointed approach and undertaking projects that do not seek to address the significant challenges facing the town centre.

Reasons for Supporting Option Recommended

19. The framework provides a coordinated approach to delivering the desired outcomes for the town centre. It also sets out performance framework for the town centre so that the impact of the interventions made in the town centre can be measured. In addition it provides a framework to commission new activity and projects to ensure future resources are being deployed to best effect.

Next Steps in Process

20. As part of the review of partnerships and the governance of the town centre, further conversations will take place with partners and other stakeholders to understand how they can contribute to the ambitions set out in the plan.
21. The Framework will be graphically designed and communicated to residents via the council's website, social media and *Ashford for You* magazine.

Conclusion

22. There are significant challenges facing Ashford's town centre. The Town Centre Framework brings together the planned and new activity to meet the aspirations of the local community and businesses and ensure our town centre is fit for the future.

Portfolio Holder's Views

23. "The Town Centre Framework aims to provide a clear future direction for the town centre bringing together an inspiring and ambitious programme of events, activities and projects to enliven and enrich Ashford's offer. In developing this plan we have listened carefully to what residents, businesses and partners have said about Ashford town centre. We must continue to work together to tackle the challenges facing our town centre to ensure our town is a place where people and businesses flourish. I therefore recommend that Cabinet approve the Ashford Town Centre Framework."

Cllr Gerry Clarkson, Leader of the Council

Contact and Email

Lorna Ford, Head of Corporate Policy, Economic Development and Communications
Lorna.ford@ashford.gov.uk