

REPORT OF THE PLACE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE: SCRUTINY OF FUTURE OF RETAIL AND THE HIGH STREET

Cllr Kieron Mallon
Chair of the Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee
March 2023

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to —
 - a) Agree to respond to the recommendations contained in the body of this report, and
 - b) Agree that relevant officers will continue to update Scrutiny for 12 months on progress made against actions committed to in response to the recommendations, or until they are completed (if earlier).

REQUIREMENT TO RESPOND

2. In accordance with section 9FE of the Local Government Act 2000, the People Overview & Scrutiny Committee hereby requires that, within two months of the consideration of this report, the Cabinet publish a response to this report and its recommendations.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

3. At its meeting on 25 January 2023, the Place Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered presentations from the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP) and from the Banbury Business Improvement District (Banbury BID) on trading trends in the high street and how best to boost local economies and create new job opportunities in the county.
4. The Committee received the input of Bill Cotton, Corporate Director for Environment and Place, Rachel Wileman, Director of Planning, Environment and Climate Change, Nigel Tipple, Chief Executive of OxLEP and Jasmine Gilhooly, BID Strategist at Banbury BID. The Committee would like to thank everyone, especially external contributors, for sharing their time and expertise with the Committee.

SUMMARY

5. The Chair introduced the discussion on this item. He referred to the introduction of a number of the Council's environmental policies across the County and how it was an appropriate time to consider the impact of these on the retail sector and town centres.
6. Nigel Tipple, Chief Executive of the LEP, gave a presentation on Oxfordshire Economy: Town Centres and High Streets covering the following issues:
 - Impact of the COVID pandemic on town centres, working at home and footfall
 - Programme for enabling spaces for shops, cultural venues and other working facilities
 - Visitor economy data – comparison with 2019
 - Refresh of Oxfordshire Economic Plan
 - Growth hub grants and business support
 - Support footfall back to business and high streets
 - Information on public transport and access
 - Work with art and cultural partners to encourage more art installation and events
 - Partnerships and action for each location
7. Jasmine Gilhooly, gave a presentation on Love Your Town: Shopping in Banbury and covered the following issues:
 - Proportion of local business rates allocated to town regeneration
 - Role of the local community
 - Shop window dressing competition
 - Local businesses – quality and experience
 - A video clip promoting Banbury as a place for new independent businesses
8. During discussion, members made the following comments:
 - The business community needed to improve the way in which it promoted economic activity in towns
 - Place design is critically important in the regeneration of town centres
 - There is scope to review park and ride car park fees and impact on footfall in town centres
 - Moving health provision such as physiotherapy and occupational health to the high street would have benefits
 - Concern about investment in improved infrastructure in cycling without evidence that this would increase cycle usage in town centres
 - Need to consider the impact of social media on promotion of local businesses
 - Improved data on predictions of footfall resulting from traffic controls would be beneficial

RECOMMENDATIONS

9. The Committee discussed how businesses and the local economy are impacted by a wide range of factors (for example, the availability of public transport, traffic

flows, ease of parking, etc.). The Committee considered the importance of fully analysing the potential impact of major policy changes on local businesses to ensure that policies or new projects do not have an unforeseen negative impact on businesses and the local economy. As part of this it will be important to consider how policies and projects might impact accessibility by residents and other customers, for example by reducing parking available or increasing travel times for out-of-town visitors, potentially having a negative effect on footfall and business revenue in local areas. Extensive engagement with local stakeholders, including businesses, should be undertaken whenever considering major changes to ensure that these will have a positive impact on the local community and economy.

Recommendation: That the Council's policies that may impact on local economy and accessibility are considered as part of the process leading to major policy changes (including by engaging with businesses and considering the sustainability of measures).

10. The Committee considered the importance of ensuring high streets, town and city centres are attractive destinations for customers, particularly in the context of a modern economy where online shopping is part of the norm and increasingly consumers go to the high street for 'experiences' rather than just retail. This further reinforces the importance of designing and regenerating town/city centres and high streets to be attractive destinations in their own right and places where customers want to spend time. Oxfordshire County Council as a key partner in economic development should ensure that it contributes to place-shaping discussions with colleagues in the District Councils to help ensure the long-term sustainability and success of local high streets.

Recommendation: That the Council influences place-shaping in partnership with District Councils and other relevant organisations.

11. The Committee considered how initiatives by the County Council are often successful in improving services for residents. More, however, could be done to promote and communicate these benefits clearly in plain and accessible language. The Committee agreed that it would be helpful to ensure that the positive outcomes of major schemes are clearly communicated to the public in plain language to highlight what has been delivered (for example, highlighting how a scheme has cut travelling times for residents by X minutes).

Recommendation: That the Council takes steps to ensure that the benefits of policies and projects are communicated in plain and accessible language.

NEXT STEPS

12. The Place Overview & Scrutiny Committee will review the published Cabinet response to this report and its recommendations at the meeting of the Committee after Cabinet's response in accordance with part 6.2, 13(f), of the Constitution of the Council.

13. The Committee does not anticipate looking at the future of retail and the high street again within the current civic year.

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