



**PORTFOLIO HOLDERS : POLICY AND STRATEGY
ECONOMY AND PLANNING**

**ECONOMY AND PLANNING REVIEW PANEL - 19 SEPTEMBER 2001
CABINET - 3 OCTOBER 2001**

TOWN CENTRE MANAGEMENT (CO-ORDINATION) REVIEW

1. SUMMARY

1.1 This report reviews the operation of the Town Centre Management initiative in Ringwood and Hythe since its inception in January 1999. It assesses the effectiveness of the initiative to date, and presents options for its continuation/modification/enhancement.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 Town Centre Management (TCM) initiatives have been widely implemented by local authorities as a means of sustaining or improving the prosperity of town centres. Central to this approach is the creation of a partnership between local government, private sector and community groups, with the aim of ultimately involving all sections of the community in measures to support town centres. Work programmes will usually focus on initiatives relating to

- encouraging new investment,
- improving the environment
- undertaking promotion
- developing partnerships

2.2 In 1998 the Civic Trust Regeneration Unit was appointed by the Council to explore the issue of TCM and the extent to which there was potential for a successful initiative in the District. This was followed by extensive consultation. It was decided to concentrate efforts initially on the two centres of Hythe, where a partnership was already in existence, and Ringwood, where it was felt that the town possessed unrealised potential as a retail location. If successful, the Council was also to look at how the initiative could be rolled out to other town centres within the District at the end of the initial period.

2.3 Opportunities for improving the environmental and economic performance of the two towns were identified and subsequently incorporated into action plans.

2.4 The initiative was established to run for a period of three years prior to review, with the post of Town Centre Co-ordinator (TCO) subsequently established and filled from January 1999. The post was established without any associated budget. In the

last two years the TCO has been able to access some funding from the economic development budget to support local projects. By the end of the calendar year the initiative will have cost, inclusive of staff and budgets, an average of some £38,000 per annum over the 3 years.

- 2.5 The role of the TCO is to work with all interest groups in developing the function, attractiveness and viability of the centres. Achieving this by building linkages between organisations, helping better delivery of local services, promoting positive images and investigating new initiatives through locally agreed action plans. Priorities will always vary at the local level, based partly on need and partly on opportunity. While working on the basis of agreed action programmes, the flexibility to address ad hoc issues and opportunities is integral to the role.

3. POLICY BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Government policy is strongly supportive of measures which reinforce the historic role of town centres as focuses for retail and service delivery, and is a key element of sustainability. It is reflected both through planning policy advice and through the strategies of national agencies. Supporting the vitality of market towns is now a key part of the Countryside Agency's policy agenda, which involves actively encouraging the assessment of the "health" of towns in terms of their viability, and supporting both the formation of local partnerships and the production of agreed action programmes.
- 3.2 The Council's corporate plan *The Heart of the Forest* sees town centres as an important part of both the local economy and the local community:
- "Enhancing our town centres to maintain and improve their attractiveness and viability to assist their essential role as local community and commercial centres."
- 3.3 These policies are also supported in other Council policy documents and strategies such as the New Forest District Local Plan.
- 3.4 The Council's recently published Economic Strategy highlights the enhancement of town centres as a priority action in order to make them attractive, vibrant places where businesses are able to thrive. The continuing role of town centres as points of retail and service delivery is a key element of both community economic development and the wider sustainability agenda.
- 3.5 With out-of-town and larger centres continuing to attract an increasing proportion of retail expenditure, further major retail investment in close proximity to the District, and the influence of other developments such as e-commerce, town centres in the District need to ensure that their own "offer" is attractive and competitive.
- 3.6 They also have a key role within the community planning agenda at the local level, and associated with this are the significant linkages to locality working, the area delivery of services and demonstration of efficiency/effectiveness improvements. These are of interest to all directorates, ranging from street cleansing through to community safety and tourism.

4. EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- 4.1 Although substantive financial support resulting from the Rural White Paper was limited to market towns within specified rural priority areas, only small amounts of funding are available for the production of strategies for towns. A number of measures have been announced by the Countryside Agency and others to help the formation of partnerships, the assessment of strengths and weaknesses of towns, the production of action plans and funding for small-scale parish facilities. Some of these are already being progressed within the District.
- 4.2 There are other measures which can also bring in small-scale funding e.g. the SEEDA funding of an SRB 6 project to support some local initiatives in market towns throughout the southeast region. Under this project a bid for small-scale funding to assist partnership formation in Ringwood has been successful, while further bids for a pilot shopmobility scheme in Ringwood and the production of a tourism strategy in Fordingbridge are awaiting decision.
- 4.3 More significantly, Hampshire County Council is currently in the process of recruiting an officer to act as an advisory resource for partnership development in towns across the county. The post, which will initially be on contract for 12 months initially, is expected to run for 3 years, and will also advise on accessing funding from other sources.
- 4.4 While the role of market towns is currently high on the Countryside Agency's policy agenda, and there is some small scale funding available for the production of action plans under the 'Vital Villages' initiative, there is little significant funding for the implementation of individual projects within New Forest towns. Given the relative level of problems elsewhere, any funding of this nature is likely to be restricted in the future. Against this, the likely designation of the National Park may well lead to projects in Ringwood which could attract Countryside Agency funding under separate budgets, and which would be of direct benefit to this and possibly other centres.

5. WORK PROGRAMMES AND ACTIVITIES

- 5.1 As outlined above, conventional town centre management work focuses on the four key areas of environment, investment, promotion and organisation. Within individual towns, the balance will obviously vary according to local circumstance and priorities.
- # 5.2 Existing work programmes for Ringwood and Hythe are attached to this report as appendix 2.

6. CONSULTATION IN THE CENTRES

- 6.1 Informal consultation has been carried out with various local interests in addition to internal officer consultation. Views are various and point to no overall consensus as to either the success of the initiative so far, or on the way forward from here. However, there are some common themes which do emerge.

6.2 Hythe

- 6.2.1 There is a recognition that expectations of the TCO's role has varied widely (manager, janitorial, events promoter etc). While working relationships are reasonably good, the Hythe Centre Advisory Group has no control or ownership of the TCO's work. It was felt that direct contact between the business forum and line management would achieve agreement on priorities and enhance feelings of local ownership and control.
- 6.2.2 There is a recognition that knowledge and experience has been brought to bear and that a number of successful measures have been implemented e.g. graffiti cleaning, farmers markets, retail guide and tourism strategy. There has also been some progress on the promenade, the key physical opportunity in the town centre.
- 6.2.3 There is a need to establish clearer criteria for improvement in the town centre's performance. This could be addressed under the Countryside Agency's Health Check Programme.
- 6.2.4 The lack of resources was initially a problem and it is only more recently that some small-scale support has been available for local promotional initiatives and events. A commitment to supporting such measures is seen as vital to the future of the initiative.
- 6.2.5 While there was recognition of the operational difficulties of working between two centres some 20 miles apart, there had been difficulties in accessing the TCO on occasions, and some questioning of whether best use had been made of the officer time available. Some form of local assistant/admin support could be useful in this respect.
- 6.2.6 At the start of the initiative, considerable work had already been carried out by some existing stakeholders in the town centre, and interests were already coming together to form a town centre partnership. There is a perception that the rate of advance may have slowed since the appointment of the TCO, but the local view does acknowledge that this could be due to lessening of voluntary effort with the easier actions having already been achieved.
- 6.2.7 While there is a need for a stronger strategic view of where the town is going, overall there is a strong feeling of the value of TCM as a function, and an appreciation of the efforts of the TCO.

6.3 Ringwood

- 6.3.1 There is a general view that overall the initiative has not achieved what it could or should have in terms of uniting local organisations and opinion.
- 6.3.2 At the same time, there is acknowledgement from some that the town is not an easy environment in which to foster joint working and agreement as to priority actions.

- 6.3.3 There are widely varying perceptions of what the post was intended to achieve and how it was intended to operate e.g. how far it could or should operate as the face of the District Council, or as a focus for more broadly based town centre interests.
- 6.3.4 There are strong feelings from some that outside influence and input must necessarily be detrimental to the town.
- 6.3.5 Inevitably, experiences have been significantly coloured by the proposed Furlong development and the reactions of the local community, who have perceived it as more of a threat than an opportunity.
- 6.3.6 The town council would have preferred to been more closely involved with the initiative. It perceives its own role as being the local focus for taking forward work of this nature in the future, and considers itself able to engage the community through a local partnership. With the partnership established as a working party of the Council.
- 6.3.7 There are some criticisms that the initiative has concerned itself too closely with physical development, rather than concentrating on promotional and marketing initiatives. Some were of the view that awareness of the TCO and his role was not sufficiently widespread amongst local business.
- 6.3.8 Looking forward, some perceive that the District Council should input from a central resource/adviser working out of Lyndhurst, with an associated budget to support projects and initiatives within local communities.
- 6.3.9 There is a widespread view pressing for the strengthening of the Town Council's role, wishing to engage at local level with Countryside Agency's "Vital Villages" and associated measures.
- 6.3.10 Overall, within Ringwood there is generally no feeling of local ownership of the initiative, and that it would more appropriately be driven by local organisations.

6.4 Totton

- 6.4.1 There is an awareness that Totton has not shared recently in increased prosperity to the same extent as other centres in the District, while at the same time there is currently funding available in budgets to support some extension of the TCM initiative to include Totton. Transport and environmental deficiencies have been recognised and from 2002 HCC have allocated funding of some £500,000 for highway and related improvements and £300,000 for environmental improvements, although this latter will be spent south of the railway outside the town centre as such. A further £100,000 of District Council funding for environmental improvement works is in programme for 2002/2003.

6.4.2 An amount of consultative work within the local community has been carried out over the past two years in terms of highway proposals. Likewise two meetings have also taken place in January and March of this year with businesses to engage them in the improvement process, although with mixed results and some uncertainty as to the way forward. To an extent this has been exacerbated by the absence of any local chamber or voice for town centre traders. There was general agreement that a forum, independent of elected authorities was needed, and that this should be established as a matter of urgency, and that the town council be requested to provide administrative and executive support. Other informal discussions show a local view that the programmed improvements would benefit from an executive resource which could weld business and community groups together, and generate promotional and other initiatives to sit alongside the programme of physical improvements.

6.4.3 The town council is aware of the Countryside Agency initiatives relating to “health checks” and “town plans” under the Vital Villages initiative, and is investigating these. The town council is unusual in having a qualified planner as a staff resource on a part time basis.

7. OTHER LINKAGES AND MATERIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 7.1 There are significant linkages to other services and policy areas, more especially planning and tourism. There are other linkages to the delivery of services both by this Council and by other agencies.
- # 7.2 Similar initiatives have been undertaken in many other areas around the County. Experiences have been mixed. A summary of the situation in four multi-centred Districts similar to New Forest is attached at Appendix 1. Reactions to experience so far is mixed, but these do demonstrate:
1. A continuing role for the District Council in supporting local groups carrying out improvements and initiatives
 2. A move to involve individual communities in establishing programmes and delivery actions.
 3. The level of variety, and the change and modification of initiatives which is necessary over time to meet and adapt to local circumstance.

8. CONCLUSIONS AND ASSESSMENT

- 8.1 While there are some in Hythe who believe that the District Council input has resulted in local players letting up in terms of their own time and commitment, overall there is a positive feeling that the initiative is helping to move specific projects such as the waterfront forward, and that event, promotional and other actions have added to the town's overall offer.
- 8.2 Although views in Ringwood vary, there is a significant feeling of disappointment that the initiative has not as yet delivered what the town needs. It is also felt that, looking forward, local ownership and management of promotional and other initiatives would be more appropriate, with the town council playing a key role in a wider partnership.

- 8.3 Expectations of the role in both towns have varied, from a concentration on “janitorial” activity and links with direct service delivery on the one hand, to guiding and influencing medium term environmental projects on the other. As mentioned above, action programmes were agreed in each location, and work has subsequently been directed largely at implementing these.
- 8.4 Totton has a funded programme of highway and environmental improvements which will commence shortly. There is significant potential to add value to this through the development of a local partnership together with promotional and other measures.
- 8.5 It was the original intention that there should be a strong element of local involvement and influence. There is generally a shared feeling, especially in Ringwood (but not shared by all) that there needs to be a significant amount of local autonomy, and that towns should be left to manage their own resources. Unsurprisingly, these views do not extend to funding.
- 8.6 There are mixed views concerning the capacity and ability of local councils to fully engage with, and benefit from, the Countryside Agency’s health checks, Vital Villages agenda and associated “town plan” process. This capacity will vary significantly between towns across the District.
- 8.7 Governmental policy is seeking to raise awareness of the need for agreed local action programmes within individual towns. These in turn are already looking to District Councils to provide advice and support. There are very strong links between this work and the emerging community planning agenda.
- 8.8 As ever, resourcing of local initiatives is a key issue. The District Council could make available a finite sum for funding, or matched funding, of local events and initiatives within Ringwood, Hythe and Totton, or more generally across the towns in the District. There appears to be some scope for local councils to increase precepts to support projects which have specific local impacts.
- 8.9 Some small partnership monies have already been obtained and there are a number of projects underway in both towns. It may be difficult to re-cast this initiative without detracting from what has been achieved to date, and some level of support to existing initiatives will be appropriate.
- 8.10 The new advisory post at the County Council will be an additional resource which communities will need to actively seek to use. Given the number of towns and larger villages across Hampshire inputs locally will obviously be restricted. While this HCC post may generate some advantage to this District, it is unlikely to materially affect current decisions.
- 8.11 A question mark exists as to whether the District’s town centres are themselves too small for a conventional TCM/TCO role to be effective. It would arguably be more effective/less contentious to put in place a structure which can support more locally owned working at the level of individual towns across the District. In time, this could contribute to a fuller development of priorities and service delivery as part of a community planning/working process.

- # 8.12 Given the finite level of resource, varying levels of need, and differing views as to priorities within individual communities, there will be no entirely satisfactory way forward. At the same time, experiences of some other multi-centre Districts in Appendix 1 show their evolving responses to town centre management issues. These will be further influenced by government policy and the availability or otherwise of funding. It is reasonable to expect that further change may be appropriate in this Council's response in the medium term.

There are a number of possible options:

1. Continue the initiative at its current level, noting the comments received from consultation and seeking to add an additional post for Totton, which will be an active area of work over the next two years. This would require funding over and above existing budgets of some £15,000 to cover 50% of salary and a further £6,000 to support local initiatives.
2. Change the focus to the local level – look to local partnerships to lead and implement, but with some District Council funding to provide matched funding for local initiatives. Such funding should be available from a central budget into which local partnerships would bid, and a process would need to be established for assessing and deciding between bids. A staff resource would be needed to liaise and evaluate projects, and would involve ad hoc demands on the time of a range of officers.
3. Have one officer operating on a District-wide basis to provide both advisory support on action planning, and to input to local projects in individual towns especially in Totton, and initially in Hythe. The post would also support the development of effective local partnerships where this was felt to be needed by local communities. The postholder would need to be able to operate in a flexible manner in terms of inputting to work at the local level and building consensus on solutions, and would also need a dedicated budget to match locally raised funds on a project by project basis. A district-wide approach would also be able to look at promotional and other complementary measures which might be shared between towns. Initially this work would relate to the traditional TCM agenda, but could be capable in the medium term of contributing to the community planning agenda. This option could be funded from within existing budgets.
4. Do nothing, end staff input and financial support, and generate savings.

9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Existing budgets allow for some extension of town centre management work to Totton, and the recommendation can be met wholly from within the existing budget. The longer term funding of town centre related initiatives within individual communities may be a matter for the LSP to consider as to how it can help to augment existing funds and service delivery.

10. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 There are benefits for sustainability objectives to be gained from the project, especially from the local provision of retail and other services, with the effect of reducing the number of longer journeys to more distant centres. The implications for social cohesion and local prosperity are also strong elements of the sustainability agenda. The work also contributes to specific environmental improvement projects.

11. CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

11.1 There are important two-way linkages between town centre management and levels of crime and disorder. Promoting the visibility and vitality of town

12. COMMENTS FROM ECONOMY AND PLANNING REVIEW PANEL

The Economy and planning Review Panel at their meeting on 19 September 2001 made the following recommendations:-

12.1 The Panel considered a review of the Town Centre Management Initiative and options for the future.

The Head of Economic Development prefaced the report by explaining that town centre management was now an accepted part of local government structures nationally and there were several good examples in other authorities.

Cllr Thierry attended the meeting to speak on this item and give his view of the Ringwood perspective of the Town Centre management initiative. He felt the Initiative had actually had a negative effect on the Town and he did not feel there were any identifiable benefits derived "on the ground" or set out in the report. He felt the Town Centre Co-ordinator had been linked too closely with the Furlong Development and should not in his view have been seen to be actively promoting it. Overall, he felt the Town's expectations of the Town Centre Management Initiative were very different from the reality, and he had received a significant amount of local criticism about the role of the Co-ordinator. In summary, he supported the first recommendation that the post should be deleted but did not agree that the initiative should continue in the way proposed, at least in the short term.

Local members from Hythe reported a different experience of the Town Centre Management Initiative and felt that on the whole it had had a positive impact on the area. It was felt the Co-ordinator had facilitated many schemes and ensured that certain events had been undertaken more smoothly. Furthermore, members felt that the Co-ordinator had brought funds into Hythe that may not otherwise have been obtained. It was felt that there was a much needed role for the Co-ordinator to play in the Waterside Area though it was accepted that this could be carried out in a more pro-active way. Members supported the proposed greater emphasis on the Totton area under the proposed new initiative, which could help bring funds into Totton to complement the Regeneration of Older Urban Areas Scheme and foster links with local chambers of commerce.

The Panel's general view was the Initiative could have achieved more than it had done. Accordingly, it was felt that more time was needed to consider whether and in what form a revised initiative should be implemented. Members asked that further options be brought to members at a future meeting, together with proposed job descriptions. The Economic Development Officer pointed out that there would be difficulties in obtaining a consensus amongst the Panel if job descriptions were to be brought to them.

Cllr Droogleever was reluctant to abandon the scheme altogether as he felt it was a much needed facility in the District which could be made to work successfully. The need for Town Councils and local District Councilors to be involved in formulation of any new scheme was acknowledged.

Members requested that job descriptions, other options and their financial implications be brought back at a future meeting of the Panel for consideration.

RESOLVED:

That the Cabinet be advised that the Panel recommends as follows:-

- (i) That the current town centre management initiative be terminated at the end of the current calendar year;
- (ii) That recommendations (ii) and (iii) of the report be deleted
- (iii) That, in view of the Members' concerns as set out above, the Officers be requested to report back to a future meeting of the Panel submitting a new range of options for the Town Centre Management Co-ordination Initiative with their respective financial implications and proposed job descriptions

13. ORIGINAL RECOMMENDATION TO THE ECONOMY AND PLANNING REVIEW PANEL

13.1 That the current town centre management initiative be terminated at the end of the current calendar year.

13.2 That a new job description be prepared to fulfil the role identified in paragraph 8.12 option 3, and the post filled on a two year fixed term contract. The success of the role and any changes in context to be evaluated after two years, and the role to be reviewed in the light of the evaluation.

13.3 That a sum of £25,000 be identified from within current economic development budgets to match fund locally raised monies for initiatives within individual town centres in 2002/2003, that a process be devised for local groups to bid into this fund, and that local councils be invited to encourage such bids.

14. REVISED RECOMMENDATION TO CABINET

That in the light of the views of the Economy and Planning Review Panel:

- 14.1 That the current town centre management initiative be terminated at the end of the current calendar year.
- 14.2 That further consideration be given to the options as to how this function might be delivered, especially in relation to the developing Community Plan and the relationship with local business, and that a further report prepared for members' consideration in due course.

For further Information Contact:

Neil Miller
Economic Development Officer
Tel: (023) 8028 5353
Email: neil.miller@nfdc.gov.uk

EXPERIENCES OF SOME OTHER DISTRICTS WITH MULTIPLE CENTRES

West Wiltshire

Together with other partners (County Council, Chambers of Commerce, Community Service Councils etc), the District has established the Five Towns Partnership, with forums in each town to take forward local priorities. Grants are available to the five local councils, chambers of commerce or other broadly based local groups for projects which contribute to the vitality and viability of towns. Decision making on grant applications is devolved to quarterly meetings of a Five Towns Steering Group. Overall funding of £125,000 is available, most of which is provided by the District and the five town councils. Projects are mostly capital schemes. Funds are made available on a matching basis, of which £50,000 is provided by the District Council. The two town centre co-ordinators in the District are employed by the town councils. The initiative, which has cost some £400,000 to date, is currently being evaluated by external consultants. It is seen as a key element in local community planning.

Reigate and Banstead

The approach to town centre management has been modified significantly over the past 8 years. Until two years ago, there was one town centre manager covering four towns in the District. This post was deleted as the result of a cost savings exercise. Subsequently the funding which was available for initiatives has been incorporated into a central pool to which bids are made for individual projects by the town centre partnerships. Significant officer time, distributed between a number of individuals, is involved in facilitating this. District officers consider their task to be made easier by the strength of the existing partnerships which are already in place. The District Council views the process as working reasonably well, and see it supporting the development of the community planning process.

Kennet District

The District has at one time employed a regeneration officer on a term contract in one of the four towns in its area. The town centres agenda is now being taken forward by Town Community Partnership Liaison Officers working with the District's geographic communities. While their role involves measures funded under the South West Region Market Towns programme, they also address the partnership development agenda and issues which are more cross-cutting than individual economic development objectives, and may support area LSPs in due course.

Mendip

Have previously had one town centre manager for each of the 5 towns in the District. Have recently reorganized into 3 areas with TCMs becoming wider community development role across the whole of settlements, with town centre issues forming one constituent part of the wider community agenda. Allied to this has been the introduction of a process of area budgeting.

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