

## TOTTON COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

### 1. RECOMMENDATION

1.1 It is recommended that the Cabinet:

- a) Consider the content of the report and support progressing delivery of the projects that have been identified in the report as 'quick wins';
- b) Support in principle the 6 Design Principles which set the Vision for Totton and agree that further consultation takes place to seek views from key stakeholders such as the Town Council, County Council and Neighbourhood Plan Team; and
- c) Support more detailed technical work as set out in the report to progress a Regeneration Plan for Totton which will also inform future Local Plan work

### 2. PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

2.1 The purpose of this report is to;

- Update Cabinet on the findings of the community engagement work
- Identify some early projects that could be delivered
- Identify the next steps in the work
- Confirm the relationship between this work and future work on the Local Plan Review.

### 3. INTRODUCTION

3.1 In January 2021 NFDC together with the County Council and the NPA launched the Vision for Totton and the Waterside. The document sets out the shared vision of the opportunity across the whole of Totton and the Waterside, the collective assessment of the cumulative impact of the development aspirations, together with the partners understanding of the total infrastructure needed to support and enable the growth plans for the area, to be delivered in a way compatible with the shared vision.

3.2 The Vision acknowledge the importance role of Totton town centre and how it needed improvements to better fulfil its role as the key urban centre for the Waterside and its communities both now and as those communities grow.

3.3 The Cabinet report of May 2021 titled 'The Local Plan Review Part Two and other supporting work' identified other work areas which will complement work on the Local Plan, and/or support and enable the sustainable delivery of the adopted LPP1 sites and strategy. It identified work relating to Totton Town Centre to deliver a Regeneration Plan to reflect the ambition of the Totton and Waterside Vision document.

3.4 As the first stage of the Totton Regeneration work the Council commissioned Planning, Urban Design and Community Engagement consultancy Practice to undertake a community engagement across the Summer of 2022.

### 4. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

4.1 This report captures the results of the community engagement exercise that explored ways in which Totton town centre could be improved. Suggestions include changes to the events, activities, and retail offer so the town centre could better act as a destination for the local area all with the backdrop that the nearby Waterside area will accommodate substantial growth in the coming decade.

- 4.2 The study team's community engagement process informed two levels of proposed interventions. These are described as quick wins and future strategic areas to investigate. The quick wins comprise community-led initiatives and meanwhile use projects that can be put in place relatively quickly.
- 4.3 Four engagement techniques were used to enable the project team to connect with a wide range of people and extrapolate ideas from people in different ways. The engagement was also organised around the different and distinct geographies of the town centre area;
- Whole Town Centre – to establish what people think of Totton and the community as a whole
  - New Town Centre area- this includes the Precinct and Commercial Road area and Junction Road as far as the railway
  - Old Town Area – focusing on Rumbridge Street and Junction Road up to the railway tracks
  - Testvale Park – this includes the collection of public sector services in the campus environment
- 4.4 The engagement was carried out through;
- a series of street audio recording interviews
  - Zoom discussions with 24 people and /or organisations to participate in a series of online stakeholder meetings
  - Face to face meetings were also held with representatives from the local history group, the Totton Community Centre and the Men's Shed Group
  - Totton and Eling Neighbourhood Development Plan team
  - Survey on a Bespoke Website
  - On street discussion Boards.
- 4.5 A total of 874 responses were received from around 250 different contributors. The drawings contained at Appendix 1 represent the main ideas and comments gathered through the various street consultation exercise. The stakeholder meetings echoed much of what had already been said but there were two positions that emerged from these discussions.
- 4.6 The first prospective was that all efforts must be made to keep the cars moving within the town. The roads should be running free to minimise vehicle congestion. There were a number of ideas about how to keep cars moving and reduce the perceived congestion some more radical than others. The second prospective was to redistribute road space for non car travel. This would include reconfiguring road space to improve connectivity and encourage walking and cycling in line with national policy.

### **Key themes that emerged from the Engagement exercise - setting the Vision for Totton**

- 4.7 Seven key themes emerged from the engagement phase:

#### **Theme 1**

Cars, traffic, and congestion are a real source of irritation to people. People complained about the traffic on the roads, the roads bisecting the town, the difficulty crossing the roads, the pedestrian guard rails that deliberately prevent people crossing the streets in locations that are desirable. They also complained about the railway and the fact that when the level crossing is closed, vehicle congestion builds up. It is a point of interest that when people talked about traffic and congestion they expressed their concerns from the pedestrian experience, not that as a car driver. This is interesting as it suggests the people that were engaged saw themselves as walkers' who wanted a better pedestrian experience.

## **Theme 2**

People really liked Testvale Park and the Civic Centre area. These are key places in Totton town centre, and they are essential to the character of the town centre. That said, it is the green spaces that people identify with in these areas, rather than the buildings.

## **Theme 3**

There is a need to upgrade the Civic Campus to perhaps include better access to outdoor space and area to play for children. Several people noted that the current configuration of the civic buildings – e.g. library, Community Centre, the Three Score Club (which is privately owned) and the Health Centre could benefit from being rationalised and made more legible, while maintaining the sense of openness and green space offered by the current campus style arrangement.

## **Theme 4**

People were frustrated with the Precinct, saying it was shabby and run-down. Participants often blamed the landowner for not keeping the place maintained properly and felt the place was being allowed to deteriorate. The Precinct is the commercial heart of the town centre, but it feels tatty, unloved and people want to see visual and aesthetic improvements.

## **Theme 5**

There is a keen sense of community in Totton. It is a friendly place and people refer to it as a feeling like a village and enjoy the village atmosphere. People use Totton in multiple ways – as a local high street, as town centre and as social space.

## **Theme 6**

Totton suffers from a series of disconnected streets with severance issues caused by wide, fast roads and the railway. This interferes with easy movement around and through the town.

## **Theme 7**

The current low-density footprint of the town centre allows for intensification but only if the current disconnects due to heavy road infrastructure, the railway and poor quality walking routes can be successfully addressed.

## **Design Principles**

- 4.8 The collective results of the engagement phase have been translated into a series of potential design principles. There will now need to be wider engagement with key partners such as major land owners, the Town Council and the County Council before these principles can be agreed. The Design Principles identified are:

### **The Modern Market Town**

Totton has the potential to be a really lovely place to live and visit. It combines certain urban qualities (such as the Civic Centre area) and identifies as a town, yet people love the local community “village feel” and easy access to nearby wild spaces. In many respects, this mix of a range of local services set within countryside is the essence of the English market town. This design principle emerged through engagement when it was found that some viewed Totton as part of Southampton, and others as part of the New Forest. Others then viewed Totton as central to these, with an identity of neither being a town nor village. Instead, it is

proposed that Totton strives to become a “modern market town” — one that does not try to replicate the picture postcard qualities of some other New Forest towns but is bold and modern with its architecture, its attitudes towards sustainability and access, has strong green credentials through links to landscape and urban biodiversity and appeals to a local audience in terms of skills, employment, and urban living.

### **Independence**

People want a town centre with a greater range of independent shops. They do not want to be another Southampton but at the same time, Totton lacks basic comparison retail, such as clothes and shoe shops. Linking to the idea of principle of the “modern market town”, such services would be an expected feature of a revitalised Totton town centre. People spoke of independent business found small towns in the New Forest, such as Romsey, Hythe, Lyndhurst. This desired land use mix related to the identity of Totton, where many feel it has an independent spirit or character, but this is not reflected in the range of shops and services. Any new development in the town centre that increases commercial or retail floorspace needs to specifically think about how to accommodate and attract independent businesses.

### **Cohesive Community**

Community was a key topic that emerged during the engagement phase. Some felt a sense of community was lacking in Totton, while others said there were areas with a strong community feel and this could be revealed and expanded to the wider town centre area. One way of creating a strong sense of community would be through the creation of more civic spaces in the town centre – both hard landscaped space and green spaces. Creating walkable links between these locations will be important to establish a network of spaces. People spoke highly of existing events that are regularly organised, of the Three Score Club and the Community Centre adjacent to Testvale Park. An enhanced programme of events and activities to animate these spaces will be a key part of fostering a more cohesive community.

### **Connected & Permeable**

Words that emerged during the engagement phase to describe Totton town centre included disconnected, fragmented, and disjointed. People said they often visited one bit of the town centre at a time, with few linked trips. For example, the Precinct and Rumbridge Street were seen as separate, disconnected entities, isolated from each other, and not part of one joined-up town centre. The main causes of this fragmentation are the A336/A36 Commercial Road and the railway level-crossing, which people perceive as “hard barriers” to their journey. However, while this is a genuine issue, the severance is more psychological. The walking distance is short between the north and south of the town even if it feels much longer. This is an area that will need to be explored further supported by further technical work.

### **Links to Landscape**

Though Totton is a relatively urban area, it was widely recognised that the town centre lies in close proximity to green and blue infrastructure and wild areas, such as the Lower Test Valley Nature Reserve to the north and Eling and Southampton Water to the south. These natural features should make it a very attractive place for leisure and health. This design principle emerged as people identified that one thing that they loved living in Totton was living in close proximity to nature and green spaces, whether that be the New Forest, Eling, or Test Valley. However, many said that these spaces and routes just outside the town centre were not well known, and not signposted. If more people were made aware of these routes, it may encourage people to get active for leisure, but also to walk into town to do errands if they are aware of a more attractive route than their usual route that may just encourage them to drive.

## **Flexible & Adaptable**

The hard infrastructure of roads and rail that have blighted the town centre are an example of inflexible and rigid urban interventions. They create hard edges and affect the land either side in ways that make it difficult to reinvent, repurpose and remodel for new uses. In a similar way, the campus environment of the Civic Centre area has an irregular and scattered layout of pavilion buildings that fail to frame public space in a safe and legible way. This leads to an inflexibility in the way this area can adapt to changing economic, social, and environmental demands.

### **5. QUICK WINS**

- 5.1 Many of those that engaged in the work said that more community events could improve Totton. Consideration needs to be given to where these events could take place within the town centre, potentially within existing car parks or the park given the temporary nature of the events. These events could include markets but also could consider play activities.
- 5.2 Whilst there were differing views on the role of the car within Totton town centre there was overriding concern about the impact of traffic on the sense of place. Within and alongside this engagement work there is a recognised need for better signage with walking within the town and for route maps to be produced. A further initiative could be a Totton Walking Festival which could support highlighting existing routes to those less familiar with the town and the routes to the surrounding countryside. Residents could also be encouraged to map the route from their home to the festival. This initiative would tie in with the work that has been piloted in New Milton to identify Green Infrastructure projects and work on the Greenway Routes.
- 5.3 A more detailed piece of work could be done through the Environmental Design team to identify opportunities to introduce 'play on the way' features similar to those included within a number of new development across the district. There may also be opportunities across the town centre for small areas of urban greening which could form part of this work.
- 5.4 A more detailed examination of the layout and design of Testvale Park and the surrounding area should be progressed with the Town Council to identify how this area could be enhanced to contribute to the sense of community and place within the town centre.

### **6. FUTURE WORK**

- 6.1 This initial Community Engagement work has set a clear ambition from the community of Totton to make improvements to the town centre. It is important that communication and engagement continues. There is clear opportunity across the immediate and wider town centre for redevelopment or intensification to continue to support a mix of uses within the town centre. There are also clear opportunities to shift the town street structure towards a greener economy and more people focused town.
- 6.2 Whilst some initial work was done immediately before the pandemic around future needs of public bodies that currently occupy the Civic Quarter more detailed work is needed to understand the future shape of this area within the overall context of the town centre and surrounding area. A more detailed Master planning workstream will be commissioned during 2023 bring together specialist advice on urban design, transport, viability, retail and employment need together with advice on market demand and deliverability.
- 6.3 Whilst this is a separate workstream from the Local Plan Review it will inform the Local Plan Review. Land within the Town Centre identified for redevelopment may be allocated within a future Local Plan. It is therefore important that future work is detailed enough to be used as evidence to support the Local Plan.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS**

- 7.1 The level of response to this community engagement work demonstrated the passion and strength of feeling the community has for Totton. The work has identified a number of quick wins that can now be worked up into projects. Members will recall that the UK Shared Prosperity Fund allocated £220,000 for Town Centre Improvements with the schemes proposed including activities such as one-off markets, healthy eating demonstrations and cultural events with early pilots in Totton.
- 7.2 The engagement work has also identified more strategic issues that will inform the next stage of more detailed technical work. Feedback from the community of Totton has led to 7 potential Design Principles that would set the vision for Totton which now need to be tested with partners.

## **8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 8.1 The suggested 'quick wins' will be funded through the UKSP Fund.
- 8.2 The proposed General Fund revenue budget for 2023/24 has included a new annual regeneration working budget of £50,000 which will support the more detailed work involved in the next stages. Although no sums specific to regeneration projects are currently included in the Council's Capital Programme, the Medium-Term Financial Plan has indicated that Capital resources will likely be required over the more medium-long term as larger place shaping regeneration projects are developed and brought forward for due consideration.
- 8.2 There is also budget for a Town Centre Regeneration officer. The initial recruitment cycle for this post was not successful, with a clearer programme of work through the UKSP Fund officers are optimistic that a further recruitment exercise maybe successful.

## **9. CRIME & DISORDER IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1 The 'quick wins' identified will improve the sense of pride and community cohesion within Totton which has been shown to reduce crime within area. Longer term initiatives will also create a safe environment and design out crime.

## **10. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1 The impact on more strategic changes to the town centre will need to be fully tested to understand their impact on the environment. The 'quick wins' are designed to encourage walking reducing the impact of the car journeys on the environment and making a positive contribution to the Climate and Nature Emergency.

## **11. EQUALITY & DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS**

- 11.1 The findings of the community engagement work will inform short, medium and long-term change within Totton town centre helping to create a place that is more inclusive.

## **12. PORTFOLIO HOLDER COMMENTS**

- 12.1 The success and future of Totton as the largest centre at the heart of the Waterside area is important to the district as a whole, especially for the people who live and work there. The engagement study clearly identifies community ambitions for Totton to be a modern market town, and this ambition should be supported by following through with the recommended next steps to deliver both quick wins and developing a strategy for longer term regeneration. Whilst

this paper focuses on Totton various work is going on in other towns and communities with a view to evolving those towns in the future.

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**Background Papers:**

None

## Appendix A



### Testvale Park

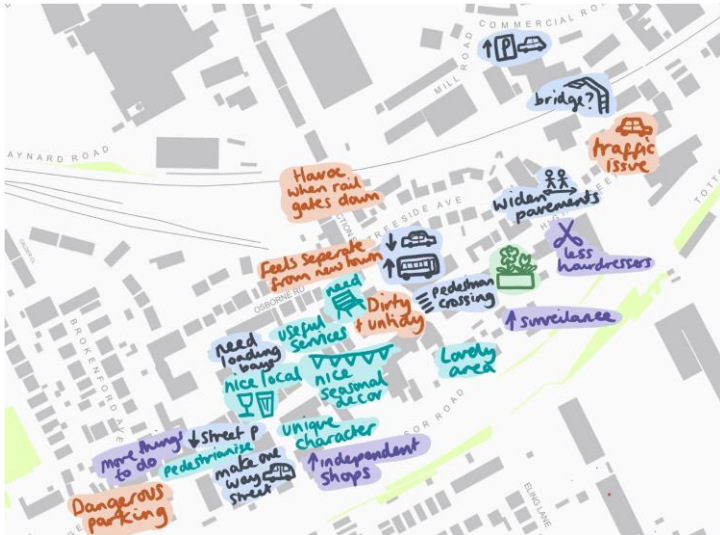
This drawing represents the main ideas and comments for the Testvale Park area as gathered through the various street consultation exercises to date



### New Totton Town Centre area

This drawing represents the main ideas and comments for the New Totton area as gathered through the various street consultation exercises to date





## Rumbridge Street

This drawing represents the main ideas and comments for the Rumbridge Street area as gathered through the various street consultation exercises to date.