Committee: Cabinet
Date of meeting: 13 March 2019

Subject: Future of the High Streets in Elmbridge
Lead Officer: Rob Moran, Chief Executive
Portfolio Holder: Councillor James Browne, Leader of the Council, Councillor Ruth Mitchell, Portfolio Holder for Resources
Link to Council Priorities: All
Exempt information: None
Delegated status: For resolution
Key Decision: N/A

Executive Summary:

Across the country, we have seen the changes facing our high streets and town centres due to the changing nature of retail. Town centres are evolving, and traditional retail will not return to the high streets that existed 10 or 20 years ago.

This report makes suggestions as to how Elmbridge Borough Council could coordinate work to ensure that High Streets in Elmbridge continue to be places where people visit.

Recommended: that

(a) a Member/Officer working group be established to look at the future of High Streets/Town Centres in Elmbridge; and
(b) agree the terms of reference as outlined in paragraph 6.1.

Report:

1.0 Economic strategy 2019 – 2023

1.1 In January 2019 the Cabinet adopted the Economic Strategy 2019 – 2023. The strategy builds on The Building a Smarter Future work undertaken with the Local Government Association and reflects opportunities and threats outlined by our businesses through our business engagement work with the Elmbridge Business Leaders Board, Elmbridge Business Network and surveys of the business community.

2.0 Enterprise Elmbridge Action Plan 2019-2021

2.1 The strategy sits alongside an updated Enterprise Elmbridge Action Plan 2019 – 2021 helping to steer economic development activity, attract external funding and support our businesses, town and village centres to ensure Elmbridge remains a great place to do business.

The action plan builds on the Enterprise Elmbridge work to date and reflects the strategic objectives set out in the Economic Strategy.
3.0 **Elmbridge Local Plan**

3.1 A Local Plan sets out the long-term strategy for the Borough, outlining how we will ensure growth is delivered in the right places. It does this by setting out local planning policies and identifies how land is used, determining what will be built where. Alongside national planning policies, planning applications are assessed against local planning policies.

3.2 The Council’s current Local Plan consists of a suite of individual planning documents. The Core Strategy (adopted 2011) provides a high-level policy in relation to our town and village centres, seeking for them to be the focus for new development, provide a range of service in well-designed environments that are accessible. This takes into account each of the centre’s respective roles and characters. In addition, the Development Management Plan (2015) sets more detailed planning policies in relation to the evening economy and advertisements, shopfronts and signage against which planning applications are assessed.

3.3 The Council closely monitors the vitality and viability of the Borough’s retail centres and undertakes annual ‘health checks’ in relation to vacancy rates and mix of offer. The outcome from the ‘health checks’ provides an indication of how well the Council’s existing planning policies relating to our centres are performing. This also provides vital evidence to inform policies emerging from the new Local Plan.

3.4 As part of the preparation of our new Local Plan, the Council needs to consider the Borough’s development needs over the next 15 years. This includes retail demand in terms of floor space, but also the function and role of our centres to support the delivery of sustainable communities. The new Local Plan is a placemaking tool and will include land use allocations, designations and broad/strategic policies to steer development as well as more detailed planning policies.

4.0 **Elmbridge Town Centres and High Streets**

4.1 As part of the Enterprise Elmbridge Action Plan a number of activities and initiatives have been undertaken to support our High Streets, these are outlined in Appendix A. It is recognised that the work has been received well in the High Street, but the future of town centres and high streets is changing and in order to support this the Council needs to examine more closely what action it needs to take.

4.2 From a local and national perspective, it is clear that town centres and high streets are evolving, and evidence suggests that traditional retail will not return to the high streets that existed 10 or 20 years ago. A combination of internet shopping, the convenience of out of town retailing and an exceptional number of well-established retail formats reaching the end of their commercial life cycle suggests that it is time for the Council to re-evaluate its role in relation to the high street.
4.3 This report outlines some proposals which will hopefully assist in ensuring that our town centres and high streets continue to be the focal point of our towns and villages. As a Council we can support our town centre space through working in collaboration with all sections of the community. Our vision is to support town centres, high streets and villages to ensure they are the places where people want to be.

5.0 Reimagining our town centres

5.1 Reimagining our town centres should not be seen as a central programme dictated by the Council. It should involve a series of locally inspired and led initiatives that are supported and guided by the Local Plan and a Council that offers information and helps to clear obstacles out of the way. As a Council we can use our community leadership role to help on a town by town basis, enabling local leaders to design future town centres that recreate a community hub.

5.2 The town centre of the future should attract local people to take part in a variety of activities - including dining, leisure and sport, culture and the arts, entertainment, medical services, and many more uses. They should also contain business premises, offices and residential including affordable housing.

5.3 National evidence indicates the major obstacles that prevent local communities from reshaping their towns to provide spaces fit for the future are as follows: planning issues (including permitted development rights), a shortage of specialist expertise in space design and the lack of local leadership.

5.4 Local initiative is an essential ingredient for success. The proposal is not to offer places a standard off-the-shelf process because a one-size-fits-all solution will not work. Local teams, which may comprise of the Council, businesses and community groups, in each town must discover a culture and central purpose that unites their community and attracts them to the town’s central hub. We have found that each successful town has its own brand and understands its unique selling point and as a Council we wish to explore how we can more proactively support this.

5.5 As life becomes more dominated by digital technology, there is an increasing need to encourage social interaction. Face-to-face communication has an important part to play in wellbeing, by establishing the strong attachment with others that are a critical part of making us human.

6.0 Working Group

6.1 It is suggested that the Council set up a member/officer working group to look at the future of the high street. It is suggested that the terms of reference could be as listed below:
• The role of Elmbridge high streets and town centres in contributing to the local economy and the health, wellbeing, cohesion and cultural life of the local community.
• The economic, demographic, social and technological challenges facing Elmbridge high streets and town centres and how they are likely to develop over the next ten years.
• How Elmbridge high streets and town centres are adapting to meet these challenges, the conditions necessary for sustainability, for example, residential development and related infrastructure, and how local areas are planning for the future.
• The future outlook for Elmbridge high streets and town centres when they may not be able to rely on consumer spending and business growth and investment.
• Whether Elmbridge have the planning, licensing, tax raising and other tools needed to help Elmbridge flourish and how they make use of these.

6.2 The working group should consider looking at involving people from different sectors and different types of organisation. The group should consider looking at how to engage and build a collaborative vision with community organisations and entrepreneurs.

6.3 One of the best ways to improve and inspire local leadership is through bringing them together. By bringing together inspirational community leaders, with other Councillors, the group could give them an opportunity to listen to experts, best practice and allow for discussion about what is best for Elmbridge.

The working group could engage a mix of local stakeholders, experts and best practice including interviews with representatives from the following groups.

- Esher Business Guild
- Weybridge Town Business Group
- Walton-on-Thames Trading Alliance
- Cobham Chamber of Commerce
- Molesey Business Association
- Thames Ditton High Street Retailers Association
- Claygate Traders
- Bridge Road Traders
- Surrey Chambers of Commerce
- Specialist town centre speakers (For example the Association of Town and City Management)
- Enterprise M3 Local Enterprise Partnership
- Established Business Improvement District representatives from across Surrey
- Wider town centre and community groups (For example Cobham Heritage or the Weybridge Society)
- Landlords and national and independent businesses in our town centres from a mix of sectors and high streets
6.4 It is anticipated that the review group will take up to a year to reach its conclusions. Councillors will be invited to join who have an interest in the work of the group and who represent a mix of village and town centre perspectives.

7.0 Future High Street Fund

7.1 In the Budget on 29 October 2018, the Chancellor announced a £675 million Future High Street Fund to help Town Centres plan better spaces for their communities.

Future High Streets Fund is now open for expressions of interest for projects seeking co-funding towards capital projects that bring transformative change. The Government is looking for applications that support the regeneration of our town centres through innovative proposals around transport, housing delivery and our public services. Local Authorities can bid for between £5m - £10m in capital funding.

Elmbridge Borough Council is working with local partners in Weybridge on a Future High Streets Fund application as we explore the potential for funding and support from the fund across various projects including: affordable housing delivery (Weybridge Estate), service transformation (via the Government’s One Public Estate programme), regeneration (Weybridge Hall plans to deliver a new two screen cinema/affordable housing), sustainable transport (Brooklands Accessibility) and improvements to the public realm (Weybridge Streetscape) to develop and implement our vision to meet the challenges of becoming a sustainable 21st century town centre.

Weybridge was selected as the town can demonstrate a range of challenges: housing affordability, the changing local demographic, importance of talent attraction and the retention of leading international businesses.

The application will help ensure that Weybridge town centre can continue to support the Borough’s key economic cluster with approx. 17,500 jobs and the likes of leading international firms such as Sony and Proctor & Gamble based across the wider Weybridge hinterland.

If the draft application is supported by the Council, the final submission date for the Future High Street Fund is: 22 March 2019.

8.0 Conclusion

8.1 The working group will play an important role in developing, enabling and evaluating what needs to be done with Elmbridge High Streets/Town Centres. The establishment of a working group will help to develop clear strategies that unearth and mobilise local resources to ensure that Town Centres and Villages continue to thrive and are places where people want to visit.

Financial implications:
None
Environmental/Sustainability Implications:
Economic development contributes to sustainable communities. Actions to support our town and village centres can contribute to customers buying produce locally, reducing vehicle trips.

Legal implications:
None

Equality Implications:
None

Risk Implications:
Failure to promote economic growth could result in a reduction in business rate revenues, which under new legislative proposals could affect Council income.

Community Safety Implications:
None

Principal Consultees:

Background papers:
None

Enclosures/Appendices:
Appendix A: Enterprise Elmbridge

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