

## **Economy and Growth Committee**

---

<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	17 January 2023
<b>Report Title:</b>	Town Centre Vitality Plans
<b>Report of:</b>	Jayne Traverse, Executive Director - Place
<b>Report Reference no:</b>	EG/02/2022-23
<b>Ward(s) Affected:</b>	All Wards

---

### **1. Purpose of Report**

- 1.1. This report seeks approval of Town Centre Vitality Plans for Alsager, Congleton, Handforth, Knutsford, Middlewich, Nantwich, Poynton, Sandbach and Wilmslow.
- 1.2. Each Town Centre Vitality Plan sets out priorities for supporting the vitality and viability of specific town centres as and when funding opportunities arise.

### **2. Executive Summary**

- 2.1. The Corporate Plan states that ensuring Cheshire East is a thriving and sustainable place is a corporate priority. In pursuit of this aim it states that the Council will work with partners and key stakeholders to understand what is important to our towns and produce town centre recovery plans for key centres, other than Crewe and Macclesfield which already have town centre regeneration strategies in place.
- 2.2. Officers have progressed this workstream, commissioning the development of Town Centre Vitality Plans for the borough's nine key service centres as identified in the Local Plan. With input from Town Councils, draft plans have been produced and the public subsequently consulted on those draft plans.
- 2.3. The Town Centre Vitality Plans identify projects and initiatives which should be the subject of focus as and when sources of funding become available. They do not commit the Council to funding any initiatives or projects at this stage.

- 2.4. Any projects that are brought forward will require a High Level Business Case that has been fully assessed, that is affordable both from a capital and revenue perspective and meets the Council's objective before being considered for approval as a capital project in the Medium Term Financial Strategy.
- 2.5. This report and associated appendices give an overview of the public consultation and the feedback received and set out recommended final TCVP for formal approval.

### **3. Recommendations**

- 3.1. That Committee approve the Town Centre Vitality Plans set out in Appendix A, endorsing the priorities they identify to be taken forward to support town centre health as and when suitable funding opportunities arise, and resources allow.
- 3.2. That Committee endorse Town Councils being requested to also approve the plans with a view to establishing a joint set of agreed priorities.

### **4. Reasons for Recommendations**

- 4.1. The Council is committed to supporting successful town centres in the borough's key towns as set out in the Corporate Plan.
- 4.2. Research is clear that having a clear vision and strategy to facilitate collaboration is key to driving forward positive change in town centres.
- 4.3. Additionally, when town centre funding opportunities arise, it is often a critical requirement that funding bids demonstrate a clear strategy and rationale for projects put forward. Demonstrating community support for those plans is also often key to securing funding.
- 4.4. The Council has enabled the development of Town Centre Vitality Plans, with input from Town Councils, with a view to identifying priority projects and initiatives for supporting town centre vitality.
- 4.5. The draft plans have been the subject of a six-week public consultation. All representations have been considered by the consultant team with amendments made to the plans as considered appropriate, as detailed in Appendix B to this report.
- 4.6. The plans are now considered by officers to be suitable for approval and adoption by the Council.

### **5. Other Options Considered**

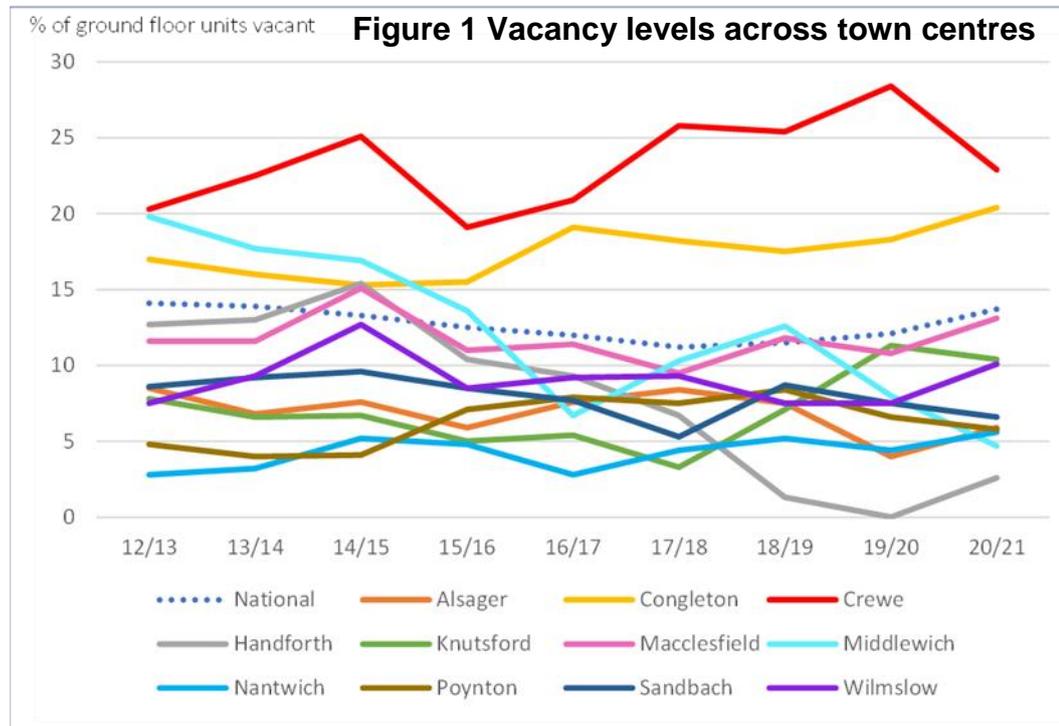
- 5.1. Not approving the Town Centre Vitality Plans is the clear alternative option. Revising the plans with further rounds of consultation would be another.

Option	Impact	Risk
<b>Do nothing</b>	Not approving the Town Centre Vitality Plans would leave the Council without specific approved proposals for supporting the town centres of key towns and continued lack of clarity over which actions should be taken forward (as resources allow) to support town centre health.	<p>Reducing the likely success of any future funding bids.</p> <p>Resources diverted responding to ad hoc requests to support various uncoordinated town centre projects which may conflict</p> <p>Failure to deliver actions identified in Corporate Plan</p>
<b>Further consultation and refinement</b>	Delays and additional costs	<p>Missed opportunities to ensure funding such as Shared Prosperity Fund is aligned to agreed town centre priorities</p> <p>Resources diverted from delivery of regeneration projects</p>

## 6. Background

- 6.1** The Council is committed to supporting the health of town centres as indicated in the Corporate Plan and recognises that every town centre across the borough is an important hub for the residents and businesses in its catchment.
- 6.2** However, with challenges around funding and resources, the Council has to prioritise where it focuses that support. Areas of focus are influenced by a variety of factors.
- 6.3** Town centre health is of course key, but this needs to be measured on an objective basis to enable fair comparisons. There are many indicators recognised as being potentially relevant in assessing town centre health with 13 different indicators identified in national planning guidance. Every 5 years the Council commissions an assessment of town centre health, the latest published in June 2020 as part of the Cheshire East Retail Study Partial Update. Aside from these 5 yearly health checks, until 2020 the Council had limited current data to help it understand the vitality and viability of town centres. Whilst annual ground floor vacancy surveys have been carried out for many years, reported as part of the Council's annual Authority Monitoring Report (AMR), these are only a single indicator, and the headline figures can be misleading. For example, considering **Figure 1** which identifies the vacancy levels in town centres since 2013, Congleton has recorded vacancy levels in excess of 20%. On face value, this could be taken as an indication

that the health of Congleton Town Centre is weak, but analysis of the data reveals that a large proportion of vacancies are clustered in two private developments (Capital Walk and Bridestone development) which have been closed and not actively marketed for a number of years, distorting the true health of the letting market in Congleton.



**6.4** As the borough’s largest town, with the greatest levels of deprivation, the most significant allocation for new homes in the Local Plan Strategy, and with national funding opportunities associated with HS2, Crewe has been the obvious focus for town centre regeneration activity in recent years. The Council commissioned a Regeneration Delivery Framework for Crewe town centre, completed back in 2015, and has been able to make a strong case for Government funding for the town centre linked to the opportunities around HS2. Consequently, Crewe has an ambitious town centre regeneration programme.

**6.5** The importance of Macclesfield town, with the highest number of retail/service units of any town in the borough as well as the highest recorded town centre footfall, has also been recognised for some time. In October 2019 the Council approved the Macclesfield Town Centre Strategic Regeneration Framework (SRF) to set a clear strategy for its revitalisation as and when resources allow. This has facilitated the Council in putting forward bids for funding when opportunities have arisen such as Levelling up Fund bids. Unfortunately, in the highly competitive environment for central Levelling Up Funding, it has been extremely challenging to secure funds for Macclesfield, which does not have the same demonstrable level of need or opportunity as Crewe. Nevertheless, having a clear strategy for the town centre remains important as a tool for focusing what resources do become

available and the SRF has been useful in enabling officers to collaborate with other key stakeholders such as the Town Council, to take forward incremental town centre projects in the knowledge they will complement longer term plans. It has also proven to be useful in responding to private developer's enquiries, giving clarity over the types of private town centre development that should be encouraged and supported.

- 6.6** More recently, the Council included in its Corporate Plan the intention to consider how best to support the centre of other towns via the development of town centre focused plans for the borough's other key towns. With the rise of internet retailing, banking etc. all town centres are in a period of transition during which they may need support. Recognising that all towns are individual and there is no recognised single strategy which will suit all, in 2020 the Council commissioned the development of Town Centre Vitality Plans for the borough's nine 'Key Service Centres' as defined in the Local Plan.
- 6.7** Additionally, recognising the need for additional data to inform thinking on town centres, initially utilising government funding made available via the Reopening High Street Safely Fund and Welcome Back Fund, and subsequently utilising the Economic Development Service budget, the Council also commissioned the collection of footfall/visitor information across the borough's two principal towns and nine key service centres up to September 2026. This data enables comparison of activity levels across eleven town centres, using data collected in a consistent manner. This data has enabled the Council to understand the comparable impacts of Covid 19 on town centre footfall in different towns and, it is clear, that impacts have varied from town to town.
- 6.8** This data has been used to help inform the development of the Town Centre Vitality Plans, together with a variety of other data collected from secondary sources as well as from site visits and local workshops held with town councils and in some cases other key local stakeholders.
- 6.9** On 30 November 2021 Economy and Growth Committee considered a Town Centre Regeneration Update, noting the progress made in developing Town Centre Vitality Plans and agreeing that the draft reports should be issued for public consultation in early 2022, with a further report to committee post that consultation.
- 6.10** That public consultation has now been undertaken as set out in more detail in the following sections.

## **7 Consultation and Engagement**

- 7.1** Two rounds of workshops with individual town councils have been undertaken to ensure local knowledge and views were embedded into the

draft Town Centre Vitality Plans. Attendance at the workshops has varied from town to town. The first round of workshops focused on SWOT analysis of the town centres to both inform the baseline position and to start to identify potential areas of focus. The output from those workshops was then considered alongside a wide range of additional baseline data collected from secondary sources and site visits to identify potential areas for focus in each town. Tentative suggestions as to areas for focus were then discussed in a second round of workshops, before draft Town Centre Vitality Plans were produced.

- 7.2** Following the production of draft plans officers held a total of eighteen briefing sessions, one for the local ward members of each town, and one for each town council. This was followed by a six week online public consultation to enable the public to put forward comments and suggestions whilst the plans were still at a formative stage. Further details of the consultation, including both an overview of the process and feedback received in response, is set out in the Report of Consultation at Appendix B.

## **8 Implications**

### **8.1 Legal**

- 8.1.1** Town Centre Vitality Plans do not negate the need for further action to be taken where appropriate and necessary, e.g., submission of a Planning Application for any development or change of use. The TCVP do not have any formal status within the Council's Local Plan.

### **8.2 Finance**

- 8.2.1** The Town Centre Vitality Plans identify projects and initiatives which should be the subject of focus as and when sources of funding become available. They do not commit the Council to funding any initiatives or projects at this stage.
- 8.2.2** Any projects that are brought forward will require a High Level Business Case that has been fully assessed, that is affordable both from a capital and revenue perspective and meets the Council's objective before being considered for approval as a capital project in the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

### **8.3 Policy**

- 8.3.1** The Corporate Plan recognises that successful town centres are vital to ensuring thriving urban and rural economies with opportunities for all, but town centre projects and initiatives can support more than a thriving economy. If designed and delivered with holistic thinking, town centre revitalisation and regeneration projects can help support numerous Council policies, for example by: enabling and encouraging a sense of community and combating isolation by better utilising public spaces providing new opportunities for people to come together and socialise; improving health and reducing carbon emissions by reducing car dominance and facilitating and encouraging cycling and walking

into and within town centres; and highlighting heritage assets thereby supporting their appreciation and conservation.

## **8.4 Equality**

**8.4.1** Public authorities have a legal responsibility to assess their activities, and to set out how they will protect people from discrimination on the basis of their 'protected characteristics'. An initial Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) was undertaken prior to the development of Town Centre Vitality Plans. This raised no specific implications for equality stemming from the plans. The EIA was reviewed following consideration of representations submitted at public consultation stage and has been developed into nine individual EIA. These indicate that for all towns the recommended actions within the TCVP have the potential to impact differently on people with protected characteristics dependant on the detail of any projects taken forward. To ensure equality impacts are properly considered it will therefore be appropriate to undertake specific, focused EIAs as and projects are taken forward aligned to recommended actions in the TCVP.

## **8.5 Human Resources**

**8.5.1** There are considered to be no direct implications for human resources stemming from this update report.

## **8.6 Risk Management**

**8.6.1** When approving any strategy or plan seeking to improve any aspect of the borough of interests to residents and the business community, there is a risk that expectations will be raised unrealistically. This can be mitigated by clear communication on the Council's website that Town Centre Vitality Plans are not a commitment to delivering the projects and initiatives they identify as desirable but rather a tool to support the Council and others in seeking funding and driving forward initiatives and proposals as and when resources allow.

## **8.7 Rural Communities**

**8.7.1** As Town Centre Vitality Plans are focused on town centres there are considered to be no specific implications for rural communities. However, it should be recognised that many residents of rural areas will visit town centres and may also be impacted by any future proposals brought forward aligned to the Town Centre Vitality Plans.

## **8.8 Children and Young People/Cared for Children**

**8.8.1** Town centres offer facilities and spaces which can be used by residents of all ages. Key to successful town centres is recognising that younger people may look to town centres to provide activities and opportunities in a different way to older generations. For example, whilst since 2010 the percentage of adults holding a driving licence has increased overall, the percentage in the 17-20 year age groups has significantly reduced, suggesting that younger adults are less likely to have independent use of a car and thus perhaps more likely to

appreciate town centres which support walking and cycling and place less priority on catering for motor vehicles.

## 8.9 Public Health

8.9.1 The quality of the built environment is a determining factor for mental and physical health. Noise, pollution, access to safe spaces to cycle and walk, quality of open space, opportunities for people to meet and socialise, access to services and appearance can all play a part. Therefore, town centre strategies and projects can have an impact on mental and physical health and creating accessible, inclusive town centres that enable everyone to play an equal role in society is important in protecting and enhancing well-being and health.

## 8.10 Climate Change

8.10.1 The Town Centre Vitality Plans recognise the pressing need to reduce carbon emissions and tackle the climate emergency. The plans incorporate several suggestions aimed at facilitating and encouraging increased walking and cycling to and within centres and reducing the priority and dominance of motorised vehicles. As any individual projects are brought forward further opportunities can be explored on other specific measures to reduce carbon may be embedded.

<b>Access to Information</b>	
Contact Officer:	Jo Wise, Development and Regeneration Delivery Manager Jo.wise@cheshireeast.gov.uk 07939 508547
Appendices:	A: Recommended Final Town Centre Vitality Plans B. Report on Consultation
Background Papers:	<a href="#">HSUK2020-End-of-Project-Reportcompressed.pdf</a> <a href="#">(placemanagement.org)</a> <a href="#">Equality Impact Assessment</a>