

Report to: Cabinet
Date of meeting: 11th Nov 2013
Report of: Andrew Gibson – Economic Development Manager
Title: Future Town Centre Management and Business Advice Arrangements

1.0 **SUMMARY**

- 1.1 Over the past months consideration has been given to the best way of managing the Town Centre and how best to evolve business advice services. This has resulted in two projects which are outlined below.
- 1.2 A new Town Centre Partnership has been formed comprising a wide range of stakeholders, including local business leaders and the Mayor and Managing Director.
- 1.3 At its inaugural meeting on the 3rd September, the Shadow Partnership Board discussed the need for a dedicated post to support the partnership's activities and the proposed use of the £100k allocated by government to WBC through the High Street Innovation Fund.
- 1.4 It was agreed that a town of Watford's size and ambition should have a dedicated Town Centre Manager with an associated budget to implement and deliver the priorities of the Town Centre Partnership. It was agreed that WBC would employ the Town Centre Manager by reallocating budget from an existing vacant post (originally the Town Centre Programme Manager) and that the £100k High Street Innovation Fund would be allocated to the partnership over 2 years.
- 1.5 The economic downturn and resulting cuts have had a significant impact on the public sector landscape of business support. With the demise of Regional Development Agencies and major cuts to national programmes such as Business Link (which has moved entirely to an online resource), businesses are finding it difficult to navigate or find suitable sources of support, financial or otherwise, which would help them sustain or indeed grow their business.
- 1.6 Watford is in a somewhat unique position in that we have a range of local stakeholders each with a role to play in helping to create, support and ultimately grow local businesses. While existing initiatives are proving successful, there is a growing understanding that even greater impact could be achieved by adopting a truly multi-disciplinary approach to business support by creating a single point of contact/signposting facility to help direct the business to the most applicable source of advice or information.
- 1.7 An opportunity has arisen for the co-location of a number of these key stakeholders

with the Watford & West Herts Chamber of Commerce in one building in a central accessible location. This presents the best opportunity, to date, to create a single point of contact for advice and signposting to the range of business support still available. Advantages of a multi-disciplinary approach include: creating a focal point for business issues, reducing duplication and providing an all round better service for business – ensuring that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

- 1.8 Premises have been identified in Clarendon Road which could accommodate the proposed Business Advice Service, a new permanent location for the Chamber and its staff and the Town Centre Manager. This would create flexible space from which to operate the proposed Town Centre Management office and a business advice and signposting facility.

2.0 **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 To agree the appointment of a Town Centre Manager responsible for implementing the priorities of the Town Centre Partnership.
- 2.2 To agree the allocation of £100k High Street Innovation Fund to the Town Centre Partnership over two years.
- 2.3 To agree the establishment of the One Stop Business Advice centre, co-located within Watford & West Herts Chamber of Commerce on Clarendon Road, and the subsequent capital and rental contributions.

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Report approved by:

Jane Custance, Head of Planning and Regeneration

3.0 **DETAILED PROPOSAL**

Town Centre Partnership and the appointment of a Town centre Manager

- 3.1 The creation of a Town or City Centre Partnership (TCP) is recognised best practice in many localities across the UK and is subject to significant commentary around the future of town centres in recent studies such as the Mary Portas Review and the Grimsey Review.

Partnerships are often created as a response to complex and multifaceted problems that cannot be tackled effectively by an individual or single organisation. They therefore have the potential to deliver real benefits for town centres and in most instances, deliver outputs that often exceed the sum of their parts.

- 3.2 An effective TCP can:
- ✓ Create a forum to engage local stakeholders in discussion and collaboration
 - ✓ Shape and influence organisational agendas to develop a shared strategic approach to town centre development
 - ✓ Deliver baseline services and/or provide a channel for additional services and enhanced delivery
 - ✓ Facilitate access to multiple funding and resource opportunities to enhance town centres
 - ✓ In addition, an effective TCP can provide flexibility, innovation and additional financial and human capital resources to help solve problems, all of which are powerful incentives for organisations to work together to benefit the town centre, local communities and in particular, local businesses.
- (Managing Town Centre Partnerships, CLG, 2008)
- 3.3 Local authorities and the wider public sector have much to gain from supporting business-led partnerships. Effective engagement with business can help to:
- ✓ Better understand business needs in order to support the prosperity of the town centre
 - ✓ Raise extra resource for service enhancement
 - ✓ Find delivery mechanisms which help the public sector to deliver services more efficiently and effectively and help achieve public sector targets in an era of reduced public finances; and
 - ✓ Develop new accountability mechanisms and communication tools with town centre stakeholders.
- 3.4 At the inaugural meeting of the Watford TCP on the 3rd September five key reasons were identified as to why now was the right time to create a new TCP for Watford:
- 1) There is an opportunity for the town centre to maximise the benefit from current major investments taking place: The Parade improvements, the new Watford Market, Charter Place redevelopment with Intu, the new Met Quarter restaurant area and other public realm works happening in the wider town centre
 - 2) There is an opportunity to develop a programme of events to promote the town centre and increase footfall, dwell time and visitor diversity.
 - 3) There is potential to build a more balanced town centre that includes retail, the night time economy, leisure and professional services co-existing, complementing each other in their offer to residents and visitors and ultimately increasing prosperity
 - 4) Increasing Watford's competitiveness as a retail destination – whilst the town is under pressure from other retail hubs, the Partnership can explore ways to improve marketing of the town to increase footfall and investigate ways to decrease vacancy rates taking account of the CRL extension into Lower High Street and the current capital investments.
 - 5) The opportunity to intensify marketing and promoting Watford so that the Town's regional standing continues to be enhanced building on the initial work of Watford For You and the success of Imagine Watford.

The can also consider how barriers to success can be addressed and explore how businesses could work together to overcome the challenges that the town centre faces.

3.5 It is important in any early-stage partnership that resources are available to stimulate or incentivise participation. The Council was recently awarded £100k from the High Street Innovation Fund with the aim of helping support and tackle impacts from the economic downturn. It is recommended that, in the spirit of partnership and the recommendations of both the Portas and Grimbsy reviews, this funding be allocated to partnership activity. In terms of human capital to take forward the work of the TCP and the implementation of its priorities, it is recommended that WBC support the creation of a dedicated Town centre Managers post. This post can be supported by reallocating budget from an existing vacant post (formerly the Town centre Programme Manager).

3.6 **Emerging Vision for the Town Centre Partnership**

Whilst the Council is taking a leadership, pump priming role to support this key initiative, partner funding for the TCP costs is under discussion. In addition in the long term it is possible that the TCP will form as a legal entity to stimulate a Business Improvement District which if successful, will generate additional resources for the Town Centre. Furthermore, the Watford For You website has been hosted by John Lewis and co-funded by Intu, John Lewis and the Council. The TCP would be the appropriate vehicle to lead this marketing and promotion activity in due course and also to take a key role when appropriate to commission and oversee Town centre events.

Business Advice Centre co-located with Watford & West Herts Chamber of Commerce

3.7 The economic downturn and resulting cuts have had a significant impact on the public sector landscape of business support. With the demise of Regional Development Agencies and major cuts to national programmes such as Business Link (which has moved entirely to an online resource), businesses are finding it difficult to navigate or find suitable sources of support, financial or otherwise, which would help them sustain or indeed grow their business.

WENTA and the Chamber of Commerce both currently operate from premises at Colne Way. These facilities are under pressure from the high level of business start-ups and from the Chamber's point of view are not ideal as a base for business engagement. The Chamber has been looking for a town centre location which would better suit their needs and those of their clients.

Along with Chamber Services an inward investment service is located there, which would also benefit from a higher quality and more accessible location.

Although the work of WENTA and the Chamber in terms of business start ups shouldn't be underestimated, in view of the loss of business services nationally there is an identified need for better provision.

The Chamber's decision to relocate has provided an opportunity to provide this enhanced business signposting and advice service at a joint location.

Accommodation

3.8 Premises have been identified in Clarendon Road which could accommodate the

proposed Business Advice Service, a new permanent location for the Chamber and its staff and the Town Centre Manager. This would create flexible space from which to operate the proposed Town Centre Management office and a business advice and signposting facility.

The facility would be located at Gateway House, Clarendon Road, sub-let from the Watford Community Housing Trust. The Chamber will take the sub-lease with the council making a financial revenue contribution. The cost of the Councils contribution to rental charges would be £5000 per annum for a 5 year period. It is intended to fund this from the LABGI reserve.

Branding and identity for the facility will be developed over the coming weeks, including signage facing onto Clarendon. A small set-up budget will be required to provide IT infrastructure and initial publicity material. It is anticipated that this will cost between £10k-£15k and this will be finalised through the Councils normal budget approval process.

4.0 **IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 **Financial**

4.1.1 The Director of Finance comments that the Town Centre Manager post can be accommodated within existing staffing budgets. The remaining funding will come from the High Street Innovation Fund reserve (£100k) and the Local Authority Business Growth Incentive reserve (£15-20k).

4.2 **Legal Issues** (Monitoring Officer)

4.2.1 The Legal and Democratic services Section Head comments that the council will need to ensure that there are appropriate agreements in place to document the funding arrangements.
(NB This will take account of Human Rights issues as appropriate.)

4.3 **Equalities**

The proposed business advice centre will be open to all sections of the community and for the benefit of all including business, social enterprises, charities as well as act as a sign-posting facility for general enquiries on starting a business.

4.4 **Potential Risks**

Potential Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Overall score
Financial stability of Chamber of Commerce	1	5	5
Town Centre Partnership dissolves	2	4	8
Lack of uptake from business community	2	4	8
Those risks scoring 9 or above are considered significant and will need specific attention in project management. They will also be added to the service's Risk Register.			

4.5 **Staffing**

The proposed Town Centre Manager is a dedicated post to facilitate and deliver the Town Centre Partnership's priorities.

The proposed business advice centre will be staffed on a duty-rota basis by a range of local support organisations including WBC staff (regulatory), WENTA, West Herts College, Watford & West Herts Chamber of Commerce. Co-location with the Chamber also allows for greater continuity, if for example, a member of the support team were absent through illness.

4.5.1 **Accommodation**

4.6 As discussed.

4.6.1 **Community Safety**

4.7 Na.

4.7.1 **Sustainability**

4.8 Business advice will include advice on low-carbon initiatives and funding streams eg Green Deal for Business. It is anticipated that the facility could deliver significant improvements in terms of local companies accessing existing support initiatives.

Appendix 1 – Key role of the Town Centre Manager

Appendix 2 – Initial TCP Newsletter

Background Reading:

[Managing Town Centre Partnerships, A Guide for Practitioners, CLG, 2008](#) (click to follow link)