

24. Town Centres Programme

Gareth Bradford presented a report which updated the Board on the emerging regional town centre programme and which sought agreement to the five town centres to be selected as a vanguard and test bed for the first wave of the programme. The report also sought delegated authority to be granted to the Director of Housing and Regeneration in consultation with the Portfolio Lead for Housing and Land to agree the membership of the Regional Town Centre Task Force, the role of which would be to champion and support the town centre programme and to provide hands-on support, where appropriate, to the selected centres.

A supplementary report was circulated at the meeting which identified the five centres which were recommended as the first wave of centres. He explained that Coventry City Council and Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council had not made bids for consideration for inclusion in the first wave.

Councillor Ian Courts referred to the need for flexibility with the implementation of this initiative. This remark was acknowledged by the Chair who urged the Board to seize the opportunity to re-invent town centres including the acceptance that the retail offer would continue to change and the possibility of town centre living becoming more popular.

Gareth Bradford commented on the need for a structured process to assess the success of the criteria used for the selection of the first wave in order to determine how the criteria could be best adapted for the second wave. This matter would be considered at the Housing and Land Steering Group and subsequently by this Board.

The Board acknowledged the difficulties faced by town centres and the traditional market towns in competing with on-line shopping and out of town stores. Councillor Ian Courts commented on the need to identify which interventions would be successful.

Councillor George Adamson reminded the Board of the work which had already been undertaken by the Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership on town centres and the opportunity to benefit from this work. He also referred to the 'Designer Village' which was scheduled to open in Cannock in 2020 and the need to ensure that this did not affect detrimentally the town centre.

Councillor Richard Overton reported on a development by Telford and Wrekin Council which had focussed on the night time economy but that nationally a number of such premises had encountered financial difficulties. He suggested that HM Government needed to consider addressing Business Rates but acknowledged that, in turn, this affected potentially, funding for local government. He supported the concept of promoting the use of town centre premises for residential purposes.

Gareth Bradford reminded the Board of the interdependencies of the report under consideration with the other two reports to be considered at the meeting (Affordability and Social Housing Supply Proposition and Housing and Land Funding) inasmuch as the town centres would play an important part in delivering affordable housing on brownfield sites and on the need for investments to be made carefully in order to generate a return which could, in turn, be re-invested.

Councillor David Humphreys referred to the problems encountered with securing the build out of developments with planning permission and enquired if there was any way this could be controlled. Gareth Bradford suggested that the sector was waiting to see if there would be an announcement in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Budget Statement on this matter following the independent review of build out rates conducted by the Rt. Hon. Sir Oliver Letwin MP.

Councillor Daren Pemberton advised the Board of the interpretation of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) used by Stratford on Avon district Council where developers were encouraged to submit full planning applications rather than outline applications. A recent planning Appeal decision had also supported the Council's stance in disregarding outline planning applications in the calculation of available land supply. The Council also prepared an Action Plan for each development of over 30 units which identified any barriers to development. These Action Plans were updated regularly and, as necessary, he would, as the responsible Cabinet Member, intervene with developers seeking to ensure developments were progressed. He offered to provide a report on this matter to the Board in six months' time.

With regard to the selected five town centre schemes he questioned how success would be measured. Gareth Bradford advised that progress on early delivery and impacts versus the criteria used to determine the first wave would be monitored and reviewed by the Housing and Land Steering Group and this Board in due course and best practice shared consistently.

Resolved:

1. That the first wave of the town centre programme consist of the following five town centres:
 - Bilston;
 - Bordesley Green;
 - East West Bromwich;
 - St Thomas Quarter, Dudley; and
 - St Matthews Quarter, Walsall
2. That delegated authority be granted to the Director of Housing and Regeneration in consultation with the Portfolio Lead for Housing and Land to agree the membership of the Regional Town Centre Task Force with the type of expertise and sectors to be represented on the Task Force and its role as set out in the report;
3. That the offer of Councillor Daren Pemberton to present a report in six months' time on the Action Plan process at Stratford on Avon District Council be accepted;
4. That examples of best practice be forwarded to the Director of Housing and Regeneration for circulation to partner authorities.