

# Agenda item 7

## Hertfordshire Growth Board (HGB) – Re-invigorating Town Centres Workstream

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### 1 Purpose of report

- 1.1 This report updates on progress with the re-invigorating town centres workstream in supporting our district/ borough councils with the increasing challenges facing Hertfordshire's town centres and high streets.
- 1.2 The Growth Board working group has worked with stakeholders and consultants to collate a current picture of the economic situation facing high streets and town centres across Hertfordshire and has developed a bespoke package of support which would be commissioned from Save the High Streets, a leading advisory body in this field. The endorsement of the Board for this work, funding for the offer and the proposal for ongoing monitoring of the health of Hertfordshire's towns and high streets is set out below.

### 2 Re-invigorating Town Centres

- 2.1 The Growth Board has been working on this specific workstream since the inception of the Board, recognising the constantly changing and challenging economic situation, particularly for high streets and town centres, not only in Hertfordshire but nationally. The challenges cannot be pinpointed to one specific driver but range from legislative changes in the General Permitted Development Order (2015) rights (allowing retail to change to residential without the need for planning permission), to new development, Covid-19, significant changes to greater use of online shopping, rising inflation and increases in the cost of living. All of these factors have contributed to and continue to change the retail landscape across Hertfordshire.

### 3 Support For Town Centres Vitality and Viability

- 3.1 In March 2021, the Growth Board engaged with the Institute of Place Management (IPM), supported by Manchester Metropolitan University. A workshop was held and engagement with key stakeholders to establish a baseline of the situation in Hertfordshire at that time.

- 3.2 A Ten Point action plan for Hertfordshire was subsequently developed, (based on the IPM identified 25 priorities for town centre vitality and viability) and issued to all district/ borough councils in Spring 2021 following Growth Board endorsement. This was to help inform how district/ borough councils directed the Welcome Back Funding Allocations to best support local town centres following re-opening of high streets upon first relaxation of Covid-19 restrictions.
- 3.3 Over the course of 2022, the working group have considered appropriate next steps and further measures which could be put in place to support Hertfordshire's high streets and town centres. IPM were commissioned again to run the survey conducted in 2021, which was carried out in summer 2022. The Group have also worked with Save The High Streets.org to understand what additional support might be useful in Hertfordshire and which the Growth Board work could support. SaveTheHighStreet.org is a five-year-old industry movement. They deliver programmes to transform and strengthen high streets in partnership with local businesses, community champions, local authorities, trade associations, Government departments, new start-ups, property developers, retail landlords, industry suppliers, media owners and others. Through combining their market-leading technology, insight, and engagement, they have been able to radically improve the impact and economics of supporting small and start-up local businesses. Save The High Street.org have already worked with Dacorum Borough Council and Three Rivers District Council.
- 3.4 The results received from running the survey again showed a more comprehensive picture of the situation across Hertfordshire. When reviewing the data, it is clear from the responses that although Hertfordshire's high streets and town centres are unique, the feeling across them all is very similar. It is important to note that the survey was issued by each borough/ district council to ten key stakeholders identified for their input/ influence on the local economy. The survey results have now informed a more targeted offer of additional support from Save The High Streets.org to focussed on targeted retail support. The proposal recognises that each of our town centres is unique and therefore the suite of offers allows flexibility to select what is more appropriate by area.
- 3.5 The Save The High Streets.org offer seeks to provide local support for:
1. vacant units- through a landlord engagement campaign, a campaign to attract and evaluate potential occupiers, running an incubator pilot, developing a strategy brief, or designing a meanwhile space,
  2. targeted business support via the JO platform- their unique digital assistant for ten businesses for an 8-week period of support,
  3. community champion support- working to strengthen existing Traders Associations/ Groups and supporting new Trading Associations/ Groups. These offers would be open from the end of February 2023 up to 31 March 2024.

## 4 The Offer and Measuring Outcomes

- 4.1 To receive the offer from Save The High Streets.org, the Board is seeking funding of up to £5,000 per district/ borough council. The approach to place management in town centres/high streets across Hertfordshire is significantly mixed, from no discernible activity to cutting-edge approaches being undertaken. The offer will seek to bolster existing activities and where the survey results show that additional support is needed, it will seek to establish new Trading Associations which can be key to the vitality and viability of Hertfordshire's high streets/ town centres. Vacant units are a county and countrywide issue, with the changing retail scene there are a number of large vacant units in a number of our town centres. Save The High Streets.org can work to help repurpose units to allow for new start-ups, noting that whilst Covid-19 had a significant impact on high streets, a large number of new start-up businesses were born and are now looking for assistance in expanding/ moving to the high street. The use of the JO platform will give significant support to such businesses as well as to established businesses in supporting continued strong growth.
- 4.2 It is noted that should a district/ borough council wish to work together on this commission that this is accepted and encouraged. Providing this additional support will help colleagues continue to innovate, boost confidence, and help drive a positive increase in footfall, less vacant units, better business development and more community champions across Hertfordshire's town centres and high streets.
- 4.3 Both IPM reports identify and recommend similar interventions. The support offer will encourage further local collaborative working with key stakeholders to enact specific interventions based on the requirements of each individually identified town centre. Save The High Streets.org has come recommended as the most appropriate organisation to assist the Board with this work locally.
- 4.4 In measuring success of this scheme, each offer that is taken up locally will be measured against existing baseline data for the high street/town centre where available and the recommendations of the previous IPM reports.
- 4.5 The Working Group has also highlighted the importance of maintaining this workstream and will continue to monitor the progress of this scheme, subject to financial endorsement, reporting back after the summer of 2023 and at the end of the financial year 2024.

## **5 Implications**

- 5.1 This proposal seeks support from the Corridor projects budget of £5,000 per District and Borough from the Hertfordshire Growth Board Growth fund. This funding is already in this year's approved Growth Board budget.
- 5.2 There are no adverse legal, equalities, environmental, sustainability or other implications arising from this report and its recommendations which support the ongoing work and priorities of the Growth Board.

## **6 Recommendations**

- 6.1 That the Board approves funding of up to £5,000 per district/ borough council to provide the support offer for high streets and town centres and ongoing monitoring of the local economic situation in these locations across Hertfordshire.