

STREETS AHEAD

ideas for a change

STREETS AHEAD

ideas for a change

About this document

This is the final report of the Streets Ahead working party, which was created to determine how we, as Wealden District Council, can best support local efforts to stimulate the future health of our high streets. The Streets Ahead working party comprises John Carvey, Lin Clark, Nigel McKeeman (Ch), Ken Ogden, Susan Stedman and Chriss Triandafylou. This report presents the working party's recommendations for decisive action.

| Contents | Page |
|-------------------------|------|
| Part 1 | |
| Quick start guide | 3 |
| Part 2 | |
| The challenge we face | 7 |
| Part 3 | |
| The solution we propose | 21 |
| The implications | 32 |

General notes for all sections of this document

- 1) For simplicity, the term 'high street' generally refers to any part of a town or village that is mainly dedicated to shops and enterprises. Similarly 'town centre' can refer to the retail centre of both towns and villages.*
- 2) 'The Council' generally means Wealden District Council - both as an elected Council and as an organisation.*
- 3) 'Members' generally means elected Members of the Council. 'Officers' likewise.*
- 4) 'Wealden' generally means the whole of Wealden district - and all its towns and villages.*
- 5) At this stage the views expressed are those of the working party and do not necessarily represent the views or policies of WDC.*

Streets Ahead

Ideas for a change

Quick start guide

Our insights

Britain's high streets are going through radical period of change, driven largely by the impact of a combination of internet, mobile, edge of town, out of town and supermarket shopping. Many of our own towns and villages will need all the support they can get in tackling the challenge of ensuring that their high streets can successfully evolve, thrive and continue in the future to be valued as centres of the community.



From our work over the past ten months we conclude that there is more that Wealden District Council could and should be doing to engage with this issue - with the aim of providing better support and encouragement for the efforts of those involved locally in high street regeneration.

We also recognize, from talking to people in local teams across the district, that there would be value in creating a partnership approach that would enable issues to be identified, ideas to be generated and solutions to be shared for the advantage of everyone.

The significance for Wealden District Council

Such a partnership needs a champion to get things going. We believe Wealden District Council has uniquely the wherewithal, and also the social responsibility, to take the initiative by establishing the foundations of a collaboration that can enable all Wealden's communities to achieve their aspirations.

We recommend that the Council now becomes more visibly and proactively involved in supporting local communities in their efforts to revive, revitalize or even re-define their high streets and town centres.

The Council already is involved through its local members, many of whom work hard with their parishes and town teams to help re-energize the high street. But the seismic change that will be demanded of our high streets, if they are to remain vibrant centres of the local community, means that the Council now has an urgent responsibility to engage with this issue on a completely new and more knowledgeable level - involving both members and the wider organization - in support of local community needs and aspirations.

Our big idea - a project that everyone can get behind

In essence we are recommending that Wealden District Council should create a project (working title the STREETS AHEAD project) through which to work more effectively with local teams across the district and to act as the focus for the Council's efforts in supporting initiative in this area.

In collaboration with partners, this project will provide the Council with a clear vision, strategy and plan for practical ideas and actions. It will seek to embrace all existing activities within the Council (many largely unrecognized) that contribute to this task. It will be the catalyst for new thinking, new ideas and a new level of partnership with the communities involved in local action for high street change. And, whilst initially formed and resourced by the Council the aim will be that, over time, the project will increasingly be owned and led by participating partners and the local communities involved, with the Council continuing as a supportive and enabling contributor.

In part 2 of this doc (see page 7), we look at:

The challenge we face:

- The changes are structural and permanent
- An opportunity for a new beginning
- Creating a positive sentiment
- Successful adaption demands local ideas, plans and actions
- Short term reinvigoration - attracting people back in
- Medium term reconfiguration - providing lasting value
- Long term reinvention - rebalancing for the new realities
- We cannot prevent change
- Communities need collaborative support as they develop at their own pace.

In part 3 of this doc (see page 21), we look at:

The solution we propose:

- Wealden can become an exemplar
- This should be a project - not 'just another strategy'
- A project with vision and commitment
- A plan that adapts and evolves
- A project team that connects with local communities
- Communicating, sharing and working together
- Learning, reviewing and evolving new plans
- A new model for how we do things

Project aims

The proposed project will have the following broad aims:
(see page 24 for project aims in detail)

- Support local high street regeneration efforts
- Assist with district-wide joined-up strategic solutions
- Stimulate supporting economic growth
- Improve perceptions of Wealden's high streets
- Position Wealden as a leader of innovative high street regeneration

Initial activities

We envisage the initial activities as follows:
(see page 25 for initial activities in detail)

Getting started

- Establish the project, involve members, and scope the potential partners across the district

Listening and sharing understanding

- Engage with local community groups and begin building relationships with partners

Developing practical solutions

- Work on actions identified and formulate strategic plans

Spreading the word

- Begin promoting high street progress to consumers, visitors and businesses

Recommendations

We request that the committee supports the following recommendations:

- 1) The committee agrees with the Streets Ahead group's conclusion that this is an urgent issue that demands practical action from Wealden District Council so that it can better support local communities and their high streets.
- 2) The committee recommends the creation of a project (working title the STREETS AHEAD project) to tackle this challenge in a coherent, strategic and collaborative way, building on the ideas and plans outlined in the Streets Ahead report, and demonstrating that the Council is an exemplar of community partnership.
- 3) The committee requests a review of the resources available for this area of work, so that the Council can work with partners to deliver the proposed practical solutions at both a local level, through proactive partnership with individual high streets teams, and at a strategic development level as part of a more integrated approach to high street regeneration and local economic growth.

Left blank

Streets Ahead

The challenge we face

These are the worst of times, and the best of times

Looked at one way, the current times are amongst the worst that have been faced by our towns and villages for several generations. There has arguably never been a worse time to be a high street trader. Traditional high street retailers are continuing to disappear and most of the surviving shops face harsh trading conditions.

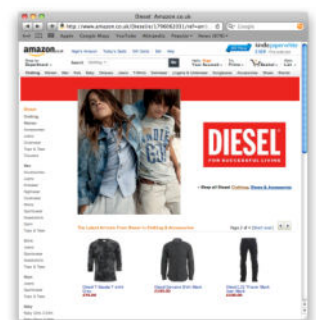
But looked at in another way, the current times can be seen as offering our towns and villages a rare opportunity to re-think what 'the high street' is for. Across the UK towns and villages are rising to this challenge, trying out new ideas and finding fresh ways to attract local people and visitors back into the high street.

The changes are structural and permanent

There are real opportunities for change, but the starting point must be a recognition that many of the shifts in consumer spending are structural. We need to accept that the downward and outward trends are set to continue and are not just some the short-term result of the economic downturn.

It is generally accepted that most towns will never return to the hey day of the late 20th century. Many people no longer look to their local high street to get most of what they wish to buy. They want better, cheaper, quicker - and they want more choice than could ever be offered in small local shop.

High street competition now comes from an enticing array of choices including large supermarkets, edge of town and out of town stores, out of area shopping malls, catalogue shopping, TV shopping channels, online and smart-phone shopping, and most potentially damaging of all 'click and collect', which will bring city department stores to consumer's doorsteps.



By 2014 two out of three people in the UK population will have a smart phone. With a couple of clicks, consumers can now buy stuff from around the world, compare prices, order services, find better and cheaper shops and arrange click and collect deliveries.

As a result, the high street as we have known it up until now is becoming increasingly irrelevant to a significant proportion of the public. The research shows that high street shopping as a proportion of spend is falling fast, and this trend is set to continue and possibly accelerate.

An opportunity for a new beginning

It is now widely recognized that even successful high streets of the future will in many cases have a very different mix of uses, with conventional retail sometimes representing only a small element in people's reasons for spending time there.

The changes in our high streets, though inevitable, need not be for the worse. In fact we believe that, with the right support, the next 15 years could see a re-birth of our towns and high streets as vital centres for the local community.

What will constitute a successful future will differ from town to town, and from high street to high street.

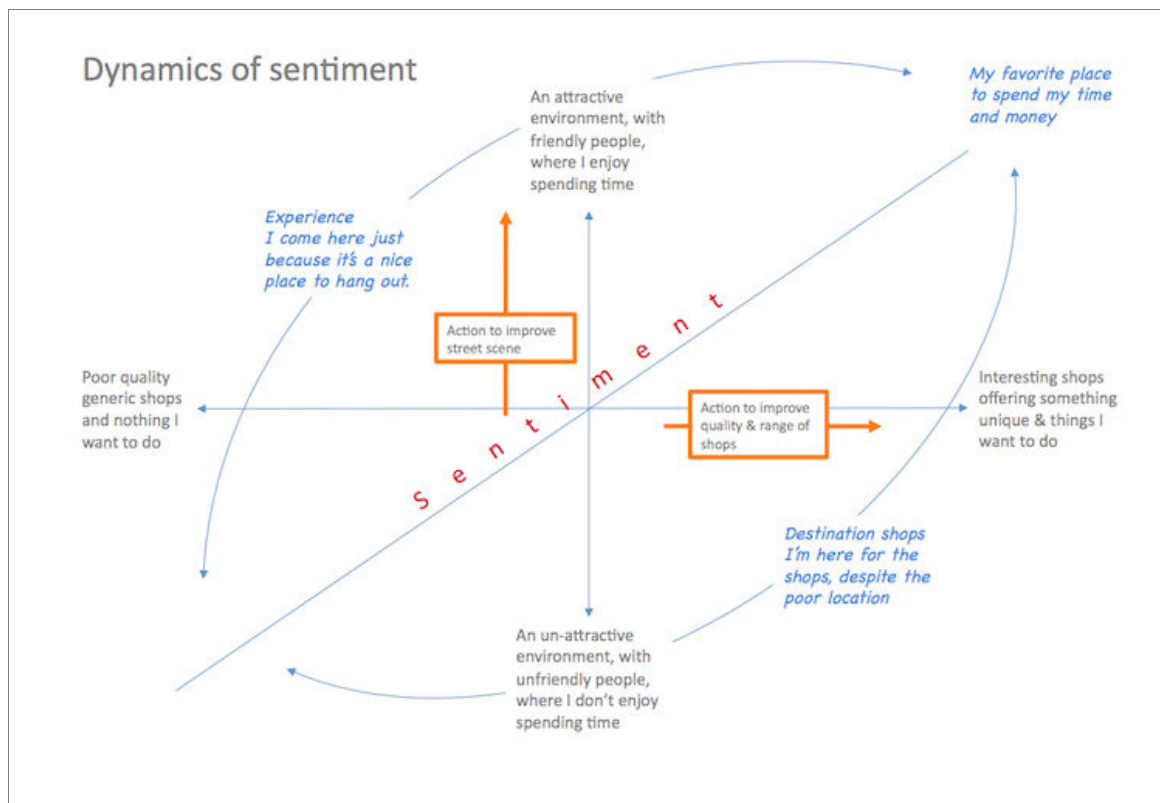
For some, there may still be a successful future as a predominantly retail-based economy - but only if the local demographics can sustain it and the retail community can transform and adapt to the emerging consumer expectations. This has already been realised in some towns and villages where a resurgence of interest in local shops is creating a healthy local market for high quality, versatile and innovative independent retailers.

In other towns and villages, the mass of shoppers may continue to vote with their wallets - preferring to spend the majority of their weekly budget outside the high street. In these cases, a successful long term future could involve a radical rethink of the definition of the high street and a potential re-balancing of many of its elements.

Many high streets are already beginning to evolve and change. The local teams are aware of the realities and they are beginning to adapt their thinking accordingly, with more emphasis on services, entertainment, events and the experience of an attractive environment. At the heart of many of these efforts to change is a recognition that regeneration is all about changing the way people think about a place.

Creating a positive sentiment

Successful high streets and town centres are those that are busy and vibrant. Places that people want to come back to again and again. Unsuccessful high streets lack vibrancy and become desolate and unattractive. In essence, this is all about ‘sentiment’.



What is important is how people feel about a place. How they talk about it. What they say about it to others.

For example, if a high street improves its appearance, or creates events that stimulate interest, shoppers are attracted back in numbers and existing traders will be encouraged to raise their game and new more enlightened enterprises will be encouraged to set up shop. Similarly, if progress is made with the choice and quality of shops and the exceptional levels of customer service offered, this will attract new and existing customers to come back. This in turn will provide an incentive for things to be done to improve the environment.

Ultimately, successful high streets need to offer an experience that attracts people back again and again - an experience that everyone will want to recommend to their friends and family - “*My favorite place to spend my time and money*”.

Successful adaption demands local ideas, plans and actions

We have identified three components of regeneration that most communities are likely to need to address at some level, and that many towns teams are already thinking about and acting upon:

Reinvigoration

Tactical activities to stimulate interest and attract people back into the high street

Reconfiguration

More complex solutions, taking time to develop, aimed at making a substantive difference to the shops, services and experiences that the high street has to offer

Reinvention

Far-reaching ideas and plans that address the more fundamental changes, and involving the potential for a rebalancing of high street activities.

High street regeneration plans / roadmaps

Our towns and villages need to be supported, where required, in their work to evolve and put into action the short, medium and long term plans that will retain and grow their high streets as busy, attractive and continually adapting centres of community life.

The timing or necessity for each of these elements will vary from place to place, but they can be broadly characterised as:

Short term - reinvigoration

Medium term - reconfiguration

Long term - reinvention

In many situations however, some of these components will need to be considered and acted upon in parallel. As can be seen from the examples in the following sections there are plenty of good ideas, addressing various elements of these components that can be found within and beyond the district.

Short term reinvigoration - attracting people back in

Reinvigoration can involve:

- improving the immediate impression of the high street's appearance and tidiness;
- encouraging people in with initiatives like markets, fairs and festivals;
- and rekindling loyalty through communications and rewards.

Starting with the basics

As shoppers have gravitated towards other retail choices, high street shops have in some cases become jaded and run down. The overall upkeep and attractiveness of some high streets has also suffered from neglect. These shortcomings, combined with an increasing scarcity of shoppers on the pavements, mean that some high streets are at times quite bleak places to visit.

One way to reverse this cycle is make the high street a more attractive environment. This can involve improving pavements, lighting, seating, accessibility and signage. It can involve voluntary high street 'clean-up gangs'. It can also involve short-term initiatives to reduce the visual impact of closed shop fronts.



Over more than 15 years, the Heathfield Partnership has been steadily improving the physical appearance and functionality of the high street. Changes have included improved pavements, lighting, road layouts and parking areas, crossings, hanging baskets, seating and better accessibility for the disabled.

In Uckfield, a team of volunteer litter clearers was created - involving people from across the community including students and school children. The litter squads would patrol the high street areas clearing away any refuse and generally making the place look clean and inviting.

The Hailsham Forward town team are experimenting with vinyl graphics to improve the appearance of temporarily empty shops and also to help prospective traders to imagine what a thriving enterprise might look like in the vacant location.



In nearby Eastbourne, a team of volunteers has been recruited to 'spruce up' empty shops. In this example, the cleaned up empty shop has been used to display artwork and installations by students from a local college.

Another way to tackle 'sentiment' is to encourage local people to re-engage with their local high street. This can be fairs and festivals that bring large numbers of people back into a town or village.

A good example of this would be the Heathfield 'Le Marche' French market that now attracts a huge crowd every year. In addition to French traders, the market also attracts large numbers of local food businesses.



Farmers markets have been very successful at attracting people in but, as they have often been located away from the town centre, they do not always create an actual increase in high street footfall.

The benefit of the traditional 'market day' was that it was in the centre of the town and drew people, on foot, into the high street. Many towns have now been attempting to recreate the market as a focus for the high street.

Hailsham has introduced a new Street Market, three times a month, to encourage shoppers back into the town centre. This is a formula that has proven very successful in Eastbourne, where the Street Market has been running weekly since 2012, with an additional Art Market on certain days

Other towns have successfully introduced loyalty schemes and other promotional devices to attract people back into the high street.



Crowborough has been running a loyalty scheme in which customers collect points as they use local shops. When enough points earned, shoppers qualify for a regular prize draw.

Nearby Lewes is famous for introducing its own currency as a way of engaging local people and keeping spending within the community of independent traders.

Many towns across the UK took part in a 'love your local shops' week that encouraged consumers to re-discover their local retailers. The supporting promotion and publicity served to remind people of what is on offer locally, and of the importance of supporting independent traders.

Re-invigoration is about starting to reverse the downward cycle that many high streets find themselves in. Taken together, initiatives like these have been successful in encouraging a more positive 'vibe' throughout the high street. The idea also is that, as the high street becomes busier and more attractive, traders will be encouraged to up their game - offering better service and working harder to meet customer needs. If the high street begins to look more vibrant and busy, new traders will be attracted into the area - beginning the process of what we have termed 'reconfiguration' . . .

Medium term reconfiguration - providing lasting value

Medium term reconfiguration may involve:

- stimulating innovation with things like social network based customer communities;
- encouraging all shops and services to achieve the highest levels of customer service and communication;
- creating flexible spaces for traders, services, hybrid sellers and small businesses;
- promoting a reputation for themes such as ‘Antiques’ or ‘Local produce’;
- and improving accessibility with things like pedestrian priority and redesigned parking.

Re-engaging with the consumer

A vital ingredient in this equation is the trader. There’s no point in attracting people back into their high street, if when they get there they can find nothing they want to spend their money on. Many high streets already show signs of entering the remorseless downward cycle - where, as a result of the exodus of the ‘quality shoppers’, what’s on offer is increasingly the lowest cost item or service, with no expectation of quality - the pound shops, the charity outlets, the lower end convenience stores and the cheap takeaways.

High streets can only reverse the downward cycle if what’s on offer in the shops is exceptional. This could be exceptional customer service, it could be exceptional products sourced locally, or it could be an exceptional experience as a place to spend time.

Traditional models of trading can still be successful, particularly where the alternative threats are not in close proximity, but customer service needs to be so good that customers come back again and again.

Case study

A good example of an ‘old-school’ retailer that has bucked the trend would be this Ironmongers. At a time when many such stores are closing, this enterprise has survived and prospered by offering an exceptional product range, a pleasant and easy shopping environment and staff that are all knowledgeable, helpful and friendly. The business also benefits from the fact that there are no edge-of-town retail sheds (such as Wickes) to sap their trade.



Alternative shop formats

Many high streets have successfully experimented with encouraging different forms of retail space. Pop-up shops have proved an effective way for enterprises such as small fashion or food specialists to create temporary shops in empty units. Micro-shops, in which empty units are subdivided into small stalls, have also proved very popular for things like street food, retro clothes, accessories and antiques

Towns as social centres

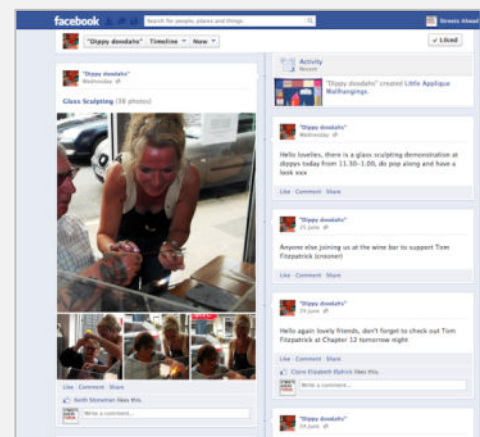
One solution is to encourage social experiences, to compliment the diminishing retail activity. The proliferation of coffee shops and small eateries shows that people do like to have somewhere to get together and relax. This can be successfully combined with activities such as music venues, small cinemas and evening entertainments - encouraging late trading for the whole high street and the establishment of the so-called 'night-time economy'.

Shops as places to relax and spend time

Another trend that is emerging is the combi-shop, where a seating area is mingled with other businesses. The highly successful 'Bills' pioneered this in Lewes, combining fruit and veg shopping with a busy restaurant and cafe. Others have combined coffee shops with retro antiques and art galleries.

Case study

Dippy doodahs is good example of new thinking and a fresh approach that is likely to be more resilient in today's marketplace. Dippy doodahs calls itself a 'Tearoom, giftshop, and clothing boutique'. The interior is part gift shop, part cafe, part someone's front room. This 'combi-shop' is run by friendly and enthusiastic Kate Bishop who also uses the shop as the base for craft workshops and events like jewellery making and glass sculpture. Everything is relayed, in breathless tones to all Dippy Doodahs many followers on facebook and twitter. Places like this are as much about their relationship with a group of interested and loyal customers, as they are about the things they sell.



Hybrid shops

Many traders are already combining conventional retailing with thriving online trading. The online business enables the enterprise to reach customers on potentially a global scale. The resultant supplementary sales volume helps to make the physical trading viable. An online presence also helps to publicise the shop and bring people in. Traders like this are also generally very active users of social media as a way of strengthening their relationship with loyal customers and tapping into changes in consumer demands.



Reconfiguring the status of traffic

The domination of some high streets by heavy traffic is the result of the relentless increase in traffic volumes. But high streets can be successfully 'reconfigured', to give the high street back to shoppers, without having necessarily to completely block out traffic. In fact allowing some short term parking can be good for trade. There are also many successful examples where changes such as surfacing the road like a pavement and allowing only small pockets of parking have changed the dynamic and made the street a more friendly, safe and inviting place.

Eastbourne town centre now combines pedestrian areas with road access where traffic is very slow and parking is limited to short stay or deliveries. The pedestrian (and increasingly also the cyclist) is now very definitely the owner of the town centre space. Part of the pedestrianised area is now also used for a flourishing weekly street market.



Giving people a reason to visit

High streets may increasingly need to focus on a theme or emphasis. Consumers are more likely to make a location a 'destination' if they feel it's known for something in particular. This could be specific, such as 'retro' or 'locally produced food' or it could be general such as "a great place to potter around the little shops and stalls".

George Street, in Brighton's Kemp Town, has become a destination for retro furniture and bric-a-brac. Local traders got together to create promotional material listing all the shops that specialise in this type of goods - creating a sense of identity for the area and spreading the word.

Long term reinvention - rebalancing for the new realities

Long term reinvention could mean re-balancing the high street for a new social, civic and community role. It could also mean new forms of retail such as maker-sellers and retail partnerships, and a new role for residential, small business and enterprise in maintaining the vibrancy and economic viability of our towns.

Starting with a 'blank street'

Whilst medium term strategies can help high streets to re-connect with shoppers there may, in the long term, be a need for a new balance of activities better suited to today's consumer lifestyle.

Towns and villages may need to start thinking about what, if they were to remove everything and start with 'blank street', would be the elements that would best match the needs of their local people, and their local economy, in today's very different marketplace.

Would they need shops at all? If so, what would be the most popular locally and how many would we actually need? Would there be benefit in having more people living at the heart of the community - bringing everyday activity back into deserted streets?

If we were to visit this future town centre, even though there might be fewer retail shop fronts, the centre itself could once again be full of life. Ailing towns could again become attractive and satisfying places in which to spend time both for visitors and for those who live and work there.

Creating a sense of identity

The impact of edge of town retail estates and large retail centres within easy reach, combined with online shopping and click & collect, may in some cases mean that high streets may need to evolve into something altogether different. This could include elements of retail, but there may be a need to take the 'destination' approach a step further into a more radical reinvention of the function of the whole town centre.

To illustrate some of the differing ways in which individual towns might reinvent themselves we have, on the following pages, put together a series of example scenarios.

Although some of the characteristics shown in these scenarios may be similar to some of our own towns, these are not intended as specific suggestions for specific places.

In practice, towns would be likely to adopt combinations and permutations based on a whole range of expanding possibilities.

Linfield

This town sets out to make itself a hub for arts and entertainment. The annual art festival is expanded to create three major events every year - one focused on art, one on music and one on theatre and cinema. Community and church halls, the town hall and other spaces are made available free for concerts, exhibitions, film screenings and theatrical performances. A series of empty shops is converted into a permanent 'open studio' space that is used by artists, craftspeople, jewellers and furniture makers - and where people are invited to drop in, see the activities, and perhaps buy items. In the weekly street market, an area is made available for professional and amateur artists to sell their work. Free transport is provided to encourage buskers and street performers to appear on market day. With galleries, music events and other places staying open into the evening, a thriving night-time economy develops and Linfield becomes a destination both during the day and the evening. On the back of these changes, new retailers begin to be attracted back - such as a retro-vinyl music shop, an artists materials shop, a second hand bookshop and a drum and guitar shop.

Chrissington

This town aspires to be a haven for antiques, curios and all things retro. An annual fair is established, making use of a central hall and available spaces, including empty shops, around the town. Three times each year a valuation and restoration workshop is organised by several local auctioneers and specialists, attracting collectors from across the district. Several empty shops are converted into a series of small micro-shops for traders selling things like retro fashion, sixties furniture and the like - this retro market is open twice a week and creates an extra buzz in the town on these days. New and existing traders group together to create and distribute 'Rediscovered in Chrissington' - a guide with details of where to find antiques, bric-a-brac, retro and objects for interior and exterior design and decoration.

Susanford

This town makes a determined effort to pin its future on becoming a retail destination - with fashion and accessories as the main theme. A major retailer is persuaded to invest in a retail area in the centre of the town. On the back of this, the town encourages a range of fashion and fashion related retailers into smaller spaces for independents. This includes inexpensive workshop spaces for small local maker-sellers of handmade garments, handbags, jewellery and accessories. Susanford organises two annual fashion weeks coinciding with the seasons and encourages both major retailers and smaller independents and designers to take part. Design and fashion students from the local academy also take part with the potential to have their own catwalk show, and with the best designers winning a week working for a fashion house or designer. Susanford is also successful in attracting the first of a new generation of 'click, try and collect' drive in superchannels where customers can collect, try and either accept or reject their online purchases. This attracts people into the town from far afield and adds to the footfall in the conventional retail areas.

Kenton

This town recognises that, through its close proximity to other larger and better appointed towns, it may never again be able to be fully reliant on retail. Instead, the town embraces the new permissions for change of use to residential and encourages the conversion of the surplus shop capacity into flats, maisonettes and town houses. A reduced number of shops is focused into a semi-pedestrianised area known as 'Kenton Village', which develops a growing reputation for outstanding restaurants, bistros, bars and coffee shops all staying open late into the evening. The street environment is made more friendly and intimate through use of traditional lighting, cobbled areas, very limited street parking, seating areas, trees, flowerbeds and green spaces. Traders are encouraged to adopt traditional styles for their shop facias and there is a street market in the centre of Kenton Village every Saturday that, in the summer months, stays active well into the evening. As a result, Kenton Village becomes a popular place to live in, or to spend time in at weekends and in the evening.

Johnsea

This town capitalises on its surrounding farming enterprises and small businesses to become a mecca for local produce and all things food related. At centre of the high street a permanent covered area is created. This is used for thriving street markets during the week and at weekends. Encouraged by subsidised, flexible trading space, a number of new generation artisan maker-sellers establish their businesses right at the heart of the high street - these include a cheese-maker, a sausage and cured meat specialist, a cider maker and a baker. All these businesses also trade offline, attracting determined foodies to make personal visits from miles around. The food theme continues with regular food events, featuring guest appearance by top chefs, and a busy programme of cookery courses and food-making workshops. An increasing variety of excellent restaurants and bistros is established in the town, which rapidly gains a reputation for great eating and drinking. Related shops include a kitchenware shop, a wine cellars and a hand-made kitchen showroom.

Nigelhurst

This town concentrates on attracting small businesses and enterprises. Vacated shop spaces are converted into flexible spaces that can be used by small to medium sized businesses. The local council takes out a long lease on some high street office space, which is then offered at very low rents to start-up businesses for the first 12 months of trading. These new businesses benefit from a network of local services offering things like marketing and digital support. The Nigelhurst Enterprise Network fosters a strong extended community of small businesses, incubators and home-workers, offering marketing and promotional support, and encouraging all local businesses to use the emerging local services that include accountancy, logistics and business development. A local developer converts several shops into a collection of cool apartments that are quickly occupied by young workers who are attracted to the buzz of the area. A thriving 'enterprise quarter' soon emerges, with an array of small cafes, eateries and independent retailers that are geared up to cater for the new generation of residents that breath life back into the centre of the town.

We cannot prevent change

No one can know for certain what will happen in the future. But there is value in imagining what might happen, based on current trends and developments. Below we list some of the developments we believe might emerge. That's not to say we think these are all desirable changes. In fact some of these possibilities could further undermine the role of the high street. But we shouldn't discount the possibility that they may happen somewhere, in some form, sooner or later.

Through the STREETS AHEAD project, we would hope to create opportunities for everyone to think about how things might evolve, to have views on the potential consequences and to be involved in shaping high streets the way local people want them, rather than just being dictated to by commercial interests and 'the market'.

The drive-in online collection hub

We could see companies such as Amazon and Royal Mail creating co-owned sites where shoppers can 'collect, check and choose'. Customers would be able to drive in and check their online order (including trying on garments, testing devices etc) prior to taking them away. Unsuitable orders would be sent back free of charge.

The 'Super Village'

We could see a village community, through its neighbourhood development plan, partner with a major chain such as Tesco to create a green field site Super Village. The Super Village would comprise a village green, a supermarket, a community health centre, a village hall, a collection point for online purchases, a market square surrounded by independent shops, enterprises and artisan producers - interspersed with residential, coffee bars, restaurants and local services.

Growth of 'membership' on the high street

We could see more traders and services in the high street beginning to establish one-to-one relationships with their customers. 'Subscribing' to a shop would bring special offers, discounts, news of what's available and a much stronger personal connection with the business. Successful traders would be those with individualism, and a genuine interest in each of their customers as individuals.

The first virtually 'shop free' market towns

We could see some towns in the UK where conventional retail largely disappears, to be replaced with a combination of residential, small businesses, cafes and restaurants, services and community spaces.

High street Micro-Factories

We could see a steady growth of high street outlets offering on-site product production (from gizmos to fashion items) using the next generation of 3D printers. Consumers would be able to design their own customised version of the latest iPhone at home, and pop into the Micro-Factory later the same day to collect it.

Hot-housing

We could see some people beginning to use homes in a more flexible way - rather like hot-desking - no longer having a fixed home but moving around in a more free-form lifestyle, to match the increasingly flexible nature of the employment market. If this were to be a trend where residential replaces empty shops, the 'hot-house' residents would be likely to be younger people with more potential to spend locally in smaller independent shops offering something special.

Communities need collaborative support as they develop at their own pace.

Every town or village will have different issues, requiring different solutions. Every town will be at different stage in the process - some well advanced, some just starting. But many of the underlying concerns and challenges will be shared, and there would be benefit in creating a partnership across the district, enabling the sharing of ideas and the tackling of the common problems.

Wealden's towns and villages vary enormously both in the challenges their high streets face and in the stage they have reached in the development of local partnerships and action plans. The Heathfield Partnership has been established for more than 15 years and in that time has worked steadily to improve and strengthen the high street, the town economy and the wider community. Towns such as Crowborough and Uckfield previously had well organised local groups working on ambitious high street plans, but when these plans stalled, the local groups lost some of their momentum. However, even in these cases, the hiatus in longer term thinking has not prevented the implementation of many good local ideas for improving the attractiveness of the high street and encouraging shoppers back. Hailsham suffered similar setbacks with its earlier high street plans but recently, prompted by large numbers of shop closures, the town created a team based on the government's Portas model and, although not selected as a Portas project, they were given a modest grant towards local initiatives and the high street improvement work is developing extremely well.

The best model for gaining community support for high street plans appears to be an approach that is fully representative - i.e. a team involving local traders, local businesses, youth groups, residents, parish or town councillors, district councillors, county councillors and if possible the local MP. Sometimes, as has been evidenced in Hailsham, practical actions are best achieved through a smaller, more nimble, sub-group of individuals with particular expertise in 'getting stuff done'.

Overall, the experience seems to be that high street plans are most effective when they combine all three of the elements we have identified

- Reinvigoration thinking - immediate priorities and actions for attracting people into the high street and improving the experience once there.
- Reconfiguration thinking - about significant changes to the high street in the medium term, and the practical tasks that will need to be achieved.
- Reinvention thinking - where the high street needs to head in the longer term, and the investment, planning and community engagement needed.

As those local plans and actions continue to evolve at their own pace, we believe those teams at an earlier stage will benefit from sharing ideas and gaining insights from others across the district. We also believe that there are issues, for all local teams, that can be tackled for the common benefit. And we believe the Council should be the catalyst for this partnership and collaboration . . .

Streets Ahead

The solution we propose

Wealden can become an exemplar

Wealden should set itself the goal of becoming an exemplar for community partnership inspirational thinking, and collaborative action for high street regeneration.

In order to fulfil its responsibilities as a vital enabler of all the changes local communities seek to achieve, from short-term re-invigoration to long-term reinvention, Wealden District Council needs to evolve a new way of doing things.

Working in partnership with others across the district, the Council needs to be part of the solution:

- Helping communities identify practical models, for more sustainable town centres, that can be the basis for local plans.
- Exploring the tools and resources that could make it more affordable for towns to develop and refine their own local plans.
- Investigating how best the aspects of planning, rates and rents can be better managed to support this more proactive shaping of town centre development.
- Looking for ways to support, promote and generally fly the flag for, Wealden's towns and villages and all they have to offer.

Overall, the Council needs to pioneer a more joined up way of doing things, in which issues are tackled and solutions acted-upon, by people drawn from across the disciplines, rather than within silos.

The magnitude and complexity of the changes now facing our high streets means that the time is right to change the way this issue is addressed by the Council and to therefore review the level and capability of regeneration and economic development resources available.

This should be a project, - not ‘just another strategy’

We propose a project aimed at fully engaging Wealden members, the District Council organization, and a wider partnership developing over time, in the support and encouragement of effective local action for high street change.

Strategies are two-a-penny. They look good on a report but can quickly gather dust and become forgotten.

A project is something more tangible. It is something everyone understands and can feel involved in. It is easy to communicate the aims and plans a project, and people will develop an interest in seeing how the project develops over time.

We recommend therefore that the Council commits to initiating a project (working title the STREETS AHEAD project) to act as the focus for a series of initiatives, plans and actions that will explore and address the high streets issues across the district.

The project should have a clear vision, with a commitment to action

The project should be developed by bringing together people from across the disciplines of Wealden District Council, and by seeking to encourage the involvement of partners from towns, villages, and other relevant groups with knowledge, expertise, ideas or concerns to share.

Over time, it can be hoped that this project might develop a momentum of its own - a genuine collaboration for the benefit all the communities concerned. At the outset however, we see a need for Wealden District Council to take the initiative in setting up the project, defining some initial goals, scoping the resources required to kick start some of the essential activities and building the relationships that will form the basis of a wider and more inclusive partnership.

A project with vision and commitment

It's not just about having processes and policies. It's also about having ideas. The Council needs to think about, and distill, where it would hope to see its towns and villages going over the difficult period ahead.

The Council needs to earn a reputation for engaging with the challenges and practicalities of enlightened high street evolution . . . founded on a simple, clear vision for the future of Wealden's main towns and villages, with a commitment to actively support local efforts to achieve the necessary evolution. This vision and commitment should inform the way the Council organizes to better address these issues, and the way the Council communicates with, collaborates with, and supports local teams and the wider community.

Vision

Wealden District Council's vision is that all its towns and villages evolve and develop to be, in the immediate and longer term future: lively, inviting, relevant, valuable, useful and sustainable centres of their local communities. This will result from forward-looking local team plans, actions and initiatives involving all the local businesses and communities, and successful partnerships across and beyond the district.

Commitment

As a Council we will play our full part as a partner in this evolutionary process - providing support, helping to coordinate action and connecting local plans into a district-wide high street picture that integrates with our own Local Plan. We recognize that the long term solution to successful high streets may be an evolving mix of retail, services, community activities, small businesses and residential. We undertake to do what we can to ensure that this evolution is born out of the longer-term needs and aspirations of local communities, working through their high street teams, rather than being driven by the forces of 'the market' alone. We will also strive to stimulate new and existing business development, in and around towns and communities, to provide the economic growth needed to support local employment and sustain the high street economy.

An approach that adapts and evolves

The nature of this project will be that the approach will need to evolve as our understanding develops, the aspirations of communities take shape, and external factors (such as new government policies) emerge.

The proposed project should have an initial duration of at least 5 years so that the more fundamental high street issues can start to be addressed.

The project will have the following broad initial aims:

Support local high street regeneration efforts

- Helping members work effectively with their local communities
- Gathering information and insights from further afield
- Encouraging the sharing of knowledge, ideas and experiences
- Developing the support needed for specific high street plans
- Assisting continuity of effort for local projects and thinking

Assist with district-wide joined-up strategic solutions

- Helping the formulation of long term solutions to the high street challenges
- Enabling a more integrated deployment of relevant Council activities
- Coordinating the response to policy changes, developments and challenges

Stimulate supporting economic growth

- Encouraging full utilisation of the business spaces in and around our towns and villages
- Integrating high streets plans with wider economic development strategy

Improve perceptions of Wealden's high streets

- Promoting local high streets
- Encouraging people to re-engage with local shops
- Coordinating tourism communications with local high street themes and features

Position Wealden as a leader of innovative high street regeneration

- Gain press attention for Wealden regeneration success stories
- Promote the project as a successful example of local partnership and collaboration
- Foster an image of Wealden as an innovative, lively, responsive and forward looking community where new enterprises can flourish

Getting started

We envisage the following overlapping phases of activity during the initial 12 - 18 months:

1 Getting started

- Initial workshop for all members and key officers in related areas
- Core project team established
- Project goals, parameters, resourcing requirements and potential partners agreed

2 Listening, and sharing understanding

- Forum for all towns and villages + members + others potentially involved in the wider project team
- Ideas bank fully functional and shared across community teams
- Regular newsletter for the developing project network
- Project team begin recruiting partners and liaising with local teams to assist local projects

3 Developing practical actions

- Develop collaborative solutions identified through Forum and through working with local teams
- Longer term policy improvements identified and work begun on policy change
- Local community teams encouraged to have, and share, short to long term plans
- Cross-district initiatives developed and shared
- Wealden's longer term strategy for support of high street re-invention formulated within the project partnership

4 Spreading the word

- Introductions website fully operational and linked to good quality local sites
- 'We do brilliant high streets' launched, as part of wider tourism campaign
- External publicity of progress being made by local teams
- Wealden strongly promoted to new businesses, new retail enterprises and other potential users of business space both around and within communities

Communicating, sharing and working together

We need to encourage interested people across Wealden to share their experiences, insights and local concerns and work better together on supporting local action.

Workshop for members and officers

Many Members are already very active locally through partnerships etc, but there is little coordination and no sense of how individual community efforts are building into a wider picture of change. We need to encourage Members to take an even more active role in not only supporting local initiatives, but also in providing the intelligence and insights that will enable the Council to understand, and respond proactively to, critical issues for high streets across the district.

We propose a short workshop to encompass:

- Introducing to the Streets Ahead project and encouraging member involvement
- High street economics, consumer trends, choices for the high street
- The need for re-invigoration, regeneration, and re-invention, with examples
- Contrasting issues and experiences across wards. Sharing best ideas.
- How we encourage and support local community teams
- Briefing on policy developments

Forum for Towns and Villages

We plan a one-day Forum for everyone concerned with local action for change:

- The challenges, and the opportunities, for local high streets
- Local experiences and progress being made
- Need for short, medium and long term thinking
- Insights on creation of effective local teams
- Introducing to the Streets Ahead project and encouraging involvement
- Some of the initiatives already planned
- Collecting ideas for future actions
- Fostering a wider network of people passionate about high street futures

Facebook, newsletter and other ways to keep in touch



The existing prototype facebook page can be developed to become an online place for sharing ideas, successful initiatives from across the UK, new policies and announcements, sources for information and news about events.

A quarterly online (and print) newsletter can be used to provide a regular distillation of developments including the achievements of the project and progress by local community groups in towns and villages.

The project team can also provide briefing materials, drawing together insights from across the district, for use by members when talking to their local community groups concerned with high street futures.

Following on from the member workshop, it may also be useful to organise regular briefings and training sessions for members actively involved in assisting local communities in putting together action groups, developing plans and testing ideas.

Open access ideas bank



The Ideas Bank, a prototype of which has been developed, is intended as a simple way for good ideas and experiences to be captured so that they can be shared. Why re-invent the wheel when someone else has already tested and proved a good solution to a particular problem.

Based on the format designed for the prototype, the next step should be to create an online version that can be accessed, and contributed to, by anyone involved in high street futures. This 'open access' principle is important if the ideas bank is to be genuinely useful.

We believe it would make sense to ask anyone contributing an idea, or viewing material, to

'register' so that we can ensure against misuse. New entries would be moderated, but only to the extent of filtering out malicious entries or overt advertising.

Once the ideas bank is set up, we do not anticipate a large amount of time being required to moderate and manage the material as the entries would be likely to build gradually over time. The ideas bank should connect to, and compliment, other ways of sharing insights and experiences such as the facebook Streets Ahead Forum we have been testing, twitter strands and other channels.

Online 'introductions' example

The Streets Ahead group proposal for an 'introductions' website is an example of the way that the Council could become more actively involved and engaged.

The introductions idea was born out of the observation that the web pages currently existing for towns and villages currently offer an array of different types of local information. Town web pages can come from a variety of sources including Town Councils, Chambers of Commerce, History Groups etc. And as a result, the content of these pages is often dominated by the particular focus of the organisations involved. Rarely is there a simple introduction to the town itself - what it has to offer, where it is, and it's history and heritage.

The 'introductions' web pages have a simple remit, which is to provide a clear and appealing introduction to the location and then give links to all the other web pages that may be relevant and useful.

The landing page has an introduction about Wealden and its towns and villages. Using links or clicking the map, takes the viewer to the introduction page for that town or village.

The individual town and village pages are kept simple - providing a brief introduction, details of how to get there and links to the best relevant web pages about that town or village.

A new model for how we do things

To play our full part in supporting, and helping to enable, effective town and village regeneration, we need two important new dimensions within Wealden District Council: Proactive Partnership and Strategic Development

Proactive Partnership

We believe that to contribute to the STREETS AHEAD project, and to competently and knowledgeably assist local teams with their high streets work, we need dedicated resources to support and compliment the efforts of local members. We need to develop an internal capability for 'Proactive Partnership'. This means having people who have the time and the capability to develop an in-depth understanding of the challenges facing each main town and village, the solutions being developed and the assistance that may be required. Those involved in this 'Proactive Partnership' would work closely with members, but also consolidate the intelligence gained to inform broader decision making at a strategic development level. The specialists involved would regularly share local plans, progress and action required for each of their towns. They would also be responsible for ensuring that each town's initiatives and progress is effectively communicated and promoted across the district. Ideally there would at least two individuals dedicated to this task - one for North, one for South.



Strategic development

By Strategic Development we mean the fully resourced capability to plan and manage Wealden District Councils actions and policies to support and collaborate with towns and villages, based on a continuously reappraised analyse of the changes in external influences (including govt policy), the evolution of local town and village economies, the progress of town teams and the best external thinking about effective strategies for change. We believe this is an area that has lacked attention in the past. The new emphasis should result in a 'Strategy for High Street Futures' that can inform policy development, partnerships and further work on initiatives to support local activities and solve local challenges.

This strategic development responsibility should also encompass the work required to fully address the task of boosting the local economic growth that needs to underpin the high street development. In particular, we need to ensure that every effort is made to promote all available space - both new and existing - to suitable enterprises. In this context we would like to see an annual review of all business space, showing the levels of utilisation by area - particularly around and within towns and villages.

There are many areas where we have been very successful in encouraging economic growth and business expansion. All the individual initiatives need now to be drawn together into a coherent 'Local Economic Development Strategy' that connects with, and compliments, our emerging Strategy for High Street Futures.

Implications

Whilst some of what will be needed to sustain this project can be drawn from across the partnerships created, the initial project development work, and some of the longer term strategic development and proactive partnership will require a level of dedicated resources to deliver it.

As can be seen from the table below, there are a number of activities that are required and it would be impractical to achieve the project's aims from within the resources of the existing team based on current priorities. There is the need for a review of resources to explore how best these new capabilities can be made available so that the project can be credibly established - which in turn will give partners the confidence to get involved and play their full part. It is envisaged that resource estimation, planning and allocation would be amongst the first tasks for the project team.

| Strategic development | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Knowledge gathering | Keeping up to speed with all high streets' short, medium and long term plans |
| External research | Understanding patterns of successful evolution, effective strategies and lessons learned across the UK. |
| Policy planning | Following policy development and implications, working on potential internal changes to address local needs |
| Big picture | Developing and maintaining a summation of the developments, plans and implications across the district, including economic development issues |
| Strategy development | Leadership of an evolving strategy for high street regeneration, economic growth and inward investment |

| Proactive partnership | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Coordination | Encouraging the creation and effective working of local community teams |
| High street plans | Keeping up to speed with each high street's short, medium and long term plans |
| Initiatives | Understanding key local initiatives and any support required |
| Solutions | Formulating ideas for initiatives, partnerships and strategic development for local areas |
| Sharing knowledge | Informing local teams about development and implications, relevant examples from elsewhere and potential support |
| Reporting | Summarising and sharing progress, news, developments and issues for the project team |
| Surveying | Liaising with local teams to conduct surveys of streets, trader confidence and shoppers |

Communication, project development & integration

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| | |
| Facebook | Adding new posts, maintaining the page and promoting through WDC website |
| Newsletter | Research, creation and distribution of a quarterly newsletter |
| Ideas bank | Researching, maintaining and encouraging participation of the ideas pages |
| Streets Survey | Collecting data from local teams, analysing changes, reporting and publishing |
| Sentiment questionnaire | Collecting data from local teams, analysing changes, reporting and publishing |
| Introductions website | Development and management of the introductions website, including keeping track of latest links etc. |
| Project development | Working on projects identified through local partnerships, and developing for application |
| Integration | Identifying connections between existing activities and the project, communicating synergies and adapting activities to match emerging needs |
| | |

Existing activities that underpin the project aims

(largely communication, project development & integration)

| | |
|--|--|
| | <i>South East Local Enterprise Partnership</i> |
| | <i>Locate East Sussex</i> |
| | <i>Team East Sussex</i> |
| | <i>Wealden Economic Development Strategy and Action Plan</i> |
| | <i>Directory of Wealden Industrial Estates</i> |
| | <i>Directory of Wealden Rural Business Units/Centres</i> |
| | <i>Wealden Business Breakfasts</i> |
| | <i>Wealden Apprenticeship promotions</i> |
| | <i>Wealden Business Focus newsletter</i> |
| | <i>Online listings and events calendar</i> |
| | <i>Tourism Strategy</i> |
| | <i>Enjoy Sussex guide and online material</i> |
| | <i>Love Sussex</i> |
| | <i>Tourism South East campaigns</i> |
| | <i>Wealden Community Grants programme and support for community groups seeking funding</i> |
| | <i>Volunteer Award Scheme</i> |
| | <i>Healthy Live, healthy people strategy</i> |

Risk assessment

There are some reputational risks with getting more visibly involved with high street developments. For example, if the way the new permitted development rights for residential in town centres is applied by local councils proves unpopular or contentious, then the Council could be seen as being the culprit, through its inability to prevent certain types of high street development.

However, it is our opinion that the more the Council is actively involved with local plans, the more it will be able to help shape a successful outcome - with positive results for the Council's reputation both within local communities and further afield.

There is also a very real risk of negative reputational impact if the Council does not begin to become more actively involved. If some of Wealden's high streets begin to fail badly, while other authorities are successful in achieving sustainable regeneration, then the Council will begin to look out of touch and passive in the face of change.

We do not foresee any significant financial risks from this project as it is all about 'enabling' and at no stage is there any suggestion that the Council should become financially involved in any regeneration solutions that might be developed locally.

One area that will need to be worked on is the use of technology to share ideas and create communities of people keen to get involved. There may be a need to develop 'arms length' communication channels where the public can use the freedom of social network spaces to share ideas and find solutions, without the Council having to play the heavy-handed sensor. Here, the Council should aim to 'enable' the creation of such spaces and networks without needing to take responsibility for the content in the longer term.