

SCRUTINY REVIEW – TOWN AND VILLAGE IMPROVEMENTS – OBSERVATIONS AND DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Purpose of Report

This report summarises the actions to progress the Town and Village Improvements Scrutiny Review following discussion at the Scrutiny and Performance Committee on 17 January 2017. It also provides draft recommendations to be presented to Full Council on 28 March 2017.

2. Recommendations

Members are asked to:

- 2.1 review and agree the evidence and analysis so far from the scrutiny review detailed in the **Appendix**; and
- 2.2 review and agree that the draft recommendations reported in the **Appendix** will be presented to Full Council on 28 March 2017.

3. Considerations

3.1 The Scrutiny and Performance Committee agreed to undertake a review of Town and Village Improvements on 16 April 2015.

3.2 The Review Scope's purpose is:

To evaluate the effectiveness of the investment made in the town and village improvements and identify any improvements for the future.

Review Objectives:

- Identify public realm improvements to key towns' centres (Dumfries, Stranraer Lockerbie, Dalbeattie and Annan) across the region over the last five years
- Understand the Shop Front Improvement Scheme including the factors that have influenced take up
- Establish the role of planning and the opportunities for positive contributions
- Establish the impact of the improvements made
- Compare and contrast with arrangements in other local authority areas, including evaluation methodology
- Make recommendations for future arrangements

3.3 Members agreed that the initial observations listed below and presented at the 17 January 2017 Committee meeting be developed into recommendations.

- The initial budget for the Shop Front Improvement Scheme was set in 2013 at £200k and was applied for evenly across the region. This particular initiative was targeted at owners and tenants in priority smaller towns and was a regional programme from the outset.
- A process was in place to ensure small towns would have been prioritised over Dumfries if the overall project had been over-subscribed. The spread of projects across the region suggests no locational bias and that the project succeeded in being a regional initiative.
- A novel project was carried out as a trial in Dalbeattie where a block application for the Shop front Improvement scheme had been made from a number of shop owners/tenants and this had made a bigger impact on the High Street. This

approach was well received by the community and may be an approach that could work elsewhere.

- The evidence showed that where there was an active business community group the take up of the grants from the Shop Front Improvement Scheme was high and gave a very positive return.
- Broadly, the public were not always aware of the Council's involvement in the Shop Front Improvement Scheme and, although they welcomed the shop front improvements, they did not associate any of the funding with the Council.
- In some cases, local businesses found the application process to be complicated or the amount of funding too low and felt that there were other routes that they could take to receive funding.
- Within our region, and other Local Authority areas, signposting and word of mouth promotion for local businesses towards the Shop Front Improvement Scheme were found to be valuable ways to ensure shop owners/tenants are aware of the scheme.
- The way that information received by Elected Members on the Shop Front Improvement scheme did not enable all Members to be well versed on the benefits that the scheme could offer to businesses within their ward, or assist in the scheme's promotion.
- Individual members of the community and community groups felt that tourist and directional signposting (e.g. car parking/how to walk to the town centre) in towns and villages was not always clear and did not always give the best impression to visitors.
- Whilst the Conservation area in Dumfries is not restrictive in respect to opening stores, there is an issue with the size and costs of vacant properties. Contributors highlighted it could be restrictive to both Start Ups and Multi Nationals.
- Council officials acknowledged that Planning Gain can be considered for larger scale town centre or village projects to ensure the community benefits fully, but due to the sometimes delicate and challenging negotiations it would have to be done on an individual project basis.
- Our region comprises of mainly rural market towns which do not always have a vibrant evening economy. In many towns, shops and businesses close early evening and this does not encourage high street or town centre living or social and leisure activity.
- The improvements to individual shops was significant in many cases and the before and after pictures demonstrated the significant improvements that can be achieved.
- The current Shop Front Improvement Scheme is operated as a stand alone project. It has been widely established that regeneration requires a wide range of initiatives to succeed and in itself cannot address town or village regeneration.
- Dumfries and Galloway Council has not evaluated the Shop Front Improvement Scheme and this was found to be the same in other Local Authority areas where a shop front improvement scheme was operated. Methodologies do exist to evaluate town centre regeneration as well as studies that set out clear strategies, objectives and evaluations, giving a holistic approach to town centre regeneration which may include shop front improvement as part of the overall programme.

3.4 This report includes the final evidence presented to Members in earlier items on this agenda. The observations from these reports are listed below and have been developed into draft recommendations, which are included within the **Appendix** for Member consideration.

- Over £9 million has been committed over the last five years as part of wider public realm regeneration programmes based on the principles of place and local context and “town centre first” principles.
- There appears to be a lack of consistency across different signage conveying information for pedestrians, motorists, public transport, visitors and cycle routes; all of which are aimed at directing the public and visitors within our towns and villages. Local communities, public and private bodies all have the freedom to create and design their own signage which succeeds in providing a local style but does appear to create a lack of consistency across the region. In discussion with Council officers with varying responsibility for signage, there is recognition that a clearer and co-ordinated approach, led by the Council, to tackle this issue is needed
- Within the Local Development Plan it is proposed that a less restrictive framework be developed in terms of what types of proposals will be supported and encouraged within town centre boundaries and that these proposals will be more focused towards the High Street and regeneration areas.
- Dumfries and Galloway’s house building is characterised by a number of small scale builders and people who want to build their own house and the Council’s planning authority has proposed to the Scottish Government the development of a ‘Plot Passport’ model for small and single unit sites.
- Through the Strategic Housing Investment Plan (SHIP), Registered Social Landlords are developing a number of large and small scale projects in towns and villages across the whole of our region to deliver new affordable housing. A number of these projects encourage town centre living.
- No formal evaluation has been undertaken of the public realm projects completed so far by the Council. Officers highlight the intention that in the future an evaluation will be undertaken in accordance with the national methodologies developed by the Scottish Town’s partnership.

3.5 The following are the draft recommendations for consideration to proceed to Full Council:

- R1 - Public Realm projects in town and village centres should contribute to the sustainability of centres and communities. The rationale to deliver a regeneration strategy for the local area, which is strongly embedded in the principles of place and local context and “town centre first” principles, should be supported.
- R2 - A set criteria based on the approach used by Renfrewshire Council should be adopted for inclusion into any future Shop Front Improvement Schemes in Dumfries and Galloway. The criteria should help prioritise projects and positively influence take up of the scheme. In addition, a review of the application process should be undertaken to ensure that the process is as simple as possible.
- R3 - The Council’s contribution needs to be more visible in town and village improvement schemes with consistent Council branding included within material relating to any future schemes.
- R4 - Easy to access information should be available to a wide range of sources, including Elected Members, to ensure that any future Shop Front Improvement Scheme is promoted locally and that take up is maximised across the region.

- R5 – Continuation of The Shopfront Improvement Scheme should be encouraged as a positive contributory factor to a suite of initiatives and projects, which together combine to make a significant impact to appearance.
- R6 - Block applications should be encouraged for future Shop Front Improvement Schemes to help achieve a more significant impact.
- R7 - Evaluation of individual projects, including for example the Shop Front Improvement Scheme and other Public Realm projects that form part of a programme, should be undertaken in accordance with the methodologies and Scottish Government guidance developed for that purpose.
- R8 - Planning Gain should be considered and negotiated at the outset of relevant projects to maximise benefits to towns and villages.
- R9 – Planning and co-ordination should be improved to ensure signage within the region’s towns and villages is consistent and effective. The Council has a lead role in coordinating activity across Council Departments, local communities and other bodies.
- R10 – Continue to support the proposals within the Strategic Housing Investment Plan (SHIP) for large and small scale projects in towns and villages across the whole of our region to deliver new affordable housing, a number of which encourage town centre living.

3.6 Subject to the agreement of this Committee and finalising the report, the Chair of Scrutiny and Performance Committee will present the approved recommendations to Full Council on 28 March 2017.

4. Governance Assurance

The Corporate Management Team and the Lead Officers for the Review topic contributed to the development of the Review Scope and are involved in, and in agreement with, the overall Review process and arrangements.

5. Impact Assessment

As this report does not propose a change in policy, the formal adoption of a plan, policy or strategy it is not necessary to complete an Impact Assessment.

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Appendices – 1

Appendix – Town and Village Improvements Scrutiny Review Observations and Draft Recommendations

Background papers

[Scrutiny and Performance Committee - Handbook – meeting of 15 November 2012](#)

[Scrutiny and Performance Committee – Future Work Programme 2015-17 – meeting of 16 April 2015](#)

[Scrutiny and Performance Committee – meeting of 17 January 2017 Item 6, Actions, Next Steps and Initial Observations](#)