

**Agenda Item 7(a)**

# Stafford Town Centre Events Task and Finish Group Recommendations to Cabinet

<b>Committee:</b>	Economic Development and Planning
<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	13 March 2025
<b>Report of:</b>	Head of Economic Development and Planning
<b>Portfolio:</b>	Economic Development and Planning

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## 1 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To update the Scrutiny Committee on the outcome of the Task and Finish review and to make recommendations to Cabinet to support future activity in this workstream.

## 2 Recommendations

- 2.1 That members note the report.
- 2.2 That the recommendations proposed by the Task and Finish Group are noted and if agreed by the Committee presented to Cabinet for consideration.

## 3 Key Issues

- 3.1 Members will be aware that in the past the Borough Council has been involved in sourcing, delivering and marketing events within Stafford Town Centre. As Council priorities have changed with a greater focus on longer term regeneration and a more challenging position in terms of available resource and budget it should be noted that this report is not commenting on the past arrangements but looking at ways to increase the short, medium and long term benefits that an active events programme can deliver.
- 3.2 During the course of the Task and Finish review the nature of the Stafford Town Centre Partnership (TCP), of which the Council is a member, has changed. As such some recommendations around strategic objectives of the Partnership, its relationship to a future Business Improvement District (BID) or similar and the future role of the Council in the Partnership are now moot.

- 3.3 The role of the events within Stafford town centre should be considered in the context of the immediate benefits (residents, businesses and visitors enjoying the experience and seeing increased activity across the retail, hospitality and leisure sector on the day) and also the medium to longer term benefits around supporting the wider regeneration of the town, encouraging social cohesion and building pride in the County town and brand Stafford.

## **4 Relationship to Corporate Priorities**

- 4.1 A vibrant events programme supports delivery of Business Objectives 1 and 2 in the Council's Corporate Business Plan 2021-2024.

## **5 Report Detail**

### Scope of the Review

- 5.1 The scope of the Task and Finish review was agreed to assess the following:

- 1) The aspirations of users, visitors and residents for the future of Stafford town centre and the events which are run within it;
- 2) The impact that events can have on the vitality of the town
- 3) The potential contribution to inward investment from events

- 5.2 In the course of the review two additional work areas were also considered as follows:

- 4) Recommending approaches to town centre events for Stafford Borough Council
- 5) Scrutinising the impact of the town's programme of commercial and local authority events since the completion of the Market Square and Victoria Park (programmes, bookings, likely impact on the vitality of the town)

### Information Gathering

- 5.3 As part of the information gathering phase of the review the following stakeholders were engaged:

- Economic Development team officers
- Markets team officers
- Traders within Stafford town centre (including hospitality)
- Stafford Town Centre Partnership, including the Chair Mary Walker

- 5.4 Similarly a range of information was reviewed to understand the current activity, roles and considerations under the umbrella of town centre events. This included:
- The types and frequencies of events booked in Market Square during 2024 including the hours of operation and delivery leads
  - The availability, accessibility and scope of events related information with particular focus on the Council's own communication channels
  - With particular focus on Market Square all information relating to the process of hiring the Square to understand where barriers to use may exist
- 5.5 During the Group's own discussions consideration was also given to those events held in the past that were believed to be successful, those that residents and businesses have indicated were beneficial and would like to see again and also the kinds of events Stafford should aspire to host.
- 5.6 Finally, the Task and Finish Group also considered the role of monitoring and evaluation, what this would seek to demonstrate and how this could potentially be resourced.

#### Findings of the Review

- 5.7 In terms of the number and frequency of events the Group identified that there is a mix of annual (Mayor Making, Remembrance Sunday Parade, Christmas Lights Switch On), monthly (Farmers Market, Food and Music Festival) and one off or new events (Stafford Pride). Typically, activity is a little quieter in the post-Christmas period but with a mixture of markets, sporting events and Civic ceremonies each month will generally host two or three events as a minimum.
- 5.8 Prior to the pandemic the TCP were active in delivering events such as the Cheese and Ale Festival and Stafford Arts Festival however the focus of their activity has changed significantly since 2020. The Borough Council actively manage the regular Farmers Markets and Civic Events alongside working in partnership with Freedom Leisure to deliver the Christmas Lights Switch On event which continues to be hugely popular. The remainder of events are now delivered either by Freedom Leisure or local events organiser LR Partnership.
- 5.9 The TCP has recently reconfigured its operation with a move away from being a membership organisation to setting up town centre champions. The TCP has previously looked at the idea of establishing a Business Improvement District (BID) for the town centre, but the timing of this needs to be carefully considered. Town centres that have BIDs in place have access to budgetary resources that the TCP doesn't currently have and this creates an opportunity

to develop a more diverse and active programme of events throughout the year.

- 5.10 Talking to local businesses revealed that where events transferred location to Victoria Park, whilst still successful, no longer benefitted the town centre businesses to the same extent. Given the size of the town and proximity of key event venues such as the Square, the Gatehouse and Victoria Park it should be possible to ensure all areas of the town benefit from the additional footfall that events encourage. This matter is considered more closely in respect of the communications and marketing aspect of the Task and Finish review.
- 5.11 It should also be noted however that moving an event away from the Square can be a positive change. For example, stakeholders commenting that the relocation of the Farmers Market to either side of the Square during the renovation works created a better atmosphere over a wider area and encouraged footfall both north and south of the Square itself.
- 5.12 Traders in and around Market Square described the importance of the refurbished Square and the street furniture (seating and planters) was actively encouraging people to extend their visits to the town centre. As an extension of this a number of stakeholders also commented that outdoor seating at hospitality venues positively supports the feeling of vibrancy and prosperity, particularly during the summer months.
- 5.13 Clearly increased footfall and extended visits to the town centre are central to supporting and developing the local economy (as set out in Corporate Business Objective 1) but a successful events programme can also deliver wider outcomes in terms of health and wellbeing. Stakeholders have explained how attendance at those events which include performances from local singing, dancing or theatrical groups actually increases the visibility of those groups and attracts new participants who may otherwise have not known they existed (supporting Corporate Business Objective 2).
- 5.14 The case for a strong events programme is therefore clearly demonstrated from the research carried out by the group. The focus of the Task and Finish exercise then explored how the Council support new and existing events. Following initial investigations into how easy it was to access information on hiring the Market Square and the costs and procedures associated with doing so the relevant webpages on the Council's site were improved within 24 hours of the group providing feedback to officers.
- 5.15 Whilst this is clearly a positive move forward a number of stakeholders commented on the difficulties of actually finding out what's going on in the town centre. It is acknowledged that this is in part due to number of organisers but if the Council's role is to champion the town centre as an events hub then Members may want to consider how communication of all events could be managed. This should also include consideration of communication channels

and access for those who don't use social media alongside how and potential disruption from the wider regeneration works can be mitigated.

- 5.16 Finally Members have been briefed on the upcoming Stafford Town Centre Masterplan which is currently being procured and will be reported to Scrutiny at a later date. Whilst the main focus of the masterplan is around regeneration, the way in which the town centre functions is a key part of that and it is anticipated that there will be public consultation and engagement giving the public the opportunity to put forward ideas for new events and activities within the town centre footprint.

### Recommendations

- 5.17 On the basis of the findings set out above the Task and Finish group propose the following recommendations be referred to Cabinet:

- 1) That all Members are actively engaged with the development of the refreshed Economic Growth Strategy, the Stafford Town Centre Masterplan and associated strategies and plans, with public consultation and engagement undertaken.
- 2) That on completion of the Stafford Town Centre Masterplan Cabinet ensure that the vision is then embedded within emerging planning policy as part of the Local Plan process.
- 3) That the Cabinet articulate the role of the Council in respect of town centres within the refreshed Corporate Plan including the Council's relationship with partners also directly involved in the town centres.
- 4) In response to the reconfiguration of the Town Centre Partnership Cabinet ensure that the new structure includes a suitably experienced, dedicated and proactive private sector based Events Champion.
- 5) That the Council continues to work in co-operation with the reconfigured Stafford Town Centre Partnership and other community organisations to identify new ideas and opportunities for events that will add value to the existing programme and attract a wide audience including families and young people.
- 6) Given that the Council continue to work with the Town Centre Partnership to examine the potential for a BID for Stafford town centre it is critical that this piece of work moves at pace to maximise the chances of this proposal being successful. Underpinning this will be a robust delivery plan produced by the Town Centre Partnership that is scrutinised monthly by Cabinet.
- 7) To ensure that a vibrant events programme is positively contributing to the local community Cabinet should embed within the existing performance

management reporting monitoring and evaluation of events based upon footfall, car parking revenue and experiential data. That information should then be used to identify opportunities for expansion of activities.

- 8) That the necessary resource is made available to produce the data identified in Recommendation 7.
- 9) That the necessary resource is made available to actively manage the communications around town centre activity during the regeneration of the Guildhall and former Co-op sites.
- 10) That the necessary resource be made available to create and then manage an easily accessible events webpage that links with existing visitor economy sites to promote all events, regardless of whether the Council is the lead organiser.

## **6 Implications**

### **6.1 Financial**

None as a direct result of these recommendations but the need for additional resources has been identified in 5.17.

### **6.2 Legal**

None

### **6.3 Human Resources**

None

### **6.4 Risk Management**

None

### **6.5 Equalities and Diversity**

None

### **6.6 Health**

None

### **6.7 Climate Change**

None

## **7 Appendices**

None

## **8 Previous Consideration**

None

## **9 Background Papers**

Notes of the Task and Finish Group's meetings and research are held by Democratic Services.

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**Ward Interest:** Forebridge

**Report Track:** Economic Development and Planning 13 March 2025; recommendations to a future Cabinet meeting

**Key Decision:** N/A