



High Streets and District Centres Strategy

Economic Development

Authors: Liz Orme, Hannah Porter, Paula Sales

Version: V2

Date: September 2021

Background and context

Across the country, high streets and district centres are changing, and the Bournemouth Christchurch and Poole area (BCP area) is no exception. Some will need assistance to change, to help curate the commercial offer and further develop communities in those locations. Others are developing without any intervention. The future of high streets and district centres is one of community where people will live, work, and play in a vibrant, mixed-use and sustainable environment.

The British high street is set against a difficult economic backdrop which requires new, innovative solutions. In recognition of these changing dynamics, the Grimsey Review 'The Alternative Future for the High Streets', noted that the future of our economy depends on thriving, vibrant, micro-economies. It suggested that local authorities have a responsibility to produce Town Centre Business Plans identifying their own individual selling proposition and vision based on their unique heritage, and that significant action is required to assist change through encouraging local investment, such as opportunities for community hub solutions.

The 2019 Government report 'High Streets and Town Centres in 2030', states that our high streets and town centres will survive, and thrive, if they adapt. Becoming activity-based community gathering places, where retail is a smaller part of a wider range of uses and activities, will create a space that is the "intersection of human life and activity" based primarily on social interactions rather than financial transactions. Individual areas will need to identify the mix that best suits their specific characteristics, local strengths, culture and heritage. Fundamentally, community must be at the heart of all high streets and town centres.

Setting BCP area in context of other UK cities and towns, the Centre for Cities Recovery Tracker identifies that BCP area's economy has bounced back well and is classified as 'strong.' It falls in the top 5 for both footfall and spend (May 2021 figures), attributable in part to its strong tourism offer, coastal location and an increase in staycations due to COVID-19 restrictions. The consumer spend index is increasing positively with a shift towards a growing majority of consumers coming from outside the area.

Current high street trends are associated with the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with a general culture change following the impact of online shopping and high streets becoming less retail and more leisure, food and drink based. Accounting for the eventual return to normal conditions post-restrictions, the ability of the high streets and district centres to continue to thrive once staycation visitor traffic settles is a key consideration for both their short-term and long-term economic growth.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Policy Paper, Build Back Better High Streets, was published on 15 July 2021. It sets out the government's plan for high streets and how high streets and town centres can adapt and thrive after the COVID-19 pandemic. It sets out government action across 5 areas:

1. Breathing new life into empty buildings
2. Supporting high street businesses
3. Improving the public realm
4. Creating safe and clean spaces
5. Celebrating pride in local communities

Introduction

Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council (BCP Council) has created a Strategy to ensure high streets and district centres across BCP area are fit for the future, becoming vibrant, thriving and enjoyable locations for everyone. At the heart of the Strategy is the intent to positively and proactively intervene where and if appropriate.

BCP Council's formation of the R³ Retail, Hospitality and Leisure (R³ RHL) Sector Working Group has been an invaluable resource for enabling regular industry updates and positive action. Part of this intervention is also to provide a leadership and/or a convening role, recognising the many stakeholders who have a stake and interest in high streets and district centres and the need for collective responsibility.

This Strategy looks at our high streets and district centres through the lens of economic growth, focusing on creating an environment for economic vibrancy and enabling a high quality, world-class visitor experience.

To do this it will:

- intrinsically link to the Economic Development Strategy
- support and inform BCP Council's Local Plan
- be supported by and link with other BCP Council strategies, including those focusing on development, regeneration (including the emerging Urban Regeneration Company and the High Streets Renaissance project), housing, communities, transport, destination, Smart Places and culture
- make connections with BCP Council's operational delivery of current and planned interventions, and any other projects that focus on high streets and district centres
- assumes the Government's roadmap and re-opening post-pandemic will continue to progress as planned.

It will not:

- replace or duplicate other BCP council strategies
- deal with site or area-specific issues, but recognises that these will contribute to creating successful high streets and district centres

The Strategy is designed to set the objectives and form the framework for a series of more detailed project-specific Action Plans that will be produced for each high street and district centre. Initially, audits of each centre will be undertaken to allow a fair assessment of each area, identify options and which projects could be meaningfully funded. The Action Plans will be flexible working documents and will evolve and the high streets and district centres themselves evolve and future iterations may be required.

Engagement process

The following engagements have been undertaken:

- BCP Council 'Reimagining Your High Streets' Engagement HQ survey (March 2021)
- Information Officers engagement and feedback from high street businesses (July 2020 – ongoing)
- internal officer/service evidence gathering by interview (April – August 2021)

This is not a fixed piece of work and will need constant review and evolution through regular communication and consultation. Audits and Action Plans should include consultation with Ward Councillors, Neighbourhood Forums and local business and community representatives.

Public consultation will be considered for the more detailed proposals which will be taken forward through individual high street and district centre Action Plans.

A 'Reimagining Your High Street' Engagement HQ digital public consultation exercise was undertaken in March 2021 with the public being asked to contribute ideas for how the identified high streets and district centres across the BCP area could potentially be developed and re-energised.

This Strategy considers the feedback received and aims to respond to the main themes identified and aligns them with nationally recognised themes identified by the High Street Taskforce.

- Regeneration
- Arts/Culture
- Retail
- Parking and Streets

BCP Council has regular and comprehensive dialogue and consultation with the three established Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) (Bournemouth Town Centre, Coastal and Poole) and the emerging Christchurch BID steering group as well as Chambers and trade groups; this will be ongoing. In addition, the COVID-19 recovery group, R³RHL is an invaluable resource for ongoing operational feedback and it recently commissioned Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG) funded research work that includes a significant element of public consultation, which could be used for the Action Plan stages.

Information Officers have been employed over the past year to conduct direct business engagement and provide support across every high street and district centre, targeting key sectors when necessary and feeding back on-the-ground-intelligence for officer action where required. Between July and December 2020 alone, 3,707 business addresses were visited across BCP Council's local, district and town centres, and a total of 1,436 surveys were completed to understand COVID-19 safety measures and associated impact on trade.

An internal evidence gathering exercise has been undertaken with individual Council service directors and officers, with the aim of identifying current work and planned projects in the main town centres to inform this Strategy. This has identified opportunities and areas for improvement in the future as well as highlighting gaps and differences in provision from the legacy Councils merging.

Rationale

The High Streets Taskforce (HSTF), a nationally recognised alliance of place-making experts providing support to local leaders of high streets in England, was commissioned by Government in 2019 to develop a COVID-19 recovery framework and a route-map to transformation.

The HSTF examines footfall trends and other data across UK towns and has categorised them as: Holiday, Multifunctional, Speciality and Comparison Towns:

- Holiday towns are defined as busy in summer, quiet in winter, with a focus on a good offer to summer visitors, attraction to tourists, but relatively weak in terms of comparison (non-food) shopping offer.
- Multifunctional towns have a flat footfall throughout the year and their retail offer, opening times, events, services and other uses are focused on the local community.

They have convenience (food) shopping anchors, are places of work, public transport hubs, markets and a variety of shopping and services organised as reliable community hubs.

- Speciality towns have footfall peaks in the summer months and before Christmas. Anchors are not retail-based and offer something unique, such as, heritage or cultural attraction. They attract visitors but serve local population.
- Comparison towns have a noticeable pre-Christmas rise in footfall, a wide range of retail leisure, food and beverage, strong retail anchors and international brands. They serve a wide catchment area and people travel a long way to reach them.

This Strategy recognises the importance of the largest high streets in the BCP area as holiday, tourism and attraction destinations. To drive economic growth and add value in the future, it is equally important that the three towns are repositioned as multifunctional locations but draw on their specialities and unique cultural heritage as well as tourism offer. The focus for the district centres should also be multifunctional, supporting local communities with local businesses.

The HSTF has identified the top priorities that local place leaders should focus on to achieve vitality and viability, create sustainable high streets and meet the needs of their catchment communities. These priorities form the basis of our strategic themes:

1. **Vision and Strategy / Networks and Partnerships**
2. **Adaptability and Experience**
3. **Appearance and Attractiveness**
4. **Place Marketing**
5. **Activity and Innovation**
6. **Liveability and Functionality**

Objectives and Framework

Theme 1 – Vision and Strategy / Networks and Partnerships

Objective 1: to support a broad variety of uses in our high streets and district centres

The future of successful high streets lies in encouraging mixed uses and supporting independent and small businesses, whether they be retailers, hospitality, other service uses, or markets, so that they collectively positively contribute to the high streets and district centres in which they are situated. Solutions could include the creation of a Landlord and Agent Forum with the dual purpose of creating a strategy for an optimal tenant mix for vacant units and those with lease expiries. This will enhance the long-term returns of the Landlord and allow the Tenants, including start-ups, to occupy at sustainable rents and business rates.

Objective 2: to make full use of our high street properties

The evolution of our high streets is at its most basic level, a result of market forces. To minimise vacant units in our centres, BCP Council will aim to develop an Empty Shops Initiative, working with the Landlord and Agent Forum and aligning with planning policy to create a strategy for encouraging mixed uses and activity at a ground floor level. BCP Council's wider regeneration plans will also take account of opportunities to encourage a range of new businesses including local independents.

Objective 3: to ensure successful partnership working

Partnerships between those working on our high streets have been refreshed in the wake of the pandemic, providing the opportunity to work together in new ways. This has strengthened already strong working relationships with the place experts, BIDs, Chambers and industry leaders collaborating with BCP Council officers and politicians through the R³RHL group. The work of this group will align with the strategic objectives of BCP Council's Our Big Plan and the emerging Urban Regeneration Company to ensure that our high streets and district centres are fully supported in the long-term. There is an opportunity for the involvement of education providers including local schools, colleges, and universities.

Theme 2 - Adaptability and Experience

Objective 4: to make our high streets and district centres culturally rich destinations for experiences and events

A diverse offer of experiences and reasons to visit is integral to the success of our high streets and district centres. With a rich cultural heritage and waterside location, the opportunities to maximise the tourism, event and cultural offer, embedded in the BCP area should be maximised. Drawing on BCP Council's Events programme, Tourism Strategies and the emerging Cultural Compact will develop talent and forge links between the day and night-time economy. This will include opportunities, from small scale to significant investment supporting a variety of offer from local artists and the art community to major attractions, to embed BCP area as a sub-regional cultural destination.

Objective 5: alternative and future uses for our high streets and district centres

A primary role for support partners is to consider the future of the high streets, who uses them and for what purpose. Using ARG3 funding allocated to the R³RHL group, a research project is underway which will explore public perceptions and expectations. Consideration will be given to linkages between the day and night-time economy, diversification of uses and creating long-term sustainable outcomes for the high streets using green and renewable solutions. The recommendations will be used to assist BCP Council in creating solutions to achieve the most appropriate outcomes for residents and the local economy via forthcoming Action Plans.

Theme 3 - Appearance and Attractiveness

Objective 6: make our high streets and district centres cleaner and greener

The visual appearance of our high streets is paramount to ensuring a positive customer experience. Whilst there is already a full programme of operational work being undertaken in our high streets and district centres, comprehensive street audits are underway with the intention of monitoring and benchmarking standards, highlighting and tackling areas of concern. The newly formed Cleaner, Greener, Safer Panel will be central to achieving this objective.

Objective 7: keep our high streets and district centres safe and secure

The role of the licensing, enforcement and regulatory teams are integral to the safety and security of the communities that use our high streets and district centres. The multi-agency

HQ, located in central Bournemouth, monitors activity across the conurbation. We will continue to support high street and district centre businesses and their public realm by tackling anti-social behaviour using powers supported by the Community Safety Accreditation Scheme and the Police, Shop Watch and Pub Watch schemes. The objective will seek to ensure that each area is covered by the requisite level of resource.

Theme 4 – Place Marketing

Objective 8: market and promote our high streets & district centres to showcase their full potential

Commitment and support for high streets and district centres is evidenced in ongoing communications which keep their visibility elevated. The intention is to take residents and visitors on the positive journey of the changing face of our traditional shopping areas. Working with internal and external partners, we will regularly promote our activities and interventions using high profile campaigns and branding, including:

- Coastline of Opportunity
- Beyond the Beach
- Coast with the Most
- Events programmes – Festival Coast Live!
- Contactless Giving

Theme 5 – Activity and Innovation

Objective 9: use our high streets and district centres as data-rich locations that are easy to navigate

Tracking changes and trends in high streets and district centre activity is essential to enable positive action to be taken. Data availability is key to enable this; the current provision of footfall cameras and CCTV will be reviewed and balanced to ensure that each key location is comparable and equipped to provide the information we need. It is important to monitor and support activity, not just in the day and evening but also the period that bridges that gap, to support our high streets and district centres to become thriving community hubs around the clock.

Action Plans for each area will consider the need for clear gateways into the area and wayfinding/signposting through the larger high streets. Accessibility by public and private transport and parking availability will be analysed.

Intelligence-gathering is a common function for many of the BCP Council service areas. The business engagement and support for high street and district centres undertaken by the Information Officers is a valuable resource that will be considered for ongoing funding. The opportunity for this information to be gathered and aligned to enable the creation of data dashboards, accessible centrally, will be explored.

Objective 10: future proof our high streets and district centres as Smart Places

BCP Council's Smart Place programme has placed the digital agenda front and centre. There is a huge amount of value in place-making; the key to unlock its potential needs to consider the use of new technologies such as 5G and free Wi-Fi to provide new visitor experiences. The digital future is evidenced by the successful engagement and public consultation exercise by Engagement HQ to support this Strategy. Proof of Concept apps are already being developed to encompass augmented reality and animated experiences

designed to add further dimensions to high street experiences and events; the infrastructure required to support this will continue to be developed.

Theme 6 – Liveability and Functionality

Objective 11: diversify our high streets and district centres as mixed use, dynamic places to live, work and congregate

The high street has evolved from being a retail-anchored destination. The high streets and district centres of the future will be multi-purpose, sustainable locations for living, working, culture, education, health, events and congregating. Their new focus will be to become community hubs which, in turn, will generate increased footfall and opportunities for growth.

Using the principles of Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), residents, communities and businesses can all play a role in driving the process by identifying and mobilising existing but often unrecognised community assets, such as libraries and community centres, responding to challenges and creating local social improvement and economic development. This could include developing existing or creating new markets to make a positive contribution to our high streets and district centres.

Next steps and conclusion

In recognition of the changing nature of our high streets and district centres, the objectives identified will set the framework for stakeholders and partners to be involved in localised solutions. Action Plans will be developed collaboratively, based on initial audits which will allow a fair and equal assessment of each area to be undertaken and identify which projects could be meaningfully funded.

The Action Plans will use the Strategy objectives as a framework and will be working documents, with a shared aim of revitalising, reimagining, and supporting our town and district centres. Defined KPI's to identify measurable outcomes will be included in the Action Plans.

There is already an incredible amount of activity and focus on ensuring the longevity of our high streets and district centres that needs to be harnessed, co-ordinated, embraced and acted upon. This will require careful management and collaborative working between internal partners and stakeholders. The effects of the pandemic will be felt for years to come and this Strategy will be the framework for future proofing our heritage, vibrancy and unique characteristics that make our high streets and district centres stand-out as destinations.