

## **HERTFORDSHIRE WORKS**

**TUESDAY 1<sup>ST</sup> SEPTEMBER 2009**

### **REPORT: VIBRANT TOWNS GROUP**

**Lead: Dorothy Thornhill, Elected Mayor of Watford**

#### **Purpose of Report**

To provide an overview of the activities of the Vibrant Towns Group, its proposals for distributing that element of PRG allocated to supporting town centres and its SMART Action Plans

#### **The Vibrant Towns Task Group**

Chaired by Dorothy Thornhill, the group is made up of representatives from Dacorum, St. Albans, Stevenage, Watford, Welwyn Hatfield and HCC together with a representative from the county's Town Centre Managers (currently the Hitchin TCM). It has met twice and has agreed terms of reference and a process for managing that element of the Hertfordshire Works PRG allocated to support town centres.

The group has also shared information on the practical difficulties of working with landlords to bring empty shops back into use, on success stories around bring empty units back into use and on recent Government initiatives such as 'intermediate leases'. Unfortunately, the much-heralded DCLG initiative to make £3M available for an 'empty shop revival fund' is only available in the 57 hardest hit areas, none of which are in Hertfordshire.

#### **How the recession is affecting Hertfordshire's Town Centres and Local Shopping areas**

Nationally, the number of empty shops rose by 42% between December 2008 and February 2009 (LGA) while the British Retail Consortium predicts that 15% of High Street shops will be vacant by December 2009 compared to 7% at the beginning of the year. In January 2009, a survey by the LGA revealed that four-fifths of councils reported increases in empty shops in their areas and two-thirds said that empty properties were having a significant/moderate impact on their High Streets.

Across Hertfordshire, the effects of the recession on High Streets and local shopping parades are mixed. In a recent national report ranking the 20 High Streets with the biggest rise in voids, Hertford was ranked the 10<sup>th</sup> worst affected town, falling 8 places in the retail rankings in 12 months (Experian – The Impact of the Recession on UK High Streets, June 2009) In Watford, the overall vacancy rate is 9% compared to 3-4% 12 months ago. On a positive note, there is interest in the former Woolworths stores in Watford, Hitchin and Stevenage and the former store in Hertford has now been re-let. Several towns have held promotional events which have increased footfall and in Stevenage, there are currently two less vacant units compared to October 2008.

### **Proposals for allocating PRG**

The Vibrant Towns Group is the route through which PRG for supporting town centres and local shopping parades will be allocated. Two projects are envisaged and the Group has agreed to implement these as follows:

1. Creating a local shopping centres improvement fund aimed at improving the appearance of local shopping parades and empty retail units and involving a bidding process and requiring match funding. The group considered a proposal to split the £500,000 funding 10 ways and allocated an equal sum to each district but took the view that a bidding process would be more likely to generate more innovative solutions. The need to match fund the PRG money was felt by some to be a constraint particularly where the district had already allocated its LSP PRG so the Group agreed that this requirement should be interpreted flexibly. Bids should be developed in partnership with Town Councils, Town Centre Management or local traders and would be judged by practitioners from outside the county working with HCC. Criteria for bidding are now being developed and consideration will be given to creating three 'pots' for major town centres, smaller/market towns and local shopping parades.

2. A 'shop local' campaign to promote the Hertfordshire retail offer. The group has agreed that a countywide approach would achieve the best value for money and that the campaign should build on existing initiatives to encourage more people to visit Hertfordshire's towns and to use their local shops. Such a campaign could build on the concept of a 'shop Herts cheque book' or loyalty passport scheme' to incentivise people to shop local, either offering discounts at local shops and restaurants or enabling residents and visitors who spend say £10 in participating shops to enter a draw with prizes donated by local businesses. District Councils, Chambers of Commerce and local media would be encouraged to be partners in this scheme and could have a role to play in publicising the scheme which might be match-funded by a major retailer.

The group will meet again on 8<sup>th</sup> September to progress these initiatives.

### **Action Plans**

An Action Plan for the Vibrant Towns Group is attached as Appendix A.

Dorothy Thornhill, Elected Mayor of Watford and Chair of the Vibrant Towns Group

## Appendix A Vibrant Towns Action Plan

Action	Partner Organisations	When by	PIs	Targets
Create a local shopping centres Improvement Fund	HW Vibrant Towns Group District Councils TCMs Local Traders	Develop scheme by 31.9.09 Bids received by 30.10.09 Winning scheme signed off by HW Board 2.12.09	% Increases in footfall; % Increases in turnover; No. of shopping centres implementing schemes	Tbc when details of successful scheme available
Develop a 'shop local' campaign	HW Vibrant Towns Group District Councils TCMs Local media Local retailers	Develop scheme by 31.09.09  Implement scheme by 31.1.09	% Increase in turnover; Number of vouchers used; Visitor perception surveys	Tbc when details of successful scheme available
Share information on how the recession is affecting local shopping centres	HW Vibrant Towns Group TCMs	Ongoing	Monitoring levels of occupancy in retail units in town and local parades; Anecdotal information from retailers	No. of new projects targeting vacant retail units
Investigate and access external funding sources for supporting towns and local shopping parades	HW Vibrant Towns Group TCMs	Ongoing	No.of funding sources accessed ££ investment in shopping centres/parades	t.b.c