

Briefing Note



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Subject: Proposed modification to the Southend Central Area Action Plan (SCAAP)

Summary of proposed modification to the Southend Central Area Action Plan (SCAAP) following the Examination

Background

Helen Greenhalgh (HG) attended the Examination of the SCAAP on 23 and 24 May 2017 on behalf of the owner of the Royals Shopping Centre.

In respect of Matter 3.3, HG commented that the high level of vacancies needed more attention and guidance and that the SCAAP should be more proactive and specific about how the council intends to tackle this issue. HG said that allowing some diversification of uses might assist in part, but fundamentally vacancy levels need more attention. HG also noted that this point links to other concerns over the lack of a robust strategy to protect the town centre and encourage future investment. HG said a worst-case scenario would be the vacancy levels increasing dramatically as a result of the town centre key retailers leaving to go to the major out of centre retail and leisure scheme proposals at Fossetts Farm. It was therefore important for the council to respond positively to this issue with an action plan.

At the Examination, the Inspector requested that Indigo prepare a proposed schedule of actions to reference within the SCAAP to help address the significant vacancy levels in the town and try and agree with officers.

Following the Examination, a vacancy strategy, prepared by Indigo in discussion with Alan Bacon on the Southend Business Improvement District (BID), was suggested to officers for inclusion in the SCAAP. The details of which are outlined below.

The suggested list of actions is as follows:

- Work with landowners and meet on a regular basis to understand the issues leading to vacancies and to understand how these can be avoided;
- Work with the BID to enhance shop frontages;
- Provide rates assistance on a case by case basis so to help attract new retailers to the town;

- Relax the planning controls where justified and allow more flexible street seating for occupiers;
- Provide an area on the council's website for vacant shops and other premises;
- Pedestrianise other parts of the Central Area during peak times, such as Christmas;
- Create a High Street fund to improve the appearance of the centre including lighting, pavements, seating, shopfronts etc;
- Work with the BID on projects such as street rangers to improve the atmosphere of the high street;
- Work with the BID to deliver its investment and improvement objectives for the Central Area;
- Work with the landlords to provide information on town and future projects;
- Promote a policy of high street first for retailers who are already on the high street and want to relocate out of town i.e. requiring them to occupy two stores for say 10 years.
- Promote Southend as a retail destination and leisure experience;
- Create a platform to share local business opportunities;
- Improve and seek funding for security measures in the Central Area;
- Prepare and keep up to date a schedule of measures to be funded through S106 monies secured from out of centre retail and leisure developments.

It was also suggested that the Council includes a list of measures in the SCAAP which the Council can link s106 payments to for town centre improvements to help mitigate the impacts of out centre proposals, for example the current planning application at Fossetts Farm.

Discussion with the Council

The proposed vacancy strategy was emailed to Mark Sheppard, Team Leader of Strategic Planning at Southend on Sea Borough Council, on 24 May 2017. Mark stated (by email response on 14 June 2017) that he and his colleagues did not consider the strategy to be necessary for the soundness of the SCAAP. As such, it was suggested that the proposed vacancy strategy is sent directly to the Inspector for consideration. We felt this was an opportunity lost for the council in terms of creating policies which help support and protect the centre.

Indigo would therefore be grateful if the Inspector could consider our request and recommend that a strategy such as the one outlined above is included within the final SCAAP.