

Scrutiny Committee report



Report of head of economy, leisure and property

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Market towns

Recommendation

Scrutiny committee is requested to provide its comments on the support proposed for the district's market towns so that cabinet can take these into account before considering the proposed growth bid as part of the council's budget setting process.

Purpose of report

1. The purpose of this report is to determine the future of the council's support for market towns in relation to the Wallingford market town co-ordinator, Henley town centre manager and the Thame funding pot.

Strategic objectives

2. The role of supporting market towns falls within the strategic objective to "build the local economy" and the corporate priority to "continue to invest to improve the viability and attractiveness of our towns".

Background

3. On 18 January 2012, the cabinet took the following decisions in relation to the council's future role in the district's market towns:

- a) to extend the contract for the market town co-ordinator for Wallingford for a period of two years, subject to match funding from Wallingford Town Council
- b) to recruit a market town co-ordinator for Henley for a period of two years, subject to match funding from Henley Town Council
- c) to remove the post of market town co-ordinator for Thame and to reallocate the post funding for projects and project delivery in the town, using existing resources within the economic development team to provide support for project development in the town
- d) to continue the production of annual action plans for the market towns in conjunction with the town partnerships and town councils.

In addition, cabinet supported the dedication of a member of the economic development team to a specific town, in order to strengthen links with the town councils and town partnerships

4. Economic development officers continue to support each of the towns and the development of an annual action plan for each market town in partnership with the town councils and business partnerships. The council supports each plan with £4,000 revenue funding a year and capital funding for specific projects where identified.
5. We extended the contract for the Wallingford market town co-ordinator role from April 2012 for a period of two years. Since this post was extended, there have been a couple of changes of post-holder for various reasons. The current post-holder, Kate Rayner, has been in post since September 2012 and is based in the council's offices at Crowmarsh, although she will be on maternity leave from 17 January 2014. Wallingford Town Council takes an active part in supporting the role, providing £5,000 match funding for the post a year and taking part in regular update meetings. The annual cost of the post is some £15,000, for 18.5 hours a week. Wallingford Town Council and Wallingford Partnership also provide match funding support towards delivery of the annual action plans.
6. Henley Town Council took on the recruitment of a town centre manager. The council was involved in the recruitment process and officers attend regular review meetings with the post-holder, Peter McConnell. Peter has been in post since April 2012 and is based at the town council's offices. The council provides £10,000 contribution a year to the town council to support the post, the town council provides £5,000 funding a year and the Henley Partnership provides a contribution of £1,000 a year. The salary of the post is around £15,370 a year and the post is 18.5 hours a week. Regular update meetings are held between the council, the town council and Henley Partnership to aid the development and delivery of the annual action plan, which is matched financially with a contribution of £4,000 by the town council and also receives a small financial contribution by the Henley Partnership.
7. In Thame, the request was to establish a funding pot, rather than a specific post. The purpose of this was to enable a range of different organisations and projects to apply for funding support to deliver projects in the town. The council has provided a £10,000 pot each year for project support. Whilst match funding is not

essential, generally contributions are sought towards projects. For the annual action plan, £4,000 is provided by the council with contributions from Thame Town Council towards specific projects.

Review of support for market towns

8. On 19 September 2013 officers and the cabinet member for economic development held a meeting with representatives from each of the town councils and business partnerships. The purpose of the meeting was to review the council's role in each of the towns over the last two years, the success of the market town posts and the Thame funding pot, to review the job descriptions and to look at support funding available in the towns. The feedback from each town is detailed below.

WALLINGFORD

9. Wallingford Town Council supports the continuation of the market town co-ordinator role. It believes that the post-holder's work programme is ambitious and resources limited. It has confirmed that it will continue to part-fund the role by contributing £5,000 a year. It welcomed the support provided by the economic development team to the town and felt that the working relationship has improved. Going forward, it suggested that the post-holder could have a "hot desk" in the town council offices to enhance working relations.
10. Wallingford Partnership also supported the continuation of the role and suggested that it should be increased to a full-time post. However, it was aware that additional funding would need to be sourced to enable this to happen.
11. The post-holder, Kate Rayner, is due to start maternity leave on 17 January 2014 and, therefore, officers have made the decision to recruit maternity cover for the role for a period of up to a year.

HENLEY

12. Henley Town Council is supportive of the town centre manager role and committed to continuing its part-funding of the role. It would like to see the role covering the whole town, not just the town centre, but recognises the difficulty in achieving this in a part-time role. Ideally, it would like to increase the role to full-time or perhaps two part-time roles, with one strategic role dealing with items like inward investment and one providing administrative support. The town council bears the hosting costs for the role in relation to back office support and training. It welcomes the support offered by the council's economic development officers.
13. The Henley Partnership was also supportive of the town centre manager position. It believes that the post-holder has become the "go to" person in the town. It highlighted a difficulty for the post-holder in balancing the strategic nature of the role with the day-to-day administrative side. It felt the role is valuable as the post-holder orchestrates projects through partnership working, encouraging others to take on the implementation of projects. In order to ease this balance, the council's economic development officers will strengthen their support to the post-holder on strategic issues.

THAME

14. Thame Town Council felt that the current arrangement has worked well over the last two years, and that the town does not have a need for a dedicated co-ordinator post. Its preference is to continue with the funding pot going forward. Thame has an extremely low level of vacant shops, and most activity is led by community and voluntary organisations in the town. Thame's neighbourhood plan also provides an opportunity to develop particular projects, which may be eligible for support by the funding pot. Thame Town Council considered that the working relationship with the council had improved through the work of the neighbourhood plan, but felt that there was a need, going forward, to review how projects are identified and how engagement with businesses in the town could be improved. It was also keen to look at how to work closer with neighbouring settlements, such as Chinnor.
15. 21st Century Thame was not present at the meeting, despite being sent a number of invitations.
16. Since the meeting, no further feedback has been received from any of the towns in relation to any additional funding to the existing funding or any intention to change the hours and nature of the role in Wallingford or Henley.
17. The view of officers is that the current arrangements have worked successfully over the last two years and good progress has been made in relationship building with each of the towns. This is evident in the action plan projects, which have been achieved through partnership working rather than by officers having to deliver without town support. It is clear that a "one size fits all" approach is not appropriate for all the towns and, therefore, officers consider that the current arrangements are ideal as they are appropriate to each town's particular needs.
18. On this basis, officers propose to maintain the current arrangements for a further two years, including the provision of maternity cover whilst the Wallingford market town co-ordinator is on maternity leave.

Financial implications

19. Officers have submitted a one-off growth bid for 2014/15 and 2015/16 for £31,500 a year. This growth bid reflects £11,500 for the Wallingford market town co-ordinator post (including on-costs and maternity costs), £10,000 contribution for the Henley town centre manager and £10,000 for the Thame funding pot. This bid assumes a contribution of £5,000 from Wallingford Town Council towards the Wallingford market town co-ordinator post which has now been confirmed.

Recommendations to cabinet

20. On the basis of the feedback from the towns, as detailed above, officers will be making the following recommendations to the cabinet:

- a) to extend the contract for the Wallingford market town co-ordinator for a period of two years to 31 March 2016, subject to confirmation of £5,000 funding from Wallingford Town Council
- b) to agree that the Wallingford market town co-ordinator spends one day a week based at Wallingford Town Council offices
- c) to support the provision of maternity cover whilst the current Wallingford market town co-ordinator is on maternity leave
- d) to provide Henley Town Council with a contribution of £10,000 a year for 2014/15 and 2015/16 towards the Henley town centre manager role, subject to confirmation of £5,000 funding from Henley Town Council (and £1,000 from Henley Partnership)
- e) to provide £10,000 a year for 2014/15 and 2015/16 as a funding pot for Thame to support projects and project delivery in the town.

Conclusion

21. The views of the scrutiny committee are welcomed on the support proposed for the district's market towns so that cabinet can take these into account when considering the officers' recommendations and the proposed growth bid as part of the council's budget setting process.

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