

Background

Government launched a call for "Expressions of Interest" (EOIs) on Boxing Day 2018¹. Bids were invited from Local Authorities for proposals for investment in high streets. It was a competitive process and Successful bids will be taken through to a second phase where detailed business cases will be scrutinised.

As part of the criteria for applications, bidders needed to show evidence of support from their LEP. In total, 14 bids for the HotSW LEP region were sent to the LEP.

Summaries of the challenges and ambitions from the HotSW region EOIs were as follows:

Common Challenges

- High vacancy rates and a decline in footfall
- Traffic congestion
- Lack of integration of high streets with other areas
- Lack of evening economy
- Lack of affordable housing
- A need for investment e.g. in public realm

Ambition and Vision

The ambitions and visions expressed in the EOIs reflect the goal to address the challenges set out above. Whilst there were some specific aims relating to local characteristics and assets (e.g. historic buildings, features in the natural environment and so on) the bids presented similar set of aspirations, summarised as:

- Strengthen and diversify offer
- Accessible "go to" locations/retail destinations
- Vibrant attractive centres
- Well connected
- Resilient, stable and sustainable economies
- Hubs for employment
- Affordable housing
- Cultural centres (including for a younger demographic)

Considerations for the HotSW LEP

The dispersed geography of the HotSW and the transport and connectivity challenges that this can represent perhaps highlights the importance of successful, thriving high streets to local populations and the economy of the region as a whole. Furthermore, harnessing the value of locally specific characteristics, such as landscape features and cultural heritage could also contribute to the region's distinctiveness and in so doing, contribute to its attractiveness for the visitor economy.

Whilst it seems highly unlikely that there is a "one size fits all" solution for the rejuvenation of high streets across the region, there do appear to be some common themes which are of central interest

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/future-high-streets-fund>

to the LEP for driving productivity growth, such as the need for investment in transport infrastructure and housing, alongside action to promote sustainable business development which would also have the benefit of creating employment opportunities.

Although this is a very superficial review from a limited sample, it does appear that there would be value in establishing a piece of work to develop the evidence base on the challenges and issues faced by high streets and town centres across the region with a supporting analysis to identify strategic level proposals and actions that could be put to Government to promote sustainable productivity growth, perhaps as part of a future UK Shared Prosperity Fund bid.

Rob Hensley

HotSW LEP Place and Infrastructure Group Secretariat

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