

Draft Final Report of the Scrutiny Review Panel -  
District and Local Centres – best practice and building upon it  
September 2024 to April 2025

## Foreword by Councillor James Frizzell, Chair of the Scrutiny Review Panel

Since I became a councillor in May 2023, it has been a pleasure to work with the District Centre Manager for Reddish. From organising visioning groups and engaging small and medium businesses to inspiring volunteers and delivering hugely successful events on a limited budget, our two District Centre Managers have accomplished an impressive amount in a short period.

They have been instrumental in bringing to life the recommendations from the Institute of Place Management's 2022 report. Stockport is now recognised as an exemplary model for other towns and cities looking to support and add vibrancy to their District Centres.

This report and its recommendations aim to capitalise on what we have learned so far and apply it in a way that will benefit businesses throughout the borough. This includes not only our District Centres but also our Local Centres and beyond.

I am extremely grateful to my fellow panel members and Council officers for their enthusiastic approach to this work. I also extend my sincere thanks to all the business owners who generously shared their valuable time and insights during our research, as well as to contributors from other councils who provided sage advice.

I am delighted to commend this report and its recommendations to the Cabinet, and I hope it will be valuable in building on our success in supporting and enriching our District and Local centres in the coming years.



# 1. Introduction – local context and background to the review

- 1.1 In 2019, the Council established a partnership arrangement with Manchester Metropolitan University's Institute for Place Management (IPM) who are recognised leaders in the field of coordinated, multi-stakeholder approaches to improving places. The focus of their work was to support the council in creating strong and healthy District Centres, of which there are 8 in Stockport.
- 1.2 Following the initial high-level assessments of each centre by IPM, it became apparent delivering tangible improvements in complex multi-stakeholder environments would require dedicated capacity. Funding was secured from within existing budgets to support two new District Centre Manager posts. The two Managers were appointed in January 2022 and they each manage 4 centres.
- 1.3 With the removal of all Covid-19 restrictions, Phase 2 of the IPM work commenced in February 2022 involving a series of workshops with local stakeholders including local businesses, landowners, community groups and Ward Members. This work culminated in a detailed report for each District Centre and led to the creation of a District Centre Action Plan for each centre based on the recommendations within the IPM reports together with other local intelligence gathered over the previous 12 months. The Action Plans reflect local priorities and include quick wins and longer-term actions.
- 1.4 To help with overseeing the delivery of projects, to generate ideas for new initiatives and activities and to identify priority actions, multi-stakeholder Visioning/Steering Groups have been established for each centre.
- 1.5 There is no 'one size fits all' approach, as each District Centre has its own set of challenges, and this is reflected in the type of projects that are delivered in each centre. The type of projects range from installing planters to add colour and greenery into centres through to large scale monthly specialist markets. The membership and frequency of the Visioning/Steering Group meetings is also specific to each centre based on feedback from stakeholders.
- 1.6 What is common across all the centres is that the District Centre Managers engage regularly with businesses and retailers and make them aware of the support they can access from partner organisations, the funding opportunities that exist and they disseminate information on local matters such as road closures.

## 2. Scope of the review

- 2.1. In addition to the 8 District Centres, Stockport has 9 large Local Centres that primarily provide for daily shopping needs but generally with a more limited role than District Centres, along with 16 local centres (see table below). Whilst the District Centre Managers do not have the capacity to deliver the same level of support to all these centres, they have developed a detailed knowledge of the type of support businesses and stakeholders within those centres require to enable them to work collaboratively and help create strong, healthy centres.

<b>Large Local Centres</b>		
Davenport	Heald Green	Moor Top (Heaton Moor)
Gatley	Heaton Chapel	North Reddish
Great Moor	Marple Bridge	Shaw Road / Heaton Moor Road
<b>Local Centres</b>		
Adswood	High Lane	Fir Road (Bramhall)
Brinnington	Fiveways Parade (Macclesfield Road)	Smithy Green (Cheadle Hulme)
Cheadle Heath	Offerton	Turves Road (Cheadle Hulme)
Heaton Mersey	Offerton Green	North Park Road (Bramhall)
Berrycroft Lane (Higher Bredbury)	Woodley	
Hall Street (Offerton)	Councillor Lane (Cheadle)	

- 2.2. The Scrutiny Review Panel carefully considered the comments of members of the Economy, Regeneration & Climate Change Scrutiny Committee in relation to the suggested aims of the review. The panel, at its meeting on 17 September 2024, then agreed the following scope:
- To gain an understanding of best practice used to support the vibrancy of Stockport's district centres and assess how this could be applied to other district and local centres, with particular regard to how the council forges effective relationships between residents, businesses and the council, and assessing how the council can help to increase the benefits of the approach and extend it to our local centres.

- To understand how national policy can support the vibrancy of Stockport's district and local centres.
- To consider any other examples of best practice in this area that panel members are aware of to support learning and inform the panel's recommendations to Cabinet.

2.3 Following a discussion with the Chair of the Scrutiny Review Panel, members agreed to speak to local business owners in district centres as part of the evidence-gathering phase of the review. For members taking part in the visits, questions were drafted with panel input and provided to support members with their conversations with business owners. Following these visits, panel members then spoke to business owners in local centres, with the aim of finding out what support local centres could benefit from. Feedback from the district centre visits was able to inform the questions put to local centre business owners.

### 3. Methodology

3.1 The Economy, Regeneration & Climate Change Scrutiny Committee appointed a Scrutiny Review Panel to carry out the review, comprising of the following members:

- Councillor James Frizzell (Chair)
- Councillor Ian Hunter
- Councillor Micheala Meikle
- Councillor Jake Austin
- Councillor Dena Ryness
- Cllr Matt Wynne (co-opted member)
- Cllr Catherine Stewart (co-opted member)

3.2 As part of the review, the panel had the support and assistance of:

- Helen Walters, Town and District Centre Manager
- Jude Barker, Assistant Director, Development & Regeneration
- Charlotte Douglass, Senior Democratic Services Officer

3.3 The panel met on five occasions between September 2024 and February 2025, and carried out the following activities:

Stage	Key activity	Relevant meetings <b>(bold)</b> /key dates
Scoping	Scope agreed by the Scrutiny Review Panel	<b>17-Sep-24</b>
Evidence-gathering phase	Members to speak to a range of district centre business owners during this time	Sep - Oct
	Meeting to review evidence gathered from District Centre visits and discussion on examples of best practice	<b>4-Nov-24</b>
	Members to speak to local centre business owners during this time	Nov - Dec
	Meeting to review evidence gathered from Local Centre visits. Update on examples of best practice and District Centre Managers in attendance	<b>11-Dec-24</b>
Reporting	Meeting to review examples of best practice, consideration of a new information portal for district and local centres, and discussion of recommendations for the draft final report	<b>5-Feb-25</b>
	Final meeting/wash-up session for the panel to sign-off the final report and recommendations to Cabinet	<b>25-Feb-25</b>
	Scrutiny Committee consider and agree report's onward submission to Cabinet	6-Mar-25
	Cabinet considers report and recommendations	18-Mar-25

## 4. Feedback from District Centre and Local Centre businesses

- 4.1 As part of the evidence gathering phase of the review, members met individually with a number of businesses in District and Local Centres with the aim of seeking their views to inform this work on best practice and whether best practice could be replicated to support other District or Local Centres.

The following questions were put to District Centres business owners:

1. a) Have you noticed any positive changes or improvements to this district centre over the past couple of years?  
b) What could be better?
2. Is there anything in particular that makes this district centre special/different to others?
3. Do you feel as though the cost-of-living crisis has impacted the district centre?
4. Is there anything you have seen in other district or local centres in the borough or elsewhere that you would like to see replicated in this district centre?
5. Do you know how to contact the council if you have an issue or question? If yes, please tell us how you would go about contacting the council.

The following questions were put to Local Centre business owners:

1. What are your thoughts on this local centre?
2. Do you feel as though the cost-of-living crisis has impacted the local centre?
3. Are you aware of what business support and advice you can access free of charge to help with running your business?
4. Would you be interested in working with your neighbouring businesses to deliver joint projects which might help generate additional footfall? For example, the council were to provide planters to increase greenery in the centre, would you be willing and able to maintain them? (Along with other local business owners).
5. Is there anything you have seen in other district or local centres in the borough or elsewhere that you would like to see replicated in this local centre?
6. If the council were to create an information portal for local business owners, is there any specific information that you would find useful on there?
7. Do you know how to contact the council if you have an issue or question? If yes, please tell us how you would go about contacting the council.

4.2 The panel's key findings from this evidence and in relation to the scope of the review can be summarised as follows:

- District Centres had benefited from a variety of exciting **events** and activations, which had proved popular and attracted additional footfall to centres and which in many cases has led to an increase in visiting high street businesses. For both District and Local Centres, local events and markets, maintenance, **greening and other projects**, as well as street art, had been very well received and had helped to increase footfall and presentation and utilisation of space on High Streets. It was felt that more of these practices could benefit District and Local Centres in the borough, permitting businesses having the time and local support to deliver joint projects, as well as any ongoing maintenance of projects. Events and/or projects that leant into the **heritage** of an area were of particular interest.
- The **location** of some centres situated along/amongst main roads had an impact on popularity of some areas of the centres and meant that footfall was not always translated along the centre as a whole; and thought could be given as to how to give **priority to pedestrians** in centres situated along main roads.
- Camaraderie was strong in many District and Local Centres, with independent businesses supporting one another and a **strong sense of community**. Business owners in Local Centres felt that centres were **community led**.
- Each centre had its own **unique** appeal, with some centres focusing on different practices e.g., greening projects or markets.
- Many businesses in District Centres were familiar with their District Centre Manager. **District Centre Managers** were a conduit between the council, members, members of the public and important stakeholders, and spent time signposting businesses to partner organisations and other departments in the council who could provide advice and support.
- Some businesses felt their local High Street was dominated by certain type of businesses and wanted to see more **variety** on offer. This reflected the national picture for High Streets and was one of the consequences of online shopping and the changes in the way people used their High Streets.
- Some businesses felt that rents were too expensive, whilst others felt the opposite was true. Vacant units presented problems in some centres, and it was felt that successful centres included working with **landlords** to ensure success.
- Many businesses had noticed that the **cost-of-living crisis** had resulted in people prioritising buying essentials rather than luxury goods and that business owners had had to adapt, many of which had done so successfully to make their businesses work for the new environment. The Covid-19 pandemic did not appear to be impacting businesses.
- Many businesses were **not fully aware of support available** to them from the council and others to help them grow and adapt to the changing shopping environment.



- Businesses found the council website accessible and easy to use, and felt they would benefit from having **more access to information** which would help them not only develop their business, but also gain an understanding of rules and regulations and be ‘in the know’ about upcoming local events or works that may impact their business, as well as how they could find out who to contact on specific issues.

## 5. Best practice from other local authority areas – findings

5.1 The panel reviewed best practice from other local authority areas and found the following:

- Desk-top research found that other local authorities tended to hold information for businesses on their websites, but did not appear to have specific District Centre Manager resource in supporting their district centres.
- Members took part in an interview with Bristol City Council to learn more about possible best practice as part of the evidence-gathering phase of the review:
  - It was reported that Bristol City Council was one of the few councils that employ District Centre Managers, of which there are two, and the importance of their role in the facilitation of business collaboration was stressed (e.g., facilitation of group meetings).
  - Bristol City Council were able to put capital investment into their district centre programme at an early stage and addressed vacant units and greening as their initial priorities.
  - Other key learnings highlighted the importance of helping businesses to get up and running, with effective signposting and early business support, as well as tackling vacant units.
  - Limited success in business engagement had been experienced generally, but it was felt that getting the events programme ‘right’ was very important. A monthly Saturday market in Bristol was extremely successful (with a footfall of approximately 200 people per hour) and no council funding was required for the event.
  - Business collaboration and being flexible to adapt work based on local needs were the keys to success.

- A further interview is scheduled with Lincolnshire County Council at the end of February. However, as the interview is expected to take place following the close of the review, the panel's findings from this interview will not form part of this report but will help to inform future work in this area.
- Other councils had established design guides for their District Centres; it was suggested that design guides could be explored to help make Stockport's District Centre areas more cohesive, and that an equivalent to the Stockport Town Centre Residential Design Guide for individual areas could further support the borough's District Centres. It was found that Withington had received UK Shared Prosperity Funding as a result of the Manchester City Council's strategy for the area. Members felt that further funding was needed to support the vibrancy of Stockport's district centres, and that strategies could support bids for funding.

## 5.2 Comments from Stockport district and local centre business owners in relation to best practice elsewhere:

One business owner felt that **Altrincham** Market had greatly improved the feel of Altrincham town, giving it a new lease of life, and that lessons could be learnt from this particular market.

In **Wilmslow**, a Christmas tree competition for businesses fosters a sense of community in the town centre; businesses decorate in line with a theme relating to their business and the competition is judged by members of the public, including children.

In **Brighton**, a scheme had been established where all business owners had a responsibility to keep the area in front of their shops well looked after.

## 6. A new information portal for District and Local Centres

6.1 The council had been planning to set up a new information portal for District and Local Centres and the panel's review has been timely in enabling valuable trader and member input to inform this piece of work. It was expected that the online portal would hold a wealth of useful information to help businesses with, for example, reporting concerns to the council, accessing business support and the delivering of events and high street activations. Whilst much of this information already exists in some capacity on the council's and partner websites, it was felt that it would be beneficial to have it all in one place for ease of accessibility for those in district and local centres.

6.2 The panel considered a report detailing the proposed content for the new portal and were pleased with the proposed content as per the report. The panel also made suggestions for other areas of inclusion, as well as the structure and format of the portal, using their learnings from the evidence-gathering phase of the review:

- Crime prevention information and signpost to 'Be in the Loop'.
- An interactive forum where businesses could post useful information to each other would be valuable and reduce the need for meetings.
- Information and pre-warning in relation to flooding or upcoming scheduled or unscheduled road works.
- Awareness of the full range of services and advice the council had to offer.
- A 'what's going on' and events webpage would be useful to enable business owners to take part in events if they wished.
- It was suggested that consideration be given to the structure of the portal for its targeted audience with specific sub sections e.g., prospective or new business owners, existing business owners and councillors.
- Information on setting up businesses as Community Interest Companies.
- A sub section of information for prospective or new business owners. By way of example, information for prospective businesses looking to open in a centre could include an area profile and local data e.g., whether the area is a conservation area and what this would mean for their business.

- A sub section for councillors e.g., a councillor playbook, to include guidance to assist councillors in supporting their District and/or Local Centre. By way of example, the different funding streams available (council or otherwise) for community and other groups to support them and the wider District/Local Centre community. It was suggested that the councillor playbook could be tailored by levels of councillor engagement e.g., gold, silver and bronze in relation to a councillor's interest and/or available capacity to dedicate to supporting a local area. With a 'gold' level of engagement signposting to more in-depth information.
- It was suggested that the portal should be created at the earliest opportunity and that it should be constantly evolving with information being added to and altered as required.
- It was suggested that case studies on successful events and achievements from other District Centres and elsewhere be shared, as well as a meeting with District Centre Managers be arranged with councillors to talk about best practice and knowledge share.

## 7. A summary of key findings for the review

- Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council is doing well compared to many other councils in its supporting Stockport's District Centres, and specifically, with the appointment and work of two District Centre Managers, both with a track record of 'making things happen.' Although work to develop Stockport's District Centres has been successful, more could be done to support their development, and the development of Local Centres, in a changing landscape where the cost-of-living crisis, changing retail buying habits and other factors mean new approaches need to be developed and work flexed to adapt to the changing needs of Stockport's District and Local Centres.
- Supporting the vibrancy and development of District and Local Centres is not a quick and easy fix, and requires deep partnerships between business, landlords, community and other groups, residents and the council. Consideration should be given to the addressing of vacant units, as to how the council can better communicate with landlords, and the role of landlords in contributing to the vibrancy of Stockport's District and Local Centres.
- Members found that the importance of business collaboration was highlighted throughout the review time and time again and suggested that consideration be given to local vision meetings across the borough and their focus on business collaboration e.g., joint projects and marketing opportunities, and an awareness of each other's opening times and events. It was recognised the membership of these meetings were not solely businesses.
- District Centres had benefited from a variety of exciting events and activations, which had proved popular and attracted additional footfall to centres and which in many cases has led to an increase in visiting high street businesses. The importance of events was again highlighted throughout the review time and time again. For both District and Local Centres, local events and markets, maintenance, greening and other projects, as well as street art, had been very well received and had helped to increase footfall and presentation and utilisation of space on High Streets. It was felt that more of these practices could benefit District and Local Centres in the borough (permitting that businesses have the time and local support to deliver joint projects), as well as any ongoing maintenance of projects. Events and/or projects that leant into the heritage of an area were of particular interest.
- Members felt that, for local councillors with a keen interest in supporting their district and/or local centre, it would be helpful for them to be further informed about their District and/or Local Centres and as to how they could provide more support to centres, including businesses and the District Centre Managers, as well as energising groups to work effectively together. Further knowledge of the local high streets and their needs could help to inform work that takes place there; it was recognised that

different centres had different needs. Members felt that a councillor 'playbook' or guide as part of the information portal and the introduction of a session on Supporting District and Local Centres as part of the Member Induction Programme (open to new and existing councillors) could help to achieve this aim.

- A dedicated information portal and 'one stop shop' for businesses and others would be an effective tool in supporting the vibrancy of Stockport's District and Local Centres. The panel support the establishment a new information portal and hope that the panel's review can help to inform this work as it develops. Members ask that careful consideration be given as to how to promote the portal.
- Plans and guides to support the vibrancy of District and Local Centres tend to be lengthy documents, but detailed plans were not always the right format to help drive change and any future plans and guides developed for areas needed to be flexible and adapt based on local needs and the developing centre in question. Members felt that further funding was needed to support the vibrancy of Stockport's District Centres and recognised the challenging financial situation that the council found itself in. However, it was felt that plans and guides could support bids for funding. A recurrent theme highlighted in the review was the limited resources of the council in working to improve the vibrancy of Stockport's District and Local Centres, and it was suggested that the relevant Cabinet Member be asked to write to the Minister for Housing, Communities and Local Government relating to the financial and other support needed to support the vibrancy of District and Local Centres.

## 8. Recommendations

Following consideration of all the evidence gathered throughout the review, the panel made the following recommendations for Cabinet to consider:

- The panel agree that a dedicated online information portal and 'one stop shop' for businesses and others would be an effective tool in supporting the vibrancy of Stockport's District and Local Centres. The panel asks that Cabinet support the establishment of an information portal for District and Local Centres in supporting the vibrancy of Stockport's District and Local Centres and increased engagement from the council. Further, that the panel's findings and suggestions help to inform this work as it develops.
- That Cabinet endorse the introduction of a councillor 'playbook' or guide as part of the information portal and the introduction of a session on Supporting District and Local Centres as part of the Member Induction Programme (open to new and existing councillors) for local councillors with a keen interest in learning how to best support their District and/or Local Centre.
- That Cabinet endorse the establishment of an accompanying communications plan to promote the information portal, and that careful consideration be given as to how to promote the portal to ensure maximum reach and sustained use of the portal going forward.
- That Cabinet endorse a review of the structure and format of local vision meetings across the borough to provide more of a focus on business collaboration.
- The importance of events in supporting the vibrancy of District Centres was highlighted throughout the review. The panel asks that Cabinet reiterate and strengthen its support for frequent events in District and Local Centres in order to maintain and increase footfall in centres, and enable further consideration to be given to the type of events that could be held to promote the heritage, uniqueness and/or special features of a centre.
- For both District and Local Centres, local events and markets, maintenance, greening and other projects, as well as street art, had been very well received and had helped to increase footfall and presentation and utilisation of space on High Streets. The panel requests that Cabinet endorse more of these practices being delivered by District and Local Centres (with support from the council) to bring further benefit to centres across the borough. Again, reiterating support for events and/or projects that lean into the heritage of an area.

- Supporting the vibrancy and development of District and Local Centres is not a quick and easy fix, and requires deep partnerships between business, landlords, community and other groups, residents and the council. The Panel asks that further consideration be given as to the addressing of vacant units, how the council can better communicate with landlords, and the role of landlords in contributing to the vibrancy of Stockport's District and Local Centres.
- A recurrent theme highlighted in the review was the limited resources of the council in working to improve the vibrancy of Stockport's District and Local Centres, and the panel requests that the relevant Cabinet Member write to the Minister for Housing, Communities and Local Government relating to the financial and other support needed to support the vibrancy of District and Local Centres.



## Next steps

The panel may refine recommendations to Cabinet, taking into account the views of the Economy, Regeneration & Climate Change Scrutiny Committee at their meeting scheduled to be held on 6 March 2025. It is expected that Cabinet will consider the panel's final report and recommendations at their meeting scheduled to be held on 18 March 2025.

## Background documents

[Agendas and minutes of the meetings of the Scrutiny Review Panel – District and Local Centres – best practice and building upon it](#)

2022 Manchester Metropolitan University Report – vital and viable Stockport district centres

[Bristol City Council Business Start-up & Development Toolkit](#)