

To note: Epping

The attached report has been commissioned by EFDC Officer from a specialist external consultant.

Work on this report was carried out between December 2020 and April 2021 so some of the observations may refer to issues and conditions that existed at that time and may have been subsequently addressed.

The report is often linked with development proposals focused on the immediate actions required to improve the town centres. Further reports will be brought forward, often associated with more significant investment and development to cover the medium and long-term improvement of the town centres.

The immediate resources required to address priority town centre issues were identified in the EFDC 2021/22 Budget or will be supported by specific Covid 19 recovery grants made available by the Government.

It is intended as with the Waltham Abbey and Ongar town centre reports, that all approved recommendations will be project managed in detail, assigned to managers, given timelines, supported by identified resources and their delivery and impact monitored.

The reports have been produced after extensive consultation. This consultation with local members and other key partners will continue.

Although not specifically mentioned in this report, work on the ground will be linked with other initiatives such as sustainable transport with sub projects of demand responsive transport, cycling routes, electric car charging points and various greening and tree planting initiatives being taken forward as per our Green Infra-structure Policy and climate change action plan.

Comments only for Cabinet: Epping

The report is generally positive and has only been edited with regard to the permanent pavement widening work and the community hub, (which has obviously stayed as an idea), but now infers that the location for this is the Civic Centre rather than the current Library.

The only other issue of note is how active the District wishes to be about frontage, preserving retail space at the core of the town and other associated actions. At one level there is an option of a "Schedule D" protection of the town centre, through an updated Planning re frontages, signs, colour palette etc, through to informal guidance and encouragement. It should be noted that Government has become more permissive recently regarding change of use and similar but a balance between a market driven adaptive look and feel to the place, versus a Planning determined look, needs to be considered.

Epping

Regeneration Study and Proposals

“The most successful high streets and town centres will need to change to reflect the communities they serve by transforming themselves into community hubs, playing to their strengths of offering human interaction and a unique sense of place and community”

HM Government response to an enquiry into High streets and Town centres in 2030 (presented to Parliament in 2019)



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AUTHORS NOTE:

The contents of this report and the recommendations made are based on Studio 3 Ltd's view of the town centre as a whole and the actions which should be taken to regenerate the towns and increase their general attractiveness to residents, visitors and businesses. Absolutely no consideration has been given as to whether the suggested actions and/or any related costs are the responsibility of the County, District, Town/Parish Councils or any other body.

What is crucial is that the different Councils, Town Partnerships, businesses and residents come together to agree priorities and for each organisation to put in place the necessary actions within their remit/responsibility to make the required improvements.

The regeneration of our town centres is the responsibility of all stakeholders. Key to these changes are the businesses, residents and Town/Parish Councils themselves. They are closest to the town and really know and understand the town and the needs and requirements of the local community. Their counsel and guidance should both therefore be provided and encouraged at all times.

The reinvention of our town centres will only be achieved by a joint and collaborative approach utilising the knowledge, expertise and skills of a range of people, bodies and organisations. No single person or organisation can achieve this on their own and everyone has their own specific part to play. It is essential that any plans have the buy in of all connected persons and that all parties support each other through the process.

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Foreword

Epping Forest District Council is reviewing a number of its Town centres with the objective of regenerating them and making them a better and more attractive place to live, work, visit and play. There have been numerous projects over the years to generally improve the amenities, however the UK as a whole is now in the midst of a new era which will undoubtedly change high streets up and down the country. Covid 19 has unexpectedly changed the way we live and also as a result, our relationship with our local High street and/or Town centre. More people are now shopping locally and more people are working from home, which in turn is encouraging them to use their local amenities on a more regular basis. The Grimsey Review advises that High streets need to be re-invented as unique Community hubs, designed around health, education, culture, housing, leisure and arts and crafts, along with retail shops. If towns can get it right, consumers should emerge from the pandemic with a stronger sense of community and a desire to support their local Town centre. Strong High streets can build communities, keep crime at bay and foster civic pride and togetherness.

A YouGov poll revealed that only 9% of Britons want life to return to “normal” after the coronavirus outbreak is over. The positive from the above is that this is a great time to engage with our local communities and reinvent our Town centres while the focus is on them and before things automatically revert to the “old” normal.

The Grimsey Review goes on to advise that for Town centres and High streets to thrive and rediscover their community purpose we need to see:

Localism - A massive shift in power to local communities and a renewed focus on localism. Local people must be empowered to redesign their own High streets and have a say on the businesses, services and amenities that occupy it.

Leadership - Local leaders should be valued and recognised. Candidates for leadership roles should be selected for having a broad range of dynamic and collaborative skills in order to get the best out of communities. Local leaders who embrace change and are brave enough to imagine a new world have a better chance of succeeding.

Fewer cars, more green spaces - fewer streets and a huge expansion of green space, parks and town squares. Our towns must no longer be designed around the car as people learn to appreciate the benefit of open spaces.

Other important takeaways from the Grimsey Review that should be considered is the fact that there is a growing view among young adults that businesses need to be accountable to more than their bottom line and for the wellbeing of people and communities. It goes on to confirm that 72% of millennials (aged 24 to 38) would rather spend their money on an experience or an event than buying things and that this is reflected in the shift towards leisure, arts, culture and dining on the High streets. Deloitte’s 2019 Millennial Survey showed that millennials will patronise and support companies that align with their values and make a positive impact on society. Generation Z’s (aged 5 to 23) are also socially focussed with their opinions on companies formed by their ethics, practices and social impact.

The Grimsey Review confirms that town and High street plans should put sustainability and the environment at the heart of everything; should base their development on quality of life and experiences and not blind mass consumerism; should recognise and reward great local leadership; and allow local communities to develop their places to compete for people to live, work, visit and play.

Introduction

Epping is a busy, bustling, historic market town with a number of listed buildings, situated to the north of Epping Forest and completely surrounded by countryside. It is nestled just north of the M25, west of the M11 and a 40-minute London Underground Central line journey from London's Liverpool Street. Although a relatively small town with a population of 11,461 (Source Office of National Statistics 2016) it has a large central High street and in addition to serving the community of Epping is also a main shopping area and Town centre for a number of nearby villages. Epping is a fairly affluent area, it has an average property price of £622,458 (Source: Zoopla March 2021), but is also surrounded by a number of multi-million-pound properties. Although not the largest, Epping is an important town within the Epping Forest district. It has real character and historical interest and it is important that work is done to ensure the town maintains its position and attractiveness.

I am pleasantly surprised by Epping. It has a great feel to it, a real sense of community and a wide range of shops and businesses. As a result of Covid, more people have been working from home and I think this can be seen in Epping as even with Covid restrictions the High street is fairly busy. This is undoubtedly assisted by having a Tesco and Marks and Spencer Simply Food in the town centre, which encourages people to use other Town centre facilities at the same time. This I think reinforces the importance of anchor retailers in Town centres and highlights the disadvantages of allowing supermarkets to build in remote, out of Town centre locations.

There are a number of exciting developments proposed within the town centre which I feel will help to rejuvenate the town and keep it relevant and up to date. Having said this I am pleased to see that they have been planned in an area just off of the High street which will mean that they don't take away from the historic Town centre and as a result should maintain the town's character whilst adding new life and vibrancy.

Interestingly, Epping town centre has almost as many shops in it as Loughton High Road, yet with a population of about a third of Loughton. In the current climate, much the same as Loughton, this concerns me. Epping still has three banks and a number of branded retailers and restaurants. This I suspect could change in the near future as banks and brands withdraw from the smaller High streets and resulting in lesser attraction for consumers to the Town centre. This however will in some way be countered by the building of a new leisure centre and also a retail and cinema complex in the Town centre, which will hopefully maintain footfall.

I think the future for Epping is bright but the town shouldn't be complacent. The town centre needs to be worked on to ensure its continued vibrancy, life and attractiveness. It also needs to ensure its retail offer remains suitable to the wide needs of the community and also to the visitor economy. The town has residents which appreciate and love where they live, active town teams such as Epping in Bloom and a passionate and engaged Town Council – all of which want to improve the Town centre and make Epping a better place to live, work and play.

1 Quick Wins

There are a number of matters which could be addressed quickly and cheaply and could make considerable improvements to the centre of Epping:

- ***Sweep/clean the High street on a regular basis and ensure that litter bins are emptied and litter is cleared from the street/pavement.***
- ***Decide whether adjustments to the public realm as a result of Covid considerations should be made more permanent and action asap. This is now being actioned.***
- ***Plastic barriers, cones etc need to be removed to increase the attractiveness of the public realm this relates to both High street and the junction of High street and Station Road. This is now being actioned.***
- ***Remove all unnecessary temporary signage – which again makes the public realm look untidy.***
- ***Arrange for the cleaning/redecoration/repair/replacement of all street furniture – lamp posts, bollards, railings, planters, litter bins, benches etc.***
- ***Add further benches and bike hoops along High street to meet the needs of all sections of the community.***
- ***Add dog poo bins at suitable intervals.***
- ***Review planting in public realm and add planters/hanging baskets etc as appropriate along the length of the High street.***
- ***Consider additional heritage type signage from the station to Epping Forest, to the Town centre, to The Epping Way and also town entrance signs welcoming people to Epping.***

2 Town Management

2.1 Town centre Leadership

Town centre regeneration is about localism and local leadership and the way to make this work is to provide local leadership with its finger on the pulse and with a connection to the local community. Therefore and accepting that this project is being driven by Epping Forest District Council, it is suggested that buy-in, action and leadership should be provided by Epping Town Council with the support of a Town(s) Centre Manager appointed by the District Council.

All Town Councillors are local and as a result should be able to bring the local community and businesses together and develop a strong visionary plan to reinforce the distinctive heritage of the town, assist in making the Town centre a real community hub and making Epping a far more attractive town for locals and visitors alike. The role of an independent Town centre Manager will be critical to provide professional expertise and an unbiased view on what is needed locally.

Epping already has a strong local community, great community spirit and an active and motivated Town Council. I am certain that these working together with the District Council will produce excellent results.

Recommendations:

- 1) Engage with Epping Town Council (ETC) and the town centre partnership.***
- 2) Obtain ETC commitment to the scheme and to providing leadership and support.***
- 3) Work with ETC to establish and action a realistic plan.***

2.2 Town(s) Centre Manager

It is suggested that the Council commits to the appointment of a shared Town Centre Manager. The manager would act as a single point of contact to receive ideas, thoughts and views from local stakeholders and as such, would be known and trusted by businesses, retailers and residents alike. They would work with the Town Council to ensure that standards are adhered to and that the town is as vibrant and attractive to local people and visitors as possible. A review of the post would be undertaken after 12 months to assess progress against the Town centre action plan and the success of interventions and extended if necessary.

NB. As a part of its regeneration, Stockton-on-Tees council pulled together a multi-disciplinary team of market management, street licensing, civil enforcement and business support to manage their Town centre. Stockton is a much larger town than Epping, however the principles of hands on organisation and management are much the same.

Recommendations:

- 4) Write Job profile and agree responsibilities for Town centre Manager post.***
- 5) Post to be part of EFDC's Economic team within Strategic Planning Directorate.***
- 6) Town Team establishment to be priority.***

2.3 Establishment of a Town Team

To achieve the required changes, considerable two-way dialogue needs to be sought from the town's residents and businesses. Buy-in from the community is important to ensure that there is a need or requirement for any proposed changes and that as a result these are carried out with the support of the town. Epping has an active Town Council and also a Town Partnership representing the businesses in the town. It is thought that these, in conjunction with the District Council, could be used as a catalyst for pulling together a formal Town Team.

It is important that the Town Team is made up of a cross section of the community including residents, businesses and retailers. A fair representation of age, sex and race should be included and input should be encouraged from organisations such as educational establishments, religious groups, social groups (e.g. Scouts etc) together with members of the Town Council and any tourism and visitor groups.

Recommendations:

- 7) Decide with ETC the make up of a Town Team and what it will be called.***
- 8) If utilising current Town Partnership, engage with and obtain commitment and support from the Chairman accordingly.***
- 9) Arrange initial meeting to establish parameters and put in place a plan for Town Team development and action.***

2.4 Epping Town Partnership

Epping has a Town Partnership which has been established for a number of years. It has in the past run a number of successful Town centre events and was particularly active in Town centre initiatives and activities. In more recent times and also due to Covid, it's activity level has reduced.

Having spoken to the Chairman, she can clearly see the benefit to both the traders and the town of having a successful Town Partnership and would be happy with support from the Town and District Councils to reform and revitalise it.

Recommendations:

- 10) Town centre Manager to work with Town centre Partnership to reform and re-establish the organisation.***

2.5 Attracting New Businesses and Brands

In conjunction with the Town Team, work could be done to identify key brands, businesses and/or other organisations to attract to Epping and then steps taken to secure them. Thought could also be given to approaching landlords of empty units and considering the viability of making them available for short term let - for perhaps pop-up shops, start-up ventures, new/irregular non-High street retailers to test the water for their market and for more experiential and art-based activities including exhibitions, shows, demonstrations etc.

Recommendations:

- 11) Put in place programme to encourage new businesses.**
- 12) Target prospective businesses.**
- 13) Communicate requirements to commercial agents.**
- 14) Consider use of empty units for non-conventional retailing i.e. pop-ups, start-ups, experiential etc.**

3 Town Offer

3.1 High street

The high street in Epping is central to the town with the main high street and shopping area extending for approximately half a mile. Its central location makes it accessible for residents from the majority of the town and also potentially reduces and/or removes the need for residents to have to drive. The town is made up of a selection of buildings from various eras. Some are older historic and listed buildings whereas others are much more modern. They come together to form a somewhat disjointed yet somehow charming Town centre.

Epping High Street is a busy mixed-use centre with a variety of retailers, restaurants and cafes and numerous businesses above and behind the shops. The town benefits tremendously from supermarket anchors, Tesco and M&S Simply Food within the town centre. These will undoubtedly aid footfall to the remaining retailers as will the central position of offices and other businesses.

There is a great community feel to Epping and it seems everyone has a vested interest in maintaining its viability and ensuring its continued and future success. It's a nice town to live in and a town to be proud of. There will be changes as the town develops and the retail element will go through some transition as a result of changing shopping habits and consumer needs, however I am certain that with careful management Epping will thrive and maintain its position as an attractive and sought-after town.

3.2 Retail

The retail offer on Epping High street consists of approximately 160 individual shops spread along its half a mile length. In addition to the anchor supermarkets of Tesco and M&S Simply Food, there is a Next and a FatFace, three banks and a few branded restaurants amongst the 24 available (14%). As is normal in this day and age the other larger supplier on the High street is hair and beauty providers. These account for 19 units or 12% of the high street. Currently there are 16 empty units which equates to a 10% vacancy rate. This is slightly lower than the national average.

As stated elsewhere in this report, the viability of Epping Town centre is supported tremendously by the central location of Tesco and even better location wise, M&S Simply Food. For consumers using these retailers, it is very easy and convenient for them to avail themselves of the products and services of other retailers in the High street and/or to meet friends for a coffee/lunch etc at the same time.

Within the main body of the High street there is a good mix of retailers, however there is little which would differentiate Epping High street from other High streets and therefore make the town more of a destination. There are some more unusual upmarket retailers, such as Coles Fine Clothing for Men, Roy Cain Tailoring and Church's Butchers. These niche and quality retailers can really differentiate a High street and providing there is enough of them, can replace the need for branded/chain stores to attract footfall and keep the town busy. The same goes for restaurants and coffee shops.

There are some trendy and upmarket outlets, such as the Roza restaurant and Fred and Dougs coffee shop and popular niche restaurants such as Harry's Pie and Mash and although not currently in a permanent shop,

the Brick Lane Bagel Company. These are however few and far between. To keep the town viable and relevant it is important that the town does what it can to attract more of these types of brands and build a reputation for a wide selection of quality, independent and niche shops, bars, coffee shops and restaurants.

Undoubtedly as the digital age changes the way we shop and banks and branded chains are withdrawing from smaller high streets, it is important that the High street adjusts to meet the needs and requirements of its shoppers. High streets now need to be more experiential, more social and more of a community hub and in support, they need to have retailers offering unique products, services and possibly more important, experiences, together with a selection of hospitality options providing a range of relaxed and comfortable environments. Retailers may also have to review their operating times to suit their customers – this could mean evening and weekend opening and perhaps longer operating hours.

Epping High street will undoubtedly change and I suspect, lose a large amount of its shops. I think that it is important to recognise this and also to identify and protect the retail heart of the town – which in my mind runs from St Johns Church northwards towards the Council offices. If retail units become empty and are not let they can easily transfer to residential use. This can fragment a High street the size of Epping and I feel, unless the retail centre is protected, will take away from its unique character.

Recommendations:

- 15) Identify retail centre of the town and consider taking steps to protect from conversion to residential use.**
- 16) EFDC and ETC to maintain and increase attractiveness and draw of Epping Town centre public realm.**
- 17) Town centre Manager with support of Town centre Partnership to discuss needs of the town with retailers and seek views on needs and requirements to maintain retail viability.**
- 18) Build wish list of new Town centre retailers and pursue.**

3.3 New Developments

The proposed development of the Cottis Lane and Bakers Lane car parks is seen as being a real positive addition to the town. The biggest and most attractive element of these developments is the fact that they are situated right in the heart of the Town centre, providing easy access to the high street. This will encourage town centre usage and will benefit the retail centre and its shops, restaurants and bars as a whole.

The developments will also bring more visitors to the town to avail themselves of the new facilities. The big draws will be the new leisure centre and particularly the swimming pool in Bakers Lane and the addition of a cinema in the Cottis Lane development. It is worth highlighting that it has been suggested to me by various Epping residents that an “Everyman” type cinema and environment would attract a wider section of the community than a normal cinema. This I think I would agree with as it would make trips to the cinema more of an occasion and encourage shopping and other hospitality prior to and following the film. I am comforted that there aren’t too many additional retail outlets within the new development and that the High street will remain the substantial draw for the retail offer.

Once the developments are complete and particularly the Cottis Lane development it will be important that the standard of the public realm connecting with the development and running into the high street is brought up to the same standard. This will ensure connection and flow and tie the High street into the development making it feel like a single and continuous space.

I see that the proposed St John Road, Hemnall Street and Condor building residential developments are also a big positive for the town. They will bring new life to Epping, increase the mix of residents and will hopefully bring a new and perhaps younger dynamic, which again should encourage and drive retailers and assist greatly in the continued success of the town.

It has been suggested that there is no playground space in and around Epping Town Centre. This would be a great addition to the new development and provide an additional attraction for younger families to the high street. Additionally, I would recommend ensuring adequate bike parking facilities in the Bakers Lane and Cottis Lane developments, bike storage facilities in the residential developments and provision of dog poo bins across all areas.

Recommendations:

- 19) Review plans for the new Town centre developments and consider adding a children's play area.**
- 20) Ensure that plans are made to refurb the High street to the same standard as the new development, tying in the High street so it flows and feels like a single space.**
- 21) Ensure adequate bike parking/bike storage facilities across all developments**
- 22) Ensure addition of dog poo bins across all areas.**
- 23) If not done already considered make the cinema an "Everyman" type concept.**

3.4 Market

The Grimsey Review highlighted the importance of markets and their positive effect on residents. In a report by the Institute of Place Management (2015) it explained why markets are economically, socially and politically critical for Town centres. The report also confirmed that markets can generate footfall increases of circa 25% and have been shown to increase retail sales with market visitors spending money in other shops. The report then goes on to explain that markets provide low barriers to entry and as result can encourage new businesses and nurture retail innovation.

The Town Council has been working hard to maintain the Town's Charter market on Mondays. It is trying to keep the market more traditional with a wide range of stalls selling a selection of goods. It has also worked to change the style of the stalls, moving away from the old metal frames to more modern gazebo type stalls, making the market look more attractive and also taking less time to set up and break down. Although the market continues it is not the size, nor as vibrant as it has been in the past. This appears to be a common problem across the district and I feel needs further consideration and attention.

The addition of speciality markets on perhaps a monthly basis at weekends would add greatly to the towns ambience and increase the attractiveness of the town for both residents and visitors alike.

Recommendations:

- 24) Town centre Manager to work with ETC to review the current market and take steps to develop.**
- 25) Consider addition of weekend speciality markets and take steps to secure.**
- 26) Town centre Manager to review markets district-wide and look for a revised approach to their operation, also taking the specific opportunity offered by the regional market at North Weald Airfield.**

3.5 Library

The library continues to play an important part of local Town centres. Epping is no exception. As a part of the redevelopment plans, it is intended that the library be kept, but potentially relocated to an alternative location. The options are under consideration.

If it is intended to emphasise the community hub aspects and if relocation occurs, ensure it is located in building that provides space and support for a variety of community hub activities, such as those envisaged for the Waltham Abbey Community Hub development

Recommendations:

27) EFDC/ETC to consult on space requirements and needs of a new library and work to secure a suitable location.

28) Consideration should be given to establishing the library as a Community hub and provision made for this accordingly.

3.6 Community hub

A town centre community hub would provide a central location specifically designed to provide a range of services for residents and businesses. It could include such things as a mini job centre for local employment opportunities, a Police helpdesk, town centre information point and a place where locals could come to discuss and highlight issues, concerns or thoughts they may have. The community hub could provide space for local exhibitions, culture/arts, demonstrations, lectures and talks, social space for mums groups, youth activities and as a meeting space for community themed meetings, consultations and discussions. It would be a useful and safe space for older residents and generally aid a stronger sense of community and wellbeing.

A logical home for a community hub would be a colocation with library, voluntary and other public service bodies, e.g. The Civic Building. The events run at the community hub would bring continued footfall which, providing it was positioned in the town centre, would in turn benefit local retailers and businesses. It is noted that the Town Council operate a number of facilities for community use and due consideration should be given to the option of using these as well.

Recommendations:

29) Continue with the Community hub development of the Civic Centre.

30) Review benefits of Community hub and put together program of events.

31) Publicise community hub and program of events.

3.7 Playgrounds

There are a number of playgrounds around Epping, some of which are better than others. I am aware that an organisation called the Epping Playground Association has been formed and is actively funding for updated facilities at the Lower Swaines recreation ground playground. I feel that these play areas are an essential element of a town's make up and encourage community and social interaction. As a result, it is important that both the Town and District Councils are actively involved in their ongoing development and support.

Currently there are no play areas within Epping Town Centre. However, a play area is something which could be included within the new Town centre developments and I feel would be of great assistance in ensuring a Town centre offering something for families and for the community as a whole.

Recommendations:

32) Consider addition of a childrens' play area to the new Town centre developments.

3.8 Tourism/Visitors

Although Epping is a lovely town with a great deal of character, charm and historic interest, it is not particularly a tourist/visitor destination.

Clearly with the introduction of a new sports centre/swimming pool and a cinema this will change tremendously and also add some further footfall to the evening economy.

The Epping Ongar Railway is a major attraction to the area and in the year pre-Covid carried approximately 45,000 passengers. Although it is called the Epping Ongar Railway it doesn't currently link up with Epping and instead runs from North Weald to Ongar with a vintage bus service operating from Epping to North Weald. The railway track does run to Epping, however there are a number of engineering and other practical hurdles that need to be addressed to extend the service to Epping. If the heritage railway could run from Epping this would increase the attraction tremendously and could potentially double passenger numbers – which of course would also increase footfall to Epping Town centre and benefit the economy as a whole. With this in mind, I would recommend EFDC maintains relationships with the Epping Ongar Railway and supports them in extending their operating service.

Recommendations:

33) EFDC to support Epping Ongar Railway in its plans to increase the operating service.

34) Develop town offer to make Town centre more attractive to visitors.

3.9 Signage

Signage within Epping could be greatly improved and should be reviewed accordingly. Examples would be from the station to Epping Forest, from the station to the town centre and to the Epping Way to name but a few. Also signage welcoming people to Epping. All new signage should be of a heritage type and compatible with the historic character of the town.

Recommendations:

35) Review all signage in and around Epping and ensure it s suitable to the needs and requirements of the town.

36) Ensure any new signage is in keeping with the character of the town.

3.10 Public Facilities

Epping should be reviewed to ensure it offers the required public facilities. These include adequate seating for all sections of the community in all areas, open, clean and functional public toilets, adequate lighting at all times across all areas of the Town centre, bike racks/hoops in easily accessible places and strategically placed dog poo bins.

Recommendations:

- 37) Review benches and seating in Epping and ensure it is adequate for the needs of the town.**
- 38) Review bike racks/hoops within the town centre and at other destinations and ensure they are adequate for the needs of the town.**
- 39) Review dog poo bins in town centre and other areas as appropriate and ensure they are adequate to needs of the town.**
- 40) Ensure that all areas of Epping, including car parks, alleyways, etc are adequately lit.**
- 41) Review provision of public toilets and ensure they are adequate for the town.**

3.11 Wi-fi and Digital Presence

The digital age and the need for connectivity is increasingly important for numerous sections of the community. As a result I would suggest free wi-fi availability on Epping high street and across the new leisure and retail developments.

It should be acknowledged that people are now shopping differently and that circa 30% of retail sales are being done online (Office of National Statistics, Aug 2020). This figure is up from 21.9% at the beginning of March 2020 and the beginning of the Covid 19 lockdown. Regardless of the pandemic, online sales will continue to grow, and retail expert KPMG predicts the figure rising to 50% by 2025. As a result, retail businesses need to adjust their business models accordingly and develop their offer for both markets.

As a part of adding a wi-fi option to the town centre a social media presence should be developed enabling online and offline businesses. Mobile technologies and virtual shopping should be used to enhance the consumer Town centre experience and in turn increase footfall.

Consideration should be given to bringing in a third-party contractor such as Click It Local and Maybe (www.maybetech.com) to develop online, social media/Town centre/retailer collaboration.

Recommendations:

- 42) Put in place free WI-fi within the High street and new leisure and retail developments, and publicise.**
- 43) Consider benefits of Click It Local scheme. Secure and promote accordingly.**
- 44) Agree way forward in respect of social edia strategy/presence and execute accordingly.**
- 45) Arrange for assistance and support for retailers in establishing an online presence.**

4 Appearance

Epping is an extremely attractive town. It has a very definite town centre, a good community feel and from the people I have spoken to has the genuine affection of everyone who lives and works there. The main High street has a real mixture of properties. Although built across different eras, the Town centre comes together well and its mixture of property gives the feel of a town that has developed over time, is lived in and well used and appreciated. There is a nice green space half-way along the High street at the end of Station Road and at the northern end the High street tapers out onto another lovely green and war memorial. The new developments will add a further and more modern aspect to the Town centre, but if done sympathetically should generally increase the overall attractiveness of the town, whilst maintaining its character.

Maintaining and increasing the attractiveness of the public realm makes a massive difference to a Town centre. It encourages people to visit and also increases their dwell time, which in turn benefits the local shops and businesses. Making a town into something that residents can be proud of and somewhere they are pleased to be seen increases their loyalty, encourages their support and engagement and of course helps build a strong and cohesive community. It is important therefore that the public realm is continually reviewed, that maintenance issues are addressed and that the residents and businesses take a pride in its appearance.

4.1 General Maintenance and refurbishment

The majority of the general maintenance issues are covered in the Quick Wins earlier in this report.

Recommendations:

46) Review Quick Wins and arrange for work to be completed.

4.2 Widening of pavement area.

As a part of the Safer Spaces work by EFDC, a number of parking spaces have been removed to make a wider pavement space for Covid safe pedestrian separation. The areas are currently separated using plastic barriers which are both untidy and unsightly. Moving forward, it has been decided that a more permanent temporary pavement area be established and that it will remain there until a potential removal date of December 2021.

The loss of parking spaces doesn't appear to be making a particular difference to Town centre parking and only accounts for a small percentage of the overall parking spaces. As a result, I see this scheme, particularly in the main stretch of High street from St Johns Church to the Council offices, as an excellent way of testing the ground for a permanent extension of the pavement and also as a way of encouraging shops to extend their business to include both on-street trading and on-street hospitality. The widened area could also be used as a performance space for street musicians and buskers, adding to the overall atmosphere. This will all add to the attractiveness of the town centre, increase the feeling of community and make the town more of a destination to visitors.

Recommendations:

47) Encourage retailers to extend their business to include street trading.

48) Review benefit/appropriateness of extended pavement space and consider making permanent. This is now taking place.

49) Consider encouraging musicians and street performers into the high street

4.3 Shop Fronts

The uniformity of shops fronts along a retail centre can markedly increase the attractiveness of the road and also in doing so increase the attractiveness and therefore draw to individual stores. The majority of shops in the High street are attractive and in good repair, however there are some which require redecoration and/or complete refit. To do this would undoubtedly assist the retailers in attracting business, increase the attractiveness of the public realm and therefore improve the town centre for everyone's benefit.

It would be good to agree at Council level a uniform approach to shop front and signage presentation along the High street and to ensure that this is adhered to. Careful consideration should be given by the Council in allowing changes to shop fronts and/or shop signage and in ensuring that any proposals are in keeping with the area.

Recommendations:

50) Consult with ETC, ETCP and retailers to consider options in respect of shop fronts and making/keeping them attractive and in the overall style of the town.

51) EFDC to give careful consideration to design and style of Town centre shop fronts and signage.

4.4 A-Boards and other retail paraphernalia

A number of retailers have A-boards and other retail paraphernalia, external trading/retail displays on the pavement outside their shops. Although I understand the need for this, if not carefully managed these can block access and generally make the place look untidy. Street trading licences should provide for these and lay out the conditions and spaces for use – the Council should monitor this and ensure that all conditions are being complied with, particularly to ensure that the High street remains as attractive and as accessible as possible.

Considerations should be given to some form of demarcation outside each store over which seating, A-boards and other retail paraphernalia, if allowed, cannot overstep.

Recommendations:

52) Review Town centre policy and regulations for trading from the front of premises, retail displays and A-boards on the pavement and enforce accordingly.

4.5 Trees and Planters

Tree lined pedestrian routes and landscaped areas all contribute to civic pride and generally make a town more attractive. Epping already has an active Epping in Bloom scheme, with a team of local volunteers improving the appearance of the public realm and also adding the interest of a community garden in the Town centre. I feel though that this could be built on considerably and that perhaps the District and Town Councils could work with Epping in Bloom to extend the scheme further.

There are a number of trees along Epping high street and also from St Johns Church, running south, a large expanse of grass borders and verges. From St Johns Church running north however there is very little until you reach the planters at the very end of the shops, by the Council offices. My feeling is that the public realm along this stretch could be greatly improved with the addition of some planters, hanging baskets etc. This landscaping should also be followed along the same theme and design into the new developments.

Recommendations:

53) Review current “green” townscape and work with Epping in Bloom to develop and improve.

54) Add further planters/hanging baskets etc along the High street north of St Johns Church.

5 Access

Town centres need to recognise that Co2 emissions have to be reduced and as a result there is much more emphasis on ensuring a reduced reliance on cars. To this end, Town centres need to ensure their accessibility via other methods of transport and provide for these methods accordingly. In addition to reducing carbon emissions this will also encourage the use of the Town centre by the wider community via various methods of transport.

Simply stopping car access and reducing or taking away parking spaces, doesn't resolve this problem. Undoubtedly people will still want to access Epping town centre by car, however there is a balance to be had between encouraging pedestrian, cycling and public transport access and then gradually reducing provision for motor vehicles as other methods of travel develop and gain traction.

For generations urban areas have been designed exclusively around the car. This now has to change and Town centres developed to provide attractive, walkable and cyclable physical space.

5.1 Parking

Parking in Epping is undoubtedly a problem. There are insufficient parking spaces for the number of cars using the town and even through the pandemic, car parks and high street parking have been heavily used. With further residential development planned and additions of a new leisure centre and cinema/retail developments encouraging more people to use the town there will be an even greater need for parking. It is appreciated that we are trying to encourage a lesser reliance on cars, however with the introduction of cleaner electric cars, I think it will be some time before we see a reduction in car numbers and as a result Town centre parking will continue to be in demand.

Having discussed this matter with all the stakeholders, residents and businesses, there is no clear answer. I think that commuter parking should be discouraged other than in the station car park. I would suggest that commuters bring no benefit to the town and that a reduction in street parking for commuters would increase the street parking available for residents and short-term visitors. This could be enforced using parking restrictions such as permit holder parking and "permit holders only 1-2pm", zone parking, use of pay and display in a greater number of areas and increasing the cost of longer-term parking. Another option would be to consider making the Epping Station car park into a multilevel car park, thus doubling or more, the number of spaces.

The other option is to find alternative ways for residents to access the town centre – see below.

Recommendations:

- 55) Review parking provision in and around Epping and consider schemes to aid resident and business parking.***
- 56) Review parking arrangements to discourage commuter parking***
- 57) Consider option of making station parking multi level.***

5.2 Electric Scooter Scheme

Consideration should be given to implementing an electric scooter rental scheme to help support a 'green' alternative to local travel that is convenient, clean and affordable and helps to mitigate reduced public transport capacity and allow for social distancing as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic. E-scooters can reduce reliance on car trips, reduce congestion and improve air quality.

The Department for Transport (DfT) expanded trials of rental e-scooters and legislation was introduced to allow e-scooters to use highways and cycle routes. Only e-scooters in an approved trial are legal. Privately owned scooters will still be illegal on public networks.

It may be worth consulting Buckinghamshire Council which introduced this service on a 12-month trial in Aylesbury and High Wycombe. The scheme is operated by Zipp Mobility. The scooters have defined parking areas and also a defined operating area, outside which they cease to run.

This would be a great scheme to assist in discouraging car usage in Epping. Scooters could be made available at the station and at various locations in and around the Town centre. If successful, consideration could be given to extending the scheme to other areas within the District.

Recommendations:

- 58) EFDC to consult with ETC on viability of introducing an E-Scooter scheme.**
- 59) EFDC to contact Buckinghamshire Council and discuss trial findings and benefits.**
- 60) Introduce scheme for Epping on a trial basis.**

5.3 Cycling

Cycling is increasingly being promoted and encouraged and it is important that all residents of a town should be able to access the town centre, the towns various green and public spaces, leisure centre and attractions easily and safely by bike. In addition, the town should also provide for cycle racks/hoops at various destinations to enable the bikes to be safely secured.

My feeling in Epping is that the majority of roads are fairly quiet and that as a result there is minimal need for dedicated cycling lanes. Having said this, High Road/High street (B1393) in and out of Epping is a busy route. Although some of the road has tracks running alongside it within the safety of the forest, some sections could do with the addition of a dedicated cycle lane.

Recommendations:

- 61) Review cycling accessibility in and around Epping - particularly around main roads and the B1393 and make arrangements for the provision of safe, secure and clearly marked cycle paths and routes where necessary.**

5.4 Buses

There are numerous bus services in and around Epping connecting the town with towns like Harlow, Loughton, Waltham Abbey and Ongar. From what I understand these aren't reliable or punctual services. At a time when we want to reduce car usage and encourage public and other forms of transport the benefit of a reliable bus service is important and key. As a result I would suggest that the bus routes and their timetables are reviewed to ensure they are meeting the needs of the community.

Recommendations:

- 62) Review bus routes and timetables to ensure they are meeting the needs of the community.**

5.5 Trains

Epping is the final stop on the London Underground Central Line and provides regular commuter and other services in and out of London with Liverpool Street 40 minutes away and Stratford 20 minutes away. The Central Line makes Epping a busy commuter town not only for residents, but also as it is at the end of the line, for a number of commuters who drive from neighbouring towns and villages to access it.

6 Consultation

6.1 Market Research

In addition to thoughts and expertise of the author, consultation for this report has been obtained from the following:

Epping Forest District Council
Epping Town Council
Epping Town Partnership
Qualis Group Ltd
Epping Ongar Railway
Various councillors and other prominent/influential Epping residents
Various Epping retailers
Various Epping residents

It is accepted that additional research will be required from residents, retailers and businesses to move the ideas in this report forward. It is felt however that if the initiative is going to be Community/Town Council driven research should be carried out more locally.

7. Sources of Additional Support

High streets Task Force (www.highstreetstaskforce.org.uk) – supporting communities and local government to transform their High streets.

Click It Local (www.clickitlocal.co.uk) – online shopping/delivery service

Maybe (www.maybetech.com) – A smarter approach to social media

Action List	Priority
<i>EFDC/Highway Rangers to complete “quick wins”.</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Appoint Town centre Manager.</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Discuss and establish Town Leadership Team - form Town Team and/or refocus Town Centre Partnership.</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Complete research on thoughts and considerations of residents and businesses – incorporate and implement where appropriate.</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Identify the retail heart of Epping and take steps to protect it from residential development.</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Discuss vision for the High street and target new and specific retailers and businesses.</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Review the “green” street scene and public realm on the High street, consider the addition of planters etc and action accordingly.</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>EFDC and ETC to work with Epping in Bloom to extend scheme.</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Continually review town centre public realm, maintain and increase its attractiveness.</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Review plans for town centre development and see if a children’s play area can be included.</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Ensure that provision is made to develop the town centre in line with new developments - to make the space flow continually and tie the old and new together as one.</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Carry out all general maintenance/refurbishment recommendations.</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Ensure adequate public facilities throughout the town, including public toilets, benches, street furniture, bike parking, dog poo bins etc.</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Review market provision with TC and assess what should be done to promote it.</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Review future library provision, the space required and the range of services offered.</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Review with ETC, the requirement for a community hub, consider its location and services provided.</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Review attraction of Epping to visitors, together with the services offered by the Epping Ongar Railway and take action to increase visitor numbers.</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Put in place a free wi-fi service in the Town centre and increase the towns digital presence through the promotion of Click It Local, Maybe Tech etc.</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Arrange for removal of unsightly temporary barriers, signage etc and complete more permanent temporary works.</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Encourage safe street trading and hospitality.</i>	<i>1</i>

- Consider encouraging street musicians/performers into the Town centre.*** 2
- Review Town centre policy on A Boards and other pavement retail paraphernalia and ensure pavements are kept tidy and accessible to all.*** 2
- Review parking arrangements in Epping. Take steps to assist with parking for residents and businesses and to discourage commuter parking.*** 2
- Consider benefits of an E-Scooter scheme, review Bucks Council trial and if appropriate, roll out.*** 1
- Review cycling accessibility in Epping. Consider addition of cycle lanes on the B1393, ensure adequate cycle parking in and around Epping.*** 1
- Review bus routes and times to ensure they are meeting the needs of the community.*** 3

Draft