

Name of Committee:	Cabinet		
Committee Date:	6 March 2024		
Report Title:	Review of the Operation of the Meridian Centre.		
Report From:	Councillor Kennett, Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Cabinet Lead:	Councillor Fairhurst		
Status:	Part Exempt		
Urgent Decision:	No	Key Decision:	No
Appendices:	Appendix1 – Report of the Meridian Centre Task Group Appendix 2 – Presentation by the Chairman of the Meridian Centre Task Group Appendix 3 – Updates to the Meridian Centre Task Group's Report Appendix 4 – Revised Performance Details		
Background Papers:	Responses from local resident association (open) Tenancy Schedule (Exempt) Mall Events (unredacted – Exempt)		
Contact:	Councillor Kennett Richard.Kennett@havant.gov.uk		
Report Number:	HBC/89/2024		

Corporate Priorities:

As part of the Corporate Strategy the Meridian Centre plays an important role in the regeneration of Havant Town Centre and supports the growth theme of the Corporate Strategy.

Executive Summary:

At its meeting held on 6 December 2023, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered a report by the Meridian Centre Task Group ("Task Group") on the performance of the Meridian Centre ("The Centre").

Although several units had become vacant since the report was finalised, which had resulted in a fall of footfall and a loss of income, the Committee was satisfied that, at the time of the meeting, The Centre was operating successfully and should be retained as an asset.

The Committee also agreed with the Task Group that the enhancements recommended in the report would encourage shoppers to the town centre from the Solent Road Retail Park and from elsewhere, which would in turn have a beneficial impact on the operation of The Centre.

In view of the concerns raised by the Head of Property and Asset Management that the current operation arrangements would not be sustainable in the long term, the Committee considered that it would be prudent to monitor the operation of The Centre in the next municipal year.

Recommendations:

Cabinet be recommended to:

1. Write to Hampshire County Council, the Highway Authority to request that they:
 - a. Improve the connection with Solent Road Retail Park to attract more shoppers to visit the town centre by waymarking the route more effectively and possible changing the position of the pedestrian crossing on Park Road South.
 - b. Make the area outside St Faiths Church into a pedestrian zone with demountable bollards, enabling the development of an outdoor café culture during summer months. This might also possibly attract someone to open a restaurant in this area.
2. focus on improvements to Market Parade, encouraging more shops to cluster around the Meridian Centre, reducing the footprint of the town centre shops to create a busier atmosphere, reducing the vacant shop sites; and
3. to form a group to take responsibility for the further development of the Meridian Centre and Havant Town Centre.

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 At its meeting held on 6 December 2023, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the recommendations of the Meridian Task Group (Appendix 1) together with updates on the performance and occupancy of The Centre since the report was finalised (Appendix 2).

2.0 Background

- 2.1 The Task Group was asked by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to review the working of the Meridian Centre in 2022/23 and submit its findings to the Committee.
- 2.2 Although a number of units had become vacant since the report was finalised which had resulted in a fall of footfall and a loss of income, the Committee was satisfied that, at the time of the meeting, The Centre was operating successfully and should be retained as an asset.
- 2.3 The Committee also agreed that the enhancements recommended by the Task Group (recommendations 1(a) and (b) of the Task Group's report) would encourage shoppers from the Solent Road Retail Park and elsewhere to the town centre. The Committee noted that Hampshire County Council was already looking into the pedestrianisation of the area outside St Faith's Church in such a way that funeral and weddings vehicles could still be able to park outside the church, when required.
- 2.4 In view of the concerns raised by the Head of Property and Asset Management that the current operation arrangements would not be sustainable in the long term, the Committee considered that it would be prudent to monitor the operation of The Centre in the next municipal year.

3.0 Options

- 3.1 The following options were by the Task Group:
 - a. selling The Centre on the open Market to raise revenue;
 - b. partial or full demolition of The Centre to reduce costs and to provide an opportunity for town centre redevelopment;
 - c. maintaining The Centre using the current management model.

4.0 Relationship to the Corporate Strategy

- 4.1 The Council has a duty to ensure that maximises its returns from its assets. The Meridian Centre plays an important part in the delivery of the Council's initiative" to delivering improvements to Havant town centre".

5.0 Conclusion

- 5.1 Despite a recent increase in the vacancy rate of units which had led to a fall in income and footfall, the Committee was satisfied that, at the time of the meeting, that the Centre was operating well and should be retained as an asset,
- 5.2 The Committee also considered that the enhancements set out below would enhance the Meridian Centre and encourage more use of town centre shops, including the Meridian Centre.
- a) Improve the connection with Solent Road Retail Park to attract more shoppers to visit the town centre by waymarking the route more effectively and possible changing the position of the pedestrian crossing on Park Road South.
 - b) Make the area outside St Faiths Church into a pedestrian zone with demountable bollards, enabling the development of an outdoor café culture during summer months. This might also possibly attract someone to open a restaurant in this area.
 - c) Focus on improvements to Market Parade, encouraging more shops to cluster around the Meridian Centre, reducing the footprint of the town centre shops to create a busier atmosphere, reducing the vacant shop sites.
 - d) The High Street Task Force visited the town centre in March of this year and produced a short but insightful report. They were positive about much that they saw a but identified 'the lack of an organisation or group to take responsibility for the town centre as the main barrier to transformation in Havant.' This would be a valuable way to further support the development of the Meridian Centre and also Havant Town.

6.0 Implications and Comments

6.1 S151 Comments

The Meridian Centre Task and Finish Group is a member lead group. Whilst its contribution is extremely valuable, any recommendations leading to financial expenditure should be referred to the relevant Executive Officer for a business case and/or financial appraisal before the Cabinet has enough comfort to agree to any such recommendations.

The recommendations in this report do not result directly in any financial expenditure, so I am happy to support them, although it will be important to ensure any new group from recommendation 3 is considered in how it integrates with the existing property management team and the regeneration team to avoid duplication of work and commitment of internal resources.

6.2 Monitoring Officer Comments

The Monitoring Officer supports the work of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and its Task Groups. The Monitoring Officer has no concerns or observations which need to be brought to the Committee's attention.

6.3 Head of Service Comments

The Centre was originally acquired for regeneration purposes based on a 5-year hold that expires towards the end of 2024. The Council has to be mindful of the possibility of redevelopment and cannot offer open-ended lettings that would make vacant possession of the premises at a future date challenging. As such, new lettings at the centre are currently being aligned to a 29th September 2029 end / break date, to retain flexibility.

6.4 Cabinet Lead's Comments

None received.

6.5 Equality and Diversity

An improvement in waymarking and relocation of the pedestrian crossing in Park Road South is an ideal opportunity to introducing a route to and from Solent Road to the Town Centre for all everybody.

The recommended enhancements to Market Parade and pedestrianisation of that part of West Street outside St Faiths Church is an opportunity to design a more user friendly area for everybody.

The creation of group to oversee the development of the Meridian and the Town Centre is an opportunity to ensure that any future developments promote equality and diversity.

6.6 Human Resources

None arising from this report.

6.7 Information Governance

None arising from this report.

6.8 Climate and Environment

A more pedestrian friendly location for the pedestrian crossing on Park Road South and an improvement in signage to the town centre could encourage more people to walk to and from Solent Road instead of using a vehicle to make the journey to the centre.

The pedestrianisation of that part of West Street outside St Faith's Church will lead to a reduction of vehicles parking in this area and

the introduction of an outside café culture in the area will improve the environment to the benefit of shoppers and commercial users

7.0 Risks

7.1 There are no immediate risks arising this report.

8.0 Consultation

8.1 The group:

- Meet with The Centre manager, Rob Fryer to find information on the operation of The Centre and his thoughts on how to promote and develop The Centre.
- Meet with Havant Borough Council Asset Manager, Martyn Fenwick, to review the financial workings of The Centre
- Ask local residents associations for their views on the operation of The Centre and any improvements they would like

9.0 Communications

9.1 This is ideal opportunity to promote the Meridian Centre to encourage more shoppers.

Agreed and signed off by:		Date:
Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee	Councillor Kennett	23 January2024

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