

Report to Place, Economic Growth and Environment Scrutiny Board

High Street Accelerator Update

Portfolio Holder:

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Purpose of the Report

To review progress to date on the national High Street Accelerator pilot and the focus on developing the Evening and Night Time Economy.

Recommendations

- i. To note the High Street Accelerator funding allocation and the priorities
- ii. To note the progress made in the first five months of the funding.
- iii. To note the additional green space funding secured

High Street Accelerator Update

1 Background

- 1.1 The Government announced the High Street Accelerators in September 2023 and invited Oldham Council to express interest in participating due to the high level of vacant premises in the town centre.
- 1.2 The Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities confirmed ten towns to participate in a High Street Accelerator pilot. Our High Street Nomination Form was completed for Union Street and Yorkshire Street as the pilot high streets for this funding based on existing data, notably:
 - 1.2.1 In 2019 Oldham town centre was identified as one of the top 20 town centres in the country most 'at risk' from key consumer trends (Oldham Economic Review). Geographically, Oldham struggles with leakage of jobs, visitors and spending to central Manchester and surrounding towns, and employment has fallen consistently in recent years, leading to vacant retail and eatery units; according to CACI Retail Footprint Data, the flows to Oldham town centre have retracted significantly and the spend profile for Oldham reduced from £170m in 2010 to £156m in 2017.
 - 1.2.2 The economic challenges facing Oldham have led to increases in anti-social behaviour on the high street and Metrolink network (Union Street). Oldham Town Centre Police Beat has reported the highest level of crime in the Borough (c.1,100 incidents per year), with 51% of incidents identified as violent crime. Between 2021 and 2022, 15.31% of violent crimes are recorded on Union Street and 10.93% on Yorkshire Street, with the majority occurring during the night-time economy hours but some peaks reported during the late afternoon during the week. This is associated with a noticeable lag between the end of the trading day and start of the night-time entertainment offer, and declining footfall, with a fear of crime being cited by citizens.
- 1.3 The funding was formally launched in December 2023 and the two key principles are:
 - A High Street Accelerator is a partnership, it should bring together residents, local businesses, and community organisations to work with the local authority to develop and deliver a long-term vision to regenerate a high street in the area.
 - A High Street Accelerator is a pilot. It is an opportunity to test and trial new ways of working to revitalise the high street and to tackle vacancy.
- 1.4 The High Street Accelerators pilot projects are asked to test two theories:
 - There is High Streets Task Force research and qualitative evidence which indicates a lack of partnership working can be a potential barrier to the success and resilience of a high street. This pilot seeks to test whether the High Street Accelerator model can facilitate partnership working and

subsequently support the long-term revival and regeneration of declining high streets.

- Each accelerator will receive the opportunity to access Green Spaces funding. It is evidenced that greening high streets can help to increase their vibrancy and visual appeal. New projects, like a parklet, can provide new social spaces, increasing customers dwell time in the location.

1.5 We were awarded £237k accelerator funding for Yorkshire Street and Union Street. The funding is revenue was allocated £50k to be spent by 31 March 2024, and the balance of £187k to be spent by 31 March 2025.

1.6 Oldham Council identified two programmes of activity to use this funding allocation for – developing an evening and night time economy and tackling vacant premises.

1.6.1 Evening and night-time economy

1.6.1.1 The development of Oldham Town centre is at a pivotal time. We are on the cusp of some major developments such as the opening of the new Egyptian Rooms, Events Space, Indoor Market, Theatre and the Hive business space, that have the potential to significantly increase footfall.

1.6.1.2 Therefore, now is the time to start building on this by developing and supporting our night-time offer to ensure that we have excellent operational procedures and partnership working in place to support the additional footfall and high-quality offer that is in the planning stages.

1.6.1.3 We want to create an ambitious forward-looking and inspirational town at night with a variety of entertainment, varied businesses and investment opportunities that will bring about regeneration and economic growth over the years to come.

1.6.1.4 We propose to use our funding allocation to accelerate our ambitions to develop a vibrant evening and night-time economy (ENTE), with the attainment of Purple Flag status being our overall aim.

1.6.1.5 Purple Flag is an accreditation process similar to the Green Flag for parks and Blue Flag for beaches. It leads to Purple Flag status for town & city centres that meet or surpass the standards of excellence in managing the evening and night time economy. Purple Flag is a positive initiative that indicates an entertaining, diverse, safe and enjoyable night out throughout the UK and Ireland and is now being taken up internationally. It comprises of a dedicated set of five core standards:

- i. Policy Envelope – after hours policy crosses many professional and budgetary boundaries. The challenge is to bring clarity and focus to a complicated field. A clear strategy is needed based on research, integrated policy and a successful multi-sector partnership.

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- ii. Wellbeing – a prerequisite for successful destinations is that they should be safe and welcoming, with all sectors playing their part in delivering high standards of customer care.
 - iii. Movement – getting home safely after a night out is crucial, so too is the ability to move around the streets on foot with ease and safety.
 - iv. Appeal – successful destinations should offer a vibrant choice of leisure and entertainment for a divert of ages, lifestyles and cultures.
 - v. Place – successful areas are alive during the day, as well as in the evening. They contain a blend of complimentary activities that encourage people to mingle and enjoy their place.

1.6.1.6 Through partnership working we will create a welcoming, clean and safe environment, that has a vibrant and rich mixture of entertainment and leisure options at night. Our aim is to develop a stimulating destination of choice that is easy to access and leave at the end of the night.

1.6.1.7 Working closely with all areas of the ENTE including pubs and bars, restaurants, entertainment venues and the wider cultural/heritage sector etc we will develop a strategic approach to delivering a successful evening and night-time economy in Oldham town centre, to ensure that the town centre economy is thriving and open for business into the evening and night-time.

1.6.2 Managing voids and encouraging entrepreneurial activity

1.6.2.1 To enable us to have a more strategic and focused approach to managing voids and stimulating entrepreneurs, we will dedicate resource to deliver on a town centre wide approach to securing a sustainable mix of uses that is inclusive, vibrant and increases resilience to withstand future economic shocks. In addition to seeking long-term occupancy, this will target the temporary use of vacant buildings to stimulate the economy.

1.6.2.2 We will develop a plan for coordinated engagement with landlords to develop an effective relationship management function, ensuring businesses in the town centre can shape and contribute to reducing the number of vacant town centre units including the reduction of underutilised upper floor space. These resources will be more effectively used through this coordinated way of working, developing shared and agreed plans with individuals taking clear responsibility for actions, while still retaining a sense of collective responsibility.

1.6.2.3 The programme of activity has been split into three phases, set out below.

Research Phase

- Continue the existing audit and mapping of vacant ground floor units.
- Carry out a detailed review of the current town centre offer to identify gaps and opportunities.
- Develop a database of town centre property ownership to enable a collective approach to be taken to managing churn and voids.

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- Carry out an audit of leasing in the town centre to map any units that might soon become vacant.
 - Conduct a town centre wide audit of upper floor space.
 - Develop an 'Empty Shop Strategy' outlining our commitment to tackling empty premises in the town centre.

Engagement Phase

- Develop an action plan, with key outcomes, to set-out how we will reduce the amount of unused and under-used space working with landlords and agents.
- Build on relationships with agents and landlords to capture the back story of each vacant unit and understand the barriers to letting.
- Establish a functional and seamless pathway for businesses looking to establish a presence in the town centre, that can respond to changing business needs and demands.
- Explore the possibility of hosting all vacant units digitally, linked to an integrated leasing and business support service.
- Encourage all vacant unit advertising and hoarding to be attractive and informative. Establish a protocol with planning and business rates to make this an easy to implement, commonly agreed principle.

Delivery Phase

- Encourage realistic marketing and proactive lettings of void premises. Share positive updates on progress with the property sector, existing businesses and would-be occupiers.
- Work with landlords to ensure an appropriate mix of uses.
- Support with 'meanwhile' use where it adds value.
- Explore potential for a 'Commercial Vacant Property Grant Scheme' to unlock the barriers to letting identified in the first phase, with grant values linked to lease terms.
- Deliver competition-based programmes for new start retailers to open in vacant market units to encourage new entrants and stimulate a supply of entrepreneurs.
- Develop and promote a 'Ladder of affordable business and retail accommodation' offering flexible growth opportunities.
- Whilst this phase is underway, a detailed business case will be developed for to resource the 'High Street Team' on a longer-term basis and to explore opportunities to create a 'Vacant Property Grant Scheme'

1.7 The Council has existing economic regeneration and investment strategies which outline priorities and project investments across this area, and we will work with these to maximise impact, through the growth of culture and the creative sector to support the nighttime economy and repurposing and meanwhile use of void spaces. This strategic alignment will ensure the vitality and diversity of the night time activities are supported to expand and flourish.

2 Current Position

2.1 Establishment of the High Street Accelerator Partnership

- 2.1.1 A requirement of the funding was the establishment of a High Street Accelerator Partnership. This is to ensure the pilot can test the value of partnerships in driving forward high street improvements. The initial partnership had to comprise of four members: a property owner, a business representative, a community organisation representative and a local authority representative.
- 2.1.2 During the inaugural meeting in February, the partnership appointed Maggie Hughes a local business and property owner as its independent chair. This appointment is complementary to the individual's existing role as vice-chair of the Oldham Town Centre Board (the public-facing structure to which the partnership will report).
- 2.1.3 The three other members attending this initial meeting were the manager of Spindles Town Square Shopping Centre, the Secretary of Oldham Area Civic Society and the Head of Place Making.
- 2.1.4 The partnership has made good initial progress, confirming governance arrangements, committing to expanding the membership base, and submitting the successful expression of interest for a share of the £5m Green Spaces Fund. It has held meetings and events to engage stakeholders and commissioned technical work to obtain data and evidence to inform the development of the high street vision and overall work programme.
- 2.1.5 All members are committed to growing the membership base and have been approaching business owners and other stakeholders who have previously expressed an interest in supporting initiatives to improve the high street. The partnership members have a wealth of knowledge, experience and expertise, in some cases honed over decades spent working in and trading from Oldham town centre.

2.2 Research, Data and Evidence

- 2.2.1 The initial allocation of £50k to be spent by 31 March 2024, has been used to build a rich picture of the town centre to inform action to be taken. We have undertaken:
- i. A Data and Market Analysis: As the town centre offer diversifies, there is a need to understand and support the commercial performance of town centre retail, food and beverage, and leisure, through understanding the catchment and audience that the town serves, the performance this produces and opportunities to support and extend the relevance of the offer.
 - ii. An Environmental and Safety Perception Audit: We have 'mystery shop' experts visiting the town centre to assess each street. The town centre has been divided into 10 sections, each of which will be visited on 10 occasions and measured against 14 standards to give us a visitor view and experience of each street and how they rank. We also have an evening safety

perception audit taking place, this includes visits on 5 nights, with 2 assessments each night, to give us a total of 20 reports.

- iii. Void Research Phase: We have carried out a mapping exercise of vacant properties, checking ownership, recording usage of occupied premises, to provide a detailed assessment for Union Street and Yorkshire Street and adjoining streets.
- iv. Footfall Insight: We are currently carrying out a 6-month pilot of geofence data. This goes beyond capabilities of traditional footfall counters or mobile phone signal tracking, and uses GPRS, app usage, network data and AI technology to truly understand who is using our spaces, when, for how long, where and how do they get to us, and where do they visit when they are here.

2.3 Evening and Night Time Economy Roundtable

- 2.3.1 An evening and night-time economy round table event was held on 22 March hosted by the Cllr Arooj Shah Leader of the Council, Sacha Lord Greater Manchester Evening and Night-time Economy lead, and Ojay McDonald Chief Executive of the Association of Town and City Management (ATCM) who accredit the international Purple Flag scheme.
- 2.3.2 The event, with 40 attendees, was an opportunity to have an honest and open conversation about working together to tackle the challenges being faced, to listen to a wide range of views from venues, promoters, performers as well as potential operators.
- 2.3.3 At the roundtable we asked for volunteers who would be willing to work with us to drive forward the evening and night-time economy. We have 15 people who volunteered their time and energy to work with us on this programme to become our Evening and Night Time Economy Task Force. We also have support from GMCA Evening and Night-time economy team.
- 2.3.4 Through the round table event in March, the partnership has also begun to identify ideas for projects and activities to enhance the evening and night-time economy. These include:
 - i. Provision of infrastructure to host pop-up food and drink over the summer in advance of the opening of the Egyptian Rooms in late summer.
 - ii. Programming live music and performers into venues (licensed and unlicensed) to drive increased footfall into the town in the early evening.
 - iii. Use of alternative venues for live music / dance nights – supporting operators and promoters to organise and promote.
 - iv. Refreshed town centre events programme focusing on supporting the hospitality sector, including evening street markets.

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- v. Town Centre ambassadors / security during the weekends to tackle concerns around perceptions of safety (daytime and evening)

2.3.5 To deliver the intensive programme of work, we are using part of the accelerator funding for a full-time role to drive forward this work programme. We have successfully appointed a person with experience of managing council owned and operated licensed venues, managing events, as well as working for a local authority with five years Purple Flag accreditation who joined Oldham in mid-April.

2.4 Green Space Funding

2.4.1 The partnership applied for funding from the Green Spaces Fund in April and received confirmation in May that we had been awarded £500k to be spent by 31 March 2025 to fund two projects.

2.4.2 The first is to introduce planting by encouraging high street businesses on Yorkshire Street and Union Street to take ownership of their immediate public realm – where appropriate. For businesses with the space to have outdoor seating, barrier planters will be provided, ready planted, with guidance and support on caring for the plants. The seating and barriers will be provided to the business with a requirement on them to maintain the planting and ensure the area used is also well kept. Businesses with smaller public realm footprints will be encouraged to apply for hanging planters and green walls, again with the requirement for ongoing maintenance resting with the business / property owner. This will provide some quick wins to the locations in terms of improving the look and feel of the streets.

2.4.3 The second project is developing options to create a flexible ‘green’ structure that can be used as a seating space but with the ability to place trading boards into the structure so they can be used as market stalls. Whilst this is part of the accelerator pilot, we proposed this to allow us to test options for integrating market stalls as part of linear park.

2.5 High Street Task Force

2.5.1 Through this pilot programme we also have free expert support from the High Streets Task Force that we can draw upon. We are currently being supported by Emma James, High Street Task Force Expert.

2.5.2 We also have support from the Design Council to assist in the development of an Evening and Night Time Economy Vision for the town centre. We will be working with them in June / July.

3 Options/Alternatives

3.1 Acceptance of the funding was agreed in January 2024 to support the development of the Evening and Night Time Economy ambitions and to tackle vacant premises in the defined area.

4 Preferred Option

4.1 Continue to deliver the ambitions of the High Street Accelerator proposal, with the addition of the linked Green Space funding.

5 **Consultation**

5.1 The High Street Accelerator activity is being driven by the High Street Accelerator Partnership who are being informed by data gathered and feedback from partners and stakeholders.

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Signed _____ Cabinet Member (specify whom)	Dated _____
Signed _____ Executive Director/Deputy Chief Executive	Dated _____