

### Future High Street Fund Expression of Interest Gravesend Town Centre

#### Summary of Challenges

##### **Challenge 1 – Impact of competing centres & contraction of retail**

- Competition from three of the UK's top regional retail centres all within a 25 minute journey time - Bluewater, Lakeside and Westfield Stratford City, which are ranked as the 5th, 4th and 10th largest.
- Loss of the Town's 'big name' retailers - Marks & Spencer, BHS and Poundworld Plus and recently Poundland and Brighthouse - leaving large vacancies in the main shopping streets, having a far greater impact on vibrancy and vitality of the Town and its street scene. Risk of more departures to come.
- Constant uncertainty about the Town's future shown in the fears and attitudes of the local community and the media.
- Decline in Town Centre footfall (decreased by over 9% in the last 3 years).

##### **Challenge 2 – Failure to bring forward mixed-use residential sites in the Town Centre**

- A number of former public sector land holdings remaining derelict - former Gravesend Police Station, Windmill Street and the old Maternity Block, Bath Street.
- Failure to bring forward a string of housing and mixed-use sites in and around the Town Centre – if unlocked, these could deliver more than 2,000 dwellings, creating new residential communities which will underpin and strengthen the functioning of the Town.
- Complex sites with large viability gaps given the abnormal costs of development.

##### **Challenge 3 – Yet to fully realise the transformational impact of High Speed 1**

- The Town has yet to see the kind of transformational impact that high profile transport interventions have brought to other places - due to service frequency (2 HS1 trains per hour); premium cost of HS1 services relative to resident incomes; Town yet to raise its head as a 'property hot-spot'; and no significant growth in conventional office space.
- Gravesend is essentially part of London's commuter zone and supply chain, yet the Town does not experience much of the economic, cultural and social opportunities that such proximity might be expected to bring.

##### **Challenge 4 – Vulnerable independent businesses**

- Gravesend has a sizeable independent business community (66.4% of units), representing a mix of retail, food and service related activity. Located mainly in the secondary shopping streets, many are start-ups and vulnerable to failure due to lack of footfall in the Town.
- They require additional support and training, in many circumstances to increase their online presence to attract additional customers.

##### **Challenge 5 – Net outward movement of the area's working population and poor economic performance**

- Gravesham has the smallest local economy in Kent with the lowest GVA per head of any local authority area in Kent.
  - Almost 16,000 more people leave the Borough daily for work than come in (25,815 OUT against 10,166 IN) - a significant loss of daytime workforce expenditure from the Town.
  - Gravesham is far less prosperous than many other Kent districts. A large proportion of wards within its urban catchment are within the 20% most deprived in England & Wales.
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### **Challenge 6 – Absence of a compelling leisure, entertainment & cultural activity**

- The Town lacks a larger presence of commercial leisure that will attract people, especially as there is a strengthening presence of cinema, gyms and other leisure alongside branded restaurants at Bluewater and Medway Valley Leisure Park, all within a 15 minute drive of Gravesend Town Centre.
- Consumer leisure habits in the Borough identify a strong preference for visits to cinema, restaurants, health and fitness clubs and children's play venues outside the Town Centre.
- There is a gap for compelling multi-leisure and entertainment experiences that increase dwell time and support the Town's restaurants and bars.

### **Challenge 7 – Weakness in the Town's evening & night-time economy**

- The Town's Evening and Night-time Economy (ENTE) is weak, with declining footfall. There is a diverse, yet dispersed restaurant and bar offer that may not attract far outside of the Town.
- Perceptions of the Town Centre in the evening and at night are poor, because of inadequate lighting, lack of activity and a fear of crime and safety issues - 20% of respondents identifying Town Centre safety as their single most important issue.

### **Challenge 8 – Risk of losing the commitment of the people that it serves**

- Prospects for population and employment growth are good with proposals for new residential communities along Northfleet Riverside and within the Ebbsfleet Garden City.
- Gravesend needs to offer something new, innovative and unique as a destination so that those new communities will automatically look to Gravesend to meet many of their day to day social, leisure, employment and retail needs.
- Gravesend Town Centre has had a clear focus in serving the needs of the local area and there is a high level of commitment by local communities to use the Town. That commitment is at risk of being lost, especially if the Town is unable to engage with the younger members of its community and with those within its population who have a greater propensity to spend.

### **Challenge 9 - The Town has turned its back on its River**

- Gravesend is here because of the River Thames. Retail change over the decades has relocated retail into New Road and the two shopping centres in the Town and a significant stretch of the waterfront has been redeveloped for flats.
- The Town's relationship with its River has weakened, cut off by the one-way system running along the Town Centre on its northern side.

### **Challenge 10 – Congestion & poor air quality around the Town**

- The one way system around the Town confuses those who are unfamiliar with the Town as they arrive and it spoils the waterfront and architecturally superior streets, including Harmer Street.
- There are points where there is frequent congestion which delays traffic which is a frustration for those seeking to come into Town.
- The one-way system is identified as an Air Quality Management Area (AQMA).

### **Challenge 11 – Tired and unattractive areas of the built and physical environment**

- The public realm throughout the Town Centre is in need of a deep clean and a maintenance upgrade.
  - St George's Shopping Centre is in need of modernisation to increase its attractiveness. This is underway.
  - A number of larger poor-grade, dated retail frontages and neglected smaller units and longer term vacancies, in a declining state of repair, have a significant impact on the street scene.
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- Harmer Street is dominated by traffic on the one-way system and requires public realm improvements to enhance the street, encourage changes of use to residential and see a general improvement in the quality of the housing stock.
- Queen Street, with a culturally diverse business community, close by the Gravesend Borough Market and alongside the key redevelopment area in the Town Centre is also a strong candidate for a co-ordinated enhancement scheme.

## **Town Centre Vision and Ambition for Change**

The council has a clear vision and ambition for reviving Gravesend Town Centre's purpose as a more balanced and healthy place which thrives as a unique and attractive destination and performs successfully as a focus for the diverse and growing communities which it serves. We want it to be a positive experience for all that visit and live, work or shop in the Town.

Critical to achieving this is the unlocking of mixed-use development sites in and around the Town Centre. These have the potential for circa 2000 new homes enabling many more people (+33%) to live in the Town and to use it to meet their everyday needs.

The council and its partners will bring forward a package of transformational projects that will elevate the Town's status, increase the momentum for investment and rebuild the confidence of business and local communities.

Leading this transformation is the council's working with the Reef Group to refurbish the St George's Shopping Centre. An innovative 'income strip' model of financing is being applied to enable a lender to advance the capital necessary to facilitate significant improvements. Beyond this, plans are taking shape to extend the Centre with a new entertainment quarter and new residential communities within the heart of the Town.

The council has taken this lead to regenerate the Town and to 'kick-start' investment that will create a more balanced mix of uses in the Town. It has also demonstrated its willingness to acquire sites to make this happen.

Future High Street Funding will ensure that these developments take place and are co-ordinated with a package of other investments that will make Gravesend Town Centre an attractive and genuinely different experience, set apart from other competing centres. The council is committed to engaging with community, business and developer interests to achieve a shared view of the Town and to support the case for resources.

Officer teams have been established to progress specific projects, building upon its experience of working closely with Kent County Council and with other stakeholders, and these will be expanded to ensure capacity to deliver the next stage of Future High Street Funding.

The vision addresses the identified challenges in the following ways:

### **Challenge 1**

- A broader mix of uses creating more reasons for people to be in Town.

### **Challenge 2**

- Overcoming barriers to development with substantial progress in delivering new, well designed mixed-use communities.
  - Many more people living and working in the Town Centre, underpinning and strengthening its functioning.
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- St George's Shopping Centre refurbished and extended, bringing life back into the heart of Gravesend.

### **Challenge 3**

- Fast-river services to and from Central London, with expansion of capacity at Town Pier Pontoon, together with Highspeed1 redefining Gravesend as a place.

### **Challenge 4**

- Independent businesses with a stronger online presence and benefitting from more people in Town.

### **Challenge 5**

- More people working in affordable co-working and grow-on spaces, benefitting from higher networking speeds and business support.
- A new 'creative hub', supporting the area's expanding creative/digital businesses.

### **Challenge 6**

- New leisure/entertainment experiences, orientated towards families and younger people, creating compelling reasons for more people to come into Gravesend.
- Promotion of the Town's cluster of immersive video, board gamer and escape room experiences to a wider audience.
- A recurring programme of curated cultural events and entertainment to attract footfall and encourage people to stay longer.

### **Challenge 7**

- Greater recognition of the Town's culturally diverse restaurants, drawing people in from further afield.
- A more active place creating a safer place and experience.

### **Challenge 8**

- Residents of surrounding villages and Ebbsfleet Garden City looking to Gravesend to meet their needs.
- All generations enjoying Gravesend and interacting socially within valued, welcoming and community-centred buildings and spaces.
- Public and health services co-ordinated more effectively and accessible to more people, bringing them into Town.

### **Challenge 9**

- Gravesend's waterfront transformed with a high quality, attractive and active greenspace, connected to the Town via a well-designed 'shared space'.

### **Challenge 10**

- An attractive pedestrian 'gateway' from Gravesend Rail Station, linking the transport hub with the Town Centre.
- Real-time transport and car parking information making it easier for people to arrive, with traffic flowing more freely.

### **Challenge 11**

- Public realm improvements creating more attractive and active spaces and streets.
  - Property owners incentivised to improve their buildings.
  - Higher standards of cleanliness, safety and accessibility.
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