

# Crawley Borough Council

## Report to Overview and Scrutiny Commission

13 January 2025

### Crawley Town Centre Update

Report of the Head of Economy and Planning, PES/476

#### 1. Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide members of the Commission with an update on Crawley Town Centre and its regeneration programme, particularly in light of the recent closure of the Marks & Spencer store on Queensway.

#### 2. Recommendations

- 2.1 To the Overview and Scrutiny Commission:

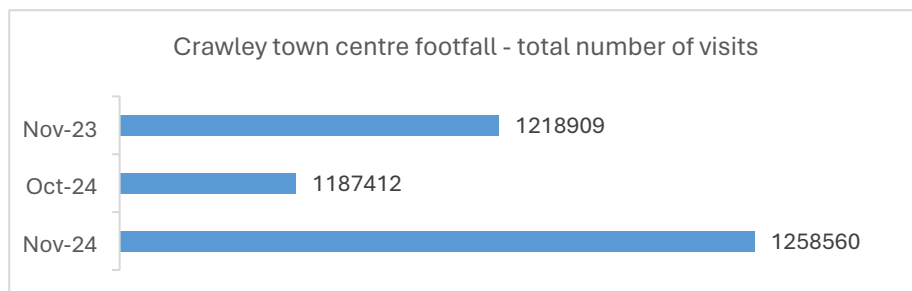
That the Commission is requested to receive this report, consider progress to date and acknowledge any future service actions.

#### 3. Reasons for the Recommendation

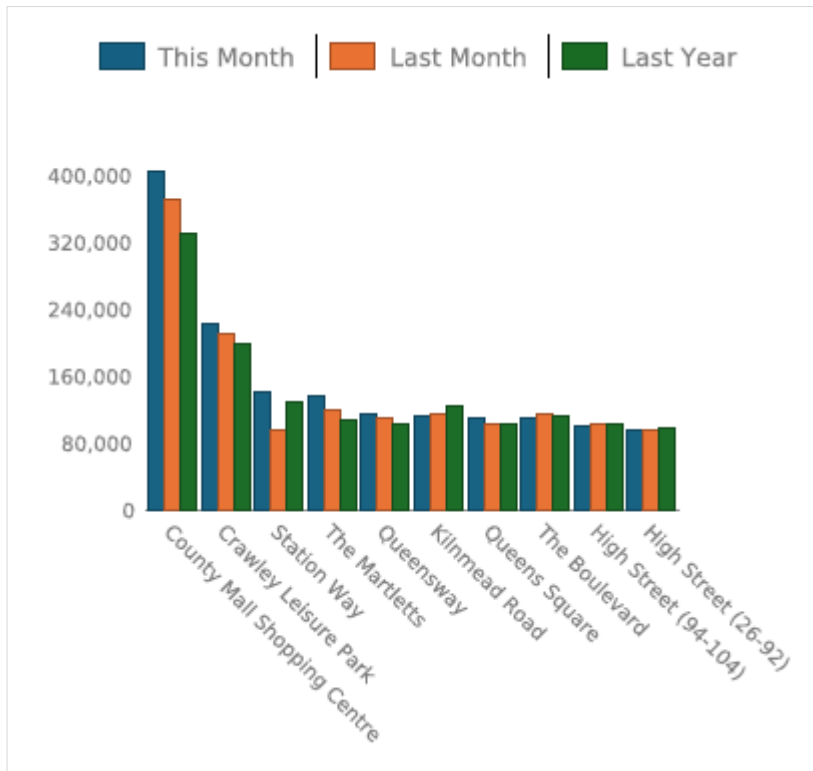
- 3.1 Under the Scrutiny Procedure Rules, it was requested that a report be provided to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission with an update on Crawley Town Centre and its regeneration programme.

#### 4. Background

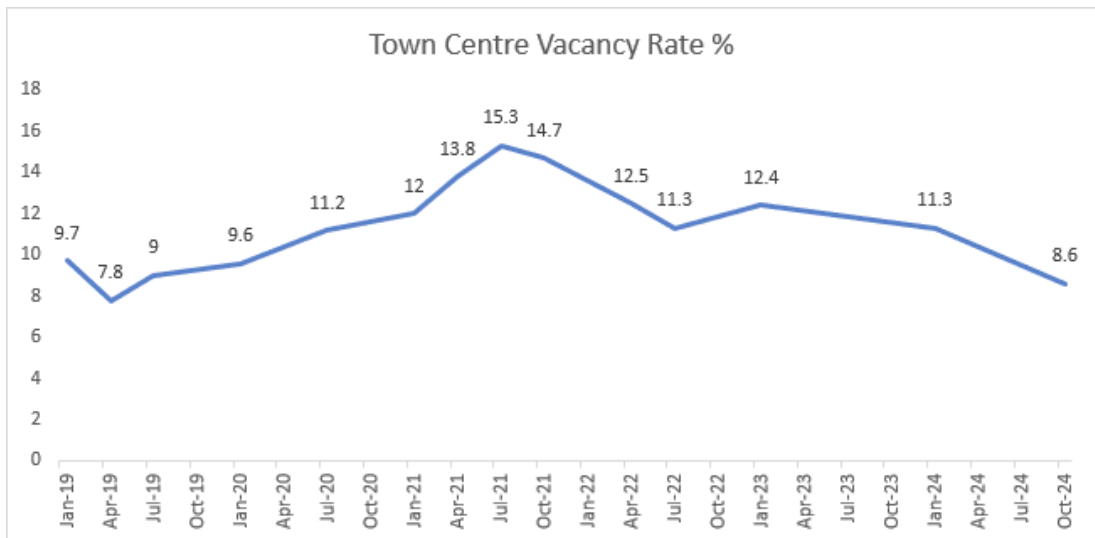
- 4.1 Crawley town centre is one of three main employment areas within the borough and performs a number of important roles. It is leading sub-regional destination for retail and leisure, popular with Crawley residents and attracting visitors from a wider catchment area outside the borough. Home to more than 450 businesses, the town centre has a workforce of around 13,500 (14% of all the jobs in Crawley) across a range of sectors including retail and leisure, administrative and professional services including those offering legal, financial, recruitment, marketing and property services.
- 4.2 There is much to be positive about. Crawley Town Centre attracts more than 1.2 million visitors every month and figures are rising, year on year.



The latest footfall data (November 2024) shows that County Mall is the busiest part of the town centre with just over 400,000 visitors.



4.3 The town centre has a low vacancy rate (8.6%) and around 100 independent retailers. This is notably below the national average (latest info: 13.8%). In recent months, there have been a number of new, niche retail and café openings that are changing the character of the town centre including Chaiwalla, Longdan Oriental Supermarket, Tesco Express, GymCrawley, Mooboo Bubble tea, Barakah Groceries, Something Wiccan and Elegans Boutique. These investments may not be as high profile as some of the more traditional brands but they are significant and mean that Crawley has something exciting and different as part of its town centre offer.



- 4.4 It is also a sustainable place to live with a residential population that has risen to approximately 1,500 in recent years. Moving forward, significant new residential development is planned and it is recognised that the town centre is diversifying to become a neighbourhood in its own right.
- 4.5 On 16<sup>th</sup> November 2024, the Marks & Spencer store in Queensway closed its doors after 56 years of trading in Crawley town centre. The reason for the closure was based on a wider, strategic decision taken by Marks & Spencer on commercial viability grounds to move towards larger, more sub-regional stores with larger floor space. The building is also very old and costly to run. Marks & Spencer have expressed their desire to expand their presence in Crawley in the future, should a suitable site become available.
- 4.6 Council officers understand that the former Marks & Spencer store is expected to be sold in February 2025 and it is conceivable that the new owners may wish to bring forward proposals for residential and/or commercial space redevelopment on the site. Any proposals that are submitted will be formally considered by the Local Planning Authority in accordance with the recently adopted Local Plan for Crawley 2030-2040.
- 4.7 Whilst the closure of the Marks & Spencer store is hugely disappointing for the town centre, Crawley Borough Council remains committed to securing a vibrant neighbourhood and sustainable future for the town centre via significant qualitative investment.
- 4.8 'Town Centre Renewal' is a strategic priority in the Council's Economic Recovery Plan 2021-2037 – **see Appendix A Slide 2** - and is underpinned by a number of regeneration and investment programmes including:
- Town Centre Regeneration Programme
  - Crawley Growth Programme
  - Crawley Towns Fund Investment Programme
  - Employment and Skills Programme

The Council has been highly successful, working with West Sussex County Council and other stakeholders in unlocking over £120m of public funding investment since 2017 – **see Appendix A slide 3**. £60m worth of schemes have been completed, many benefiting Crawley Town Centre – **see Appendix A – slide 4**.

- 4.5 Moving into the exciting next phase of these town centre regeneration programmes in 2025, the Council is leading the delivery of two flagship interventions which are specifically focused on transforming the look and feel of the town's retail core, improving accessibility and connectivity and breathing new life into the town centre through new commercial, cultural and residential development.
- 4.6 The first intervention is **Station Gateway**; a major new town centre regeneration scheme that will see £7.4m investment in the physical transformation of the public spaces in The Martlets, Friary Way, Haslett Avenue West and at the junction between Station Way and Friary Way. This will boost pedestrian and cyclist connectivity between Crawley railway station, Crawley bus station and the rest of the town centre, improving access to the shopping environment to attract new retailers, leisure and commercial activities and visitors to the town centre. The scheme will also boost the capacity of the bus station at this important gateway to the town centre by revising the layout and

creating a new central island on Friary Way for passengers to get on and off the buses. Subject to planning permission and the procurement of a construction contractor, we expect this exciting scheme to commence construction in 2025.

- 4.7 The second intervention will see the commissioning of a **new regeneration plan** for the east of the town centre, with a focus on showcasing commercial, retail and residential opportunities on six available sites in this part of the town centre. Those sites include the former Marks & Spencer building, the former Town Hall, County Buildings, the Queensway Store (Decathlon) and the northern parcel of land at Crawley College. Using Towns Fund money, the council will lead the development of a plan for the redevelopment of these sites, providing indicative concept layout plans and a portfolio of marketing materials to promote the sites to prospective investors. The Council will work closely with commercial agents, marketing experts, stakeholders and private landowners to champion, market and promote these sites through our inward investment programme 'Invest Crawley'.
- 4.8 Other projects include:
- the **Western Boulevard** Bus Service Improvement scheme, up to £2m of funding from the government, currently on site and due for completion in January 2025 – delivering improvements to the public realm and highways as an extension to the Eastern Gateway scheme, completed in 2022. The scheme will see new segregated cycle lanes, linking the High Street and The Boulevard and improve bus journey times, attracting greater visitor numbers to the town centre by bus and cycle.
  - the **Town Centre Cultural Quarter** project (paid for by the Towns Fund) – delivering a Pop-Up Culture programme since March 2023 and currently progressing a feasibility study and site delivery plans for a Cultural Hub in the town centre, delivering new jobs and business growth in the creative industries, reduced vacancy rates and an improved perception of Crawley.
  - Working in partnership with Crawley College to deliver a £14.5m state-of-the-art **Surrey and Sussex Institute of Technology** on the Crawley college campus, including a green construction skills hub, delivering high-quality learning environments for specialist construction, digital and engineering skills. This is being funded jointly by the Towns Fund (£4.5m) and the Department for Education (£10m).

The above are just a few of the programmes of regeneration schemes which are in the process of being delivered, worth £61.7 million of funding investment - **see Appendix A slide 5.**

- 4.9 Since the **Town Centre Business Improvement District** (BID) was formed in 2019 and launched in 2020, it has had a positive impact in the town centre and, supported by Crawley Borough Council, has delivered new services, events and initiatives that have helped to make the town centre safer, more engaging, better promoted with increased footfall and a place where businesses are better connected. Crawley Borough Council's Cabinet at its meeting on 6<sup>th</sup> November 2024, agreed to support the renewal of the BID for another five year term and in doing so, expressed support for the delivery of the BID's Business Plan, further demonstrating our commitment to working in partnership for the benefit of all town centre residents, businesses and visitors.

- 4.10 The Town Centre BID has been particularly successful in improving the sense of community safety and security in the town centre with its Street Ambassadors working extremely effectively with retail store managers and the police and Council community safety services to combat theft, shop lifting and anti-social behaviour.

## 5. Research and supporting information

- 5.1 A recent report by the House of Lords Built Environment Committee '[High Streets: Life beyond retail?](#)' found that the dominance of retail on high streets is a thing of the past and local communities are increasingly seeking out restaurants, cafes, cultural and leisure activities in their town centres. Town centres are constantly evolving and it is important that local authorities, communities and businesses work together to shape places that reflect local demand and are adaptable and resilient.
- 5.2 The report also confirms that high streets will only thrive if people can get to them easily and safely and that people, particularly young people, value having spaces in which to socialise and spend time without necessarily spending money. They also value green spaces in or near to the high street so more green space and improved public realm should be a key consideration in proposed regeneration programmes.
- 5.3 The Council's regeneration programmes for the town centre are focused precisely on diversifying the town centre offer and boosting the quality of the visual appearance of the town centre, supported by planning policies that proactively support the role and function of the town centre with sufficient flexibility in place to enable it to respond positively to changes in circumstances.
- 5.4 The successful ongoing delivery of the Crawley Town Centre Regeneration programme, financed and greatly supported by the Crawley Towns Fund programme, the Crawley Growth Programme and the establishment of the Crawley Town Centre BID is boosted by the key successes in unlocking new residential (over 1,100 homes built) and commercial space development in the town centre. This provides clear evidence that the Council is doing all it can to secure a vibrant and sustainable future for the town centre.
- 5.5 The evidence is strong that Crawley's economy more widely is bouncing back strongly and is well into recovery mode as can be seen by the data set out in **Appendix A – slide 6.**

## 6. Background Papers

'One Town' Crawley Economic Recovery Plan 2022-2037 – report [PES/391](#) to Cabinet 24 November 2021

Town Centre Regeneration Programme (third edition) – report [PES/397](#) to Cabinet 16 March 2022

Crawley Town Centre Business Improvement District (BID) Renewal – report [PES/469](#) to Cabinet 6 November 2024