

**Agenda Item No: 7**

**Report to:** Overview and Scrutiny (Services)

**Date of Meeting:** 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2013

**Report Title:** Is Hastings making the most of being a University Town?

**Report By:** Review Team

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### **Purpose of Report**

To report on the work of the review team and its recommendations arising from its review of whether Hastings is making the most of being a university town.

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### **Recommendation(s)**

- 1. That, subject to comments by the Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the recommendations of the Review Team are forwarded to the 8th July Cabinet for consideration.**

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### **Reasons for Recommendations**

To ensure the review findings and subsequent recommendations are cascaded and appropriate actions are followed up subject to Cabinet approval.

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## Introduction

1. A scrutiny review on whether Hastings is making the most of being a university town was included in the 2012/13 Overview and Scrutiny annual work programme. The review began in December 2012, concluded in April 2012 and fell within the remit of the Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
2. The review has run alongside two other reviews on economic partnerships and the Quality Bus Partnership as significant areas of interest for regenerating the town.

### Background information

3. University Centre Hastings (UCH) was opened in September 2003 as a key element of the 5-point regeneration plan for Hastings driven by the Hastings and Bexhill Task Force in order to raise participation in higher education and raise the level of skills within the local community and area's workforce.
4. Now called the University of Brighton in Hastings, the University has developed and grown significantly since it first opened. The Hastings campus currently has 730 students, with a significant number of these coming from outside the local area to study in Hastings.
5. At the Town Conference held in 2012, the University raised concerns that some students were having a negative experience in Hastings in terms of wider social and recreational opportunities. Eastbourne was seen by some as being far more appealing to HE students. As a result, a multi agency partnership group was established and an action plan developed to help address the areas of concern. This partnership work is ongoing.

## Review

6. Objectives
  - a. To develop a shared understanding among Team Members on the aims and objectives of the University of Brighton in Hastings.
  - b. To gather evidence from the University of Brighton in Hastings in the first instance and use these findings as a basis for further research recommendations.
  - c. To identify areas of future inquiry into the breadth and scope of the university's contribution to the economic regeneration of the town and life chances for local residents.
  - d. To understand a history of the development of Higher Education provision in the town.
  - e. The size and scale of the operation including: staffing, facilities and students accommodation.

- f. To identify the impact of the university on the town in attracting new investment and improving opportunities for local people.
- g. To evaluate the impact of work undertaken to date by the University, the Council and other partners to attract and retain students.

## 7. Members of the Review Team

- a. Cllr Mike Howard (Chair)
- b. Cllr Judy Rogers
- c. Cllr Trevor Webb
- d. Cllr Nigel Sinden
- e. Cllr Mike Turner
- f. Cllr Joy Waite

## 8. Officer Support

- a. Monica Adams-Acton, Head of Regeneration and Planning Policy
- b. Jocelyn Tilbrook, Neighbourhood Co-ordinator
- c. Mark Horan, Policy & Partnerships Officer
- d. Michael Courts, Democratic Services Support

## 9. Methodology

- a. The review team began with in depth scoping sessions, refining the review focus through selecting partnerships and agreeing lines of inquiry to inform discussions with stakeholders.
- b. Desktop research was undertaken to gather details, facts and historical information.
- c. Presentations and question and answer sessions were held with identified stakeholders. Including Brighton University, Brighton University Students Union, Students, Sussex Coast College and Bar Watch.

## Outcome and key findings

- 10. A comprehensive report on the history and development of UCH, including the student population, curriculum, links to other parts of the Hastings community, and its plans for the future, was prepared by Margaret Wallis, director of UCH, and is appended to this report (Appendix A).
- 11. Since opening, the University has grown steadily and significantly in terms of student numbers, diversity of courses, and physical size. It is now a major part of the town centre landscape, and has contributed positively to the appeal and ambience of the town centre. It has attracted new students and professionals to

Hastings, and provides an opportunity for engaging in higher education that would otherwise be unavailable to residents unable to travel outside Hastings.

12. The stakeholder meetings that took place as part of the review highlighted the commitment the University has to Hastings, and the institution's desire to provide appropriate courses to suit the town's demographic and business needs. The review revealed evidence of productive links with key sectors of the town, including businesses; primary and secondary schools and the FE college; and community based organisations. The good relationships that have been forged and the positive results of this activity demonstrate good potential for further development and expansion of these links, as well as an increasing awareness of the university as an intrinsic and important aspect of the town by the wider community.
13. Efforts to engage local businesses and business support organisations in the review were unfortunately unsuccessful. As a consequence, the review team was not able to fully investigate the impact of the university on inward investment activity and the perceptions of the value of the university to local businesses. However, the single Old Town business owner who did participate in the stakeholder panel meeting reported that he found the exercise to be worthwhile and now plans to work with the student union and students to see how his establishment and the Old Town can be more welcoming and appealing to students.
14. There is a significant shortage of work placements for graduates and employment opportunities for students who need to work. The opportunity for internships and graduate placements are important considerations for students when comparing the advantages of different universities. The lack of such opportunities in Hastings is a significant issue that has potentially adverse implications for the university's expansion plans and long term sustainability in Hastings.
15. Feedback from students regarding the quality of the teaching, the course content was very positive. Furthermore, the students and the Student Union representatives who participated in the review stated that Hastings was perceived in a positive light by most students. Increasing numbers of students consider Hastings to be more appealing than Eastbourne. This positive perception of the town represents a significant step forward from the position twelve - eighteen months ago when it was reported that students studying at the Hastings campus were moving to Eastbourne because of the negative ambience and lack of recreational amenities in the town for students.
16. The changes that have occurred in the town over the last year and the opening of the new nightclub in the former Crypt premises have been welcomed by students. These, and the increased amount of information about the town and its amenities that are given to students at the start of the university year, have helped change perceptions. In terms of the appeal of the three primary urban centres in Hastings, the town centre is generally more popular than either the Old Town or St Leonards. St Leonards is perceived to be generally unsafe and "too edgy" during the evenings and night times, and Old Town venues are not perceived to be particularly welcoming to students.
17. The students who participated in the review reported a shortage of spaces within venues in the town where students can congregate for group discussion about

coursework. There is a perception that few venues are WiFi enabled. However, the students felt that, although further work needs to be done, the student experience has improved.

18. The cost of public transport is a real issue for many students, and is a limiting factor in both academic and social aspects of student life.
19. Student union representatives spoke very positively about how the Council actively seeks out opportunities to make the most of being a university town and in encouraging more venues and activities that appeal to students. This includes the partnership work currently under way to drive forward the action plan, the involvement of the University and student union in the Evening Economy Partnership, the funding provided to the Student Union for student related projects in the town, and the continued dialogue that has come about through this work.
20. The partnership work that has been established between the University and the Council has been successful to date and has gone some way to addressing the initial issues of concerns raised earlier in 2012. An action plan has been developed and is being driven by this partnership (Appendix B). The coordination of more information for students about local facilities, venues and attractions, and the establishment of some student nights have been very positive steps. There is a strong view that the partnership working was having beneficial results, and a desire to engage further with a wider number of stakeholders, particularly those from the business sector.
21. Feedback about community safety issues indicate that incidents have reduced over the last twelve months through the efforts of the Police, Operation Columbus, Bar Watch and other coordinated activity. The students involved in the review stated that in general students don't have a perception that Hastings unsafe, whereas Eastbourne was perceived to be less safe.
22. The review revealed great potential for the university to play a continuing and significant role in the regeneration of the town. For example, over the short term there is good potential for increasing aspirations of local people, attracting newcomers wishing to study in Hastings, investment in building development to provide suitable study and teaching space, provision of student accommodation and engaging with local landlords, and working with local partners to make the most of outreach into the wider community.
23. The review was welcomed by the university administration, the HE faculty within Sussex Coast College, the Student Union and the students themselves. The view was expressed that the Council's interest in the university and the experience of the students was of very beneficial significance.
24. There was a strong desire expressed by the University, students and Student Union representatives for continued dialogue between the Council, the university and the student body. It is felt that this could be beneficial in terms of identifying opportunities to maximising the benefit of being a university town and coordinated approaches to resolving issues.

## Recommendations

25. The Council to continue to lead and develop the multi-agency partnership working to identify and resolve issues affecting the appeal of Hastings to HE and FE students and the positive growth of Hastings as a university town.
26. The Council to host an annual civic reception for new students and the university faculty.
27. An annual meeting between Lead Members and representatives of the senior management of UCH and the HE faculty of Sussex Coast College Hastings, the Student Union and students to identify issues and opportunities relating to the growth of the university in the town and maximising the life chances of local residents.
28. Through the multi-agency partnership and the Quality Bus Partnership to ensure public transport, and other key services provide good value for money in order to facilitate access for students and residents on low incomes.
29. Invite officers from the Sports Development Team to attend the annual Fresher's Fair to raise awareness of local sports facilities and clubs.
30. Undertake a further limited scrutiny exercise to engage with business support organisations and local businesses, to:
  - a. explore measures to increase the availability of work placements for university students and graduates
  - b. more fully understand the impact of the university on business prosperity and growth, and
  - c. identify measures to increase awareness of the business benefits of links with the university

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## Wards Affected

All

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## Area(s) Affected

All

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## Policy Implications

Please identify if this report contains any implications for the following:

Equalities and Community Cohesiveness  
Crime and Fear of Crime (Section 17)  
Risk Management  
Environmental Issues  
Economic/Financial Implications  
Human Rights Act

## **Background Information**

Appendix A – Report by Margaret Wallis, director of UCH, to the Overview and Scrutiny Review Team on Is Hastings making the most of being a university town.

Appendix B – Multi-agency partnership action plan

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## **Officer to Contact**

Monica Adams-Acton  
adams-acton@hastings.gov.uk  
01424 451749

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