

ECONOMY AND BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

11 December, 2013

PRESENT: Councillor Miss P Lewis (Chairman), Councillors Mrs Davies, Foster (in place of Mrs Bloom), Mrs Glover, Hawkett, Lambert, Monger, Poll, Richards, Strachan, Stuchbury, Thompson and Tyndall.

1. APOLOGIES: Councillors Mrs Bloom, Roberts (Cabinet Member for Civic Amenities) and Smith.

2. MINUTES

RESOLVED –

That the Minutes of the meeting held on 28 October, 2013, be approved as a correct record.

3. UPDATE ON THE WORK OF THE AYLESBURY TOWN CENTRE PARTNERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT OF MARKETS.

A report was received that provided Members with an update on work of the Aylesbury Town Centre Partnership (the Partnership) over the last year and an overview of the improvement plan for the markets managed by Aylesbury Vale District Council.

Members heard that the Partnership had a budget of £173,000, offset by £42,800 of income, from a variety of sources, with Aylesbury Vale District Council funding the balance.

The Partnership's annual business plan had five key headings:

- i Partnership and Communications
- ii A clean and attractive town
- iii A safe place
- iv Marketing and promoting the town
- v Support for independent businesses

The Partnership business plan was closely aligned to (but not replaced by) the recently published Draft Improvement Plan for Aylesbury Town Centre and would be reviewed again once the feedback on the Improvement Plan had been considered.

The wide range of local groups which the Partnership interacted with reflected the size and breadth of its expanding membership which now stood at over 80 and included retailers, estate agents, Thames Valley, Police, Chiltern Rail, Arriva, Aylesbury College, resident groups and the three local Councils.

All members benefitted from a regular flow of communication on Town Centre issues and the networking opportunities via quarterly meetings and the bi-annual Partnership meetings.

As the use of town centres change and socialising became a more important requirement, the cleanliness and attractiveness of the town had become an increasingly significant part of the business plan. Improvements to these aspects required ownership by everyone so work was very much a partnership and on-going effort with the Town Centre Manager liaising closely with others to coordinate a range of improvements which included:

- improvements to the High Street, George Street and Market Square
- cleaning of the war memorial and seating
- identifying and arranging the removal of rubbish from grot spots
- removal of posters, illegal notices
- repainting street furniture
- encouraging outside street trading
- organising window wraps to improve the appearance of vacant units
- managing and regulating buskers and charity collectors
- working with AVDC on extending Christmas lights to new locations e.g. Cambridge Street
- removing unpopular, excess street furniture
- coordinating the snow clearance

In 2011, Aylesbury secured the much coveted Purple Flag award, signalling that it was judged, through a rigorous, independent assessment, to be a safe and welcoming place in the evening. The accreditation was awarded again in 2012 and had just been re-awarded for 2013.

The marketing and promotion of Aylesbury worked on a number of levels. Overall responsibility for the strategic marketing and positioning of the town is the responsibility of AVDC, but the Town Centre Manager was helping to deliver a dynamic marketing and promotional plan locally.

.A programme of some 450 free events throughout the year provided essential credibility and support for the town's vision to develop its unique selling point as a town of performance and the arts. A significant element of the AVDC funding contributed towards the events programme and one of the challenges for 2014 would be to consider ways in which the programme can be maintained and balanced with savings which may have to be made.

The importance of retaining and attracting independent town centre businesses is a priority appreciated by all stakeholders including the multiple retailers.

In the last 12 months, the town centre team had increased its efforts in this area and many more independent traders had now joined the Partnership.

The culmination of the support for independent businesses in 2013, had been the launch of the Retail Lift-off - an innovative project which gained momentum after Aylesbury was unsuccessful in its bid to become a Portas town. This project gave five local entrepreneurs the opportunity to start their own retail business in the town and

had attracted national and regional publicity. Plans were now underway to extend the scheme in 2014 using the 2013 experience to make adjustments/improvements.

Markets:-

The management of the Aylesbury markets and the Winslow general market was now undertaken by the Town Centre Manager with the support of a part-time Markets' Officer with the key tasks focusing on managing the trader relationship, improving the customer experience and generating income from the markets to at least break even.

Nationally, markets were facing tough challenges and many continued to be subsidised, or were experiencing falling numbers or closure. Even much esteemed markets, such as the covered market at Oxford, were facing difficulties and are under threat. Aylesbury in particular had its own challenges which would take time to address so the work in progress is with a view to the long term sustainability of the markets rather than short-term quick fixes.

Given this approach, during the last 12 months, much of the work programme had concentrated on reviewing and improving the basic operation of the markets in Aylesbury and Winslow. New terms and conditions were being developed, new processes put in place and the communication between traders and AVDC market staff enhanced and improved. Draft business plans had been developed with input from both traders and in Winslow, the Winslow Town Council.

In Aylesbury, where the stalls are provided, one of the priorities was the replacement of the stalls, with a number of new designs currently being trialled. The challenge was to find replacement stalls which looked attractive in the historic location of the market square, were practical from a trading viewpoint and could also withstand the very high degree of erecting and dismantling required during four days trading per week.

Work had also begun on improving the Tuesday market which had moved some way from its original antiques and collectibles format. New terms and conditions would limit the type of goods which could be sold and how they could be displayed with the intention of uplifting the attractiveness and appeal of the market.

The promotion of the markets continued to be an important part of the business plans for both markets.

A priority in the New Year would be to end cash rent collections by the Market's Officer. This was not best practice for a number of reasons.

Whilst there was undoubtedly a long way to go, the work so far was paying off and for the first time in many years, the Aylesbury general market was full to capacity and the number of traders in Winslow had doubled to six.

Members were generally supportive of the direction of work being carried. However, there were a number of issues concerning which Members expressed a view on or commented generally, including the following:-

- Members commented on the problems that were being caused by groups of youths causing problems in the Town Centre during the evenings and the small groups of homeless persons that had an intimidating presence

Members were advised that Thames Valley Police (TVP) were aware of these groups and had acted on the situation by changing their rotas to suit. All persons caught stealing were excluded from the shops that used the Shop Watch service. The problems of homeless were being dealt with by the relevant services.

- Questions were asked on the economics of the events that were staged across the Vale.

AVDC actually funded 42 of their own events, mainly in Aylesbury Town Centre, with an overall cost of £67,000. Each event had averaged around £2000 to produce and realised about £1, per person attending, in consumer sales. Footfall figures indicated that most events realised attendances of over 2000. In total the Town Centre Partnership had helped in the co-ordination of 450 events during the past twelve months.

- Information was requested on how the impact of large supermarkets on town centres was assessed.

Members were advised that the Aylesbury Town Centre Partnership could only comment on applications relating to Aylesbury but in respect of the Gateway Sainsbury's application, the Town Centre Manager explained that Sainsbury's were invited to give a presentation to the Partnership at the pre-planning application stage. Members were given the opportunity to ask questions after which the Partnership met in private to discuss its views which were then passed onto the planning service. As part of the planning process, the impact of all out of town applications had been assessed..

- Information was requested on spend of the £173,000 service budget and whether this was money well spent.

A breakdown was provided as follows:-

Salaries - £58,400
 Copying - £1,200
 Window wraps etc. - £17,000
 Event promotion - £7,400
 42 large events - £67,000
 Contributions to other events - £2,200.

Members were reminded that improvement of the Town Centre was part of the Corporate Plan agreed by Council and more recently the draft improvement plan for the town centre had been considered and agreed by both cabinet and the scrutiny committee. The Town Centre Partnership worked with many partners, including Aylesbury Town Council, and the private sector who all contributed to the common aim of making the Town vibrant and safe. Many Town Centre shops had responded

to the request to invest in new shop fronts to improve the look of the Town Centre at no cost to AVDC.

With regard to the viability of the AVDC part of the service, the Committee was advised that the service would be reviewed like all other AVDC services as part of the new business model programme.

- With regard to the Aylesbury markets, information was requested on funding for the replacement stalls.

Members were advised that the Markets had their own budget of £113,000 which included the cost of salaries and business rates. Income at present amounted to £105,000 per year.

- Observations were made that there was a general perception that AVDC was the only partner that contributed funding to Town Centre improvements.

Members were advised that the value in kind from partners was huge with the benefits being Vale wide rather than just Aylesbury Town Centre, so often were not readily apparent.

Officers were asked to report back further on the contributions in kind by partners to give greater context to the AVDC funding.

- Comments were made on the quality of the shops in the Town Centre and how buildings had been spoilt by inappropriate changes.

It was explained that Aylesbury Town Centre comprised of a mix of very old traditional shops that had changed through time and newer development that reflected their use. A lot of the buildings were owned by private landlords that resided some distance from Aylesbury. It would be very difficult to change the vista over a short period of time. One advantage of having a traditional Town Centre was that film crews found it a very attractive location.

Following further discussion it was –

RESOLVED –

1. That the Committee notes the report.
2. That the feedback and comments of Members be acted upon as appropriate.
3. That the appropriate Cabinet Member(s) be invited to attend all meetings of the Economy and Business Development Committee.

4. ECONOMY SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - WORK PROGRAMME 2013 - 2014

A Work Programme for the period to end March 2015 was presented for Members approval and for Members to suggest new topics for inclusion. Following a short discussion it was

RESOLVED –

That the Work Programme as presented be approved with the following additions:-

1. The review report on the previous 12 month's scrutiny items to be deleted from the 29 January 2014 meeting and presented to Members, in due course, as an information item.
2. A report on the Council Notice of Motion on help for Businesses to be inserted for the 29 January 2014 meeting.
3. The report on Major Employment Sites to be deleted from the 29 January 2014 meeting and reinserted for the 17 March 2014 meeting.
4. A report on the future of the LEPs to be inserted once there is sufficient progress to warrant a discussion.
5. Reports on the Skills agenda to be inserted as and when required.
6. A report on the Development of East West Rail and the advantages to Aylesbury Vale to be inserted once more information was available. It would be advantageous for Bucks County Council to attend for this item.
7. Other items to be considered for inclusion were:-
 - Utilisation of redundant airfields
 - Growth of Westcott Business Park
 - Businesses that have been lost and the reasons why.