

Economy and Business Development Scrutiny Committee

13 MARCH 2018

PRESENT: Councillor P Strachan (Chairman); Councillors C Branston (Vice-Chairman), B Adams, M Collins, M Hawke, C Poll and W Whyte

APOLOGIES: Councillors J Bloom, A Christensen, T Hunter-Watts and P Irwin

1. MINUTES

RESOLVED –

That the Minutes of the meeting on 17 January 2018 be approved.

2. AYLESBURY TOWN CENTRE PLAN UPDATE

Members were provided with a report that gave an overview of the work carried out by the Aylesbury Town Centre Partnership over the last sixteen months. The report also highlighted key work that would be undertaken throughout the next 12 months. The item was attended by Diana Fawcett, the Aylesbury Town Centre Manager at AVDC, who provided a presentation to the committee.

The Aylesbury Town Centre Partnership (ATCP) was an organisation which supported the business community in Aylesbury town centre and intended to improve and promote public footfall and investment. The ATCP plan was aligned with the Aylesbury Town Centre Improvement Plan which was an overarching document which set out the vision for the town centre, the challenges the town faced, principles that guided future development and actions for the different areas of the town centre across the town centre. In order to maintain consistency in the development of the town centre, these elements were included in the draft Vale of Aylesbury Local Plan (VALP) and the Aylesbury Town Centre Manager was on the Board of Aylesbury Garden Town (AGT). ATCP had an annual business plan which had five key features:

Partnership and communications

The partnership liaised with a range of local organisations and groups with an expanding membership that currently stood at over 110. By comparison, similarly sized town centres had a membership of between 20-30. One of the major benefits of joining the Partnership was that you received regular communications from the Town Centre Manager on town centre issues, weekly and monthly general updates and quarterly meetings. Businesses had found the updates on town events particularly useful when planning their staffing rotas. The meetings were well attended and allowed the opportunity to network and ask the Partnership questions. There were three tiers of membership which ranged in pricing (£30, £300 and £3,000). Social media had an increasing role to play in communicating positive messages to the public about the town centre and challenging negative perceptions.

Clean and attractive town

This was seen as vital due to town centres shifting towards being a social environment. Improvements needed the cooperation by all businesses and a range of improvements had been implemented which included:

- Cleaning of seating
- Identification of 'grot spots' and rubbish removal

- Posters and illegal notices removed
- Repainting of street furniture
- Encouragement of outside street trading
- Managing and regulating buskers and charity collectors
- Work with AVDC on Christmas light decoration
- Snow clearance

The Partnership also sought to positively manage buskers and Big Issue sellers and also regulate charity collectors. Planters around the town centre were also used to brighten up areas. Commercial waste had been an issue of a lack of space which had also been exacerbated by the conversion of business premises into residential dwellings.

Safe town

Aylesbury had secured coveted Purple Flag status in 2011 which meant that the town centre was a safe and welcoming location in the evening. The status had been successfully renewed annually ever since and work was being undertaken to secure 2018 status. Part of the renewal process involved an inspection of the town centre over a 12 hour period from 4pm to 4am and this would be occurring in April.

The Night Time Moves Group was reformed in 2017 which intended to coordinate the Partnership work in promoting the evening economy, identify issues, develop strategic solutions and secure Purple Flag renewal. Additionally, the Group was working towards improving upper High Street through the enforcement of the pedestrianisation scheme and was liaising with Buckinghamshire County Council regarding the introduction of bollards in Market Square. Market Square and Kingsbury had suffered illegal parking on the cobbles with legal enforcement options being assessed.

Low level crime was an ongoing issue in the town centre which was below the threshold of active police involvement. To combat this, Aylesbury Business Against Crime scheme was being reviewed to extend its operation of focussing on crime within the shops to actual crime and disorder issues within the public spaces in town.

Marketing and town promotion

Strategic marketing and positioning of the town was led by AVDC in addition to the Town Centre manager's locally led promotional approach. Over 450 events had been held in the town centre and were planned and coordinated through one of the Partnership sub-groups. The group contained AVDC Communities, Bucks CC, Town Council, library, museum, Queens Park Arts Centre, St Marys Church, Mix 96, Bucks TV and Waterside theatre. Events managed range in size from the Christmas light switch on (13,000 people) to smaller events such as Wear it Pink.

The 2017 Christmas light switch on had been closed early due to a bomb threat that was credible at the time. Despite this, the Santa Sunday event that followed had a record attendance. Future plans involved developing the craft fair and continental market and also a Canal Festival.

Support for independent businesses

Having independent businesses in the town centre was appreciated and it was acknowledged that they may need additional support from the Partnership. Membership benefits included:

- Opportunity to attend events

- Quarterly network meetings
- Monthly updates on the town's activities
- Advice and assistance when applying for street trading licenses etc

The Town Centre Manager would approach businesses outside Aylesbury if she felt that they were the right fit for the town centre. This had been the case for an independent business in Tring would soon open a second outlet in Aylesbury despite having not considered the town previously.

Moving forward, there were a number of challenges that the market faced. During the successful Foody Friday event, there had not been enough power to supply the stalls which required short-term support from generators. The characteristic cobbles of the market created an uneven surface for market traders in terms of access and set-up. Competition from online companies was a national trend as was the increasing presence of budget stores. Market traders themselves were an older demographic so to rectify this the ATCP was trying to encourage youth engagement through working with Young Enterprise. Retail itself was changing nationally and the Manager outlined how retail had shifted over the last ten years. Nonetheless despite the challenges, it was felt that the market was resilient enough to continue being successful and there were opportunities for market traders providing excellent customer service and selling unique clothing and home décor.

Members had additional questions on the update and were advised that:-

- In 1970, 29,000 retail businesses across the UK provided 75% of retail. By 2004, this number had reduced to 100 businesses.
- Traders on the market were monitored to ensure pricing was on goods. Those in Hale Leys were not within the Manager's jurisdiction but complaints received by residents were passed on to Hale Leys management.
- The generosity of visitors to the town centre was being taken advantage of by those perceived as homeless and the Partnership was currently working with the police on this issue. The Partnership worked with Aylesbury Homeless Action Group to assist homeless and vulnerable wherever possible.
- Shops had been helpful in restricting sales of products that had been used for vandalism in the town.
- Crime in the town centre had not had an impact on evening theatre goers as they were in different areas.
- Part of the shift in retail was that visitors sought experiences and leisure and these types of business were having a growing presence in London. The vacant BHS unit would lend itself well to a business in this mould.
- The suggestion of the creation of internal markets in vacant units would be an interesting possibility and it was hoped these kinds of ideas would come to light when the Economic Taskforce met.
- The Partnership provided advice and tips to businesses when they were negotiating their business rates.
- Members were able to help by promoting the visit Aylesbury website: www.visitaylesbury.co.uk
- The Manager would be happy to speak to other town centre staff in Aylesbury Vale in order to share advice and quick wins on improvement.
- The Courthouse closure provided a unique opportunity for the right investor due to its features and architecture.
- The Manager had provided support to David Stopps with the David Bowie statue and businesses were encouraged to stay open longer in anticipation of increased footfall.

Members commended the enthusiasm of the Town Centre Manager and welcomed her attendance at future meetings.

RESOLVED –

That the Aylesbury Town Centre update and presentation be noted.

Note: Councillor W. Whyte declared a personal interest on this item as a member of the AVE Board.

3. WORK PROGRAMME

Members considered their work programme as per the agenda. In addition to upcoming work, the Committee saw the benefit of the following coming to Committee:-

- NIC update for the September meeting if possible
- Enterprise Zones update
- Industrial Strategy
- Market towns being supported across Aylesbury Vale

Members also saw merit in receiving an update from Connected Counties and the provision of broadband in rural areas to the North and West of the District. The Committee expressed an interest in Gigaclear attending a future meeting to understand their strategy in broadband provision.

RESOLVED –

That the current work programme be noted.