

Environment and Living Scrutiny Committee

10 FEBRUARY 2020

PRESENT: Councillor S Jenkins (Chairman); Councillors M Bateman, S Chapple, A Cole and T Hunter-Watts

IN ATTENDANCE: Councillors

APOLOGIES: Councillors B Everitt, S Cole, P Cooper, B Foster, S Jarvis and R King

1. MINUTES

RESOLVED –

That the minutes of the meeting held on 03 12 2019 be approved as a correct record.

2. AYLESBURY TOWN CENTRE PARTNERSHIP UPDATE

The committee received a presentation giving an overview of the work of the Aylesbury Town Centre Partnership (ATCP) that had taken place to support town centre businesses and promote the town as part of their annual business plan since March 2018. The presentation provided the committee with an update on their progress towards achieving the five objectives contained within the business plan:-

1. Partnership and Communications

The committee was informed that overall membership of the Partnership stood at over 90, still well above the average of 20-30 for similar sized towns. Members noted that the regular flow of communication on town centre and national issues provided by the Town Centre & Regeneration Manager (TC&RM) remained a draw towards the Partnership for local businesses, who continued to benefit from targeted updates about theatre shows, events and activity in the town, enabling them to maximise their opportunity to attract pre and post theatre diners and anticipate influxes in footfall within the town.

2. A Clean and Attractive Town

The TC&RM was liaising closely with others to coordinate a range of improvements to the town centre including:

- identifying and arranging the removal of rubbish from 'grot spots'
- removal of posters, illegal notices
- encouraging outside street trading
- managing and regulating buskers and charity collectors
- working with AVDC on Christmas lights look and location
- coordinating ice/snow clearance

Remedial action had been taken to reduce vermin problems and a campaign had been launched to discourage people feeding the pigeons.

Members' attention was drawn to a campaign by the Town Centre & Regeneration Manager in partnership with the RSPB, the Environmental Health Agency, BBOT, Waitrose, Community Safety and the ecology team to rejuvenate the area around Bear Brook. Work had begun with the Landscape and Community Safety teams to put in place measures that would prevent the area being used by homeless people in the future.

3. A Safe Place

Members were informed of the work undertaken by the TC&RM in reducing crime in the Market Square and Kingsbury which included:-

- Managing crime reduction in shops through a radio system and exclusion album of key offenders through the Aylesbury Business Against Crime scheme of which the TC&RM was both a board member and treasurer.
- Enforcing the pedestrianisation scheme by installing large pots in the Market Square roadway near the bollards to restrict access to rogue drivers.
- Dramatically reducing illegal parking levels in the Market Square and Kingsbury by transferring the management and enforcement of parking fines to NSL.
- Significantly decreasing levels of anti-social behaviour in Kingsbury by cutting back trees to allow for better visibility of the site, removing benches, facilitating more robust action by the police against offenders and increasing collaboration within the businesses.
- Plans to appoint a public realm architect responsible for stakeholder engagement. The £4.5m approved by AVDC in its capital programme for the improvement works had been carried through into the capital programme for the new council. The Shadow Executive of the new council was being asked to support the investment.
- Attending regular meetings with the Outreach & Community Safety teams and police to tackle begging and reduce homelessness levels within the town. The “Real Change not Spare Change” campaign had recently been launched to support these efforts.

Members noted that Government funding had been secured for the third year in succession to aid AVDC’s Homelessness Reduction scheme in the Vale, and that this campaign was a welcome boost to the efforts of the ATCP in the town centre.

4. Marketing and Promoting the town

Members were advised of year-on-year growth of the marketing and promotions group thanks to the efforts of many contributing partners who had funded a number of the events in cash or in kind. Their work supported over 400 events held in the town centre.

Members were notified that the success of the 2019 Live Guides tourism information distribution across the town and Vale villages would be reviewed to explore the most effective way to continue this promotional engagement in line with the desire to move away from paper-reliant methods of communication. In addition, reference was made to the launch of the national Refill scheme. The scheme’s efforts to promote the integration of a greener and sustainable market in the town were noted.

Members were informed that work was underway as part of a wider task force appointed by the team manager to anticipate the requirements of the town centre in the future as new trends emerged. They would work on cross collaboration of potential tenants and influence landlords to consider new uses for units beyond the retail space. This had already resulted in a new soft play area in the town centre and attracting a roof top restaurant. It was explained that further work would be done on this in 2020 with already five new tenants looking for retail space.

5. Support for Independent Businesses

The following support had been received by Partnership members:-

- The opportunity to attend events
- Quarterly network meetings
- Discounted theatre tickets
- Personal visits to traders affected by development /works outside their premises
- One stop shop advice and assistance when applying for licences, planning permission
- Free advertising
- Free social media blogs

In addition, Members were informed that a number of efforts were being made to promote underutilised areas of the town for rejuvenation or to increase footfall. This had included the production of voucher booklets containing offers and discounts from local businesses within the town to encourage people to support smaller and independent businesses in aid of the local economy. It was noted that this had been well received with over 750 printed brochures and over 1500 hits on the website. This had come as part of a wider effort to attract family run businesses to the town, and provide the necessary support for them to do so.

Members were reassured that in the knowledge of the challenges facing the UK retail sector, the Town Centre Manager was working closely with the Assistant Director for Commercial Property & Regeneration to stay abreast of changes and specifically through the studying of Place Management and Place Leadership with the Institute of Place Management and workshops around changing trends.

Markets:

The committee was advised of the strategy for the management of the Aylesbury and Winslow markets, specifically regarding the efforts to increase market footfall and generate higher levels of income.

Currently, Aylesbury Market was operating at a deficit, with current expenditure at £108,000, and income at £99,700. This was reflective of challenging trading conditions faced by markets nationally, with many facing closure. The business plan included the new objectives to improve the performance of the Aylesbury Market moving forward. These were as follows:-

- Aylesbury market was working towards becoming financially sustainable and was working towards becoming green. It continued to be known as a national leader in delivering innovative solutions in managing the market and enabling successful trading.
- The market respected its' heritage whilst embracing a modern, lively and social environment.
- Market traders were knowledgeable and helpful, offering a range of unique and traditional products.

The business plan highlighted a number of initiatives which had been undertaken already to achieve these objectives, with a focus on the use of social media to attract potential visitors to the market and social media training for market traders to promote their businesses independently. This had been coupled with efforts to improve the sustainability of the market which had achieved Fur Free status in the last sixteen months. It was noted that this had been a successful strategy, with a recent social media market campaign reaching over 10,000 people.

There had also been a concerted effort to promote cashless payment at the market, which it was noted had been popular with traders.

The business plan indicated that a SWOT analysis would be undertaken to explore how a fourfold increase of the stall erection costs and the need to replace damaged and deteriorated stock would impact on the running of the market moving forward as part of the effort to secure the long-term viability of the market.

Key Focus for the next Twelve Months:

The presentation highlighted the key elements for delivery over the coming 12 months. These were as follows:-

- Delivery of an exciting events programme
- Management of empty units, new tenant enquiries and innovative changes of use through the Task force
- The development of a suite of tourism Apps including trails and historical information
- Future of the market and the best way forward
- Future of Aylesbury Town Centre Partnership
- Identifying a support package for first time family run businesses.
- Ensuring that all the services within the remit of the team are safe and legal on 1 April 2020
- Working with the delivery of the Garden town projects and objectives.

Members sought further information and were informed:-

That the ongoing volatility within the retail sector had resulted in some businesses either being forced to close outright or feel they could no longer afford to remain a member of the Partnership, with the Friars Square Shopping Centre having recently withdrawn their membership. It was noted that in addition to the loss of a valued and influential voice in the Partnership, there would be a financial impact on the ongoing work of the town centre team.

Following research of shopping centre success globally, the effort to promote recreational and leisure activities in the town would continue, as the uses for town centres and particularly shopping centres continued to evolve.

That the Aylesbury bus station was being included for review as part of the Garden Town masterplan, specifically regarding the dark entrance/exit tunnel and the interior. The possible future modernisation/replacement of the station had already been identified as a key action.

The desire to pedestrianise Market Square and Kingsbury as part of the improvement schemes about to be commissioned had been positively supported by the Shadow Authority Property Board as was the need in the interests of safety, to at least limit the times when taxis could park in front of the former Courts building. Whilst Members would like to see greater provision of toilets, they appreciated the high costs of maintenance. It was however noted that a new Changing Places facility was being provided in the Upper Hundreds Multi-Storey Car Park.

Members expressed their thanks to the Town Centre Manager and her team, and

RESOLVED

That the work of the Partnership and plans for the next twelve months be noted.

3. ENVIRONMENTAL INITIATIVES UPDATE

Committee received an update, developed with the Steering Group on 4 December 2019, concerning the progress of the environmental initiatives agreed by Council in September 2019.

The update highlighted the collaborative effort undertaken by AVDC with external partners to ensure the delivery of the environmental initiatives throughout 2020. These initiatives could be implemented within the budget approved by Council, supplemented by match funding from a local charity (Heart of Bucks) and stake holders.

The update informed members that the Steering Group had agreed to:

- The creation of an environmental fund with the charity Heart of Bucks, to aid in the delivery of community driven environmental projects within Aylesbury Vale.
- The creation of a grant scheme with both Heart of Bucks and Bucks County Council to create a cleaner environment within school grounds, focusing specifically on reducing waste, encouraging biodiversity, litter reduction, energy consumption efforts and transport methods.
- Enter into negotiations with Buckinghamshire Business First (BBF) to sponsor and attend their business expo on Friday 9 March 2020 to promote green business initiatives.
- Enter into partnerships with local enterprises including the National Energy Foundation and CSR Accreditation to better train members of Parish Councils and Local Councils to inform and support their local residents on better environmental practice.
- Develop and produce a document in partnership with Bucks County Council accessible by Parish Councillors and Members to help in directing local residents who are unsure about what services were available to them.

Members were advised that some initiatives had already been implemented including flower planting at Waddesdon involving junior school children, and the provision of cycle racks at the Royal Latin School, Buckingham.

Members were very supportive of the initiatives proposed and

RESOLVED

That Cabinet be advised that this committee supported the initiatives being pursued.