

CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL 15 DECEMBER 2016

IMPROVING THE VIBRANCY OF OUR TOWN AND VILLAGE CENTRES

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In late September and October, the Employment & Tourism Team undertook a series of Town and Village Centre workshops to gain a better understand of the issues impacting local retail centres to identify ways in which these barriers could be overcome through collaborative working.
- 1.2 Four locations were identified that broadly represented the four areas of the New Forest to ensure that any business owner or resident who wished to attend had a workshop located close to them. They were as follows
- Fordingbridge – Wednesday 28 September
 - Hythe – Thursday 13 October
 - New Milton – Tuesday 18 October
 - Brockenhurst – Wednesday 19 October

2. FORMAT

- 2.1 To ensure that both of geographically specific issues as well as those of a more generic nature were captured, each workshop was separated into seven sections, each exploring a separate theme. These were as follows
- **Introduction**
 - **Town & Village Centre Planning** - How to ensure the local plan meets local needs for the future, especially the importance of the right retail and leisure mix between the day time and night time economy, to maximise and, where possible, increase footfall and boost the local economy.
 - **Identifying & Sharing Best Practice** - Research and create a high street self-help toolkit, to share best practice, and help support businesses to grow their business and the local economy
 - **Common Strategies for Skills & Digital Training** - Research business skills and digital needs, then create and deliver a series of appropriate and affordable training relevant to High Street businesses.
 - **Innovation & Transformation** - Pioneering a hub space to support young businesses through open collaboration, particularly around digital technologies and giving young people a free platform for their creative talents to help reinvigorate high streets for the next generation.
 - **Brand New Forest** - Developing the existing loyalty scheme and campaign, to specifically focus on supporting our high streets and making the most of forest wide events, such as the upcoming New Forest Food & Drink Festival Week.
 - **Broadband & 4G** - Supporting continued investment in appropriate infrastructure, to ensure access to high speed broadband and 4G for all New Forest town and village centres.

3. OUTCOMES AND RECURRING THEMES

3.1 Town & Village Centre Planning

The level of satisfaction of the quality and variety of retail offering varied across the four workshops although there was a regular theme that too many charity shops exist and concern at the loss of key High Street establishments, particularly banks. There was widespread support for pop-up shops, particularly where these can fill long standing vacancies and give opportunities to young entrepreneurs and/or emerging businesses.

It was commonly felt that high rentals and business rates discourage new businesses locating in centres. The issue of parking provided very mixed responses from at one extreme in Fordingbridge where much of the meeting was devoted to the subject to the other in Hythe where it was not felt to be a significant barrier in attracting footfall.

3.2 Identifying & Sharing Best Practice

There was widespread agreement that working together to improve the look and feel of town and village centres is important, there was however evidence that some towns have made greater progress than others in this respect. It was acknowledged that seeking to attract visitors from outside to the area could bring notable benefit to retail centres and as such, efforts should be made to work in partnership with the New Forest Tourism Destination Partnership to help bring in new footfall and external spend.

3.3 Common Strategies for Skills and Digital Training

Whilst it is widely acknowledged that High Street businesses face competition from those online, there was not universal appreciation that this was an issue in the four workshops, indeed some resist placing their businesses online in any form. Despite this, there is regular interest in the social media courses provided by New Forest Business Partnership and furthermore, funding has recently been obtained by New Forest District Council to provide basic digital training for local businesses. It was noted that where strong town/village centre business networks do not exist; online methods could be an efficient communication tool to share news, information and best practice.

3.4 Innovation & Transformation

Whilst many businesses are focussed on their own establishments; working within their own communities to improve the overall offer; most acknowledged that there is a need to look further afield in an attempt to attract new customers and potential funding. This includes working with Local Enterprise Partnerships (EM3, Solent and Dorset), National Park, District and County Councils as well as individual Town Councils. It was also noted that local retailers should seek to engage with currently underutilised establishments on their doorstep, particularly local schools and colleges.

3.5 Brand New Forest

Although it was widely recognised that Brand New Forest could be a significant aide to High Street businesses, there was mixed awareness of its existence and potential benefit. As a direct result of the workshops however, awareness is now drastically increased and many businesses have pledged to seek signups from other businesses immediately neighbouring them. Brand New Forest was therefore seen by all participants as a major opportunity to 'localise' many related solutions in the retail and service sectors.

3.6 **Broadband & 4G**

The perceived coverage of broadband varied not only from location to location but also within individual town/village centres. Despite some businesses not wishing to establish themselves online, it was generally accepted as a crucial service, increasingly from the customer base that demands/expects this as part of their shopping experience.

4. **FINANCIAL AND OTHER IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 There are no specific financial implications arising from this report although the outcome will be picked up within the ongoing Economic Development work programme.

4.2 There are no environmental implications arising from this report.

4.3 There are no crime and disorder or equalities implications arising from this report.

5. **CONCLUSION**

5.1 Most High Street businesses are positive about their future prospects and whilst they understand the pressures which come from larger retail centres and/or online they appreciate the individual customer experiences which their town/village centre can offer.

5.2 In seeking to exploit this special individual offer they are keen to work together to both promote their own destination and share best practice amongst themselves. Whilst networks of local businesses are stronger in some towns, there are examples of best practice which exist in each and these should be shared throughout the New Forest.

5.3 Although retail vacancies are not at the levels experienced elsewhere in the country they, along with the mixture of retail units available is a cause for concern amongst many. As such, innovative yet appropriate ways to overcome these should be explored and in doing so, encouraging new (young entrepreneurs to establish businesses)

6. **RECOMMENDATION**

6.1 That the Panel note the conclusions of this report

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Background Papers

None