

SCRUTINY PANEL A

Meeting held in the Committee Room, Council Offices, Urban Road, Kirkby-in-Ashfield,

on Tuesday, 13th September, 2016 at 6.30 pm

Present: Councillor Amanda Brown in the Chair;
Councillors Rachel Bissett, Ben Bradley,
Tony Brewer, Glenys Maxwell, Lauren Mitchell
and Helen Smith.

Apology for Absence: Councillor Helen Hollis.

Officers Present: Lynn Cain, Carol Cooper-Smith, Mike Joy and
Paul Thomas.

SA.4 Declarations of Disclosable Pecuniary and Non-Disclosable Pecuniary/Other Interests

There were no declarations of interest made.

SA.5 Minutes

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 26th July, 2016, be received and approved.

SA.6 Introduction to New Scrutiny Review - Encouraging Small/Medium Businesses into Ashfield and Filling Empty Shop Units

The Chairman introduced the item and explained that the topic had been placed on the Scrutiny Workplan to enable the Panel to explore and understand what actions the Council already had in place to encourage the local economy through supporting and assisting small to medium businesses. There would also be the opportunity for the Panel to consider what more could be done to ensure that empty shops and units continue to be occupied.

Carol Cooper Smith, the Council's Interim Service Director for Planning and Economic Development and Paul Thomas, the Council's Shared Service Regeneration Manager, were also welcomed to the meeting.

The Scrutiny Manager proceeded to give a brief overview of the values identified in the Council's Corporate Plan for Ashfield to be "Enterprising, Ambitious and Innovative." The Council already had an excellent track record for providing high quality business support through the "Ambition for Ashfield and Mansfield" programmes and the overall aim had always been to create

vibrant town centres that offered a variety of destinations for quality goods and service.

When the item was initially placed on the Scrutiny Workplan, Members had indicated that they were interested in the following:-

- What main challenges were being faced by the Council with regard to filling empty shops and units;
- How were small/medium business being encouraged to set up within Ashfield;
- What the Council was currently doing regarding ongoing high street issues;
- How the Portas funding had been spent;
- How many empty shops/units were there currently within the Ashfield District?

Prior to establishing the remit for the review, Members were asked to consider what they wanted to gain from the exercise, what information was required and if they would wish to speak to any new business representatives or market stall holders/shop owners to gather any additional data to inform any outcomes.

At this point the Scrutiny Manager handed over to the Regeneration Manager who undertook a presentation to the Committee.

Current town centre challenges being faced by the Council fell into the following categories:-

- Changing shopping habits including the shift towards online shopping;
- Vacant premises and their long term impact on town centre viability;
- Balance of uses/arrangement of shops to encourage shoppers to visit both ends of a town centre;
- Accessibility in relation to public transport, private transport and car parking facilities;
- Appearance of the town centre to encourage footfall and facilitate an enjoyable experience;
- Disposable income within the local economy and providing a range of shops that appealed to the local demographic.

The Council's Regeneration Team continued to encourage and attract businesses into the District in a variety of ways:-

Invest Ashfield and Mansfield

Invest Ashfield & Mansfield was an initiative aimed at promoting the area as a place to do business, both helping existing businesses grow and attracting

new ones into the area. The website offered commercial property searches for potential new businesses or existing businesses looking to expand or relocate, promoted business events and provided ambassadors to celebrate success and showcase the area as a place to do business championed by local businesses.

Account Management/Signposting

The Regeneration Team currently provided an account management service whereby a designated officer, assigned to a new business, would provide support, guidance and problem solving solutions to assist with their integration into the Ashfield business community.

Entrepreneurs Forum

An Entrepreneurs' Forum had been established to assist new businesses with key issues and provide a mentoring service. Regular seminars provided an opportunity for new start businesses and those thinking of starting a business to meet like-minded individuals in similar situations to share ideas, learn from each other, provide peer support and encourage inter-trading in an informal setting.

Women Who Do

The 'Women Who Do' programme continued to give women access to a range of support mechanisms, including 'one to one' mentoring and expert help with creating personalised development plans for making business ideas a reality.

Retail/Market Grants

The Retail Improvement Scheme had been set up to help small businesses in retail areas to improve or repair the fabric and appearance of their qualifying properties. The grant could be used for a range of improvements, including external repairs, improving internal shop fittings, displays or facilities, developing IT or painting exterior shop fronts. Under the terms of the scheme, applicants can receive up to 50% of the total cost of the project up to a maximum of £5,000.

In relation to market stall holders, the scheme offered grants of up to £1,500 to provide support to new start-up market traders moving into the Idlewells Indoor Market or up to £500 for new start-up traders looking to locate to the outdoor markets in Sutton-in-Ashfield; Kirkby-in-Ashfield or Hucknall.

To date, 72 enquiries had been received by the Regeneration Team for both schemes and 9 applications for improvements to vacant shops had since been approved.

Empty Shops

The Regeneration Team continued to locate empty shops and endeavour to identify the owner(s) via land property searches etc. Once identified, the owner(s) were contacted and in the first instance advised about the grant opportunities available for improving the shop appearance and endeavouring to make the property a viable rental prospect for the future. If the owner(s) were not forthcoming and their particular properties were in a bad state of repair, the Council would proceed to notify them as to possible enforcement action that could be taken should the property fall any further into disrepair and

continue to have a negative impact on the street scene.

High Street Improvements

The Council continued to encourage and facilitate high street improvements to improve the appearance of town centres and attract businesses to the area. Town Centre Masterplans were in place for Sutton, Kirkby and Hucknall and local planning policy continued to regulate the quality and balance of uses/businesses locating within the town centres. Key improvement projects has taken place including the inner relief road and planned pedestrianisation at Hucknall, the plaza and highways improvements at Kirkby and the relocation of the outdoor markets at Sutton.

Business Grants – Update

The Panel were advised that the ‘Portas’ funding was now completed and the remaining funds had been utilised to upgrade the Council owned shops on Broomhill Road, Hucknall. The new retail improvements scheme (as outlined above) offered similar grant funding to shops and new market stall holders and would be running for as long as the £190,000 funding lasted. The scheme had already been advertised in the local press and the Town Centres and Markets Manager continued to promote the initiative during any visits to shops/local businesses within the town centres.

Following the presentation the Committee debated the issues raised and considered the following:-

- the possibility of enabling more local businesses to advertise through the Council’s various publications;
- the possibility of offering retail improvement scheme funding to established (off the high street) town centre shops/retail businesses to enable them to set up temporary ‘pop up’ shops/market stalls on the high street for organised events and/or weekend market days;
- landlords renting out shop units to multiple concessions/franchises to make rental costs more attainable to smaller businesses attempting to expand within the local economy;
- whether the Council had any powers to curtail the number of ‘same use’ shops occupying local high streets (i.e. fast food outlets, hairdressers);
- the reasons for the limited take up of retail improvement scheme funding and the reservations experienced by many local businesses in relation to ‘match-funding’ criteria;
- the selection process for allocation of the retail improvement scheme funding;
- the reasons why the underground car park at the Idlewells Shopping Centre has been closed for such a long period;
- the plans for development of Hucknall town centre following completion of the inner relief road scheme;

- the importance of the Council improving its communication/advertising skills to ensure that all plans/improvements/events are properly marketed and publicised to reach its optimum audience at all times;
- the improvement plans for the Council's indoor market hall at the Idlewells Centre, Sutton;
- the possibility of publishing an array of small/medium business 'case studies' on the Council's website (via the 'Youtube' search engine) to offer some additional promotion for the businesses and provide educational snapshots of the services and support offered by the Regeneration Team.

On conclusion of the debate, the Scrutiny Manager took the opportunity to thank Carol Cooper-Smith and Paul Thomas for attending the meeting and providing an in-depth and informative presentation.

RESOLVED that

- a) the work currently being undertaken by the Regeneration Team to encourage small/medium businesses into Ashfield and filling empty shop units, be received and welcomed;
- b) the Interim Service Director for Planning and Economic Development be requested to investigate the possibility of extending the retail improvement scheme to allow funding to be offered to established (off the high street) town centre shops/retail businesses to enable them to set up temporary 'pop up' shops/market stalls on the high street for organised events and/or weekend market days;
- c) the Scrutiny Manager be requested to take into account the suggestions/responses raised at the meeting and formulate a set of suitable draft recommendations for consideration by Members at the next meeting of the Panel in November 2016.

(During consideration of this item, Councillor Ben Bradley left the meeting at 7.45 p.m.)

The meeting closed at 8.10 pm

Chairman.