

Economic Development Committee



16 November 2021

Title	<i>Update from the Town Centre Manager</i>
Purpose of the report	To note
Report Author	<i>Andy Willmott Town Centre Manager</i>
Ward(s) Affected	All Wards
Exempt	No
Exemption Reason	N/A
Corporate Priority	Economic Development
Recommendations	Committee is asked to: <i>Note the report</i>
Reason for Recommendation	<i>Update report only</i>

1. Key issues

The post of Town Centre Manager started in October 2020 and over a period of around 6 months was peppered with lockdowns which made communications and working with businesses very difficult. As a result, time was spent on other areas supporting colleagues with setting up of the incubator and helping with grants for the ARGs. Additionally, work was carried out with regards to the demographics of each town as can be seen with the attached papers.

1.1 Town Centre Surgeries

Regular meeting point in each town centre was launched to raise the profile of the post and provide businesses and the community a regular designated time and place to meet the town centre manager to discuss issues arising, problems and needs.

As we expected attendance has been sporadic and the numbers of businesses not great, but it has proved a useful exercise in raising the council's profile in the High Street and demonstrating our desire to work with businesses. The surgeries currently take place once a week in each town, although this will become once a month from November.

In terms of numbers, the surgeries have averaged just under 1 visit per surgery across the time we have been running them – but this has often included multiple repeat visits by the same person/business or 2 or 3 people as the same visit –

meaning there have been many occasions where there have been no businesses attending. Surgeries are moving to one per month starting in November as the take-up has not justified the time.

As well as being a useful exercise, the process has allowed contact with some businesses that would not normally happen. One example was a chance encounter with a start-up business in Sunbury, as he saw the fluorescent Town Centre Manager jacket, which has resulted in the provision of various signposting advice, invitations to events and access to digital training.

Whilst not all the business queries are possible to be answered as a large number relate to wider issues such as planning, business rates etc, they provide an important information source from our town centre businesses and help formulate our future work programme. The surgeries have also helped develop increased links with town centre stakeholders such as Ashford Wide, Rotary, Sunbury Cross Shopping Centre etc.

1.2 Cost-savings scheme

This pilot project is designed to evaluate whether to launch a cost-savings support scheme for local businesses within the borough. The service that is being delivered to businesses is a structured support solution that delivers benefit through identifying savings for businesses on their core business costs. The cost for this pilot is £5,000 and the project will run for 3 months until the end of November. The service is funded to enable a clear, impartial advisory process and it is a model that has been successfully delivered to over 130 BIDs nationally and is being implemented as part of our business recovery response to Covid.

The project officially launched on Wednesday 1st September with a soft launch prior to this in July and preparatory work prior to this which included the provision and distribution of a leaflet and launch letter to businesses across Ashford and Sunbury. A savings database is being created to ensure all data received from businesses is tracked and progress with suppliers and reports recorded. The focus over the course of the initial period has been to work with those businesses that expressed an interest in taking part in the pilot. Businesses have received an introductory call and follow up email with the offer to meet the consultant. A wide range of businesses have expressed an interest to meet and discuss further, from micro and SME businesses through to professional services.

Headline details:

- Leaflet distributed to circa 350 businesses across Ashford and Sunbury
- Calling campaign underway by place support team to book business visits for place savings team
- 27 business visits conducted to date
- 8 Businesses have shared data to date
- 4 Businesses have agreed to share data and are yet to provide
- Within 6 weeks of launch we have identified over £4000 of savings for businesses across merchant services, water, and telecoms

When the service was proposed and subsequently launched the objective was to support and save businesses money. The sudden rise in the cost of commercial and domestic energy suppliers is seeing a shift in the strategy to becoming the 'go to' source for trusted, impartial advice and guidance to support businesses in navigating the current energy crisis and ensure businesses make informed decisions on the best way forward. The free service is now available to any business in Spelthorne.

1.3 Town centre business groups

Historically, councils and other public bodies have looked to achieve business engagement through liaison with various groups of businesses within any given area. They can be larger organisations (Chambers of Commerce, Federation of Small Business) or more localised groups, usually made up of a small number of committed local people, passionate about their town/area. However, this process always comes up against the same challenge - if you ask the same people, you get the same answers.

Whilst still working and liaising with key business groups such as Ashford Wide, Lower Sunbury, Shepperton community groups, a slightly different model has been adopted whereby we are identifying key areas where we can assist businesses, working on a potential solution and then promoting that to all of the businesses to gain as much reach as possible.

This has been made possible, and necessary as a consequence of the lockdown, the rise of digital communications and, most importantly, the fact that the TCM can now regularly maintain a high visibility physical presence by patrolling the High Streets and calling in and speaking with retailers and businesses.

This is now bearing fruit with projects such as the cost-savings scheme, Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG) applications, future ARG support on capital expenditure etc reaching a greater number of businesses including ones where contact has not previously taken place.

1.4 Town Meetings / Groups - activities

Sunbury Cross

Liaising with the shopping centre management and businesses on the parade opposite to make this a more inviting commercial area.

Businesses have feedback that the area is drab and needs to be brightened up, so collaboration is taking place with Neighbourhood Services to try to enhance the look of the area with hanging baskets/greenery. The positioning of any baskets is a major issue in achieving this as there is so much signage in the area.

Lower Sunbury

Now having regular meetings with a small group in Lower Sunbury - currently working on the holding a Christmas market in The Avenue in December.

Ashford

Regularly attend Ashford Wide meetings to both keep updated on projects and to understand feedback from their businesses.

Shepperton

No formal business group is present but hold regular meetings with key businesses and the active community groups such as Rotary, Residents Association. A survey with businesses will be carried out to establish the level of support for a Shepperton Business Group.

Consideration is also being given to setting up a market at the rear of the Village Hall. This prospect has been received well by businesses as it is likely to drive additional footfall to the town.

1.5 Sunbury Cross Underpass Project

This Neighbourhood Services project is slowly taking shape and work is taking place on securing funding from the Welcome Back Fund (WBF), once this happens the relevant Council project documentation will be completed.

In collaboration with Neighbourhood Services, it has been identified that the WBF may be able to contribute towards the improved appearance and user safety of the Sunbury Cross underpass.

The key elements that they would like to achieve, if they are successful with funding are: -

- Deep clean throughout
- Reduction of trees & shrubbery to increase light into the tunnel
- Improved lighting
- Refreshing artwork (run as a community outreach project)
- Improving general safety

Once a firm project plan has been established, and the funding is secured, all information and a work programme will be available within the project documents.

1.6 Meeting with Kwasi for Sunbury businesses

Consultation with borough and Surrey councillors to organise and facilitate a dedicated meeting for Sunbury businesses with the local MP and Business Secretary, Kwasi Kwarteng.

This proved popular (45 attendees) and showed there is an appetite from businesses to meet and hear from a wide range of stakeholders that influence how they are able to run their businesses.

Future events of this type with Kwasi covering the other towns within the borough have been planned, with a more 'surgery' style to them, but the recent events with the Essex MP have meant that these are now being reviewed.

1.7 Spelthorne Business Hub/Spelthorne Business Forum

Promoting the advantages of this facility to businesses across all towns. Ideal meeting venue, home of the SBF and a business knowledge centre for all to utilise.

1.8 Plans for 2022

1.9 Cost-savings scheme

The pilot will be completed and assuming results are as expected, will examine the possibilities of extending this offer beyond the pilot stage as an integral part of the desire to making this a great place to do business. As mentioned, the current energy crisis will have far-reaching effects on all of our business sectors and this project allows Spelthorne to be at the forefront of delivering informed, impartial advice that will save our businesses costs.

1.10 ARG Capital Equipment Grant

Will need to work with all businesses across the towns to ensure that they could make their operation more effective through the grant for capital equipment. This has to be done well before the end of March so urgently need to engage with businesses. Early work has started on understanding exactly what is needed and where but there will be a need to actively encourage applications for this grant.

1.11 Business Engagement

There is a need to continue to build better and more effective links to all businesses within the towns.

Sadly, most businesses do not join or get involved with local groups, forums or organisations, and the only contact they will usually have from their local authority is when they are asked to pay business rates or some means of enforcement.

Economic Development / Town Centre Management is ideally placed to 'bridge' that disconnect and help businesses by connecting them to all opportunities (locally, regionally, nationally), informing and advising them on behalf of other internal departments and working on solutions to make Spelthorne the best place for them to do business.

1.12 Activities

A series of events will be organised for all towns across 2022.

Work with town groups will take place to produce Christmas activities - Ashford Christmas Market, Sunbury Christmas Market, Shepperton Artisans' Market. Still a lot of trepidation about events as we approach the winter months – Big Tree Night is not happening, but Little Tree Night might be.

Ashford potentially has a new 'event' area at the new Brooklands Development but currently waiting to understand how best use can be made of this.

Shepperton has a perfect 'market' venue at the Village Hall carpark, so work is in progress on a regular monthly market there. There has been very positive feedback from retailers and the community so this will be confirmed asap.

Sunbury Cross is not so conducive to running events, but conversations are taking place with the shopping centre management to investigate how best use can be made of the parking area as an attraction for customers.

2. Options analysis and proposal

2.1 Not applicable

3. Financial implications

£5,000 to instigate the Cost-savings pilot

4. Other considerations

4.1 There are none

5. Equality and Diversity

5.1 The impact on equality and diversity issues is considered at every action

6. Sustainability/Climate Change Implications

6.1 Use of the ARG funding has potential to have a positive impact on the environment through new equipment which is greener and less polluting.

7. Timetable for implementation

7.1 By March 2022

Background papers: There are none.

Appendices:

Appendix A – Shepperton Overview

Appendix B – Sunbury Overview

Appendix C – Ashford Overview