

Area West Committee – 20th November 2013

8. Chard Town Team

Strategic Director: Rina Singh (Place and Performance)
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Purpose of the Report

To report on the development of Chard Town Team and the contribution of the Team to the regeneration of Chard Town Centre.

Public Interest

As noted in the Chard Regeneration Scheme's suite of documents, published on the SSDC website, Chard has a number of significant challenges and development opportunities. If these are met, the Town will remain and grow as an attractive place to live, work and visit. The current Chard Town Team was formed in Spring 2012 to support this effort. It is now a key forum for designing and implementing regeneration projects in the town centre.

Recommendation

That the work of Chard Town Team in 2012/13 is commended.

Background

The first Chard Town Team was established in 2009 to provide local input to the Chard Regeneration Strategy as part of the brief given to LDA Design consultants. In January of that year, the Area West Committee appointed Cllrs. Dan Shortland and Nigel Mermagen to sit on the Town Team with around 20 other members drawn from the County and Town Councils, the local business sector and other public sector organisations. The Town Team successfully fulfilled their initial remit which was to examine closely and if necessary challenge and improve upon the ideas put forward by LDA Design consultants in their proposals for a Chard Regeneration Framework and Implementation Plan.

It was SSDC's intention that the Town Team remained in place as part of the recognised project governance structure, to guide the delivery of the Chard Regeneration Scheme after the completed Chard Framework and Plans were adopted in late 2010.

However, the subsequent focus of the Chard Regeneration Board on the disposal of the ACI site meant that the role envisaged for the Town Team was no longer required. No further meetings were called after 2010.

The opportunity for the Area West Development Team to support the creation of a second Chard Town Team followed the publication in December 2011 of the Portas Review into the future of high streets and the subsequent invitation to bid to become one of the 27 Town Team "pilot" schemes funded by central government. The Portas Review highlighted many of the issues already recognised in Chard that can result in reduced

town centre “footfall” and which must be tackled to keep the town centre vibrant and successful.

A key focus for the pilots was the creation of a “Town Team” able to drive innovation and improvement in the way the current high street is managed, develop a strategic and collaborative approach, and be made up of a wide range of local interests including landlords, retailers, local authorities and local communities.

With considerable support from Chard Town Council, a new Town Team was established. Although the bid to become a pilot was not successful – nationally the Chard bid was one of over 400 bids – support for a Chard Town Team was still strong enough for it to be established. In a relatively short time it has become an effective forum for designing and delivering successful town centre regeneration projects.

Who is involved?

All members of the Town Team are unpaid volunteers. From the outset the Town Team has attracted a wide range of expertise from across the business sector and the community. The team includes craftsmen, solicitors, a florist, a publican and local councillors. Larger companies in the Town have also offered their support. The strength in depth of skills has helped avoid the common pitfall of overreliance on a single champion.

The Town Team Constitution

The Town Team is constituted as a not for profit organisation. Elections to office are for a two year term. Cllr. Garry Shortland was elected Chair of the Team in September 2012. The quarterly Town Team meetings are open to any business or resident of Chard interested in supporting the Team’s work. Smaller working groups or individuals are nominated to take forward Town Team projects.

Voluntary Team Capacity and District Council Support

The capacity of the Town Team to deliver projects is limited only by the time each volunteer can make available outside of their normal working day. However, a key strength of the team has been the intention from the outset not to aspire to unrealistic ambitions.

The projects undertaken to date were considered deliverable given the time each project member could make available. Some of these projects fell into the relatively easy albeit time consuming category, whilst others proved to provide bigger challenges.

From the outset, the Area West Neighbourhood Development Officer has provided the Town Team with project management support and links to other SSDC departments of the Council including Planning and Street Scene, who have greatly assisted in project delivery.

Chard Regeneration Scheme and the Town Team

As members are aware, an update on plans for the redevelopment of the former BodenMill/ACI site will be made to the Area Committee in December. It is hoped that the Town Team will be able to play a key part in local discussions about the delivery of this element of the CRS, although the timetable has yet to be agreed.

The Town Team is able to progress other developments within the Chard Regeneration Plan to revitalise Chard. For example the Plan emphasises a need to support the existing retail cores around Fore Street and Holyrood Street with improvements to streets and spaces.

Achievements (September 2012 – October 2013)

The Traders Board and the Stringfellow Gallery

A first 'quick win' for the Town Team in 2012 was the introduction of a Traders Board with the co-operation and assistance of Sainsbury's who host the board on the wall of their supermarket. This is at the entrance to Pig Lane, a busy thoroughfare into the town centre. The board provides shoppers with an easy reference point for the types of business in the town and their location.

Installation of the Traders Board was part of a linked vision to revitalise what had become a tired and unsightly area of the Town Centre. The principal building at this entrance to the town centre, the Stringfellow Gallery had peeling paint, broken signage and empty retail units.

SSDC provided grant support to enable redecoration of the Gallery's frontage. The works has transformed the building into somewhere a business would be happy to trade. Looking down Pig Lane from the trader's board, the view to the town centre is greatly improved and the Stringfellow Gallery shop units are now fully let. The pathway of Pig Lane, which is a strategic component for revitalising this area of the High Street is to be resurfaced.

Bus Parking Configuration in Boden Street

Until recently Boden Street suffered from insufficient bus parking bays. The buses had to park abreast leading to frequent traffic jams. The Town Team lobbied Somerset Highways to increase the number of marked out parking bays during a road resurfacing programme. The result has allowed the buses to park in allocated bays which has greatly improved traffic flow.

Free Town Centre Christmas Parking

The Town Team sponsored an additional free weekend of parking in the car parks in the run up to Christmas last year to supplement the 2 free Saturdays supported by the Area West Committee.

Christmas Lights

The Town Team organised and managed a very successful grand switch on of the Christmas lights last year. Plans are already advanced for this year.

Easter Traders Event

The Town Team ran an Easter bunny hunt around the town centre shops which resulted in enthusiastic children marching their parents into shops in search of the prize.

Business Breakfast

The first business breakfast was hosted last December with 30 businesses attending and was very well received.

Business Fair at the Guildhall

The business fair in June was facilitated by the Town Team and considered a great success with 50 Businesses on display and hundreds of visitors in attendance.

Bubble and Speak Community Kitchen

In addition to economic and environmental projects, the Town Team are also supportive of projects that benefit the well being of the local community.

The Town Team administer the Bubble and Speak project which received funding from the County Council and South Somerset District Council via the community pounds project. With support from SSDC's Healthy Lifestyles Officer, a healthy cooking course is held in the Guildhall kitchen every Wednesday between 11am and 2 pm for up to 12 people. The course is funded until September 2014.

Town Centre Tree Project

The South Somerset Market Towns Investment Group (MTIG) invited project proposals in 2012 which led to two further Town Team projects.

The town centre tree project was led by Town Councillors Dave Bulmer and Sandra Pittwood who proposed the removal of the oversized trees around the Guildhall and their replacement with trees of a more appropriate size and associated flower planters for hanging baskets. The Town Team successfully secured funding from MTIG with further contributions provided by Chard Town Council and Chard in Bloom/Chard 2000. This project has proved an excellent example of co-operation between the Town Team and Chard Town Council and the results have significantly improved the landscape of the town centre.

The effect of this project has been to completely change the appearance of the town centre, especially in the summer. During 2012 the Guildhall was invisible behind a dense canopy of foliage that blocked out sunlight to both the Guildhall and the adjacent shops. This project has provided the town centre with a feel good factor that residents have really appreciated, with many voicing their thanks to the Town Clerk.

To continue its support for revitalisation of the Holyrood Street area of the town centre, the Town Team identified the Stringfellow Gallery as a location for a new business initiative for Chard, a Pop Up shop. The location reflects the Town Team's whole town approach to supporting regeneration.

Pop Up Chard

The Town Team looked at ways to encourage new business start-ups in Chard with the longer term aim of bringing empty shop units in the town centre back into use.

They devised a 12 month project funded by MTIG in association with Pop Up Britain. The Pop Up Chard shop enables entrepreneurs to trial their business ideas in a retail environment on short term tenancies at minimal financial risk. The tenants also benefit from free professional business development advice and profiles on the Pop Up Britain and South Somerset District Council websites.

A lot of time donated by many members of the Town Team ensured that the Pop Up Chard shop located in Unit 2 of the Stringfellow Gallery, Holyrood Street was ready for the official opening on the 27th August.

A typical example of tenant feedback has been:

“Last week no one knew I existed, now I have a web presence and I am selling my products”.

One of the first three entrepreneurs has already gone on to open his first retail unit in Holyrood Street and another Chard resident has branched out and is now trading at Montacute Market. The third went on to manage a craft fair two weeks after she left and intends to return to the Pop Up shop later in the twelve month project. A fourth trader moved in on the 8th October. By the next day her collection of bonnets had already been co-opted by a local theatre company as props. A furniture restorer moved in on the 5th November and three more tenants will move in during November so that the shop should be operating at its maximum capacity for the Christmas period.

All the tenants have emphasised the importance of the business development advice they received, which turned their bright ideas into viable business plans.

The South Somerset Market Town Guide App

A further district wide MTIG initiative has been the development of the Town Guide app project, to provide locally managed advertising for Chard businesses on mobile phones and tablets. The Town Team is working closely with MTIG to promote the project in Chard, with considerable enthusiasm already generated and nearly 100 businesses signed up to date. The project is now in the final stages of development before a formal launch.

Dare to Dream - Business Start-up Event

This successful Somerset Business Agency event organised in partnership with SSDC Economic Development team took place in Chard on 18th October. The Town Team were one of the event sponsors, taking the opportunity to support new business start-ups in Chard and to promote the Pop Up shop. The event was very well attended and interest was expressed in future Pop Up shop tenancies.

Halloween Event

The Town Team hired the Guildhall and organised this event. Children arrived to find a disco and a local dance studio performing a Halloween routine. Chard's hairdressers were there to face paint and provide make up for the children before they headed out to trick or treat around the town's shops. The whole event was considered a great success with 41 shops staying open and hundreds of children and their parents in attendance.

More projects in the pipeline.....

Christmas Lights

The Town Team are organising this year's Christmas lights and preparing a grand switch-on.

Signage De-clutter Project

A survey and report has been presented to the Town Team by one of its members, with recommendations for signage de-clutter in Chard town centre. This will form the basis of a forthcoming project.

Summary

The fourteen projects undertaken to date and the projects coming forward demonstrate the wide range of initiatives coming from the Chard Town Team, from high profile town centre revitalisation projects to support for a healthy eating programme. This report shows that the Town Team is concentrating on the projects where it can make a difference.

In a relatively short time Chard Town Team has proved to be an effective organisation for discussing and delivering town centre regeneration projects. As the Town Team Regional Co-ordinator for the South West of England observed, 'close partnership working with the Town and District Councils has contributed to its success.' There is still room for further stakeholder representation, particularly with large town centre redevelopments anticipated in the near future, so further work to build on an excellent start will be required. Additional projects are also coming forward at various stages of development, which will help to ensure that the Town Team maintains its momentum.

As the Portas Report makes clear, the future for high streets can no longer just be retail, there has to be a broad mix of uses to ensure their long term viability.

Financial Implications

Chard Town Team has applied successfully for "High Street Improvement" project funding through the SSDC Market Towns Investment Group.

SSDC, through the Area West Development Manager, is also the accountable body for a dedicated Town Team partners central government grant allocated to Chard Town Team.

Carbon Emissions & Adapting to Climate Change Implications (NI 188)

Improvements to the Chard town centre retail experience may encourage fewer car journeys to town centres elsewhere.

Equality and Diversity Implications

The Town Team is open to all members of the business and wider community who wish to assist with town centre regeneration projects.

Background Papers:

Area West Committee January 2009

The Portas Review into the future of our high streets. December 2011

South Somerset District Council. Our Plan – Your Future 2012 to 2015