

Review and updates of the Economic Development Department and Head of Projects

The purpose of this report is to brief the new Council and update Members on the work of the Economics Development Department, and current projects under the responsibility of the Head of Projects.

Background

Burgess Hill Town Market was established by the Town Council as one of its Bridge the Gap initiatives to support Burgess Hill's shops and businesses by attracting footfall into the town centre. The monthly Saturday market was launched in September 2020 attracting at its peak around 15-20 stallholders and was well supported by shoppers, existing shops and businesses. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic the market had to adapt its operations in line with the government's restrictions/lockdowns plus faced severe weather conditions, and as a result the number of market traders attending each market fluctuated between 7 and 21.

The market had been run in house by Liz Clark, Head of Projects, however, to free up officer time for other projects and give access to a large database of market traders, in September 2021 the Town Council decided to appoint an external market operator to see the market grow and make Burgess Hill a destination.

At a meeting of the Market Working Group in 2022, it was reported that the market operator had decided to give the Town Council notice to withdraw after the September market. Despite the operator's best efforts to find new traders to join the monthly market the number of traders had been dwindling each market day. The market operator felt the enthusiasm for regular markets had changed since Covid-19 and created a rollercoaster of changes in shopping habits with many people now preferring to do most of their shopping online and those getting out and about wishing to do it in a more leisurely way. Burgess Hill Market had not been viable for the operator and in the current climate they felt it was unlikely to become so in the foreseeable future.

The Market Working Group discussed the feedback and decision by the operator; they were disappointed the market operator was not able to make a success of the monthly market. It was agreed by the Market Working Group that the agreement with the operator should finish after the July 2022 market, and to take the operational management of the market back inhouse with a view to expand the market and allow stallholders to trade every Friday as well as the monthly Saturday market. Liz Clark, Head of Projects, raised concerns over resourcing and her available capacity to manage the market given an increase in her workload, and as a result requested a new part-time position be created to support her department's workload.

Following this request, the previous Leader of the Town Council and member of the Market Working Group, Robert Eggleston, proposed establishing an Economic Development Department to encompass the operational management of the market alongside other economic initiatives for the town. A meeting was held between Steve Cridland CEO, Gemma Wallis Head of Customer Services, and Liz Clark Head of Projects, to discuss this suggestion.

It was proposed that a new part-time position of Economic Development & Projects Officer (22 hours) be created to take over the operational management of the weekly Friday and monthly Saturday market, plus other departmental initiatives. This post would sit under the Head of Customer Services (F/T) who manages the front of house, Help Point and Tourist Information Centre, and the market would therefore move from the Head of Projects (30 hours) to the Head of Customer Services. The Economic Development & Projects Officer would also provide support to the Head of Projects, where required with the development and delivery of Council capital and other larger projects. It was also proposed the Head of Customer Services role be changed to Head of Customer Services and Economic Development.

Funding of the part-time position of the Economic Development and Projects Officer, for the first year, came from the Bridge the Gap Fund and this post has now been accommodated within the salaries budget as a permanent member of staff. The remaining Bridge the Gap Funds is being utilised by the Economic Development Department to deliver the market and other economic initiatives.

Economic Development Update

Market

The Burgess Hill Market remains challenging with regards to sourcing and retaining new traders. Overall, the market is initially attractive to them, with free pitches, electricity on-site, free advertising for stallholders and the potential for expansion; however, it can take up to 6-months for traders to establish a regular customer base and many of the recent traders who have attended the market are anticipating an immediate captive audience and are not prepared to commit for the long-term without this existing consumer base. Additionally, negative social media surrounding the market has added a layer of complexity to traders not wishing to come to or remain at the market; as fed back to the Economic Department. The on-going economic crisis is also having a negative impact on the market's viability and can be seen at other, well-established markets within Sussex.

Market Parking Scheme

Following public feedback, it was suggested free parking during the Friday market was offered, to encourage consumers to attend and shop more frequently with the existing market traders. This also gave shoppers the opportunity to support the town's shops and eateries. A self-funded pilot scheme was implemented throughout the winter months of 2023 (Jan, Feb, Mar), enabling consumers to park for 1-2 hours each Friday, so they could visit and shop from the market; claiming back the parking cost from the Town Council. A budget of £5,000 was allocated to this scheme from the department's budget, however, in total only £23 was claimed by members of the public.

Following completion of this pilot scheme, the feedback received stated that the scheme was too complex to use, the market was not desirable to shop from and brick and mortar businesses did not benefit from this scheme, which was expressed as being a higher priority than establishing a market.

Energy Assessment Scheme

Considering the energy crisis in January 2023, the Town Council rolled out a free Energy Assessment Scheme for all local independent businesses within Burgess Hill, who have 10 or fewer staff and would like to see where they may be losing energy within their premises.

To-date we have completed energy assessments for four independent businesses within the town. Detailed reports were provided to these businesses following their assessments, to identify any shortfalls in their current energy performance and work towards becoming more cost-efficient with their energy use; ultimately contributing towards savings on their electricity bills each year.

We will continue to offer these free energy assessments for as long as there are funds available.

Shop Independent

Burgess Hill's Shop Independent Loyalty Scheme was launched on 1st April 2022 and was designed to support local, independent businesses by showcasing their products/services whilst providing their customers with an opportunity of winning a free hamper of local goodies, every three months.

Twenty-nine shops are registered as part of the scheme and there has been a steady increase in the number of residents supporting the initiative, with 44 entries for the last quarter. The number of entrants has increased since the scheme originated, however, this is a drop in the ocean when compared to the number of residents within the town. Some participating businesses have mooted they feel it is too difficult to remember to stamp a loyalty card for each transaction and others, have been unhappy at providing a small donation to the hamper, once every three months. Donations have ranged from a small physical gift, a free coffee, or a discount or percentage off a service.

Apprenticeship Scheme

It was proposed that the Economic Development Department would provide funding for transport, equipment etc., in collaboration with Brighton and Chichester Universities, BHBPA and independent Burgess Hill businesses, to facilitate the matching of apprentices to businesses who would benefit from the advice, skills and support said students would bring. In particular, Marketing, Business & Economics and Graphic Design students, who could assist with the digital connectivity of these businesses, re-branding etc. This would be zero cost to the businesses and ultimately,

would assist both the independent business and student. This scheme is currently on hold as the universities are reviewing their capacity and funding restrictions.

Quarterly Economic Meetings and Economic Website

The Town and District Councils' Economic Development Departments meet quarterly to ensure neither department duplicates work and maintains a strong, working partnership. The Town Council is supporting the District Council Economic Development Department by sharing the relevant information on business and green grants, free business training, shop local schemes and other such information, via the Town Council's website to ultimately broaden the accessibility of this information.

The Head of Customer Services & Economic Development has raised concerns about the viability of successfully managing both the Customer Services and Economic Development Departments. This is due to their sustained increase in workload and as a result they have not been able to develop and progress the Customer Services Department (which was their original role), to support the town's residents and being the first point of contact at the Town Council.

Head of Projects Update

Virgin Media

The Town Council and Virgin Media entered a 3-year agreement whereby local artists can design and paint some of the grey telecommunication boxes around the town. Designs are to reflect nature or an aspect of the town, e.g., community life, history etc. Neighbouring properties and Town Ward Councillors are consulted before permission is sought from Virgin Media. The Town Council covers the cost of the paints and equipment, provides health & safety equipment, and artists are paid £50 per cabinet.

Media boxes in Junction Road, Wheatsheaf Close and Greenlands Close have been painted, and it is proposed to paint the cabinet on the corner of St John's Road and Church Close. It was hoped the media cabinet by the bike shop in Cyprus Road would have a makeover but unfortunately the artist has decided not to go ahead.

Burgess Hill Artist, Holly Mellors has drawn a design of St John's Church and swifts for the cabinet on the corner of St John's Road and Church Close. It is hoped the

artist will paint the design in August, subject to the consultation process and Virgin Media's approval.

Local artists groups, schools and colleges are being contacted to invite them to be part of the project. Burgess Hill Academy and Burgess Hill Girls have been contacted to see if their students would like to take part. Burgess Hill Girls have said they may be interested and we are going to meet them in September.

Inclusive Town Initiative

What is an inclusive town? 'A town that is accessible for all'.

Under the Equality Act 2010 a person is disabled if they have a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on their ability to do normal daily activities. The list below is an example, but not exhaustive:

- Wheelchair and mobility scooter users
- People with mobility problems (e.g., elderly people using wheeled walking aids)
- Visually impaired
- Hearing impaired
- People with dementia
- Autism
- Epilepsy
- Other hidden disabilities
- SEND

It is acknowledged that the remit to make 'Burgess Hill an inclusive town' is a vast and a long-term initiative and is about equality and diversity, as well as physical/hidden disability. The inclusive town initiative will need the support and funding from stakeholders including County and District Councils and from the retail and business community. People's expectations will need to be managed as to what can be delivered within existing and future budgets.

Following walkabouts with a mobility scooter user and a visually impaired resident, it highlighted that each person's disability is unique to them as are their needs. Issues

highlighted included, lack of dropped kerbs, camber of pavements, shop layouts, levels between pavements and shop entrances, street furniture, people blocking and not moving out of the way, people interacting with the 'working' dog, vehicles blocking pavements etc. The Head of Projects met with the then Highways Manager, to discuss some of the highway issues and way forward, to work in partnership.

The Head of Projects also approached WSCC and MSDC, who are delivering the Burgess Hill Growth Place & Connectivity Programme to see if these funds could be used to improve the levels between the pavement and shop entrances in Church Road, to enable easy access for mobility/wheelchair/pushchair users. A similar exercise was undertaken by Highways in Church Walk many years ago.

The Head of Projects feels the Town Council should review its own services first, i.e., buildings/land, facilities and culture (employment, retention, training) to ensure it is accessible to all - 'best practice'. It is proposed the Council draft and adopt an Accessibility Strategy and Action Plan. It should be noted that Mid Sussex District Council has an Equality & Diversity Scheme 2020 – 2024 in place.

It is also proposed to undertake a survey of residents and businesses and the results be used to create a 'Town Accessibility Plan' (TAP).

The Head of Projects has also joined the Burgess Hill Business Parks Association Equality, Diversity & Inclusivity Group to gain further insight and knowledge.

Burgess Hill Place & Connectivity Bus Infrastructure Improvements

Under the Burgess Hill Place & Connectivity Programme, improvements are proposed to key bus stops around Burgess Hill to include improved passenger waiting facilities (new bus shelters) and the provision of additional real-time passenger information (RTPI) screens.

The Town Council's Transport Group and Burgess Hill Bus Forum, bus companies, and West Sussex Public Transport Team were consulted on the proposed improvements, and as a result it is proposed to install 40 RTPIs and 17 bus shelters (6 replacements and 11 new) around the town. Funding for these improvements of

approximately £300k has been approved by the Burgess Hill Place & Connectivity Programme Growth Board.

It has been agreed the project will be led by the Town Council and the Head of Projects is currently liaising with WSCC Officers to get the funds released to the Town Council. Permission from respective landowners will be sought and neighbouring properties consulted prior to installing new bus shelters. It is hoped this project will be progressed during autumn/winter 2023.

New Speed Indication Device (SID)

The Town Council currently has one Speed Indication Device (SID) and would like to purchase a second one to cover additional areas around the town. A solar powered option is being investigated. There are S106 developer funds available and the Head of Projects is liaising with the District Council to request the monies.

Folders Meadow Play Area

The Head of Projects will be contacting play equipment suppliers with a view to supply and install a wheelchair accessible roundabout and other accessible play equipment, and replace the existing football goalposts at Folders Meadow Play Area. Funding to cover these costs will be covered from Section 106 developer contributions.

Operation Watershed

The drainage improvement works to connect a ditch in Junction Road Allotments to the Highway gully was completed in July and will stop water flooding onto the carriageway from the allotment site. These works were jointly funded by WSCC's Operation Watershed Fund and the Town Council.

New Finger Post

The Town Council has received a request from the Burgess Hill Business Association to fund a new finger post to signpost shoppers to Keymer Parade, Station Road etc. The Association has been asked to advise the number of finger post arms they would like and propose the location of the post, to source a quote. Once the information is received, a report will go to a future Key Area Group/Council meeting for Members' consideration. Landowner permission will also be sought.

Earlier this year the Town Council installed a finger post arm at the top of Church Walk, signposting shoppers to Cyprus Road shops/businesses. This was requested by Cyprus Road retailers, but unfortunately the new arm has gone missing (presumed stolen...) and will not be replaced due to the negativity received via social media.

Christmas Lights

The Town Council co-ordinates and funds the festive lighting in Church Walk including the tree lights outside the Six Gold Martlets (Wetherspoons), Church Road and Queen Elizabeth Avenue which are officially switched on as part of the annual 'It's Christmas' event.

The Head of Projects has approached the Six Gold Martlets to enquire if they would agree to take over the responsibility of the tree lights outside their premises and the power supply to the festive banner attached to their frontage (currently supplied by SSE Contracting/EDF Energy). They agreed to the proposal as they were keen to support the town's festivities. It is anticipated the works to move the equipment/power connection will be undertaken during the summer/early autumn.

It has been flagged up by the Head of Projects, that due to the designs of the proposed redevelopments above the Icelands and M & Co units in Church Walk, it may be necessary to relocate two of the festive banners currently attached to these units.

Mid Sussex Business Crime Partnership (MSBCP) - Disc

The Mid Sussex Business Crime Partnership (MSBCP) Disc system was launched in Burgess Hill in May 2023, along with East Grinstead and Haywards Heath in March. There are currently 169 retailers/businesses in Burgess Hill who have joined the scheme.

Disc is a secure online members-only information sharing system, that helps protect businesses by reducing low-level business crime and anti-social behaviour. The Head of Projects championed the Disc system as felt it was a great way for the business community, along with Shopwatch and Pubwatch Groups, and Sussex Police to work together to tackle business crime. Disc is funded by the Sussex Police &

Crime Commissioner and Mid Sussex District Council/Mid Sussex Partnership for 3 years and is free to members.

The Head of Projects is part of the MSBCP Disc Working Group and will continue to support the business community.

Burgess Hill & District Pubwatch & Burgess Hill Shopwatch Groups

The Head of Projects supports both Pubwatch and Shopwatch Groups by providing secretariat to the groups and coordinates the Shopwatch Radio Scheme. Both groups meet monthly and use the new MSBCP Disc system to access useful information about local low-level crime and anti-social behaviour that might impact their business, galleries of known offenders, and to submit incident reports.

At a recent Pubwatch Group meeting, the West Sussex Police Licensing Officer reported the group was having a positive effect at dealing with the 'undesirable' members of the community. Those that drug deal, commit assaults and criminal damage were being dealt with by getting banned and some were being prosecuted. The group proposed to invite the pubs in Haywards Heath to join the Burgess Hill & District Pubwatch Group as some of the 'undesirables' were moving along to Haywards Heath.

Way Forward

Following a review of the Economic Development Department and its previous initiatives, as well as discussions with partner organisations, it has raised the question of whether an economic department is required at Town Council level or whether it should remain solely at District Council level.

MSDC have a full programme of initiatives to deliver across the whole of Mid Sussex and it was mutually agreed that the Town and District Councils would not overlap or duplicate their schemes. The Town Council's Economic Department has been signposting local businesses to these existing initiatives, as well as creating various new schemes to support the town's businesses and residents alike, however these have not been well received.

It is proposed that the Economic Development Department, as it stands, cease and the operational management of the Burgess Hill Market move back under the remit of Head of Projects, and any current economic departmental initiatives are shared between the Head of Customer Services & Economic Development and Head of Projects, where appropriate.

It is proposed the Economic Development & Projects Officer post be re-titled to Market & Projects Officer and to come under the Head of Projects. It is also proposed the post of Head of Customer Services & Economic Development's title return to Head of Customer Services.

It is proposed The Head of Projects be responsible for the remaining Economic Development budget (formerly the Bridge the Gap Fund), and the remaining budget be utilised for any current economic departmental initiatives, the market and projects.

Recommendations

- a) The Economic Development Department as it stands, cease and the operational management of the Burgess Hill Market move under the remit of Head of Projects;
- b) That a Market Steering Group be reinstated;
- c) That any current economic departmental initiatives are shared between the Head of Customer Services and Head of Projects, where appropriate;
- d) The Economic Development & Projects Officer post be re-titled to Market & Projects Officer and to come under the Head of Projects;
- e) The Head of Customer Services & Economic Development title return to Head of Customer Services; and,
- f) The Economic Development budget be moved to the Head of Projects and the remaining budget be utilised for any current economic departmental initiatives, Burgess Hill Market and projects.

Risk Implications

Contained within the report.