

WYRE FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

Town Centre Manager's Annual Report

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“Overview of the first 12 months, the challenges and potential for the role”

Town Centre Manager's Annuals Report

The Town Centre Manager's position is a three year dual role collaboration between Wyre Forest District Council and the owners of Weavers Wharf, Henderson Global Investors, with an equal time split between Weavers Wharf and Wyre Forest District Council/KTCP of 18½hrs each.

The concept of town centre management is built around that of Shopping Centre Management that is able to co-ordinate and control day to day management including cleansing; car park management; site development; security; emergency procedures; ground maintenance; events, marketing and promotion; customer service and tenant liaison; business planning; and budget/cost control. The model is now widespread throughout the UK although to varying degrees with a representative body in the form of the Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM).

The following report provides a snapshot of some of the actions undertaken by the Town Centre Manager during the inaugural year 2008/09. At present these have focussed on getting to know the traders and key challenges. With a business plan in place the actions have focussed on delivering aspects of the plan around the key working group themes.

The past year has provided sufficient time to assess how embedded and effective the structure and working groups of the Kidderminster Town Centre Partnership are proving to be. An early task during 2009/10 will be to assess whether the current business plan and model are fit for purpose or whether a more holistic and visionary strategy is required.

Key Outputs:

- a. Agents breakfast event (agents, developers and solicitors);
- b. Town Centre Manager's Business Objectives endorsed by WFDC;
- c. Business Plan refresh & Recruitment Event;
- d. Kick-started rebranding (review "bringing the pieces together") with young people at King Charles High School;
- e. One to one introductions with shopkeepers and other businesses;
- f. Information packs assembled for town centre businesses;
- g. Town Centre Business Survey of TCM issues – Postal Questionnaire – hand delivered*;
- h. Town Centre Lights switch-on event;
- i. Christmas trading co-ordinated hours & publicity;
- j. Editorials and promotion through local press;
- k. Contributed towards 'Connecting Kidderminster' project; and
- l. Events with young people including visit to Weavers Wharf development.

Key outcomes include facilitating:

- m. Development of the new Debenhams Store; and
- n. Relocation of Pavers & Leading Labels within Kidderminster Town Centre.

* 850 businesses within the town centre, Crossley Retail Park, Mill St and Comberton Hill.

Administration & Premises

One of the first duties of the Town Centre Manager (TCMr)/Centre Manager was to set-up the office. A suite of unused offices provided by the owners of Weavers Wharf required kitting out by Savills/ Weavers Wharf.

A database of town centre traders has been established with the help of the Administration team of Planning, Health & Environment at Wyre Forest District Council. This contains more than 850 contacts across the town centre, Comberton Hill, Mill Street, Horsefair and Crossley Retail Park.

Key Issues

The business survey, mentioned above, generated 21 replies with the main concerns being the market, parking, empty shops, rents and rates, lack of marketing playing to the town's strengths and events to drive foot fall, antisocial behaviour and the demise of the night time economy.

Kidderminster currently has 30 empty units which is a 9% vacancy rate the national average is 11%. Although a number of national chain stores have closed we have had an equal amount of new business coming into the town, a high number of these are independent retailers. At present Kidderminster appears to be bucking the national trend with a steady increase in business which is very different to the national picture and most stores are reporting reasonably strong sales performances. In comparison Herford has 53 vacant units and 19 charity shops, at present Kidderminster has 10 charity shops. I've recently visited Bromsgrove, Redditch, Stourbridge and Halesowen who are experiencing slightly higher vacancy rates and even Merry Hill has 6 vacant units.

Street Market

Several written and numerous verbal complaints about the street market were submitted from the surrounding business community. Concerns included the obstruction of shop fronts and access for the emergency services. Relationships have been established with the markets operator and traders. At the same time the TCMr has been analysing good practice amongst other Town Centre Management initiatives. No revenue was received from the Farmers Markets also operated by LSD promotions and these recently ceased operating.

Funding & Budgets

Feedback from other Town Centre Managers suggests that the markets present a possible source of additional income.

The Partnership also has the scope to charge a fee for the banner sign over Vicar Street agreed with Worcestershire County Council. The pricing structure and terms and conditions for the banner have now been reviewed.

Possible subscription package considered but there is currently no intention to introduce this at the moment.

The Partnership have agreed to renew the lighting contracts with our existing contractor on a 3 year deal as they were the most competitive and had offered to replace the Town Hall lights free of charge. However, for 2009 KTCP would like to look at storing the Christmas lights locally, possibly either at the Rowland Hill Centre or Weavers Wharf, this would remove transportation, storage and insurance costs by approximately £1200.00.

Various funding bids have been submitted for specific projects, including:

Six letters to local trust funds and a £2500.00 application to Awards For All for funding for the town Centre website. I'm also completing a £250.00 application to Co-op for website maintenance and once the Awards For All application for the website is complete I'm planning to apply for the remaining £7500.00 for the 2009 Christmas Lights Switch On.

In previous years significant contributions towards the KTCP have been forthcoming from key shopping centres and the District Council. There is an expectation amongst certain partners that Weavers Wharf could be making a more significant financial contribution. As a 'retail park' format the development currently does not have a marketing budget and in 2008 operated on a very low service charge. The scheme owners are, however, hosting and facilitating the Town Centre Manager Post.

Kidderminster Town Centre Website

www.kidderminstertowncentre.com is almost complete. It proved challenging to get the Town Centre Partnership's agreement, enthusiasm and sign off for this project. The website has been up and running since the end of October but has been taken down temporarily, once the website is back up we will be marketing it through the local press and radio.

Events

The Town Centre Manager has been instrumental in various events working with colleagues in the Community and Partnerships Division and PHE.

Challenges

For the main part the Town Centre Management role is about co-ordinating partnership activity. This involves working closely with other colleagues and teams in the Council this has worked particularly well with Food Safety/Environmental Health, Licensing, Community Housing, Community Safety, the Hub and Parks, but for technical reasons has proved more difficult with Car Parks, Street Scene and the Events Teams. The new Council structure should help break down some of these communications difficulties.

Pedestrianised Streets – Liaison role with the police about concerns around the vehicle movement in the pedestrianised areas and sent delivery zone maps out to all businesses at the Police's request.

Parking - Concerns have also been raised about restricted parking, unloading difficulties in Black Horse Lane, Worcester St and Bridge St which I'm just beginning to explore.

CASE STUDY: Christmas 2008

The town centre Christmas tree returned after many years and at no cost to the town thanks to Cooks Garden Centre, a tree stand was designed, fabricated and donated to the town by Cavills, the electrical works were completed and certified by Parkstones and the fencing was donated by BAM Construction who is the developer of the new Debenhams store. The tree was erected and dismantled by BAM and the tree lights were donated by their associates.

In order to keep cost to a minimum it was decided by KCTP Events Group that the Christmas lights should be switched on by the Mayor, Father Christmas and 2 children. We decided to select the 2 children by running the "Best Letter to Santa" competition in partnership with Kidderminster Shuttle. BBC Hereford & Worcester sent along Howard Bentham who was excellent and promoted the Switch On event on air for us during the week leading up to the event. The TCMr working with the WFDC events team also arranged New Dimensions Choir to sing Christmas carols once the lights had been switched on. Howard Bentham arranged a number of games and the TCMr approached local businesses for prizes including SVR who donated 2 family passes for the Santa Express, the Safari Park who donated a family pass for the Santa Safari and brought Santa Elves and their Bear along to the Switch On, the Warehouse Cinema who donated 4 family cinema passes and the Glades Leisure Centre who donated 5 one month family passes and sent staff along to support the Switch On. The events team completed the first event risk assessment and briefing packs for the Lions Club Marshals.

The Light Switch On 2008 went very well with increased crowd capacity and praise from all concerned in particular Radio H&W who said "it was the best organised light

switch on they had been to". The technical side of the installation and removal of the Christmas lights went off without any problems, praise was also received from lower Worcester St, Marlborough St and Oxford St where after some planning and tweaking we managed to get the lights to flow into these streets. The clean up after the removal of the lights was also much improved on previous years. The various improvements demonstrate the added value of the TCMr working in partnership and co-ordinating.

A debrief meeting was held in early January 2009 for the 2008 Switch On. From this meeting the date for the 2009 Light Switch On was agreed as 28th November. Radio Hereford & Worcester have already been booked, along with support from the Police, Glades Leisure Centre and Safari Park. The Shuttle has been briefed and we are waiting for quotes from the staging company.

Economic Downturn

At the beginning of December we received the sad news that Woolworths would close on Christmas Eve. Many of the 80 members of staff had over 20 year's service and had never signed on, received benefits, had an interview in the last 20 years or had a C.V. They were all feeling very overwhelmed by the situation and the manager was just about keeping his head above water with the store closure. The TCMr worked with the college, job centre and Louise Hewitt Recruitment to get some help, advice and support into the store.

More generally, empty shops are a major frustration to both the public and tenants in the town centre. As well as the Agents meeting, the TCMr and Regeneration & Economic Prosperity team have been exploring other initiatives including temporary window dressing and business rate relief

Market Street – Anti-social behaviour

February 2009 - a meeting with the tenants of Market St, the Police and WFDC to discuss the antisocial behaviour currently affecting the area and the way forward.

Opportunities

Many Town Centres charge for temporary pitches for canvassers and sales to help create a sustainable income stream for their Town Centre Management and/or Partnerships. I have looked into this as an option for Kidderminster but there are complexities over control and responsibilities between WCC and WFDC and perhaps the recently adopted Street Furniture Strategy offers scope to consider this further.

I've also spoken to the Highways Liaison Officer of WCC about the 3 Lions over trading their footage and blocking the highway. I have agreed to keep him informed

of the situation and I'm currently waiting for him to return from holiday to make him aware that the situation is deteriorating again.

Kidderminster has been asked to host the ATCM regional meeting in July 2009.

Summary

We currently run on 18½ hours of town centre management and need to be realistic about what can be achieved. In order to move the town centre management position forward in Kidderminster we need to agree a realistic sense of direction, a support structure, areas of responsibilities, a budget to reflect those responsibilities and respect for the role.

In light of the challenges highlighted in this report it is suggested that a town centre audit be undertaken early in 2009/10 with a view to preparing a visionary strategy for the town centre that links with the 'Connecting Kidderminster' Regeneration Prospectus with a high level input across partner organisations. This may lead to a review of the current Partnership again in March/ April 2010 that will provide a stronger basis for a sustainable Town Centre Management regime.

We have 2 years left of the current post we need to look realistically at how we can fund the role after March 2011.