

Town Development Manager Report Spring 2024

Newton Abbot town centre continues to buck the trend of decline seen in many towns. With a vacancy rate of around 5% and a ratio of independent businesses representing around 65% of the total, this is a good position to be in and a great place to do business!

Business rates and energy bills continue to dominate the challenges for many businesses, and I use every opportunity presented to me, to lobby government on behalf of the business community about the need for a radical change on the former and support on the latter. This might be at the monthly business meetings with our MP or through the place management sector representative body, of which I am a director – the Association of Town and City Management.

We have seen government funding made available, but all too often it cannot be used for the things which towns need most and on top of this, all towns are different. For example, the 'Future High Streets Fund' and the 'Shared prosperity Fund' are both central government funds, which are currently operating and to which only Teignbridge District Council can apply. The town council is prohibited from applying directly for these funds and the range of things for which the funding can be used is often strictly proscribed by the government. I often hear people say 'they should have spent the money on xxxx'. Unfortunately, it does not work that way and it is either spend the money on the things government will allow or the alternative is not to have the money at all!

In order to really have our best foot forward, there are some things which are on my wish list. A few decades ago, some of these might have seemed laughable, as the community would have taken them for granted. These would include things like a policeman on the beat in the town centre and a local authority- funded CCTV system to keep us safe and to prevent crime. (It was however, great to see our police station open to the public again last year, after many years of it being shut.) The list features a plea for drains and gutters to be cleared of weeds and regularly cleaned and maintained. Pothole- free roads and pavements are also high on this list, as is cheap or free parking and a tourist information centre! With budget cuts everywhere, it's the nice-to- have things which go; but the nice- to- have are essential when considering what makes a town centre attractive, both for the residents who live there and those who visit. Thank goodness the town council has a small team of facilities officers, who are doing some fantastic work, filling the gaps left by the District and County councils.

What is high up on other place manager wish lists, is a department store. With the demise of Debenhams and House of Fraser, many large towns and indeed, some cities, are without a department store entirely. I was pleased to be invited to join the Mayor of Newton Abbot at a ceremony to celebrate the centenary of Austins in our town on 6th March. It was great to see the BBC and other local media there to capture the moment and it is quite something for any family business to celebrate 100 years of trading, let alone 100 years trading in a town centre!

We have some amazing community groups in Newton Abbot and once again I must pay tribute to the Community Shed, who are always so willing to help with our events.

You may have seen the standing table, created from a felled tree stump and the fantastic tintamarresque, which they created for our Easter event. They are also working on some exciting Christmas projects too, so watch this space.



Whilst you may not be surprised to know that we are working on Christmas 2024 already; before that, we have a whole range of summer events. These include our two Classic Car Shows, organised by Teignbridge Classics car club, where it's great to see cherished classic cars providing interest for shoppers in May and September.

We had the very first of our Monthly Sunday Markets in Courtenay Street on 5th May and we really thought that our luck was in when the Saturday proved sunny and bright. This tantalizing glimpse of summer was to be our last, as rain came in for much of the Sunday.

Our lovely local traders, however, all came out regardless of the unseasonal weather and provided a wonderful variety of food, produce and craft. Shoppers came out too and there was positive feedback all round.

Thank you so much to the traders and to Kris Hanson of The Plot Deli for all their hard work and we look forward to the first Sunday of every month for more local markets! I am also looking to see if we might deliver a 'Summer Nights' too this year, which if we can pull it off and find the funding for it, I know will be welcomed back.



There is consternation from a broad section of the business community about the impending traffic management scheme for Queen Street and I think it's important to reiterate here that having looked at the final proposals at the TRO stage and listened to the community, Newton Abbot Town Council objected to all but the 20mph element. If you look at the consultation documents and reports, it seems pretty clear that these proposals are not broadly supported, so it is frustrating to see them being forced through, particularly when one sees the results from consultations elsewhere, being respected.

It is disappointing that our town will not now see a multi-screen cinema being built with the Future High Streets funding. We love the 'Alex', but a large town like ours, with its growing population, needs the amenity, the flexibility and the variety which a multi-screen would bring to our leisure offer. The chosen location and design for the cinema were perhaps not widely supported, but I do hope that another opportunity might present itself in the not-too-distant future. We have a superb hospitality offer in Newton Abbot with most of our cafes and restaurants being independently owned and run and we have an enviable array of bars and pubs too; however 'big box leisure' is an important part of a contemporary town centre economy and we must look for an opportunity to add this to our list of attractions. Talking of hospitality, do check out 'Deo Gloria' in Bank Street. The community has watched progress on the former Ridgway's shoe shop premises and the doors are finally open on this large bright contemporary café and community space. Bank Street is now well and truly on the map with its choice of eateries! Look out too for the transformation of the retail unit next to the Union pub. Local investors are returning this to its former glory as two affordable retail units, with the added addition of office space above and it will be great to see our famous Mrs B's Bonnets in a ground floor setting in this historic part of town.

Looking at other new businesses – a warm welcome goes to 'Osteo and Physio' and soon-to-open. 'Maria Burns Aesthetics and Beauty' at 66 and 108 Queen Street respectively. Both of these independently owned businesses are responding to the growing demand for health, beauty and wellness services in the high street and for which Queen Street is fast becoming a destination. I would love also to take this opportunity to wish Sandra Benson of D&S sewing machines, a well-earned, relaxing and enjoyable retirement and to congratulate the team at 'Split Endz' for the magnificent transformation of their new premises at 165 Queen Street. It's great to see all this private investment in Queen Street and now that some of the empty units in Market Walk are being marketed, I'm pretty sure that we will have some new occupiers in this little shopping centre very soon. The artist's impression of how the market hall will look, once it has been refurbished were shown recently and I understand too that the planning application for the changes to this listed building will be submitted shortly. We have a fantastic nighttime economy with our existing bars, pubs and restaurants, many of which offer live music; I personally, therefore, cannot see that offering more of the same will satisfy a particular demand; however, perhaps we might gain a greater understanding of how the market hall will operate, when the plans are revealed. I think everyone is agreed that the retail markets should play a dominant role in this historic pannier market and of course the market square itself. I wish our indoor market traders luck in their various temporary premises and I'm sure that shoppers will seek them out and continue to support them.

On a final note, after decades of lying empty, there might be a possibility of a development commencing on the disused site in Wolborough Street, opposite Austins furniture store. This privately owned plot of derelict land has rather blighted this part of town and now that planning has been approved, it hopefully will not be too long before the site is sold, and a developer will get spades in the ground! I have been saying this for 15 years and so let's hope this is a lucky year!

Thank you for shopping locally and I hope to see you in town.