

ST EDMUNDSBURY BOROUGH COUNCIL

BURY ST EDMUNDS AREA WORKING PARTY

**Minutes of a meeting held on Tuesday 5 February 2013 at 5.00 pm
in Conference Chamber West (F1R09), West Suffolk House,
Western Way, Bury St Edmunds**

PRESENT: Councillor R D Everitt (Chairman)
Councillors Chung, Cockle, Farmer, Mrs Mildmay-White,
Nettleton, Oliver, Rout, Mrs Stamp Mrs P A Warby

BY INVITATION: Councillor Buckle
Mr Colin Roberts, the arc development
Mr Mark Cordell, Bid 4 Bury

13. Substitutes

No substitutions were declared.

14. Apologies for Absence

No apologies for absence were received.

15. Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 9 July 2012 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

16. Declarations of Interests

Members' declarations of interest are recorded under the item to which the declaration relates.

17. Economic Viability of the Town Centre

The Chairman welcomed Mr Colin Roberts, Shopping Centre Manager, the arc, and Mr Mark Cordell, Chief Executive, Bid 4 Bury, to discuss with the Working Party issues relating to the economic viability of Bury St Edmunds Town Centre.

Mr Roberts reported that 2012 had been a harder year for retailers in the arc although this had been a reflection of the national situation. There had been a loss of two businesses from the development but two new retail outlets had opened. There had been some encouraging signs as trading over the Christmas period had been better than anticipated. The number of visitors, 8 million, during the year was higher than the national average for comparable developments. Events had been staged in Charter Square in connection with the Queen's Jubilee and the Olympics and in support of the Breakthrough for Cancer charity. There also had been co-operation with The Apex by the live screening in Charter Square of a concert taking place in The Apex. Mr Roberts suggested that 2013 would again be a challenging year for retailers and that support was needed to reduce the burden of energy costs, Business Rates and car parking charges. He advised of steps being taken to let six vacant units and also reported that these were being advertised with

local as well as London based agents. In response to a question Mr Roberts stated that the improvement he would most like to see was to the appearance of the street scene in St Andrew's Street South where part of the arc development faced the rear servicing areas of other premises. Members, in relation to the issue of car parking charges, referred to the review which had recently taken place which would simplify the system of tariffs. It was suggested that there was a misconception that the changes being made would result in an increase in charges but, overall, this was not the case. Reference was also made to the traffic calming scheme for St. Andrew's Street South which would include the provision of street furniture and planters to enhance the street scene.

Mark Cordell reiterated concerns expressed earlier and indicated that there were a number of local independent businesses which were also struggling. He advised that a recent survey undertaken had indicated that one-third of shops in the town were occupied by national concerns and two-thirds by local independent shops and professional services. By shopping category there was a good mix of 13% selling premium brands, 12% offering value brands and 75% retailing mass market items. This along with other positive factors contributed towards having a successful town. On the negative side there were currently about 50 empty shops which, despite this number being below the national average, created an adverse impression to visitors. Mr Cordell was concerned that not enough was being done to redress this situation and he was of the view that pressure should be brought to bear on the landlords of vacant shops to let these at more economical rents and that there should be a more co-ordinated approach towards this end.

Members responded by suggesting that more independent shops might consider opening on a Sunday which was now the third busiest time for trading during the week, even if this meant closing on some other weekday. It was also suggested that empty units could be utilised by 'pop up shops' for short term periods. In relation to persuading landlords to let vacant shop premises it was acknowledged that in some cases the owners were not local residents and that they relied solely on agents to let the premises at prevailing market rents. The Borough Council's Economic Development Team already worked closely with such agents regarding bringing vacant shops back into use. There was agreement that a more co-ordinated approach should be adopted towards achieving this and that a wider approach be taken to promoting Bury St Edmunds beyond a 10 mile radius of the town. It was also felt that the Mayor and Bury St Edmunds Town Council could also assist in this promotional work.

The speakers were thanked for their participation in this discussion.

18. Town Centre Vitality/Viability Indicators

The Working Party received a presentation from the Economic Development Officer who reported on shops which had newly opened in Bury St Edmunds and on figures relating to car park usage in the town from 1 October to 31 December 2012. The annual vacancy rate for shop premises was 10.1% which was below the national average of 14%.

In response to a comment made by a Member that signage in respect of newly occupied premises in Abbeygate Street appeared to be excessive and garish officers undertook to investigate this.

19. Annual Ratepayers' Events February 2013

The Economic Development Officer advised that the events had been arranged as follows:

Tuesday 12 February 2013 at Genzyme, Haverhill;
Tuesday 14 February 2013 at West Suffolk House; and
Monday 18 February 2013 at Unisurge, Newmarket.

Each event to commence at 5.30 pm. The programme for each event was outlined as follows:

- (i) Welcome by Leader of the Council;
- (ii) Business Rates - Localisation Reform;
- (iii) Opportunities for trading internationally;
- (iv) Growth Accelerators; and
- (v) Open Forum.

Members asked that details of these events be publicised in the Bulletin again.

20. Highways - Update

The Working Party received and noted Report D264, incorrectly referenced as D624, (previously circulated) which provided information on Maintenance Issues, Residents' Parking Investigations, Local Parking Issues, the St. Andrew's Street South Traffic Calming Scheme and traffic management for Glastonbury Road.

The provisional programme for surface dressing and resurfacing sites was included within the report and it was anticipated that this would commence in April 2013 although the impact of recent weather may cause some readjustments. Councillor Nettleton asked that in relation to Anglian Lane consideration be given to imposing parking restrictions in addition to the planned resurfacing work. In response to a Member's question the West Area Highways Manager advised that dressing was the most cost effective way of dealing with deteriorating road surfaces. Dressing effectively re-sealed the surface and protected against the eroding effects of adverse weather conditions, thus prolonging its life. Resurfacing was much more expensive and there were insufficient resources to undertake this in every case. Members requested that Trent Road on the Mildenhall Estate and Raedwald Drive be added to the list. In relation to residents' parking investigations Members questioned why it had to be a significant number of responders in favour before a scheme was introduced. It was explained that this was current policy and that the numbers in favour had to be 60% or over.

The Working Party was advised on the proposed local parking measures that many of these were being taken for junction protection purposes.

In response to a Member's question about possible measures to restrict parking at the West Suffolk Hospital the Working Party was advised that there were unresolved issues with land owners and the pending creation of a cycleway linking Cullum Road, Baron's Road and Hardwick Lane.

The West Area Highways Manager advised in relation to the St. Andrew's Street South Traffic Calming Scheme that there had been delays because of discussions with the National Grid over its proposals to replace gas mains in the street. Because the National Grid worked to an annual programme it was uncertain when these works would be carried out. The traffic calming works could not be delayed any longer than this Autumn and therefore officers were considering serving notice on the National Grid of the intention to carry out the scheme. The consequence of this would be that National Grid would have to undertake its works before a specific date or if it undertook them afterwards it would be required to carry out reinstatement works to the Highway Authority's specification. A Member referred to the junction near The Grapes Public House and the difficulties crossing the road at this point and suggested that a pedestrian crossing be installed as part of the scheme.

In relation to the Glastonbury Road Scheme it was suggested that Bury St Edmunds Town Council be approached to fund the proposed works to the junction with Sherborne Road.

21. Dates of Future Meetings

The Working Party agreed to change the previously approved meeting date of 7 May 2013 to Monday 13 May 2013. A date of 19 March 2013 for a future meeting had already been agreed. The following dates of further meetings were also confirmed:

Tuesday 20 August 2013;
Tuesday 26 November 2013; and
Tuesday 4 March 2014.

All meetings to commence at 5.00 pm.

The meeting concluded at 6.40 pm.

**R D EVERITT
CHAIRMAN**