

Town Development Manager Report for the Annual Meeting spring 2021

There was a time when the only 'Road maps' we were aware of were the ones produced by well know motoring organisations! We used these to get from A to B before the invention of Google maps and some of us still prefer the comfort and familiarity of a journey planned in this way. In current times though, we think of a very different thing and the government's 'Road map' has been a long-awaited beacon of light at the end of a very long and dark tunnel in the midst of our journey.

Whilst we were operating in very different ways last year, we had a better summer in the town centre, than perhaps we could have wished for. We missed our usual events, but businesses were pleased that people came out and shopped. We also managed a very successful Christmas season, with a superb display of festive lights, bringing with them a much welcome sense of normality. In line with other towns and cities, we didn't have our traditional 'switch on' event, but there was something rather lovely about walking through town and just finding them on at the end of November. It was a lovely surprise for many and thank you so much to everyone who got in touch with the town council to say so! I would also like to thank South Devon college for sponsoring our beautiful 'Tree on the Tower' and to the other local businesses, which despite the unprecedented nature of the trading year, managed to dig deep to make contributions to the cost. We even managed some successful socially distanced late-night shopping events, with live music on each of the three evenings, with additional market stalls and walk about characters. We also collaborated with the Mid Devon Advertiser and had a 'Winter Woodland Trail' which could be carried out safely over the course of December and at the end of which there were Austins vouchers for 2 lucky winners.

You might have seen me, fellow officers and town councillors out and about doing our 'pop-up' giveaways during December and you might still be wearing one of the 'snood' face coverings and the hand sanitisers might still be in your pockets? We wanted to say thank you to people for shopping locally and for supporting the high street in a practical kind of way. It was very encouraging chatting to people in town and there was an overwhelming sense of an understanding that if we want to continue to be able to 'go shopping' then we need to 'get out' of the house and 'get into town' with our credit cards and cash. To celebrate the reopening of non-essential shops and the joy of being able to visit hairdressers, barbers, and beauty salons again this April, the town council is giving away very useful re-usable fold up shopping bags to say thank you once again for supporting our town centre. You must be in it to win it though and so these bags are not available online!

Whilst it was disappointing that the lockdown was not lifted in time to give us the Easter we had hoped for, businesses, without exception, have taken the view that they would prefer to open gradually and 'for good' rather than to rush things. Our opening of non-essential shops and outdoor hospitality on 12th April was very positive and continues to be so! Much of the attraction of Newton Abbot as a town centre, revolves around the social side of things and so we are looking forward to mid-May when many will be relishing the thought of being able to sit down inside and share a coffee, a meal, or a bevvy or two with friends! I do hope that residents will feel reassured that our businesses have done everything they can to ensure the safety of their customers and I really hope people will get offline and instead pop into town.

Many businesses have used lockdown as an opportunity to spruce up, to re-think and to invest and so I'm sure that the community will continue to show the support which they did at Christmas. We have also had a flurry of new businesses which have appeared in our town centre, showing that Newton Abbot continues to buck the trend and is an attractive place to do business. I carry out a regular survey of property which is available to let in Newton Abbot town centre and the vacancy rate, despite the unfortunate disappearance of Argos and Burger King, continues to be nearly 50% lower than it is across the nation. In fact, we now have fewer vacant premises than before the pandemic! Town Centres are now not just about shopping, they are places where we get things done, where we meet both for work and for play. As more of the population continues to work from home, people have taken advantage of the opportunity to use their local centres more. Less time spent commuting means more time for other things. Many town centres have seen an uplift in footfall as people rediscover the convenience of popping into town.

In addition to the investment which individual businesses have been making, we also have the wonderful news that Future High Streets Funding to the tune of several million pounds, is coming our way. With improvements for the Market Hall and Market Square, amongst other projects, this is another boost for Newton Abbot this year.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the town council has adopted a policy of ensuring the town centre is as accessible, clean, and attractive as possible, without resorting to the use of officious posters and tape and confusing one-way systems. As a result – the community has used its common sense and it has been heartening to see the courtesy with which everyone treats each other when going about their business safely. As with Christmas, we want to make sure that we have our best foot forward in the town this season and so the beautiful planting will once again be in place this summer, with hanging baskets and displays throughout the town and formal flower beds. Businesses too will be playing their part and so a trip into town should be an uplifting experience. Newton Abbot Town Council has also been busy ensuring that the public realm is clean and tidy. You may have seen our staff out with the jet washer and weed blaster during lockdown and so every effort is being made by the town council to make ours a town centre to be proud of.

We hope to be resuming some town centre events in late summer but in the meantime, following the success of our own little trail a couple of years ago, we will be partnering with Dartmoor National park once again this spring with a new Moor Otters Trail. 6 cheeky otter and cub sculptures will be found throughout the town centre and this is a lovely activity for families to enjoy and which we know will bring additional footfall into Newton Abbot. Do go to the website for more information on this great initiative! <https://www.dartmoor.gov.uk/enjoy-dartmoor/moor-otters>

I would like to take this opportunity of thanking the community for shopping locally and for supporting businesses which diversified during lockdown. There is no doubt that we need this support to be ongoing and not just a 'flash in the pan'. I have every confidence that as a nation, we have not lost our love of the activity of 'going shopping' and I feel encouraged that many have in fact fallen in love once again with their town centres. There are some exciting things happening in the near future and so there is every reason to see that future as being rather a rosy one!

