

TOWN DEVELOPMENT MANAGER REPORT – ANNUAL TOWN MEETING APRIL 9TH 2022

I am writing this report on the day that the government has announced that all international travel restrictions will be removed from March 18th. I have a holiday abroad booked and so whilst I may have to complete additional paperwork for my outward journey, I can look forward to spending my final days holiday abroad, not agonising over locator forms but fully enjoying the break. This seems like one of the final milestones as we come out of the pandemic and who knows – next year, the words Covid and ‘Pandemic’ may not feature in my reports at all!

The last twelve months have proved as challenging as the first year of the pandemic, with businesses having to really think outside the box to negotiate the changes in consumer behaviour. Fortunately, we have seen few business casualties and when I carried out my latest survey of commercial property available to let in Newton Abbot town centre, I was very encouraged. We have around 300 businesses which trade here and only a dozen or so commercial properties which are available to let! If this were the housing market, the estate agents would be wringing their hands at the lack of availability.

The town is quieter than we would perhaps like, but this is the case across most of the country as members of the community take their time, considering how and when a return to ‘normal’ is appropriate for them.

However, just as we were hoping for an uplift, the very real spectre of a rise in the cost of living and war in Ukraine bring another upsetting dimension to our daily lives. All of this is affecting the ‘pound in our pocket’ and businesses are needing to really step up to the plate to ensure resilience in these difficult times. Business grants have been available (and thank goodness for those!) but they have not gone far enough or covered the whole of the business community.

We have had some good news stories in the last twelve months though. I have been pleased to stand alongside the Mayor, who has been busy cutting ribbons. A warm welcome goes to ‘Greenlight Mortgages’, ‘Simply Green Estate Agents’ and ‘Meddy Grill’ to name just a few businesses which have invested in premises in Queen Street this year. It was fantastic to see our local newspaper, the MDA, open an office in Courtenay Street in March and ‘The Foot Store’ will be opening just opposite them any day now. The former Ridgeways shop in bank Street will have new owners soon and it was fantastic that Mr Austin purchased the former M&S building in March too. The DWP will remain as a temporary tenant in the building, but once they leave, we all look forward to seeing Austins expand into that space, thus ensuring the correct balance of retail in our Primary Trading area.

The development site in Wolborough Street has been a blight within our historic Clock Tower Quarter for over a decade and over the years I have liaised with the various owners to try to resolve some of the issues. It was with joy therefore that I learned of the impending sale of the land to a local developer. There was planning permission given 3 years ago, but unfortunately this has lapsed, and a new application is under way to construct the same building. Fingers crossed; we might see work starting there very soon! It is great to be able to tick this final eye sore off my list and brilliant news that we will have more town centre residential accommodation to ensure the vibrancy of the town. I was also very glad to see that there are moves to put the former Tuckers Maltings into a great new leisure use, whilst respecting its historic features. There are many too, who are excited to see the return of ‘Maltingsfest’ in Osborne Park this spring.

We see the return of events to the town centre this year, with a program which includes Easter, May Day, the Queens Platinum Jubilee, and the Carnival to name but a few. The town council continues to do its bit on cleaning and greening and making the town centre attractive. In addition to the summer planting, there will be festive bunting and we hope to have celebratory flags too, where the town council will be replacing existing flag mounts, which have deteriorated on buildings. The new stainless-steel holders will be properly mounted and tested so that we can truly 'put the flags out' this summer!

Times are tough for everyone at the moment and so I continue to offer support to local businesses and try to identify ways in which we can attract more footfall into the town centre and generally improve the visitor experience. I would like to acknowledge the work of NAST here, as the towns security team headed up by Tom Hirst, does a superb job in keeping locals and visitors safe. They are the silent heroes, whose work is of immeasurable importance not just to business but to the community as a whole and I think we are very fortunate to have their experience and commitment. As well as working with NAST, I also work with a whole host of organisations which carry out vital work in the community, including the Rotary, Community Transport, the CIC, and CAB. I am always pleased to 'add power to the elbow'!

Two years ago, we learned that Newton Abbot would be receiving over £9m of Future High Streets Funding investment. As the Town Development Manager and the person who is perhaps best placed to understand what measures might be required to ensure the resilience of the town centre, I was rather saddened not to have been invited to input into Teignbridge District Councils plans. However, having learned that most of the funds were to be targeted on TDC owned assets, I understood their reasons for keeping deliberations 'in house'. However, I always have a list of projects which I feel will benefit the town and continue to try to identify ways of funding these projects.

You may have seen that we have refurbished the large town information maps which sit in each of the car parks and another project, which we are working on is the production of a visitor guide. Tourism is important, not just for 'resorts' but for towns and cities in general. More and more people, having had a taste of the staycation during the pandemic, realise that it's just as much fun to explore one's own country as it is to travel abroad. As we think about our town guide, we realise just how much Newton Abbot has to offer!



The Mayor, Cllr Mike Joyce at the opening of Simply Green.

Deputy Mayor, Cllr Carol Bunday holding the ribbon at Meddy Grill.



The Mayor, Cllr Mike Joyce with the Town Crier, Nigel Kenneison in the background at the opening of the new MDA Offices