

Agenda Item No: 13
Report To: Cabinet
Date of Meeting: 13th July 2017
Report Title: Town Centre Annual Report
Report Author & Job Title: Jo Wynn-Carter - Regeneration Manager (Town Centre)
Portfolio Holder Cllr Graham Galpin
Portfolio Holder for: Corporate Property



Summary: This report documents the achievements and projects delivered in the town centre by the Regeneration Team with support from officers across the council, and how the delivery has had a positive impact on the town in terms of footfall, vacancy rates and consumer confidence.

Key Decision: NO

Significantly Affected Wards:

Recommendations: **The Cabinet is recommended to:-**

- I. Note the report and the considerable progress made in reinvigorating Ashford town centre as a whole.
- II. Note the significant positive change in fortunes of Park Mall shopping centre since members had the vision to instruct the council to acquire it.
- III. Agree to deliver further phase 2 of the business-mentoring programme to support independent businesses at a cost of £10,000

Policy Overview: N/A

Financial Implications: An additional £10,000 for the phase 2 of the business mentoring programme.

Legal Implications

Equalities Impact Assessment Not required

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Introduction

1. As members are aware, a number of initiatives have been undertaken to support Ashford's town centre and reinvigorate it in the last couple of years. Notably, these include:
 - a. The launch of the UK's first digital high street, LoveAshford.com, this promotes town centre businesses, guides shoppers to offers and deals, and contains valuable commentary in the form of regular blogs that highlight new businesses and how Ashford town centre can be the destination for those wishing to be part of the latest fashion trends
 - b. The acquisition of Park Mall Shopping Centre as a direct result of residents' concerns that it was tired and rundown, and its subsequent transformation through the drive and impetus provided by the council and the collective will of its new, quality independent retailers
 - c. The opening of Made in Ashford, which sees multiple start-ups test their business on the High Street in a unique shop, which is run by the council
 - d. The launch of the Healthy High Street Programme
 - e. The Business Mentoring Scheme run by the council to specifically support independent businesses
 - f. The hard work of the Town Centre Action Team (T-CAT) and the council's in-house grounds maintenance team Aspire Landscape Management, whose work in the town and on the floral displays in Ashford has been much admired and the result of positive local media coverage
2. This report sets out the way in which this has been delivered in detail and illustrates how these projects have contributed to the improving health of Ashford Town Centre. It also seeks an endorsement from members on recommendations for the future to ensure that the council continues to reduce vacancy rates and supports businesses to thrive in a competitive environment.

Background and Achievements

3. In April 2016, less than one year after Ashford Borough Council's acquisition of Park Mall Shopping Centre, Ashford was included in a prominent article in the *Guardian* newspaper, documenting its increased footfall statistics, which showed Ashford bucking the national trend. The increase in occupied units in Park Mall Shopping Centre was also considered to have begun to have a positive impact on the town centre as a whole.
4. In May 2016, Ashford Borough Council launched the Community Toilet Scheme to improve facilities for shoppers and visitors in the town centre. The town centre regeneration team worked with colleagues in Environment and Land Management to sign up businesses, offering far more choice for

residents and visitors to the town centre. All businesses taking part in the scheme are now promoted through Loveashford.com.

5. Ashford Farmers' Market,(supported by TCAT) which is now three years old and firmly fixed in the calendar on the first Sunday of every month, helped to launch the Ashford Heritage Trail with a heritage stand at June 2016 market. This trail is also promoted through Loveashford.com.
6. In June 2016, Snap Jewellery, an independent Jewellery shop opened in Park Mall Shopping Centre. This is another example of an independent retailer bringing something truly unique to the town centre. The arrival of Snap Jewellery clearly indicated that businesses continue to trust the trading environment in Ashford and recognise the support and guidance that the council's town centre regeneration team affords them.
7. In July 2016, Ashford Borough Council announced that since purchasing the shopping centre in June 2015, when one third of the 33 units were vacant, there was much to be proud of. Due to the council's ongoing work, over half the empty units had been successfully filled and many existing businesses were noting the increased momentum behind Park Mall and renewing their leases. The rejuvenation directly corresponded with an improving customer spend in stores such as Wilko and other major stakeholders in the town centre.
8. Made in Ashford continues to be a key element of Ashford Borough Council's belief that independent shops should be the spine of the reinvigorated Park Mall and create a unique selling point (USP) for Ashford town centre. The possibility and viability of such a shop is due to the success of Popup Ashford, which was part of Popup Britain, a national campaign to allow start-up businesses to test the high street.
9. Made in Ashford celebrated its first birthday in October 2016 after being a successful platform for high quality innovative businesses to trade on the high street. The concept and brand was originally created by the council's town centre regeneration manager on behalf of Ashford Borough Council and continues to be a successful project. It has attracted interest from other towns, including Canterbury, Hastings, Tonbridge and Horsham, whose council officers have been to see the shop, and Ashford town centre, for themselves.
10. At a time when independent shops are considered to be in decline across the country, Made in Ashford continues to grow in popularity. Following a refit assisted by TCAT in early January 2016, the shop relaunched and has been able to promote nearly 40 local businesses, all with their own customer base, to assist footfall in Park Mall and the wider town centre.
11. In November 2016 the vacancy rate for Ashford town centre dropped to 8.8% an historic low, the lowest since the rates were first recorded in September 2008. Four years ago, and prior to the successful Portas Bid, the vacancy rate was 19%. To be able to proactively release information that Ashford's vacancy rate was below the national average of 9.5% was a significant achievement.

12. In November 2016 the regeneration team and Economic Development team worked together to bring the Festive Family Fun Day to Ashford town centre. Visitors were treated to a whole day of fabulous Christmassy events across the town centre, County Square and Park Mall which included appearances from the Snowman and The Snow Dog, music on the bandstand, Father Christmas in his grotto and much more, creating a lovely family atmosphere for all to enjoy. This event had a positive impact on the businesses and kick started Christmas shopping in the town.
13. In January and February 2017, TCAT undertook time bound work on units ensuring tenants were maintained in Park Mall Shopping Centre and to present new units ensuring leases could be offered.
14. In February 2017 the versatility of the space in Park Mall was demonstrated by the opening of the new 'One You' health shop, part of Public Health England's national campaign of the same name. One You encourages people to quit smoking, lose weight and be more active. 'One You' provides support and advice on how to lead a healthier lifestyle and the project was being watched by colleagues across the NHS with the expectation that this sort of initiative could be part of the provision of healthcare in the future. The project has enjoyed much success and its tenure has already been extended to run for an additional two years from June 2017.
15. In March 2017, the council was delighted to welcome the KM Group, which joined the growing number of businesses in Park Mall. The nationally respected regional publishing group that writes, prints and distributes *The Kentish Express*, the leading newspaper title for the Ashford borough, moved into Unit 4, opposite The Little Teapot. The professionalism in which senior executives felt the move was handled by the council ensured the continuation of the excellent relationship the council and the KM Group enjoys at all levels.
16. Also in March 2017, there was further success to report within Park Mall. A business that has been occupying a 'business incubator' space – The Record Store – relocated from its small kiosk near Wilko to a much larger unit within Park Mall. The move reflects the resurgence of vinyl and fills a natural void in Ashford where there has not been a dedicated record store for a number of years and the council is pleased by the success of the store.
17. Footfall has increased in Park Mall by 8% comparing like-for-like figures. The positivity generated by new businesses continuing to move into the centre has led to six existing retailers renewing their leases.
18. Park Mall was not purchased as a commercial asset to generate an income stream, certainly in the immediate short-term. However, the ability of the council to turnaround the fortunes of a shopping centre that had 11 empty units and many that has been empty for 8 years, securing occupiers and create a new vibe with independent retailers forming its backbone, has substantiated the council's astute commercial approach. Furthermore, it has illustrated the competencies the council has in-house to conclude such important agreements with businesses, all of whom continue to be supported by the regeneration team and are proactively championed through LoveAshford.com.

19. Due to the strength of Ashford's project delivery in the town centre, the regeneration manager (town centre) submitted an application to be part of the Business in the Communities Healthy High Street (HHS) Programme. The programme originally launched in April 2014 and assisted nearly 70 towns in ensuring they were economically healthy.
20. In the final year of the programme, Ashford's application was accepted and on a practical level participation in the programme further enhanced the work that was already being undertaken to reduce vacancy rates and increase job creation. Additionally it helped to increase the overall number of town centre sales, enhancing the growing feeling of all stakeholders having a sense of pride in the high street.
21. Being part of the HHS campaign has been the catalyst to helping the council work collaboratively with major stakeholders in the town, including Marks & Spencer, Wilko, Boots, Greggs and Santander who are all partners of the programme. The programme ends in June 2017 and the council now has strong business partners meeting on a regular basis and collaborating to deliver events.
22. Free high street parking was trialled following a request by members of the HHS programme for the council to support businesses and the night-time economy. The scheme was piloted for six months allowing visitors to North Street and Bank Street to park their cars free after 6pm Monday to Saturday and for free all day on Sunday. This pilot has been successful and did support the night-time economy. The feedback from business owners was overwhelmingly positive with increased footfall and covers reported in restaurants.
23. In July 2016, ABC worked with the IBD Group to offer local independents across East Kent the chance to take part in a free business-mentoring programme. The programme launched and 20 Ashford and Tenterden businesses took part in group sessions. Followed by one-to-one sessions that were tailored to their individual business.
24. Prior to the programme launch the regeneration team had worked on many areas including:
 - Building solid relationships with retailers and more trust. This has led to a better understanding of the type of support required
 - Emphasising that the regeneration team has the vision and retail experience to identify what is needed for the town centre and that it is able to provide the support required by retailers and businesses
 - Illustrating that the regeneration team has a clear strategy for Park Mall Shopping Centre and the town centre and has effected this
 - Launching the brand 'Love Ashford' with a unique website and social media platform to communicate what is happening in the town centre to residents and visitors, providing an avenue for retailers to have a better online presence and create traffic to their own platforms
 - Communicating a consistent message regarding the council's long-term aspirations to improve the town, encouraging business owners to engage with the process and be fully involved with the town's future
 - Communicating strongly the 'Big 8' projects, and other town centre investment projects (currently estimated to be £360m of the £519m)

being invested in the borough as a whole) that will drive footfall and strengthen the new life being breathed into the town centre, which is of course securing funding streams to benefit the borough as a whole

25. This regeneration groundwork created a great introduction for the Business Mentoring programme, and to the mentors, allowing them to work on a variety of areas of mentoring:
 - Delivering specific support for independent businesses
 - Harnessing technology, online content and social media
 - Identifying the business model for individual businesses
 - Developing marketing and branding
26. The regeneration team have been working closely with Environmental and Land Management and members on the character and appearance of the tow. Extensive work has been undertaken in St Marys Churchyard, Taylors Passage and St Johns Lane to improve entrances into the town and in creating a sense of place for different areas of the town. This work will be expanded upon in the next 12 months.

Phase 2 Business Mentoring Programme

27. Following the positive feedback we have received from retailers involved with the original 'Minding your own Business' programme, a recommendation is put forward to members to deliver phase 2 of the original Business Mentoring programme to include interventions helping steer independent businesses away from potential closure in an increasingly competitive market. In June 2017, it was announced that Ashford's vacancy rate was at a new all-time low of just 8.8%, again below the national average.
28. Members are asked to note that 58% of shops in the town centre are strong, quality independents. This number is double that of independent businesses found in town centres nationally. While this is a positive outcome and demonstrates that together, Ashford has created a point of difference, it must be considered that independent businesses are more likely to require business support and have a higher failure rate in the short to medium term.
29. One of the businesses on the original programme, Jane's Boutique, gained the confidence to expand into larger premises from its original business incubator space. The regeneration team's close communication with both the mentors and all the businesses enabled interventions to take place to support businesses with issues unique to them at an early stage and the monitoring of processes for future progress also supported.
30. Jane's Boutique has since relocated within Park Mall on a long-term lease and has expanded its product range to include more children's wear, women's footwear, children's footwear and plus sizes. It has also started to stock homewares, all of which is proving very successful.
31. Supporting businesses and improving opportunities for growth, helping them gain confidence to deal with future challenges, including the threat of online shopping, by improving their social media and digital marketing skills. These are all areas in which we can make a real difference.
32. The town centre regeneration team has produced a social media best practice guide entitled 'Change the way your customers shop'. This document assists

businesses giving them advice when using Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. This is proving very successful with businesses sharing their content in the business community and via Loveashford.com.

33. Members are therefore asked to approve the delivery of an additional phase of the mentoring programme that will seek to retain Ashford's point of difference and harness the momentum that is so clearly building across the high streets of the borough.

Portfolio Holder's Views

34. This report demonstrates the strength of the influence that the council's team have had in the revitalisation of Ashford town centre. I am very proud of the achievements of the officer team and their ability to create a new and inclusive vigour into relationships between businesses and ourselves.
35. The purchase of Park Mall has been vindicated in that it has provided a new and thriving aspect to the town. It has not been an easy progress and I congratulate officers on their success in what is now a centre which is practically full.
36. The provision of business support has been vital in helping many smaller businesses and the retained partnership with business advisors is commended to the Cabinet. However we must recognise that our own Town Centre Regeneration Manager and her colleagues have provided considerable one-to-one support.
37. We should be very proud of Love Ashford, our digital high street. It is the model most copied but never equalled by other towns.
38. The look of the town centre with its greater cleanliness and good order owes much to TCAT, Aspire, our own officers and litter patrols. This has been achieved with the additional assistance of KCC. Much of this has been mediated by my colleague Cllr Barrett.
39. The success of Ashford's new vitality is both a driver and a beneficiary of new developments in the town and we look forward to the completion of the Big 8 to raise the profile of Ashford even further.
40. I commend the recommendation and ask that Cabinet note the progress made.

Contact and Email

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