

Forum Event Report

Creative High Streets

20th June 2013

This event was organised in partnership with Arts Council England, South Somerset District Council and Taunton Deane Borough Council, and was funded by the High Street Innovation Fund.

Please note these are my notes, taken down at speed in between sorting out the buffet lunch for 70. Some of the ideas and initiatives mentioned are suited for smaller towns, some for larger places. A buffet of ideas!

Cllr Mark Edwards from Taunton Deane welcomed everyone. 'Its about towns making people want to go to them (and always has been).' Competition from internet, supermarkets and out of town retail means the High Street has to adapt (more so now than ever). 'Towns have to offer an engaging experience – culture has a part to play in this'. Festivals & events important – Taunton have just had their first SomerFest one day festival. Trying to build on the popular Torch relay event. Also planning a Shakespeare Festival, and promoting widely on internet.

Caroline Corfe from Arts Council England introduced the day's programme; she mentioned some research by the Centre for Economic & Business Research that shows the economic value of the arts.

Liskeard's Secret Fridays. Prompted by the Town Team (Liskeard is a Portas Pilot town), local young people are working with the social enterprise Real Ideas Organisation to engage younger people in the regeneration of the town.



Organised three events, inc a parade, a masquerade ball and a themed film night.

Identified that there was a lack of food available in the early-evening; a pizza takeaway supplied the three events and has adjusted their hours. Now working with Town Team and the community arts festival on future projects. Future funding uncertain, but talking with touring theatre companies.

[Presentation here.](#)

Ben Barker and George Grace spoke about the Bedminster Portas Pilot.

Their High Street is the community centre; lots of social contact along with the retail. The aim is to make buying more fun.

Meanwhile Use on empty shops – don't waste your time on properties owned by banks or investment funds – talk to independent landlords. Finding out who these are involves asking – local Business Rates team may help.

They spent some of their £100,000 Portas funding on light installations on two prominent buildings to encourage the night-time economy. Also used the funds to deliver a BID (Business Improvement District) which will give some funding for enhancement & promotion projects for 5 years (BIDS need a reasonable number of businesses within the area, so are not suited to smaller towns). Theirs now has a collective buying group to save businesses money.



They made a 'Pocket Park' from an unused dead-end of a street. Didn't try to change the Highway – just added wooden planters, some plants and seating. Can be used by street performers.

Had artists design 80 3-D bugs which are sited in various places across the area. Young people helped to make some of these. George felt they could do more to engage with young people; and that having professional expertise to support/facilitate Town Teams was essential, as have to deal with many Council Dept's, businesses, other stakeholders, press and residents, and generally local business people on Town Teams don't have the time to deliver this.

[Presentation here. www.bedminstertownteam.org](http://www.bedminstertownteam.org)

Lucy Ball, SW Advisor for Town Teams, reconfirmed the poor state of retail in town centres (1 in 7 vacant units across England, 218 chains gone in last 6 years); how we keep up with the changes in shopping behaviour is the key. We have an ageing population – so town centres need to appeal to older people as well as to younger people. Also need to engage with the community who use the High Street – and use positives i.e. attractions/events/promotions not ‘use it or lose it’ negative messages.

Are people invigorated when they visit town centres? Or is it dull? Successful town centres need more than just shops, they need to be clean and tidy, and have convenient parking. It needs to be a quality experience. Its tough asking volunteers to do this extra work (whether via Towns Teams, Chambers or other channels).

Is shopping becoming a secondary activity in town centres? [Presentation here.](#)

Eddie Bridgeman, Director, Meanwhile Use CIC gave his top tips on how to get temporary uses into empty shops. Don’t fight Change of Use hassles with the planners – work with what you have. The main challenges are;

Landlords – knowing how to get hold of them; local landlords know the town best, so have a more realistic view (generally). Make it easy for them; outline the offer – ‘here is your lease, terms, typical costs’ etc. Pop-ups tend to be good tenants and also more likely to act as an agent.

Permissions – take the easiest path

Paying for stuff – make this clear to tenant what they have to cover (electricity, signage etc)

Presentation here.

www.meanwhilespace.com

Rachel Lewis, Regeneration Manager, North Somerset Council was the project manager for the Weston-Super-Mare’s seafront enhancements, securing funding from a variety of sources and coordinating delivery of over £30m of sea defence, public realm, highway and transport improvements. She stressed the importance of early community engagement. [Presentation is here.](#)



Lia Ghilardi, Director, Noema Research and Planning. Lia practices ‘cultural planning’, which looks at the resources of a place (it’s people, character, buildings, events etc) – it’s distinctiveness. Every place has its own culture. The ‘High Street Crisis’ is an opportunity to show how we can build better communities and create new opportunities for people. High Streets (and towns) are ecosystems not machines. The places we live are for the dwellers, not primarily for commerce. Successful places have resilience (ability to adapt/change), are inclusive (open to all inhabitants) and authentic (distinctive – the opposite of the clone town).

She gave the example of the regeneration of Mantua in Italy, which had many small businesses but little tourism. She took a delegation to Hay-on-Wye, and Mantua now has a Literary Festival that has sparked other initiatives.

‘How can we offer more to the local community? Practice Collaborative Urbanism’.

www.noema.org.uk

Questions to a panel of the speakers

Q David Evans, Economic Development Manager, Taunton Deane Borough Council - Where are the drivers coming from for major transformational projects?

Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) – get your project onto the Local Authority CIL List. New Homes Bonus possibly – though some concern over how little of this is actually getting through to communities (some Local Authorities using it to support their existing services). Possibly the LEP – Bob Watters, Glos Market Towns Forum, explained there are real opportunities from their LEP for town regeneration projects. A former RDA Officer felt that longer term, consensual partnerships were far better than trying to fit the 5-year priorities of whichever Government is in power.

Q Charles Wood, Chair, Vision for Frome – At what size does a town drop off the LEP’s and Somerset County Council’s radar? Frome is Somerset’s 4th largest town and doesn’t see anything like the investment that Taunton, Bridgewater and Yeovil get.

No direct answer to this, but suggestions for towns to go after the European Social Fund (via the LEP) or DEFRA for smaller towns. Put big ideas onto the LEP’s table – though there was some frustration at the narrow focus of our LEP. Cllr Paul Bull (Exeter City Council) mentioned Neighbourhood Plans can gain leverage (Exeter St. James NPlan example). Towns with Nplans get 25% of CIL, those who don’t get 15%. Exeter feels it is left out of the LEP too! You must ensure New Homes Bonus is used on communities and not to secure LA’s futures; difficult as the government now requires part of its Council core funding provision to come from NHB entitlement. CIL is perhaps a better bet?

Q Tony Bishton, owner, Provender Deli & Cafe, South Petherton – why can’t we improve the public realm in our town centres when Weston have shown what can be done?

Partly down to North Somerset being a unitary; Rachel sits in the same team as Highways. I flagged up our recent meeting with SCC Highways and reps from 3 town schemes – and that

SCC Highways doesn't see town centre public realm improvements in Somerset as a priority. Rachel Lewis offered to talk with SCC Highways about how they managed it in Weston.

Many thanks to all participants.

Matt Day
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www.somersettownsforum.org.uk