

Ledbury Economic Development Investment Plan
Notes of Town Zoom Meeting
Thursday 17th December 2020 6.00 to 8.00 on Zoom

Some 15 people attended the first stakeholder Zoom meeting. It included representatives of Ledbury Town Council, Herefordshire Council, local businesses, the voluntary sector, local investors and tourism attractions, Great Western Railway, land owners and local commercial agents. There were a number of apologies, a further twenty people had been engaged, a number had given comments and wanted to be involved in the process going forward. The meeting was also attended by representatives of Rose Regeneration the consultants supporting the development of a Ledbury Economic Investment Plan

1. Welcome and Introductions

Cllr John Bannister opened the Meeting thanked and welcomed all for joining.

Cllr Bannister set the context for the discussion which was he said was an exciting opportunity to enable the Town to bring forward projects to support long term economic development and sustainability for Ledbury.

Cllr Ellie Chowns, Cabinet Member for Environment, Economy and Skills at Herefordshire Council, introduced the Market Towns Investment Project as a means to develop a long term vision for Ledbury with projects that would support the delivery of that vision over the short, medium and long term.

Within the context of Covid-19 and a post Brexit future Cllr Chowns stressed that this process is not about producing a fixed strategy, but one that would evolve over time to reflect and respond in a sustainable way to the nature of a changing economic, social and environmental landscape.

2. Background and Context

Rob Ewing (Herefordshire Council) positioned the Market Towns Investment Project (MTIP) as a practical step in supporting the Economic Development of the 5 Herefordshire Market Towns. Each town plan would deliver and Economic Development Investment Plan, developed by local stakeholders to reflect local issues, priorities and opportunities. He stressed the critical role of the market towns to the Herefordshire economy and the timetable for the delivery of the Investment Plans by the consultants Rose Regeneration including:

1. The development of a Town vision
2. Identification of potential projects to drive the vision, each ranked in terms of deliverability, cost and timescale.
3. A first draft investment plan to be available by the end of January 2021 for validation.

3. Local Evidence base and data sets

Paul Sampson of Rose Regeneration provided an overview of the key economic data for Ledbury that has been produced by Rose Regeneration as an evidence base supporting their work. (Full slides attached).

In summary the data suggests that Ledbury:

- Is less deprived than England on all measures apart from Barriers to Services
- Has a similar population to other market towns apart from Kington. Population just over 10,000. 9% more over 65s than the national average.
- Has a smaller stock of jobs per head than the national average.
- Has seen an increase in benefit claimants by 19%
- Has seen a loss of 625 jobs between 2015-18. Distinctive sectors: manufacturing, wholesale/retail, transport, accommodation and food, professional services, arts and entertainment.
- Has a higher proportion of higher value properties than the national average.

Discussion highlighted the importance of local knowledge in interpreting the data – in particular in relation to job losses, where local knowledge would help to identify the causes including business relocation or other economic factors that could support projects going forward (employment land).

Further understanding in relation to Barriers to Services indicators would be required to understand the nature of this as the definition is quite wide.

4. Town vision and projects

Cllr Bannister opened the session by asking why the early, initial discussions included a specific mention of £13.6 million for projects across the Market towns, but that now this has been downplayed and the message is that projects will need to look at other sources of funding.

Cllr Chown responded that the £13.6 million related to a budget line within Herefordshire Council ring fenced for the purpose of investment in the market towns, that this budget line is still in the Councils' budget and being defended and would need to be flexible over a number of years to reflect the timescale required for projects to come forward for delivery. Cllr Chowns further explained that this 'fund' would be from prudential borrowing and would therefore be suitable for those capital projects that are able to repay such investments.

Cllr Chowns stressed the need for strong business cases for each project, and as part of the Market Towns Investment Project the consultants (Rose Regeneration) would identify a range of potential funding sources appropriate to each project, including the potential to access the £13.6 million allocation.

Cllr Bannister listed the emerging projects that had been produced as a starting point for the project but stressed that this event and further consultation with local stakeholders in the New Year would determine the eventual project listing. (Initial list attached).

The project list includes:

1. Delivery of additional parking, ground level access, station facilities and business incubator units at Ledbury station.

2. Traffic calming and shared space public realm scheme covering Ledbury High Street and sections of Bye Street and The Homend, as per the requirement identified in Ledbury's Infrastructure Delivery Plan.
3. Asset Transfer of Master's House and St Katherine's Car Park linked to local lead on delivery of public realm landscaping and additional service devolution for delivery at parish level.
4. Support to the Heritage High Street project – pump-priming delivery of the Heritage Multiple Asset Transfer plans developed by Herefordshire Council under the BIS grant scheme in 2014, to include the creation of a DDA compliant heritage hub in Ledbury's iconic Market House.
 - Barratt Browning Institute
 - Market House
 - Town Council Offices
 - Butcher's Row Museum
 - Burgage Hall
 - Heritage Museum
5. Options for opening up and promoting employment plots on Ledbury's viaduct housing site and designated employment land at Little Marcle Road/Heineken employment site.

Project discussions focussed around the following key themes:

➤ **Employment Land**

There was a strong focus of discussion on the availability of employment land and commercial property in the town.

It was stated that there is no ready supply of employment land available for local businesses to either grow into or for inward investors to locate in the Town. There has been no significant employment growth in Ledbury over the past 30 years, with new sites identified but not coming forward, the viaduct site being cited as an example.

The question was asked whether Ledbury's future would be characterised by employment growth, or whether it would be more likely to be a dormitory/commuter town.

It was noted that the town is very short on start-up premises, or on available sites where such facilities could be built. It was suggested that landowners are holding out for higher value housing development applications which is severely restricting the availability of employment sites.

It was also noted that some land is not within the red line zone for planning purposes. It was suggested that landowners should be encouraged to engage actively with the Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) which is looking at employment land and needs landowners to actively engage in order to identify deliverable sites.

It was stated that the Herefordshire Core Strategy is under review and keen for consultation which Ledbury should be proactive about, and with the Govt. White Paper on the National Planning Policy Framework expected soon it was possible for Ledbury to become 'master of its own fate', and to prevent un-planned housing of other developments that have not contributed to investment in community infrastructure.

To highlight the issue of employment land the question was asked where would investors build new factories etc?

The Heineken site (land owned by Heineken adjacent to its facility) was cited as a potential, and it was confirmed that discussions are underway with the land owners through the NDP work and the potential to deliver the site looks encouraging.

Costs for opening up the site were suggested to be high and would affect the potential viability of delivering it, but it was agreed that this is exactly the type of project that would be put forward through the Market Towns Investment Project and would be worked up through that process.

➤ **Attracting new business**

The group considered the potential for the town to attract small high tech businesses, potentially the type of spin off businesses from the security and defence sector.

The group was also asked to consider the potential to build on the existing manufacturing base of the town.

It was suggested by those representing commercial agents and local business demand that small start-up facilities are in high demand and could be easily filled, and that in addition, Ledbury's location within the 'security and defence triangle' covering Malvern, Hereford and Cheltenham, gives it a significant advantage as a location for these types of business starts.

The connectivity of the Town is also good in this respect. Commercial development at Skylon Park, the new University at Hereford (NMITE) were both seen as providing significant opportunity for the development of this aspect of the local economy.

There are a number of food producers within the town's rural hinterland that are seeking additional production space as their businesses grow in response to increased domestic demand. The potential for these businesses to co-locate around the Heineken facility should be explored given the potential shared requirements for bio-security and transportation.

In terms of distribution it was suggested that Ledbury can provide good connectivity via the M50/M5 corridor and that local intelligence indicates that these types of business are keener to be located in Ledbury than in Hereford for that reason. The expansion of Tewksbury was cited as evidence of the significance of this connectivity, particularly in respect of the food supply chain.

➤ **Existing employers, business growth and expansion**

The group was informed that a number of established businesses in Ledbury are actively requiring larger operating sites. Some of these businesses are having to operate across two sites which is not efficient but necessary given the lack of new employment land.

The town needs modern and well-designed commercial premises. Most existing stock, with some exceptions, is relatively poor.

The challenge is how to encourage spec developers when there has been no land since the extension of New Mills which is fully occupied.

It was suggested that there is a significant value in enabling existing businesses to expand into new premises as this releases their premises into the market and would act to encourage developers to invest in improving the existing stock to bring it up to standard.

➤ **Connectivity – Rail and local transport**

The group were informed of the success of the community fund application to GWR for improved signage to and from the rail station which was welcomed by the town traders representatives.

Accessibility to the rail station including car parking to alleviate current high levels of on-street parking and the provision of access to the southbound platform were considered a high priority and would underpin other aspects of the Town's vision, particularly in relation to connectivity that would encourage and support small business start-ups that require good access to other parts of the country including London.

It was agreed that the development of additional parking with the potential to include small business units and a retail offering a shop front for local produce would be a strong project to put forward within the investment plan with additional consideration given to the potential for improvement to the small commercial estate to the rear of the rail station.

The issue of insufficient footfall to the station and the consequent lack of central funding for improvements represented a revolving door that has meant no funding for improvements over many years. It was agreed that the project provides an opportunity for an innovative local solution to give impetus to this much needed development

➤ **Town traders**

It was noted that the dynamics of the town have changed considerably during the Covid-19 lockdown period, with more people working from home, using and relying more on the local retail and service offering.

The changes brought about from Covid are likely to be long term and will impact the town in a number of ways. In order to respond to the potential positive impacts – more local trade from those who are home-working, more people relocating from cities for quality of life, the town needs to adapt its offering and its accessibility.

A park and ride scheme, possibly with a town funded electric bus, would help to bring people in without clogging up the town with cars. The 'pop and shop' scheme demonstrated the effectiveness of changing the parking regime for all day to short term only in encouraging more effective use of parking for shopping with a high turnaround of vehicles.

➤ **Town Market**

The Ledbury Market is a regular feature of the town, but has not been maximised to its full potential to act as a focus to increase footfall in the town for local people and tourists.

There is scope to increase the number and quality of stalls and also to promote the market as a means to support local crafts.

It was suggested that much greater collaboration between the Herefordshire market towns would provide an opportunity to co-ordinate a much more effective offering and help to improve and increase the role and value of markets in the local economy. It would also mean sharing costs and expertise across the towns which would be more efficient and more effective.

5. Other observations

Given the strong focus on employment land and business development there hadn't been an opportunity to discuss tourism at any length.

It was agreed that Rose Regeneration will be establishing further sub-groups in the New Year and will be establishing a group to focus on Tourism.

6. Next steps

Rose Regeneration would summarise the discussion and circulate notes and slides to all stakeholders. There would be ongoing Stakeholder engagement on one-to-one basis as well as work to refine project Ideas/ working with small groups of stakeholders.

It was agreed that there was a need for more engagement with the tourism sector and that additional engagement with landowners would be reported back on in due course.

It was anticipated that an Outline Plan would be produced by end of January 2021 with a full Draft report by end of March 2021.

The Final report would be produced by end of May 2021 following which the investment plan would move to the funding and implementation stages

It was agreed further town Zoom meetings would be arranged as appropriate to share progress and help finalise the Plan