

TOWN CENTRE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP MEETING

Thursday 19 August 2021 at 2pm

Held remotely on Zoom

MINUTES

Present:

Accessible Stratford represented by Elizabeth Dixon

Bell Court represented by John Stacey

BID represented by Lindsey Armstrong

Royal Shakespeare Company represented by Geraldine Collinge (Chair)

Stratford-upon-Avon District Council represented by Cllr J Fradgley and John Careford

Stratford Society represented by John Scampion

Stratford-upon-Avon Town Council represented by Cllr Richard Vos and the Town Clerk, Sarah Summers

Stratford Town Trust represented by Sara Aspley (sent apologies; joined meeting late)

Warwickshire County Council represented by David Ayton-Hill and Aaron Corsi

Advent Communications represented by Adam Dent and Sam Jackson

Observer: The Mayor, Cllr Kevin Taylor

Clerk: Margo Galvin

Apologies:

Apologies for absence were received from Tim Aucott (Shakespeare Birthplace Trust); Helen Peters (Shakespeare's England); Cllr K Rolfe and Stephen Rumble (Warwickshire County Council); Colin Stewart (Town Transport Group)

1. Welcome and introductions

The Chair welcomed John Careford, Head of Place and Economy at Stratford District Council (from 23rd August) and the Council's new representative for the Strategic Partnership Group.

2. Minutes from previous meeting held on 15 July 2021

The minutes from this meeting were noted and accepted.

3. Action points – progress update

Action	Update
Lindsey Armstrong to investigate building/shopping trends and models of good practice from other bids.	Lindsey has spoken to Ben Collins who is managing the day-to-day operations of Stratforward BID. He has advised that the re-purposing of traditional retail units is being discussed country-wide currently. He is organising the British Bids annual conference in central London in November. This topic will be discussed then, along with sustainability, connected town centres and the kindness economy. The Chair would like to attend as it would be beneficial for the Partnership to be represented. Action: Lindsey will obtain further information.
Geraldine Collinge to follow up on a conversation with the Arts Council regarding project funding.	Geraldine has had one conversation. She will schedule another. This remains a live action.
Cllr Lee to create a map showing where projects need to happen	This is an agenda item for today's meeting.
Geraldine Collinge, Colin Stewart and John Scampion agreed to form a group to 'package' priority projects.	This is an agenda item for today's meeting.
Geraldine Collinge and Aaron Corsi to identify small actions to ensure continued progress	Geraldine and Aaron have had a useful conversation around piloting things around the town centre initiatives.
Geraldine Collinge, Sarah Summers and Advent Communications to meet to agree a calendar of communications activity.	A meeting is scheduled for Tuesday 24 August. The agenda will include how the Partnership shares news/information on social media.
SPG members are encouraged to share communications across their social media networks.	Ongoing.
Committee Clerk to post a link to the Town Clerk's blog on the SPG page of the Town Council website.	This has been done.
SPG to agree which meetings should be livestreamed	It was proposed that one meeting a year will be livestreamed which will sum up the Partnership's activity.
Committee Clerk to review/update SPG content on Town Council website	The Clerk has made some updates. New photos to be added. Advent Comms offered to support.

Matters arising not included in the actions

In his absence, an update from Stephen Rumble was given which noted that internal conversations have started about the Bridge St / High St public consultation. PJA have provided a proposal for delivering the consultation. Stephen has been advised that if the County Council is to deliver the scheme, it would be beneficial for any consultation to be led by the Council and fed through its decision-making processes as this will help to speed things up. Stephen envisages that the Strategic Partnership will continue to play a key role in the project's development; the bid is very much a joint activity.

It is expected that the consultation would follow a two-stage process: a further round of engagement with key stakeholders to inform the thinking around the design, followed by a wider consultation with the community. Portfolio holder approval will be sought in mid-October to consult later in the autumn.

Dave Ayton-Hill advised that the consultation may go ahead before the result is known. Government decisions are often delayed, and the consultation needs to happen whether or not the bid is successful and should not be delayed. If the bid is successful, things will need to move quickly so that the funds are used within the timescale. If the bid is unsuccessful, a consultation would take longer and other funding sources would need to be found. The Chair noted that funding decisions on the Community Renewal fund had been delayed which would likely knock on to Levelling up bid decisions.

The Town Clerk asked what would happen if the bid were successful but the public rejected the proposal at consultation stage. Dave Ayton-Hill responded that the project is subject to change post-consultation. As long as its core concept remained the same, changes could be made. If the scheme were to be rejected, the funding deal would not be signed and the project would not go ahead.

The Chair advised that she has emailed Nadim Zahawi to remind him that the Partnership needs his support for the Levelling Up bid and would also like to speak to him about its work. He has confirmed his support and his assistant will propose a date in the autumn to have a broader conversation.

Adam Dent asked if Nadim would be willing to contribute a preface to the project brochure that is being developed. This may help to attract potential developers and other funders. The Chair felt that he would support this. However, it was noted that, currently, Nadim can best support the Partnership in its push with government and in the external facing prospectus. The best time to involve him with local communications is when positive local buy-in for the project has been obtained.

John Stacey noted that obtaining the support of the key players in the town for the brochure, including the MP, would be a real positive. This will be discussed at the communications meeting on Tuesday 24 August.

The parking strategy is progressing. It is hoped that discussions around the potential options will start in early autumn.

4. Project programme update – John Scampion

The Chair, John Scampion and Colin Stewart met recently to discuss how the priority projects can be ‘packaged’ and clearly communicated to a general audience. The list of these projects, created by Colin, and representing the consensus so far, has been circulated to the Partnership.

Reflecting on the above discussion, John commented that this work on the projects needs to be seen very much as the Partnership’s; it is building on the NDP. There is goodwill in the local community for the Partnership and the time is now right to communicate the progress being made. The Partnership needs to crystallise its vision that Stratford is a viable, modern market town and a place of culture that extends beyond Shakespeare, with open spaces to be enjoyed by all. Adam Dent advised that this will be discussed at the Communications meeting.

Richard Vos noted that it will be important to manage the communications carefully. This is especially true for the Gateway project, which is still at the ‘exploratory’ stage and largely dependent on the landowner, Peter Warwick, and the Riverside project for which planning application has been temporarily withdrawn due to Environment Agency concerns. John Scampion noted that, since the District Council has submitted a bid for the Gateway project, this could be considered for inclusion in local communications.

<p>ACTION: John Careford to find out what can be shared about the District Council’s Gateway project. The bid funding decision is expected in the autumn.</p>
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The Chair noted that the Partnership should only communicate openly about those projects it feels confident about and exercise caution around projects it cannot control. John Stacey asked how the Partnership would manage a potential campaign about the conversion of former major shops into living space in the town, given that ownerships are often outside its control. The Chair advised there is no formal plan currently. Vacant properties have been identified and the next step will be to identify owners and landlords so that conversations can begin. John Stacey advised he could support this work.

Cllr Fradgley noted that planning applications for the conversion of retail properties into residential use are starting to come through. It would be useful to understand what the applicants are proposing so the projects can be linked to the Partnership’s vision. Other landlords could be encouraged to join the conversation and become part of the town’s transformation. It would be useful for the Partnership to see these applications, although it was noted they are submitted in ones and twos, making it difficult to obtain the overview. It was suggested that it would be useful for the project map (discussed under Point 5 below) to show empty property.

John Stacey commented that there are two types of property owners: current owners and those seeking to invest in the town in the future. It will be important to help future investors understand how they can achieve a return on their investment.

The Partnership confirmed that it was happy with the list of priority projects set out in Colin Stewart's document.

5. Update from project mapping meeting held on 13th August

The Chair, Cllr Fragely and Elizabeth Dixon had a positive meeting with Cllr Toby Lee and noted their thanks to him for creating the map of vacant commercial sites in the town centre (shown at this meeting). As a working document for the Partnership and subject to continuous change, it will not be included in the brochure in this format.

It was noted that some of the buildings shown on the map are currently under offer and that it might be helpful to distinguish between vacant properties that are ready to be occupied and vacant sites such as the Picture House cinema and the site on the corner of Arden Street and Greenhill Street.

John Stacey advised that the level of vacant commercial properties in the town is not high. A challenge in recent years, not specific to Stratford, is the failure of the department store model resulting in larger properties currently standing vacant. Towns are still in the early stages of repurposing retail properties. If Stratford can understand the strategies of the town's major occupiers, this would help understanding of how some of the commercial properties could be re-purposed.

John also noted that Bell Court footfall is currently 20% above 2019 levels and 35% above 2020, suggesting an increase in local shopping. He offered to share the weekly footfall figures. Lindsey Armstrong commented that Stratford BID figures are significantly down on 2019 and 2020: July 2019 = 479k; July 2020 = 317k; July 2021 = 276k (the data is sourced by tracking mobile phones; data does not indicate if/where people are spending money in the town).

Action: John Stacey to share Bell Court scheme footfall figures.

It was reiterated that it would be helpful to superimpose planning applications on the vacant properties on the map.

The Major noted that when the town exited the last lockdown there were 50 empty units. Since then, 23 have been occupied, 19 of which are independents. There are also several other buildings with planning applications in place e.g. Laura Ashley has submitted an application for nine first-floor apartments.

A second map produced by Toby Lee was shown to the Partnership. This attempts to highlight the priority projects shown on Colin Stewart's list. It might be useful for the brochure to help people understand where the proposed developments are, but it would need to be presented more simply.

6. **Touchwood, Solihull project – John Scampion** (former Chief Executive of Solihull Metropolitan Council)

Touchwood Court is a 650,000 sq feet development that opened nearly 20 years ago in the centre of Solihull. Led by John Lewis, it consists of 80 other units and restaurants. The project began in 1974 when local government was re-organised and Solihull became the seventh district in the West Midlands Metropolitan Authority area. At this time, it was not a cohesive community and lacked vision. The town had a shopping centre, Mell Square, which had been built in the 1960s and featured two lead stores: M&S and Beatties. By the 1980s the town needed a refresh. A planning application and compulsory purchase order were submitted to extend Mell Square, which was refused. The challenge was to then to refocus and develop a clear vision. The leader of the Council was very positive and provided strong political leadership at this time.

A large car park, south of the high street, was identified as a potential retail development site and this became the germination of Touchwood. The project's vision was to be based on the idea of quality and controlled through ownership of the land.

The three keys to the project's subsequent success were vision + leadership + the right opportunity and the right timing. The Chair noted that this important point should be taken through into the Partnership's project communications.

7. **Communications plan update**

The Partnership Chair and Advent Communications have drafted some wording for the Strategic Partnership vision that will serve as the brochure preface. They will meet on Tuesday 24 August with the Town Clerk to discuss which priority projects should be communicated and when; timing will be key here as each project will need substance behind it, including a clear link to the vision, before it can be communicated. Communicating too early could be damaging. It was noted that the data about property ownership, vacancies, planning applications and new openings is the type of information needed for communicating each project.

ACTION: each Strategic Partnership member organisation to provide the contact details of their Communications representative to help ensure a unified approach to communication. Information to be provided by Tuesday 24 August, if possible.

The importance of getting the communications right for the High Street/Bridge Street project was stressed as this will be critical for generating confidence within the local community and will set the bar for other project communications. Information should be drip-fed to the public so that it starts to be absorbed early on. Advent Communications noted that communications should be carefully planned, with staging points between now and the public consultation, with the County Council leading/advising on timings.

The consultation should give local people the opportunity to have their say and it avoid 'leading' questions. All options for promoting the consultation in a timely way should be used, including leaflet drops and online. The goal is to minimise negativity and maximise support.

ACTION: Adam Dent to contact Dave Ayton-Hill about consultation dates with the aim of ensuring all communications are carefully co-ordinated.

ACTION: Geraldine Collinge and Richard Vos to arrange a follow-up conversation to the Communications meeting on 24 August (RV unable to attend this).

The Town Clerk noted that as the Town Council is managing the funding of communications, further contributions may be required from the Partnership organisations. Any 'top-up' requirements will be discussed at a future Partnership meeting.

8. Dates for SPG meetings: October to December 2021

It was agreed to continue holding meetings on Thursday afternoons via Zoom and that one meeting between now and December should be face-to face at the Town Hall. The Town Clerk requested a date for this so that she can book it out. It was suggested that the December meeting could be a public meeting. Meeting dates proposed and agreed are: Thursday 21 October 2pm; Thursday 25 November 2pm and Thursday 16 December 2pm. The Committee Clerk will send out calendar invites.

ACTION: Chair and Committee Clerk to advise Town Clerk of the date of the Town Hall meeting.

9. Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the Strategic Partnership Group will be on **Thursday 23 September 2021 at 2pm** via Zoom.

The meeting closed at 3.40pm.