

## Minutes of the Stourbridge Regeneration Public Meeting

Held: 15<sup>th</sup> May at the Elton Centre, Stourbridge

### **1. Welcome**

Lynda welcomed everyone, thanking Hannah Rogers (Stourbridge Town Centre Manager), Annette Roberts (Dudley MBC senior Planning Officer), Mike Williams (Dudley MBC Director of Finance) and Sgt David Rennison (Stourbridge Police) for giving their time to attend the meeting.

### **2. Summary of Report from Hannah Rogers**

Retail - Although Stourbridge has been affected by the recession it is not all bad news. There are still businesses willing to invest in the town with five new businesses recently signing leases.

Addressing the problem of empty units in the town:

a) Stourbridge College will be using four of the empty units down Victoria Passage for the purpose of displaying students' artwork and King Edward VI College are doing the same in the Crown centre for two weeks.

b) The Council is considering looking at the possibility of using 'Window Dressing' to make the town look more attractive, making use of the windows of empty shops for advertising etc. The Council are currently considering the cost implications and are looking for possible sponsors.

### General Environment

Work has begun on the Northern Gateway, (the subway at the end of the Lower High Street) with murals due to be painted in June and July. The Council is still looking for funding for the Secret Garden part of the project including the pocket park by Heroes and the Stour Bridge.

### Events

Stourbridge Carnival – 5<sup>th</sup> July

Harvest Festival – 19<sup>th</sup> September

Christmas theme is traditional

Farmers Markets continue, some to be themed e.g. Strawberries and Cream in June

Stourbridge in Bloom will be judged in July.

Hannah is working with retailers so that where possible they can work together to promote the town

### The Bus Station

Centro are coming to Stourbridge in July to consult with the public.

Lynda asked Hannah about:

a) What 'window dressing' entailed.

*Hannah answered: that this would probably take the form of a vinyl covering on the windows of vacant premises. This would smarten up the empty shop fronts and could be used as an opportunity to promote the good things about Stourbridge.*

b) Rates. As Dudley owns the Crown centre would the Council be prepared to offer starter rates to businesses? Lynette Cutting from Stourbridge College had asked about the possibility of 'starter units'

*Les Jones replied: Dudley own the land the Crown Centre is built on but not the buildings, they are leased. Dudley pay rent up to a certain level regardless of whether or not the properties are let. Starter units might be possible but may cause undercutting of the market.*

Les Jones to make some enquiries.

c) Is there any legal means of making owners of properties in the High Street tidy up unsightly premises?

*Les Jones: Not unless they constitute a physical or health hazard.*

David Cox: Do we know who owners the various properties are in order to get permission for example to dress the windows.

*Hannah Rogers said that she would have to get in touch with the letting agents to find out although it was possible to put up external window dressing without permission.*

*Mike Williams said that he might be able to help with the names of the property owners but would need to check re data protection.*

David Cox mentioned the state the property owned by the vets in Market Street. The landlords have a legal obligation to secure the building but not to tidy the property etc.

Birmingham and Cheltenham have used 'window dressing' as information boards. Lynda asked if Hannah would consider 'input' from local residents as to what should be included for example a school competition.

## B&Q

An application for change of use has gone through. Any redevelopment will have to address traffic issues. Concerns were raised that if Aldi use the site for a store it will be outside the main town area and would not encourage people into the town. *It was pointed out that the Ryemarket was owned by Zurich Assurance, a private concern so that providing the necessary planning guidelines were followed the Council had no say in who actually occupied the premises.*

## Brighthouse

Concerns were raised by Lynda about the high rates of interest (29.9%) charged by the new store Brighthouse which is situated in the Ryemarket. The CAB and others have expressed concern about potential debt problems for people using the store. Lynda asked whether the Council could issue some kind of warning to people. Can Dudley do more to encourage sensible borrowing? *Les Jones and Annette Roberts to look into the matter. Mike Williams pointed out that Castle and Credit Union are coming to Lye. Lynda has been trying to promote it.*

## Aldi

Concerns were expressed by a gentleman that Waitrose's trade would be affected if Aldi had a shop in Stourbridge. *Hannah Rogers thought not as the stores appeal to different markets.* Another gentleman said that Aldi was the best thing that had happened to Wollaston as the other supermarkets had become more competitive with value brands etc.

There used to be an entrance to the town from the B&Q site through Boots but it was closed off for security reasons.

*Councillor Knowles: Aldi restricts the length of time customers can use their car parks for. There wouldn't be enough time to go into town as well.*

*Mike Williams: The council can stipulate a certain amount of time for free parking when planning permission is granted. Mike Williams said that he would be in favour of an access route into town from the Aldi site.*

The issue of accidents/tripping caused by the 'drop' in the block paving outside Nichols and Perks was raised. The white paint has faded and needs refreshing. *Hannah to look into the matter.*

Question raised by email: Are there any plans to encourage craft fayres into the town? *Hannah: the Farmers Market is run by SKETS. If someone wanted to run a Craft Market they would be welcomed.*

David Cox: David said that Ludlow had money for marketing, that they had a website. The site run by Colin McDonald, Stourbridge.com doesn't seem to be linked up to other sites.

*Hannah: There is no marketing budget but there is a budget for events. Stourbridge has a page on the Discover Dudley Council Website. There is also a wraparound on the Stourbridge News twice a year promoting the town.*

*Les Jones: Discover Dudley doesn't just focus on Dudley. It features all four major towns in the Borough.*

*Gentleman: Is there any news on Tesco? They are still in talks with Modus. Tesco hold the lease on the old Safeway. Councillor Knowles expects to hear something soon.*

## **Annette Roberts - Stourbridge Area Action Plan**

### **1. What is it?**

A land use document. A new style of Unitary Development Plan. Decisions on planning applications will be based on the Area Action Plan. The plan takes into consideration the assets, buildings, history of the town and the opinions of local businesses, residents etc.

**2. What will it do?** Identify and plan for opportunity areas in the town and at how Dudley can 'acquire' sites and develop them. It will protect historic assets and will give developers and investors in the town certainty. Sets out retail, residential and office opportunities for developers for next 20 years.

### **3. When is it happening?**

Early work is being done now. The Council will be looking at ideas to be mooted or discussed this spring and summer. There will be a draft document by the end of this year beginning of next. Dudley will consult widely on the plan. The Plan will be independently examined then formally adopted by DMBC.

### **4. How can people get involved?**

There will be plenty of opportunities for people to get involved: workshops, sessions in the town will be taking place in the next two years.

*Lynda will contact people to see whether they would like to sign up for the newsletter. The time frame set out by the government is three years from start to finish.*

**If you would like to sign up to receive Dudley Council's newsletter about the Stourbridge Area Action Plan, about how it is progressing and how you can get involved, then please let me know. I will forward your name and contact details to Annette Roberts at Dudley Council.**

**My contact details can be found on my website, and at the end of this report.**

Les Jones: The current UDP will be superseded by the new AAP. The new plan will be able to look at new ways of developing sites.

A member of the public pointed out that the ring road would continue to be a problem. *Annette: the new plan will need to address that and will look at how the flow across the road can be increased.*

Gentleman: Can planners turn down applications for change of use to licensed premises? *Annette: under the old plan no more than a certain percentage of town centre could be for non retail use. The new AAP can relook at that.*

*Lynda: The Cumulative Impact Policy is working well and allows for controls of opening hours and licences.*

*Les Jones: No further licensed premises can be opened if the police and Council think it will add to problems in the town. They can't do anything about what has already happened but can stop future pubs opening e.g. Plans for the old Yorkshire Bank premises.*

Gentleman: How do we solve the problems caused by the Ring Road? *The AAP will look at alleviating the various problems it causes taking into account the available resources. Long term a major alternative route is needed by passing the town before the ring road could be downgraded. All agreed that the problem needed to be tackled at National level re funding and this was possibly something Lynda could pursue at Regional Level.*

Councillor Knowles pointed out that it would take only one accident to close the Ring Road. A gentleman pointed out that Dudley and Brierley Hill both have ring roads (by passes?)

Gentleman: Closing hours of fast food outlets in the town centre....why don't they coincide with the closing time of the night clubs?

*Sgt Rennison: The outlets are individually licensed. It is difficult to prove that they are causing a problem. Sgt Rennison thinks that they close the same time as the clubs.*

*Lynda asked if we could confirm this.*

Gentleman: Would it be possible to have a litter officer in the town late at night with the power to fine people caught littering? *Possible if the traders were in favour of the Stourbridge becoming a BID. This would involve all the businesses in the Town Centre above a certain rateable value having to pay extra on their rates. Traders have to vote to pay more business rates. It was pointed out that at the moment street cleaners go into the town on Saturday and Sunday mornings to clear up.*

Alcohol Disorder Zones (ADZ). Lynda asked whether pubs can be made to contribute towards costs. *Lynda to research.*

## Mike Williams

### How does the rate system work? (see handout)

The Council are in effect a collecting agency for the government. The Council do not have the power to set the rates. The money collected is passed on to Central Govt who then passes it back to the Council based on a formula set by Government.

Help during the recession: Small Business Rate Relief Scheme. Small businesses can apply to get up to a 50% reduction on their business rates. No rates to be paid on empty properties with a rateable value of less than £15,000/

Help with rates also available to charities.

How is Dudley Council helping business in Stourbridge? :Nationally 60% of those entitled to help with rates have claimed it. In Stourbridge 90% are either getting it or have applied. DMBC put a claim form in with the rates bills if they think a business might qualify for help.

Council staff will tell the Valuations office Agency if they think there should be a reduction in rateable value on a property. DMBC would urge any business that is struggling to pay bills to contact the Council immediately and the Council will do what they can to help.

The Government's Rate Deferral Scheme was announced in April. DMBC have written to businesses informing them that they can request deferral of rates this year. The rules of the scheme are still being worked out.

### The Ryemarket.

Gentleman: Is it true that the owners of the Ryemarket get rate relief on empty units?

Lynda added that has she has spoken to businesses that have left the Ryemarket not because their business was in trouble but because the Ryemarket have put the leases up and refuse to reduce it because it sets a precedent for other properties across the country. It was agreed that the 'large players' like the Ryemarket don't worry too much about there being some empty units and that this was an unintended consequence of the rate free laws. The Council have no power over this at all. The problem could possibly be addressed nationally but this would take a long time.

Gentleman: The 50% relief cannot be claimed with two small businesses. Lynda asked Mike Williams if he could set out the problem in an official form and she would take it up with the Government.

### Woolworths

Councillor Knowles asked if Woolworths were still billed for rates. *Mike Williams replied that the receivers were not liable for rates.*

Lynda asked what could be done about the empty unit that Woolworths had occupied. *Councillor Knowles said that there had been a suggestion that the Doctors surgery in Heath Street might be interested in relocating there and that this would bring people into the town. However the doctors had ignored the suggestion and also there might be problems re parking. Currently the Administrators were trying to claw back money and were blocking use of the premises.*

### Sergeant Rennison

His team are Neighbourhood 24 which covers Stourbridge Town Centre, The Grange, The Old Quarter, Enville Street. There are 7 PCs, 5 Community Support Officers and a number of Special Constables. They work as a team. Shifts are 8 am to 10 pm but are extended when necessary. One week in four they work until 3 am policing the Town Centre. The rest of the time it is covered by other Neighbourhood teams.

One of their roles is to engage with the local community. PACT meetings are held monthly. The details are published on the Police Website. There are business cards with contact details.

David Cox: *Is it more difficult for the police on Friday and Saturday nights? 4 or 5 years ago violent crime was up but measures put in place by the police have brought it down.*

Phases: 1. Meet and greet between 7 pm and 9 pm

2. When people are in the pubs

3, when people come out the pubs.

Policing the town centre is labour intensive. There are taxi marshals to help get people out of town quickly. Street Pastors start next month. They will be in the town and will be wearing uniforms. They will support vulnerable people. Wolverhampton already operates a successful scheme. They can serve notices to people to get them out of the town centre and not return. Pastors have an extensive training period. The scheme is organised by Churches Together run by The Ascension Trust. First group started in Brixton and there are now several schemes around the country.

The question of whether they were insured was raised.

Councillor Knowles: The PACT police areas don't tie up with the ward boundaries. It would be more helpful for Councillors if the boundaries for both were the same. Discussions are taking place re this at Executive level.

Gentleman: Serious violent crime has decreased. Has less serious crime increased?

Lynda: What percentage of violent crime is alcohol related. Do the Police keep records on this?

*Sgt Rennison: It would be possible to find out the statistics on this as it is recorded. Without actually knowing the figures he would say in his opinion, "a vast amount."*

The police are working on a Joint Licensing Task Force consisting of Police, Licensing, Fire and Health to make joint visits to premises. The Police can ask for review of licence if there are problems. If a licence is up for review the police will run that review.

*Hannah Rogers: There is an active Pub Watch. Licensees will ban people causing nuisance from all premises. A shopkeeper pointed out that the radio link is excellent, although not under the Police remit the police do use the link.*

It was alleged that crime figures are down because people are not reporting crimes, again allegedly because police are not attending when called. Sgt Rennison pointed out that it is important that people continue report crime as it helps the police build up a picture of what is happening in the area and to identify problems.

Sgt Rennison is willing to take small groups of people into Halesowen Police Station to look at the call centre

Councillor Knowles: The police are concentrating their resources and efforts on getting people out of the town after the clubs close but this means that there are incidents on the streets leading out of town and this needs to be addressed.

*Hannah Rogers: Stourbridge has an active Pub watch scheme. Licensees will identify nuisance people and they will be banned from the premises.*

*Sergeant Rennison: It is important to report crime so the Police can build up an accurate picture of crime in area.*

Nick Barlow: Who is responsible for the enforcement re illegal parking?

*Sergeant Rennison: Obstruction of a dropped kerb is a Police matter. PCSO's do a lot of work in relation to the town centre. There is one ex traffic warden who issues fixed penalty notices. Where vehicles are parked on pavements a common sense approach is adopted. If a car is causing an obstruction police prefer to find the owner and get the car moved rather than issuing indiscriminate tickets.*

## The Way Forward

Lynda: How can this group get involved? Is there a role for a group like this?

*Annette Roberts: The group could be formalised in the planning consultancy. Could meet at a set time in the programme.*

*Hannah Rogers said she would welcome feedback.*

Lynda: How do we track the programme?

*Annette Roberts : people can sign up for the council's newsletter. Annette will mailshot interested people giving them the link to the website and letting them know the next thing they can get involved in. There will also be displays in the town.*

*Annette agreed to attend the next Chamber of Trade meeting.*

It was agreed that the next meeting of the group should be held at a sensible point in time, when there is a decision to be made. The document commences this month, the formal document to be ready just after Christmas, the first draft by this time next year.

**If you would like to sign up to receive Dudley Council's newsletter about the Stourbridge Area Action Plan, about how it is progressing and how you can get involved, then please let me know via the contact details set out below. I will forward your name and contact details to Annette Roberts at Dudley Council.**

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