

BOGNOR REGIS REGENERATION SUB-COMMITTEE

21 October 2020 at 6.00 pm

Present: Councillors Stanley (Chairman), Brooks (Vice-Chairman), Mrs Daniells, Dixon, English, Mrs Madeley, Oppler and Mrs Warr

Councillors Charles, Cooper, Mrs Cooper, Edwards, Gunner, Mrs Pendleton and Roberts were also in attendance for all or part of the meeting.

8. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Dixon declared a personal interest as a member of the Bognor Regis Civic Society.

9. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 17 June 2020 were approved by the Committee as a correct record and would be signed by the Chairman as soon as possible following the Council's resumption of normal working.

10. STRATEGIC REVIEW OF ARUN DISTRICT COUNCIL'S TOURISM SERVICE

The Chairman welcomed to the meeting Mr Adam Bates, Blue Sail Consulting, who had been appointed to undertake a review of the Council's tourism function. The review had considered all aspects of tourism support offered by the authority and its recommendations would be put forward to Cabinet for consideration and decision; the Subcommittee was being requested for its views which would be forwarded to Cabinet to assist their deliberations of the matter.

Mr Bates gave a presentation which covered his brief for the review and what Arun should be doing to fit in with others in marketing, management and development to improve the offer in the District and to increase staying visitors over the dominance of day visitors as at the present time. Tourism was an important sector for the local economy and, whilst there was a good variety, i.e. coast, towns and countryside, it was felt that what was on offer was good but not great and that there was a modest impact on tourism spend and jobs. To encourage visitors to stay, better quality accommodation would be required and experiences provided that were worth travelling for. The offer therefore needed to be renewed, new markets attracted, year round value for money provided and higher value jobs encouraged.

Mr Bates highlighted the 4 recommendations contained in the review which would have implications for the way in which the Council would organise and support tourism development in the District in order to meet its wider strategic ambitions.

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Members welcomed the report from Mr Bates and participated in a question and answer session, summarised as follows:-

- Web sites promoting the District – it was acknowledged that the 3 town websites (Littlehampton, Bognor Regis and Arundel) were good and that Sussex by the Sea should be retired but that there should perhaps be a cloaking page to transfer information across to the towns and the South Downs National Park websites. Comment was made that Experience West Sussex made no reference to the beach at Bognor Regis, which was felt to be a glaring omission. Mr Bates stated that views on web sites were very subjective and, from his observation, Experience West Sussex was doing a good job in trying to create a narrative to draw people into the area and inspire them to stay and do different things. In advising that Experience West Sussex was not just a web site, it also covered marketing and information, the Group Head of Economy requested Members to pass on to her any comments they had about it and she would take it up with that body.
- Comment was made that tourism was important to the local economy and must be supported. It was felt there was a demand for fun seaside activities and events and Bognor Regis needed to focus on its core strengths, e.g. its safe beach. Mr Bates agreed that events were a powerful tool but thought had to be given to the type and range in order to attract visitors.
- Concerns were raised at the proposal to shift emphasis away from the Sussex by the Sea website as it was felt that it had been successful in referring people to the other more detailed town website. It would therefore be a shame to lose it.

As the Chairman was experiencing connectivity issues, the Vice-Chairman took the chair for the remainder of this item and he thanked Mr Bates for a very good report and for his attendance at the meeting. He invited Mr Bates to leave the meeting.

The Vice-Chairman then invited the Group Head of Economy to present her report which set out the background to the review, its remit and the four strategic recommendations for the Council's tourism service contained therein. Support and any further comments were being sought from the Subcommittee, which would then be indicated to Cabinet when it considered and decided on the matter at a future meeting. It was also brought to Members' attention that there would be changes to the service should the recommendations be supported and that a Strategic Tourism Investment role was required to coordinate and work with the partners, towns and businesses. Members were advised that it was being proposed that Sussex by the Sea website would cease operation; the annual Visitor Guide would no longer be produced; and the Visitor Information Points in Bognor Regis, Littlehampton and Arundel would no longer exist in their present format. The Group Head of Economy acknowledged that there was a lot the team would like to do but the reality was what could actually be done to develop the tourism offer with the resources available.

In opening the debate, broad support of the four recommendations was expressed. However, other views focussed on the loss of the Sussex by the Sea website and the detrimental impact that would have on attracting visitors to the town,

even though it was acknowledged it was dated in its present format and other websites now served that function.

The Chairman stated that the Council did have to reflect on its position with regard to tourism. Although it was lucky to have strong links with key stakeholders, the Council did have to take a step back to assess who was best placed to deliver certain aspects of tourism. He was therefore of the view that the idea of developing a strategy alongside strategic partners and stakeholders made sense.

In being put to the vote, the Subcommittee did not accept the report's recommendation and therefore

RESOLVED

That officers to make Cabinet aware that the review recommendations contained within the Arun Strategic Review of Tourism are not supported by the Subcommittee.

11. PRESENTATION ON THE TRACK CREATIVE DIGITAL HUB AT BOGNOR REGIS RAILWAY STATION

The Chairman welcomed to the meeting Anne de Sausmarez, Principal Economic Development Officer, West Sussex County Council, who was in attendance to give a presentation on the recently established digital hub known as The Track.

Ms De Sausmarez advised the meeting that the aim of the project was to create a digital hub which would add value to the local economies of Bognor Regis and Coastal West Sussex by supporting the growth of high value knowledge economy businesses and jobs, including in the creative digital sectors. It was envisaged that a shared workspace would enable such businesses and entrepreneurs to work together collaboratively and flexibly. It was delivered by WSCC, with funding support from Coast to Capital LEP Local Growth Fund and partnership support from the District Council and Bognor Regis Town Council.

The Subcommittee was advised that valuable input to the project had been provided by:

Hemingway Design for their vision in transforming the empty space at Bognor Regis Railway Station and for The Track branding of the project.

Wired Sussex for their expertise and experience in working with the digital sector.

Town Square Space, as the operator of the project.

Following completion of lengthy negotiations with British Rail regarding leasing of the premises in September 2019, work was able to commence and was due to be completed in April 2020. However, due to lockdown and the pandemic, that did not occur until July and two Community Managers had now been appointed to take the project forward.

Slides of the refurbished premises were shown to Members, who were impressed with this new facility, particularly as the digital element of the District's local economy seemed to be expanding.

Following a brief question and answer session which covered a charging regime for space; activities that could be held under social distancing rules; and engagement with the business community, the Chairman thanked Ms de Sausmarez for her informative presentation and invited her to leave the meeting.

12. ECONOMY GROUP'S SUPPORT TO BUSINESSES DURING THE COVID 19 PANDEMIC

The Group Head of Economy presented this report which provided an update on the work of the team to date to support local businesses throughout the pandemic. She particularly highlighted that the Arun Business Partnership had over 3,000 businesses on its mailing list and all members received weekly electronic bulletins with the most up to date government guidance and information. Partnership working throughout this time had played an important role in keeping businesses abreast of the situation and everyone had found creative ways of working to ensure information was circulated to as wide a spectrum as possible. She paid particular tribute to the hard work and commitment of the Revenues & Benefits Team as they had worked so diligently to ensure grant payments were sent out in a timely manner.

The Economic Regeneration Officer provided further information to the Subcommittee on the disbursement of the Reopening the High Streets Safety Fund.

In concluding her presentation of the report, the Group Head of Economy focussed on paragraph 1.25, Recovery Planning. She stated that the team was preparing for that and highlighted the range of initiatives that were being put in place now and which would continue. The Youth Works project was particularly highlighted as there were significant issues around youth unemployment locally.

Following brief comment from Members relating to recovery planning and the Youth Works project, the Chairman complimented the partnership working that had been undertaken with relevant stakeholders with signage, etc to make the town centre feel safe.

The Subcommittee noted the report.

13. BOGNOR REGIS REGENERATION POSITION STATEMENT

The Chairman welcomed to the meeting, Heather Allen, Bognor Regis BID (Business Improvement District) Coordinator, who was in attendance due to the absence of Jason Passingham, to provide the Subcommittee with an update on the work of BID during these very difficult times due to the pandemic.

Ms Allen provided some detail on a number of promotion campaigns that would be held throughout October to support businesses. Christmas events could not be held this year but arrangements were in place for stand alone lighting to be installed in different parts of the town to provide visual enhancement, together with an elf house to try to create a really magical experience.

It was acknowledged that High Streets had been changing prior to Covid and that had now accelerated. However, if everybody kept working together positively and pro-actively, the opportunity to help shape that change could be seen to be an exciting time.

Members commended Ms Allen for her enthusiasm and positivity and, following a brief discussion, the Chairman thanked her for her attendance and contribution.

The Subcommittee noted the remainder of the Position Statement and was reminded by the Chairman to contact the Group Head of Economy should any Member have any queries.

(The meeting concluded at 8.37 pm)