

Oakham Task & Finish Group



UPDATE FROM THE CHAIRMAN OF OAKHAM TOWN TASK AND FINISH GROUP

INTRODUCTION

The Oakham Task and Finish Group is making good progress once again following delays due to purdah and volunteer capacity in July. The Group is laying the foundations for future improvements and building a good understanding and joint working between its partners and the wider community. In its June and August meetings the Group has covered the following issues:

RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE SUB GROUP

The Group's Research and Evidence Sub-Group has used a handbook and templates provided by the Chair to devise surveys and a research process that has ran over the summer. This process has collected the following data:

- Town Centre Users' perceptions
- Town Centre Visitors' perceptions
- Business Confidence
- Visitors to the County perceptions
- Visitor Origins through post code collection
- Data on car park usage
- Footfall counts
- Business Audit
- Online Users/Non-Users' perceptions

The period of purdah caused a delay in in the Business Confidence, Visitor Origins and online survey though all three are due to be completed and analysed by the next Task and Finish Group on September 19th. This is a substantial piece of work and impressively has been undertaken completely by local volunteers.

A key distinction is that this approach is not one of consultation on pre-conceived issues or on a proposed scheme; rather it is a first stage in wider community engagement to help understand issues before seeking to develop solutions.

COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS

Following earlier agreement by the Group about the importance of communications, Communications and Community Engagement Plan was agreed and a corresponding sub-group was established with vital officer support from Holly Bremner. It was agreed that delivery would be through a variety of mediums including a Facebook page, use of council newsletter and surgeries as necessary to

ensure residents have ample opportunity to participate in surveys, understand research findings and engage in future project development.

The Group had agreed that key stakeholder groups would be invited to present their views to the June and July Task and Finish Groups though this was not possible during Purdah; instead it will be built in to follow-up engagement to discuss survey findings from the autumn. This is a long-term process that will stretch beyond the life of the Task and Finish Group and that is establishing good principles and ways of working.

As a first step the Facebook page has gone live backed by a protocol for managing and supported by volunteer moderators who have received training from RCC's communications team. Naturally a social media presence will receive a variety of comments and it will be important that these are responded to and suitably managed.

OFFICER SUPPORT AND RESOURCES

As Task and Finish Group Chair, Mr Chris Wade is genuinely impressed by the work of volunteer Task and Finish Group members and the thoroughness of the approach being taken. He also further acknowledges the support of Mrs Natasha Taylor in facilitating the workings of the Group; the invaluable communications guidance from Holly Bremner and the experience and strategic support offered by Steve Ingram as Strategic Director for Places.

TIMETABLE AND MILESTONES

The Group is now working hard to have all the survey work completed and results analysed in time to report back to its September 19th meeting. Further engagement work and planning on projects can then begin. At this time the availability of officer support to help facilitate project development is likely to become increasingly important and needs to be factored in to the recommendations.

Ahead of the last meeting the Chair in conjunction with Natasha Taylor and Steve Ingram outlined a process and timetable for the medium-term (12-16 weeks) based on experiences elsewhere. This addresses organisational development beyond the Task and Finish Group's scheduled life; community engagement and project development.

The Chair tabled a proposed recommendation that the Task and Finish Group aims to produce an initial Forward Framework for the town. This would be based on the methodology in the recently published Local Government Association Handbook on Revitalising Town Centres. It comprises:

- i. Factual evidence base of key performance indicators and user/non-user/business perceptions of issues and priorities.
- ii. Analysis and agreement on priority issues and monitoring indicators to guide project planning by partners and wider stakeholders
- iii. An ongoing communications and engagement plan for broadening understanding, support and involvement of stakeholders
- iv. An outline partnership structure including coordinating group, theme-based delivery sub-groups, partners and responsibilities

v. An initial statement of future resourcing needs for partnership development and project delivery

In comparison to the Chair's experiences in other places, the production of such a framework would represent a significant achievement and there still remains a considerable amount of work to achieve this within the previously determined timeframe. The intention is that this initial 'Forward Framework' would form the basis of a report and recommendations in November for discussion and agreement with RCC and all Task and Finish Group partners.