

Chichester District Council

Full Council

19 March 2024

Public Question and Answers Sheet

Question from Simon Lloyd- Williams:

Of the 19 shop fronts on West Street, between the Cross and Tower Street, 13 are empty. Most for the last 5 years. What proactive actions has the Council taken to revitalise these shops?

Response from Cllr Moss:

Thank you for your question, Mr Lloyd – Williams.

It has been a challenging environment for businesses over the last few years, and for the retail sector in particular. The impact of the pandemic has been seen in high streets across the country and the growth of online retailing continues to shape significant changes in the use of the high street.

It is a common misconception that we are able to choose which businesses and shops go in which particular premises. This is not the case, it is up to individual businesses to choose whether to come to the city or not, and in the case of larger retail chains this will be based on the needs and aims of that business. Over the last few years some of the larger chains have changed and adapted their business models. If a retail business does choose to come to Chichester, then they liaise with private landlords who own the business premises.

We do not set the rents business premises. This is done by the individual landlord of each property, and we have no influence over this.

We also have no control over the levels of business rates payable. We collect them on behalf of central government which then considers how this money is redistributed across the country. The national Valuation Agency sets the rateable value, and a formula is then applied by central government to work out the rates that a business pays.

With regards to premises in West Street, there are 11 units between the Cross and Tower Street and 4 of these are empty – the former Post Office, the former House of Fraser building, the former Edinburgh Woollen Mill premises and the former Sofa Workshop premises.

We are aware that the owners of the House of Fraser intend to come forward with their proposals for the building, any plans to change the building would need to come forward in a planning application.

We have reached out to the agents of the other empty premises; the agents have not shared any proposals or information relating to these buildings.

While we are not in control of these premises, we do strongly support businesses where we are able to do so. Our Economic Development team is here for businesses across the district and provides advice and support and access to available grants and other schemes. For example we have offered an Enabling Grants Scheme for small and independent businesses across the district; a Shop Front Grant scheme for high street based businesses in the district and an Independent Retailers Grant scheme.

From these schemes

- Since 2019 we have supported 17 businesses in Chichester City Centre with an Enabling Grant to make improvements in their businesses.
- We have supported 23 City Centre businesses with a Shop Front Grant
- We have supported 8 City Centre businesses with an Independent Retailers Grant

We have also delivered Independent Retail businesses training to high street based businesses in the district and over 30 City Centre businesses have benefitted from the free training workshops and one to one follow up.

We have part funded a free West Sussex online hub for businesses to access recorded training sessions at a time of their choice which suits their business needs. A new free coaching programme for independent high street businesses is planned for later this year.

The Invest Chichester project works hard to attract businesses to the district or businesses looking to relocate, in order to boost the local economy. This includes a website to promote the opportunities for businesses in our district including promoting our high streets. Linked to this, we work closely with the BID to guide any prospective businesses considering locating in the city.

As part of the Chichester Vision, we are working with partners on further actions for the high street, For example, there is a dedicated working group on the Evening and Night time Economy (ENTE) which is an area we know that many consumers and visitors to the city wish to see to support the local economy.

As a council we also appreciate the important role that events can play in bringing people to the city and encouraging footfall, so through our events strategy we have been working hard to increase the number and variety of different events in the city centre to help support the local economy.

Chichester BID are working alongside the Cathedral to enable the Cathedral Green to become a viable, accessible event space. It is felt if we can drive regular, high-volume footfall to the area south of the vacant units cited through creating activity and interest in this part of the city, then potential investors will see the opportunity to get involved and invest in this historic part of the city.

The Council is also in the process of developing a Regeneration Strategy for the City, this strategy will look to:

- Set out the overall direction of travel and act as a catalyst for change through which the Council will look to work in partnership to influence change and investment in the city.
- Set out potential key areas, strategic land and physical assets that will help respond to the wider issues and opportunities and
- Provide a clear framework for decision making, including a high-level viability assessment of potential development sites to help steer investment priorities and identifying priority outcomes from regeneration.

The Strategy will sit alongside the Chichester Vision and Economic Development Strategy as well as the adopted local plan and emerging local plan.

Question from The Reverend Canon Bruce Ruddock:

How can CDC possibly justify risking a huge outlay of £250,000 on a high risk initiative such as an ice rink on Priory Park in December, which is budgeted to make a loss, at a time of huge stringency throughout the country, and when so many projects, especially the buildings on the Park, are either on hold or moving forward at a snails pace, and have been for years?

Response from Cllr Brown-Fuller:

Thank you for your question, Reverend Ruddock.

The Cabinet has agreed an Initial Project Proposal Document which included estimation of cost and potential income for a festive ice rink. This identified an estimated cost to the council of £5,000. This is based on a cost of £245,000 to deliver the project and a potential income of £240,000.

The council is currently undertaking the procurement exercise for the project and once returns have been received, these will be reviewed before considering to progress the project to the next stage. In addition to the potential income directly generated from ticket sales, advertising, and concessions we also expect there to be additional benefit to car park income, local shops and food and drink outlets as a result of additional visitors to the city centre over the period of the project.

The council are progressing a number of improvements to buildings within Priory Park, with improvements to the public toilets commencing this month. We are also working closely with Priory Park Cricket Club to develop plans for the white pavilion. In addition, work continues on the brick pavilion with an option appraisal being completed identifying potential uses and building works required. Currently we are working on bringing forward the building for community use involving local community groups.