

BUSINESS SCRUTINY MEETING

Tim Lloyd and David Barling have attended a meeting of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee at Horsham District Council on 19th September, which was focusing on supporting businesses in small towns and villages in the Horsham District.

We presented a very useful paper on Steyning (of which Tim was the author). A copy is attached.

Members of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee were extremely interested in this and we did make one very valuable point to them namely that we would strongly resist ever conceding charging in our local car parks which we consider to be a unique selling point for Steyning. We are pleased to say that this received a very positive response from two cabinet members of HDC who were present, and who assured us that there was absolutely no suggestion, either now, or likely in the future to bring in car parking charges in Steyning.

David Barling
Chairman

SCRUTINY & OVERVIEW COMMITTEE
SUPPORTING LOCAL BUSINESSES WORKING GROUP

STEYNING REPORT

Background

Steyning has a population of 5,812 in 2,615 homes at the last census in 2001 and is one of the 'gateway towns' to the South Downs national Park with over 125 listed buildings. Steyning is a little 'gem' of a country town, with good access from the A24 and A27 and, is fortunate that the A283 by-pass means the High Street carries mainly local traffic 'making it the 'hub' of the local community – it is also used by residents of Bramber and Upper Beeding - full of interesting 'destination' shops as well as 'everyday needs' shops and, coffee houses, pubs and restaurants. Steyning has always attracted a cross-section of tourists from cyclists to walkers to people who just want to visit and stroll through the streets and twittens drinking in the atmosphere of this historic town.

Steyning has been part of the WSCC initiative in conjunction with Simpson Consulting to look at the Economic Development in Rural West Sussex, which looked at sustaining the vibrant high street, promoting a wider mix of businesses – also developing a strategy to make these businesses interact with each other more – developing a closer relationship with the COT, developing a strong creative and cultural offer as well as providing young people with leisure opportunities, skills and employment which are vitally important to the future economic sustainability of rural communities like Steyning. The Steyning and District partnership is working with other stakeholders such as the Parish Council, Community Planning Group, Tourism Group, Steyning Grammar School and COT to develop an action plan to support and encourage local businesses in the community, develop opportunities for new businesses to come into the area, sustain the vibrancy of the high street and its retail offering, as well as building new tourism opportunities and infrastructure. The aim is to sustain a diverse economy for the next 20 years and to sustain and improve long-term employment for local people.

LOCAL BUSINESSES

The consultation process highlighted 592 companies registered in the community which also includes a few from Bramber, Upper Beeding, Chanctonbury and Wiston. 38% of businesses are in Real Estate & Business Activities, 11% in wholesale/retail, 7% in construction, 6% in Agriculture, Hunting & Forestry, 5% in manufacturing and the remainder in other community/personal businesses, IT, education, health & social work etc.

This broad sectoral distribution is not markedly different from other rural areas, but sub sectoral analysis revealed some strengths and possible specialisms, particularly in professional and personal services. Land based industries are still relatively strong.

Steyning is working with Bramber and Upper Beeding in an informal 'cluster' to look at common issues such as 'Devolved Works', retaining essential local bus services and taking over the Youth Provision Services due for funding cut-backs in 2014. With little land available in Steyning to develop new business opportunities, Steyning will work with its 'cluster' partners to look at revitalising existing business parks in their parishes, through private investment initiatives, to help drive and build the local economy.

HOUSING AND AN AGEING POPULATION

Steyning PC has done its own Housing Survey with AIRS which showed 81% owned their own houses (UK average 70%), Housing Association & Council Rented 10% (UK average 19%) and private rentals at 8.7% (UK average 10%). There is a need and support for, affordable housing in Steyning with 2.5% of the residents falling below the most common income level for those in housing need equating to approximately 65 affordable housing units. The challenge is to find potential development land in and around Steyning.

Because of an ageing population nationally, Steyning PC asked AIRS to survey older people in Steyning for their housing needs. Steyning has a higher than average older population of over 65 at 23% than the UK at 16% and in the next 20 years that could rise to nearly 30%, so, the PC is looking at how those properties could be released in the medium term for multiple occupancy, but with the closure of Steyning's only assisted care facility – to be replaced with old peoples flats – this will present more of a challenge. With the potential strain on frontline services due to an ageing population nationally - 71% of those over 55 live alone (27% of whom have long term illnesses) - Steyning PC is working with the community through the Community Planning Group and Partnership to develop community support projects to fill the 'gaps'.

TOWN & NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANS

This support from WSCC/HDC/AIRS on the economic development, housing and old people's surveys/consultations has proved invaluable in providing substantiated data to 'focus' Steyning Parish Council's Town and Neighbourhood Plans which will sustain the infrastructure of the community in the next 15-20 years. It has also 'kick-started' closer relationships with the Partnership and COT as well as leading stakeholders in 'working together as a community for the community'.

COMMUNICATION

One of the key factors in bringing the community together is communication and Steyning has developed its website to become a communication 'hub' enabling residents to keep updated on news and current events. The Council is committed to public consultation on all important issues and recently held a public meeting on the skateboard facility which was attended by over 450 local residents.

RETAIL OFFER & HIGH STREET

Steyning has a good retail offer and a mix of 'destination' shops as well as those that meet 'everyday' needs. Part of the Economic Development consultation was a 'mystery shopper survey' which highlighted the fact that Steyning had a vibrant High Street. There are currently 4 empty premises and Steyning is working with HDC to see what can be done to encourage landlords to let the shops at affordable rents. The Council has some concerns to limit the numbers of 'charity' shops as these lessen the quality feel of the High Street and because they do not pay council tax, VAT and work with volunteers, provide 'unfair' competition in maintaining high rents.

BROADBAND

From the Economic Development consultation Steyning's broadband speed, although not as fast as some businesses would like, was found to be in line with national standards and considered adequate to sustain the business community in the short to medium term.

NEW BUSINESSES

Steyning does not have any available 'brown field' development space readily available but Steyning PC is working with the Partnership and the other 'cluster' parishes to develop a plan that could see outward investment to improve the local business parks – most of these were built in the 70-80s and need updating – to provide modern light industrial units as well as serviced office accommodation and hi-tec facilities. There is also a possibility of incentivising local manufacturers to 're-locate' and use these sites for redevelopment into multiple office accommodation to encourage new businesses into the town and increase the local employment opportunities.

LOCAL & LONG-TERM EMPLOYMENT

The biggest employer in the town is Steyning Grammar school and there are 2 other sizeable companies established in the town. Most of the retail units are owner-managed and employ few staff. There are hundreds of other small businesses located in the town either in office accommodation or working from home. A few of these offer local employment, but to sustain the community in the future, more local employment is needed. Steyning PC, COT, Partnership and other stakeholders are working together to develop a strategy to (a) encourage new businesses (b) work

with the local businesses to provide work experience and apprenticeships to local school leavers (c) provide low cost accommodation for home-working businesses to grow and hopefully employ local people (d) encourage local businesses to employ local people.

In conclusion, Steyning along with other rural towns, has 'funding' challenges ahead to sustain the current level of business support, infrastructure and opportunities and, employment levels for the next 20 years. It will be necessary to work with other parishes and community stakeholders if Steyning as a rural community is not only able to provide young people with work opportunities and, sustain existing employment levels, but encourage new businesses to re-locate into the town.