

Support for Businesses

Working in partnership with the Town Council and alongside groups such as the local Business Association the Councils continue to implement a range of support for the town centre and businesses.

This includes offers and initiatives such as –

- **Free after Three parking**
 - This approach was introduced following suggestions by the businesses and campaigns by the Wokingham Paper.
 - Aim was to encourage footfall in the town centre and help reduce the pressure on peak time traffic by getting people to come into town later in the day when quieter or stay after work.
 - FA3 ran from November 2017 until end March 2018, and free parking was also introduced at December weekends in the run up to Christmas.
 - FA3 cost the Borough Council around £81k (in lost revenue and set up costs) plus additional spend on December parking

- **Improved Communications**
 - New drop in sessions organised at the Town Hall to give businesses immediate access to officers and members from Regeneration and Market Place team. Sessions originally ran once a week but were moved to monthly due to very low attendance figures.
 - Monthly newsletters for each of the projects. Whilst there were discussions around combining these into one the business preference was to keep them as separate newsletters.
 - Weekly Market Place bulletins with information about what has happened that week and what will be happening in the following period. Decision made to not take the same weekly approach for Peach Place / Elms Field as work is behind closed hoardings and has less impact on those walking round town.
 - Retailer update meetings. Working with the Business Association to run sessions on topics of interest to local businesses including a large brainstorming evening in October 2017. Whilst offers were made to run follow up events or meetings there has been limited interest as the Business Association is currently in a state of flux with limited activity.

- **Initial promotion of the town and its businesses.**
 - Including funding a range of adverts in the press and online, social media, banners, posters and flyers to promote the town remaining open as usual
 - Further adverts and flyers were also funded to raise awareness of the Business Association and encourage businesses to join up

- **Ongoing promotion of the town and its businesses.**
 - Joint funding of marketing activities with current budget spend circa £60k (to take to Christmas 2018) and agreement to continue reviewing moving forward.
 - Increased hours funded for Love Wokingham marketing support and appointment of a new social media support post to promote town and advise businesses.
 - Including supporting the creation of further marketing collateral to promote the town through social media and advertising campaigns such as 'Business as Usual', 'Keep it local', 'Keep it local this Christmas', 'Woky Presents', 'People and Personalities' etc.

- Love Wokingham Videos. Produced with local businesses to help promote the town and its businesses and encourage people to come into Wokingham Local Events. In addition to setting up events in the town centre, such as the Keep it local this Christmas shopping event and open day on December 2 2017, the Council is also offering additional support to other large events in the town centre such as the Winter Carnival to ensure they can be a success.
 - Marketing Strategy. Initial discussions have been held with the Town Council and Business Associations to reaffirm the vision for destination Wokingham and meetings are being arranged with the Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM) to identify potential resources and methods for developing the marketing strategy further.
- **Business Improvement District support.**
 - A Business Improvement District is a geographically identified area where all businesses within the area pay a small levy on top of their base Business Rates, although the BID can agree to set a minimum size / income level below which businesses don't have to pay the levy to avoid impact on the towns smallest businesses.
 - This levy goes into a pot for the BID to spend on agreed programmes that benefit their members e.g. marketing and entertainment, reduced waste collection costs, training and development.
 - The BID is made up of the individual businesses within the zone who are required to come up with an annual businesses plan on how the levy will be spent and what their priorities are to give every businesses a greater voice locally.
 - BID's must be established and agreed by the businesses within the area and are required to go out to formal vote. The council has offered to pre-fund the process of local businesses establishing a BID for Wokingham town centre e.g. funding the cost of consultants to help make an application and the cost / logistics of running a formal vote.
- **Business Rates support – local S47 Rates Relief and national Rateable Value scheme**
 - A range of business rates support has been made available to local businesses with the focus on local S47 Rates Relief (discretionary % reduction on rates paid) and national VOA Rates Relief scheme (reduction in assessed rateable value of property)
 - The level of relief granted (both national and local) reflects the disruption felt by an individual businesses and there is not generally a one size fits all allocation. As such businesses will be required to share financial information demonstrating a downturn in rates.
 - Local S47 Relief is assessed internally and the Business Rates team are prioritising town centre applications to process quickly and using whatever information is available rather than waiting for end of year accounts.
 - The national scheme offers the highest level of 'relief' however it is a complicated three stage process (Check, Challenge, Appeal) which could take several years to work through. Under the new national rates system the individual business MUST apply themselves and this is monitored (e.g. checking IP addresses).
 - Due to the complexity of applying nationally, the Council appointed Vail Williams in August 2017 to offer free support to all town centre businesses in understanding and preparing a claim. The timing was to encourage retailers to start the process sooner so they were well underway before the impact of Market Place was felt
 - This initial free support is being funded by the council but, if businesses wish VW to follow through and represent them during the entire process VW will charge around 25% of the relief granted as this can be a substantial amount of work. The 25% is

significantly lower than other consultants would charge as reflects the preparation work funded by WBC. Businesses can also apply themselves should they prefer not to pay VW or other consultants.

- To date limited numbers of businesses have applied for either local or national rate relief. Whilst not a factor for local S47 assessments, this lack of national applications is having a detrimental effect on those who have applied for a review of their rateable value. It leaves the VOA with the impression that the impact of works is being overstated as, if there was such a large issue in the town, more businesses would be applying for relief.

Business Rate Relief statistics

- The Business Rates team have provided some initial information on those making S47 Relief applications and, where granted, national relief. This list identified 87 town centre businesses, however several names are missing so figures should only be taken as indicative.
- Figures for national VOA relief only include those actually granted relief (business rates are informed by the VOA of an adjustment in the rateable value) or being taken forward via Vail Williams. The VOA would not notify the council of any direct claims made by individual businesses which have either been refused or are still being assessed.
- Some headline figures based on available data
 - 30 Businesses have applied for Local Section 47 relief
 - 58 businesses have not applied
 - 2 businesses have been refused
 - 11 businesses have been granted relief
 - 5 have submitted additional info requested and are being assessed
 - 10 have yet to submit additional info requested
 - 2 have no information on the spreadsheet other than application dates.
 - 15 Businesses have been granted national VOA Relief
 - 2 of these have also applied for Section 47 relief and ratings team are assessing one claim and awaiting more information from the other
 - 9 of successful reviews were through the Vail Williams consultancy support however it is unknown if other 6 were done independently or through another ratings consultancy
 - Vail Williams support
 - 21 businesses have requested support
 - 9 have already been successful
 - 12 are currently being processed
- 44 Businesses on the Business Rates list don't appear to have received or requested any support at all (although may have made / be making independent national claims)

In regards to timing there were the following

- 3 Applications in 2017
 - 1 in May
 - 1 in October
 - 1 in November
- 23 Applications in 2018
 - 3 in January
 - 1 in February
 - 3 in May
 - 3 in June
 - 8 in July
 - 3 in August
 - 2 in September

Of the 43 businesses who signed the letter complaining about a lack of support

- 11 Businesses have applied for local S47 Relief
 - 6 have been granted relief
 - 2 have submitted additional info requested and are being assessed
 - 3 have yet to submit additional info requested
- 4 Businesses have been granted national VOA Relief
- 7 Businesses don't appear to have received or requested any support at all
- 22 are unclear (name not on sheet of businesses but may trade under different identity or owner)

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