

# Evesham Market Town

## Background and Summary

Situated in the centre of the famous horticultural Vale is the bustling and ancient market town of Evesham. The town has a growing population now approaching 24,000, an increase of some 20% in the past 5-10 years. Evesham and its hinterland have a lower than national average of unemployment but like so many market towns also has lower pay levels. The town boasts the site and relics of one of Europe's most important abbeys. Its brand, the Bell Tower stands tall and proud, the last fully intact relic of its mediaeval past overlooks Evesham's River Avon, which is steeped in the town's history and heritage and is now complemented by beautiful parks and gardens.

*The Healthcheck was undertaken in late 2001 and was completed in December of that year by the first multi-agency/organisation Partnership in the area to oversee regeneration issues and to take responsibility for the Healthcheck process and delivery of the resultant Action Plan.*

### Key issues and priorities identified in the Healthcheck:

- Support and develop the rural economy through business initiatives such as infrastructural improvements
- Facilitate the regeneration of the town through environmental improvements to benefit the wider community and boost the local economy
- Support local community initiatives to improve social and recreational facilities
- Support schemes that foster better communication between the town and rural hinterland to improve the role of Evesham as a local service, employment and cultural centre
- Support rural disadvantaged groups through the development of outreach services and other initiatives

### The partnership – role and representation:

- Evesham Town Council
- County Association of Local Councils
- Vale of Evesham Commerce & Tourism Association
- County Land & Business Association
- Evesham College
- Vale of Evesham Civic Society
- Community First Herefordshire & Worcestershire
- South Worcestershire Primary Care Trust (NHS)
- Prince Henry's High School
- Wychavon Rural Transport Partnership
- Evesham High School
- Worcestershire County Council
- Evesham Voluntary Sector
- The Job Centre
- Wychavon District Council

## The Market Towns Programme

### Overview of the partnership's work:

The Healthcheck was an invaluable strategy and working aid that came at a time when Evesham had been at its lowest ebb for decades. A bustling market town until WW2 the town had gradually lost ground with the proliferation of the motor vehicle, imports of traditional crops and opening of markets culminating in membership of the EEC and changes in traditional working and shopping habits. The Easter 1998 floods, the Foot & Mouth epidemic and the 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001 outrage in the USA all took their toll on the town.

*The town was in dire need of regeneration and the Market Towns Initiative was the catalyst to provide the means.*

Each and every segment of the Healthcheck was systematically included in a range of projects. Studies (River Avon Tourism & Leisure and the Vale ITC) were undertaken to identify and re-inforce locally perceived needs. These studies provided the integral building blocks to the programme of riverside and town environmental improvements that would attract inward investment and to safeguard and create jobs and businesses. In addition to this a range of community, social and recreational projects were started.

Communication with the hinterland was brought up to date through a mix of 'pedestrian' and ITC driven initiatives, ranging from business seminars, the production and distribution of a community magazine, community web sites and the introduction of Broadband .

The Riverside and Town Centre Regeneration Programmes provided the blueprint for success. Based on a strategy that the town would not attract inward investment nor attract increased footfall without significant environmental restructuring, projects were structured integrally so that each was important to the delivery of the other. The programmes were delivered in stages over a 3-year period and featured:

### **Waterside – South-side of the River Avon :**

- Rebuilding/strengthening of 400m of basic wall structure that once held iron railings that were removed for the WW2 war effort and not replaced
- Transfer of riverside land from County Council ownership to District Council
- Pollarding and removal of overgrown trees and general ground clearance and leveling including a brownfield site that was once a riverside café (Tower View café, a misnomer for decades because the view of the Bell Tower was completely obscured by the overgrowth)
- Staged removal of 750m of chain linked, concrete and wooden pallisade fencing and replacement with black metal railings similar to the original design
- Installation of water and electrical pillars in Workman Gardens creating an events arena
- Staged installation of riverside feature lighting
- Construction of Waterside Gardens 150m West of Workman Gardens providing terraced gardens to boat moorings, with wheelchair accesses, locally, hand-made picnic tables and uniquely decorated benches and Spring and Summer Meadows and Art in the Park creations to brighten up the dark months.
- Rebuilding of a jetty to facilitate a 60 passenger restaurant boat, also especially equipped to handle wheelchair borne, blind and or deaf people as a new business.
- Introduction of a Parks Management Plan to ensure sustainability

### **Abbey Park – North-side of the River Avon:**

- Total, civil-engineering, reconstruction of 150m of a tree-lined riverbank, including a boat jetty, rebuilt to support a boat business. The trees, the beginning part of a 1-mile avenue of limes planted by the Victorians, were at risk due to subsidence of the bank into the river. The project directly supported two established businesses.
- Installation of feature riverside lighting complementing the South side of the river

### **Other riverside projects – road, rail and footpaths links with the town centre:**

- Creation of a sign-posted 1 ½ mile riverside and town centre walk with the restoration and improvement of a footpath that was unusable for much of the year due to poor drainage and to hardened surfacing.
- Creation of a 3-mile circular walk with a recycled plastic boardwalk, bridges and kissing gates to facilitate walking across riverside farmland the year-round.
- The building or repair of 3 other jetties to facilitate 2 new boat businesses and two existing riverside businesses and promotion of two others thus far.
- Construction of carriages for the disabled at a light railway in Evesham Country park
- A successful mini-bus pilot scheme to test the viability of instating a seasonal or regular link between the Evesham Country park and the town centre. This service will be implemented when development of further business at the Country Park successfully gains planning permission.

### **Town Centre:**

- Installation of a new Bell Tower Carillon, Evesham's Tourism Brand.
- Removal of old static bollards and installation of automatic rising traffic bollards to enforce an ineffective traffic order to protect pedestrians using the pedestrian walkways linking Bridge Street to Market Place
- Installation of lamp posts suitable for a conservation area and a lighting system that supports CCTV coverage extended to Market Place
- Installation/refurbishment of town benches and replacement litter bins
- Removal of old plastic planters and installation of feature planters with small trees along length of Bridge Street
- Installation of a network of pedestrian signs from the station to the town centre, riverside circular walk and riverside parks and businesses.
- Re-construction of a footpath over Workman Bridge to improve links between the Town Centre and Port Street
- Supporting Britain in Bloom entries resulting in Evesham winning Gold and the top regional award in 2004.

## Port Street Regeneration of a previously thriving shopping area

- Business opportunities and Traffic Studies
- Re-opening of a large semi-derelict store, previously closed for 8 years, with new business
- Engagement with and guidance to the local 'Bengeworth' Traders Association to foster new business resulting in 5 new businesses opening
- Facilitating the re-development and re-opening of a listed cinema building with two additional businesses and two homes
- Prosecution of a 3-year Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme with English heritage, AWM and Wychavon funding
- Instatement of 3 information display cabinets, signs and pedestrian signs highlighting the ancient heritage of Port Street and Bengeworth (E.G. King Canutes House, Lady Godiva's residence etc).

## Economic Regeneration/Business Promotion

- A 2-year Developing Awareness of Business Opportunities programme with business training and seminars for aspiring and existing business people including retail & services
- An 8-week promotion of the success of the MTP with a Festival of Light in winter 2004-5
- Introduction of monthly Farmers Markets to the town
- Introduction of a Local Distinctiveness project featuring the development of 5 riverside festivals attracting substantial sponsorship and kudos for the town

The Market Town Initiative has brought several important changes, not least the willingness of the Local Authorities to recognise and seize the opportunity to generate partnership working and to invest in the process beyond the lifetime of the programme. Local people have recovered their pride in their heritage, the town, river and public open spaces and proudly show off the town's attributes to friends and relatives that visit. The added value of the Partnership and Programme in attracting nearly £200,000 Liveability Funding into the town, reducing crime and gaining the prestigious award of 'Green Flag' status, along with major investment along the riverside by Housing Development Companies; building a mix of stylish new homes, including social housing and as a final example, the opening of the Marks & Spencers food store in the Town Centre all exemplify a comment by Brian Barry, The Chairman of The Vale of Evesham Civic Society:

*Evesham is better than it ever has been, at least in my lifetime and all the members of the Society". Well done. The Partnership deserve the town's gratitude and thanks for what they have achieved in such a short space of time" – Andrew Dyke, Mayor of Evesham 2004-5.*

## Lessons learned

- The balanced make up of a small Partnership Board is vital. Too big a Board can create a Bureaucracy.
- Good communication with the AWM co-ordinating officer is of paramount importance.
- Although there are other successful models for other MTPs, the benefits of having the LA (Wychavon District Council) as the Official Accountable Body, the full support of its elected members and the expertise of its officers at one's fingertips were without doubt tremendous assets.
- Unless the project is well advanced do not attempt to deliver it in one year but phase it over 2, or even 3-years. This will facilitate efficient delivery, on or before schedule and preclude the otherwise inevitable time-consuming verbal and written reports qualifying the under-performance.

## Future Plans

The MTP is now working as a joint Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) in support of the Community Plan (CP). It serves as a bridge to support Parish Plans and feeds into the CP. The CP is evolved from LSP action plans, also known as Market Town Action Plans. These help formulate the Worcestershire Community Plan through a body known as Worcestershire Partnership. This Partnership will own and oversee the nascent Local Area Agreement, which is a Government initiative based on delivering a set of Government and local area priority outcomes.

Wychavon District Council has invested in retaining its Partnership Manager for a further 3 years and has allocated a £90,000 revenue projects budget plus a share of a capital £750K budget for which 100% match-funding will be sought and for which further MTP Action Plans will be generated.