

Leighton Buzzard – Community engagement session

12th February 2020

Overview

A drop-in community engagement event was held at the Town Council's White House offices on the 12th February. The session ran from 12pm until 8:30pm and was very well attended with over 300 residents of the town coming to express their opinions and ideas. The focus of the event was on the town centre area, including the land to the South of the High Streets, but wider comments were made about key issues that impact on residents of Leighton Linlade.

Key points:

1. Residents felt the attention on Leighton Buzzard should match that of Dunstable as their population stands greater and want to be more involved in final decisions made.
2. They suggested if CBC were to purchase remaining land such as that behind the post office, then it would create one parcel and therefore be easier and more likely to attract the right kind of development to enhance the town for the entire community.
3. People highlighted the importance of keeping Leighton Buzzard a unique place with its markets but welcomed the idea of more small shops (artisan shops/workshops and light industry/repairs), restaurants, and an undercover market to increase through flow of increased footfall and reduce trips to Milton Keynes.
4. The suggestion of pedestrianising the high street was frequent, only allowing for delivery vehicles etc. or increasing parking to reflect the population.
5. Residents were keen to have more cultural space and would like to ensure building is limited on Parson's Cultural Recreation Ground as they fear there will be little grass left.
6. It was important to residents that land is not sold to developers as this often results in absentee landlords, and instead the land is used to welcome vibrant development to attract people to the town.
7. Other suggestions to the ones previously mentioned included street food, pop-up shops and having reasonable rates for set-up businesses, rather than charity shops etc. as residents feel there is already too many of these.
8. Small changes to improve the town centre area included things like flowerbeds, benches and green areas for people to meet and trees to landscape struggling areas.
9. Offering free Wi-Fi in town came up as a suggestion to ensure footfall from younger individuals, with fear of this being decreased when three tier Leighton Middle is changed to two tiers.
10. Having more publicity for events using electric signs and the local websites was important to residents as well as ensuring All Saints Church is in the official town guide as this is key to the community.
11. A final key point that was raised a significant amount of times regarded ensuring there is disabled access across town as this will help to ensure the area is inclusive and accessible to all.

Environmental concerns:

1. Regarding the environment, residents felt it was important to tackle the issue of poor cleanliness in the alleyways between car parks and shops before anything else.

2. Making the river more of a feature and developing the canal marina was a frequent suggestion, along with ensuring there is more use of Linslade Woods (keeping this as a wildlife site and ensuring it is not developed).
3. Converting Grovebury Quarry into a nature reserve and forming wildlife corridors was of popular opinion.
4. For developer's attention, residents want to ensure houses are built to a higher standard, integrating solar panels and appropriate insulation rather than building 'yesterday's houses' is really important as these eco features help areas to plan for the future.

Facilities

1. Residents stressed the importance of having a museum to celebrate the history of Leighton Buzzard (possibly at Long Stratton High School) as well as an information centre and boards for tourists coming to the area. A suggestion was also made that some form of information pack be put together for new residents.
2. Many were keen to have a public/art gallery as well as an arts centre for performances, a recording studio which could be booked out and a local radio station etc.
3. Residents suggested a large indoor space that could be divided up would be good for events/activities involving young children, families and young individuals in turn bringing them off the streets. People felt the area could benefit from a hotel with conference space and a multi-storey car park as well as business hubs for those working from home (desk space/networks). Residents were keen to see the provision of the facilities to help those who suffer from drug addiction or are homeless etc. as well as other community facilities such as a social welfare centre, an adult learning centre (possibly reopening the Riverside Centre), a life skills group and a repair cafe.
4. An informal café, cinema or bowling facility also came up as suggestions for both the young and families and to prevent people travelling out of town to areas like Milton Keynes.
5. Residents stressed the importance of keeping Tiddenfoot Leisure Centre open, suggesting it be refurbished and a second centre be opened the other side of town for those who rely on public transport and to cater for the increasing population.
6. They felt having local centres available would prevent individuals travelling out of town to areas such as Stevenage to access these, highlighting a second pool with flumes etc. could attract others to the area.
7. A number of individuals were keen on a sports centre as well as working with the football and cricket club to improve Bell Close so it can be used by the community, with suggestions being put forward for a 4G pitch.
8. Residents felt working with what they already have is key, such as reopening the library 6 days a week meaning more diverse theatre programmes are available and updating community halls, making them more accessible and changing disabled toilets with changing places.
9. People felt access in general needed improving, specifically wheelchair/pushchair at the railway station, footpaths in areas like Grovebury Rd and having an additional canal crossing.
10. Many individuals felt suggestions for more cafes and charity shops were not necessary and instead the area would benefit more from an additional supermarket and having housing for adults with learning disabilities and the elderly to help the area become inclusive of all.

Travel

1. The issue of congestion in the area was raised multiple times, especially within the town centre. Residents suggested providing an alternative route to bridge over the canal and introducing one-way systems could help to reduce the build-up. With the additional houses being built in the area, many individuals felt frustrated at the lack of compensation from the housing companies who they perceive have made the issue worse.
2. It is essential that there is an adequate flow of cars/buses through the town centre, with suggestions of a shuttle bus or a park and ride system to help achieve this. A number of residents also supported the idea of increased parking in the town centre (including electrical charging points), with the option to stay for free or free for a limited amount of time to encourage more individuals to drop in.
3. There were also suggestions of an uber style app being put to use as well as moving the taxi rank off the high street in order to reduce pollution and maintain ambience.
4. To improve transport links residents suggested extending the Luton-Dunstable Busway to Leighton Buzzard and linking North St to High St at Market Cross. Suggestions to be environmentally friendly in the future included having a large bus station with electric buses and additional paths for cycling, specifically encouraging cycling to school.
5. Other additional improvements residents felt could be made to the area included revising the current zebra crossings and changing these to pelican or traffic controlled crossings to reduce traffic, as well as introducing traffic calming measures such as having 20mph speed restrictions in areas such as Plantation and Heath Rd.
6. Reducing the cost of public transport for students and train fares to London for all individuals was favoured by many and providing additional parking at the station or having parking available on the land adjacent to the railway and walking across would help cater for demand.
7. To increase the efficiency of the public transport available, residents also highlighted the importance of linking up the times of the bus and train services.

Healthcare

1. Residents feel it is essential to have additional GP practices to cater for the amount of housing being built in the area.
2. They suggested a form of medical drop-in centre in the town (accessible by bus) could also be beneficial as it would help to supplement the surgeries on the outskirts and reduce demand for appointments.

Criminal Activity

1. A vast number of individuals believe Leighton Buzzard has become a target for crime due to the lack of police presence in the area and the nearest station being situated in Luton.
2. Many are concerned about the amount of drug dealing being witnessed, especially in public areas such as supermarket car parks, alleyways and the multi-storey car park and stairway.
3. Residents suggested small measures that could be put in place like more CCTV and lighting would help to reduce this along with other issues raised (antisocial behaviour and theft).
4. It was felt an increased police presence could also help to control smaller issues such as people cycling on footpaths and begging in the high street.

To be noted:

- 1) Some of the points raised have subsequently been covered e.g. pedestrianisation of the High Street has been taken forward under an experimental order as part of the response to reopening

High Streets work after Covid-19 lockdown. LLTC with CBC support has also launched a town centre Wi-Fi service.

- 2) Comments re LSHS and facilities the community would like to see will feed into discussions re possible future High Street focused projects and possible Future High Street Fund bid this autumn.