

The Tonbridge Portas Challenge Bid – Initial Proposals (as of 16.3.12)

Introduction and Scope of the Project

To prepare a Tonbridge Town Centre bid to be one of the 12 Pilots sought by the Government on the back of the Portas Review: An independent review into the future of our high streets (Dec 11), which the Government is currently considering and will respond to in the Spring.

There will be potential funding of up to £100K for improvements for the successful towns. The deadline for bids is 30 March 2012.

Interest has been expressed by local businesses, a local group promoting the pedestrianisation of the High Street (PATHS) and the Local Authority in submitting a bid for Tonbridge. This short note summarises the bidding criteria, sets out an initial proposal and the steps necessary to submit a bid by the Government's deadline.

The Context for the bid

Struggling towns and cities across England are being handed the chance to breathe new life into their "unloved and unused" high streets.

Successful bidders will need to demonstrate how they have the energy, enthusiasm and vision to make a real difference to their town centres and make them the hubs of their communities.

Mary Portas said: "I want the first 12 Town Teams to challenge the old ways of working, experiment, take risks and reaffirm their place at the heart of a community. A place we all want to be and can be proud of."

The contest wants to find pilot areas with a transformational vision for their high street and the backing to make it a reality. The lead partner should be able to clearly articulate this vision and demonstrate strong support for it from the local community and a wide range of local partners.

The Criteria for a successful bid

Successful bids will be able to demonstrate:

1. A representation of different town centre types/locations.

That they are drawn from a mix of pilot areas from a variety of town centres and high streets including market towns, villages, large towns, new towns, coastal towns and suburban areas. The contest wants to ensure a good geographical spread, as well as areas with both high/low average income levels and high/low empty shop vacancy rates.

2. Commitment

Bids should demonstrate maximum commitment to the town team approach.

3. Potential for improvement

Resources will be allocated on a value for money basis and therefore areas must be able to demonstrate their potential for improvement.

4. Innovation

Bidders are asked to provide an outline of what the key priorities for their pilot area will be the most innovative ideas and

5. Evidence of strong leadership

That will have maximum impact and can be replicated elsewhere

Making an Application

Summary of the Application form requirements:

1. Name and contact details of the organisation making the bid;
2. Details of the Town Team/Partnership and who will lead (presumably this could be different to the organisation in (1) or the same);
3. Who will be the accountable body (probably the Borough Council in our case);
4. How information about the use of the grant will be made public;

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) Prospectus notes that applications should make clear:

- Who will lead your pilot.
- Which local authority will be the Accountable Body (a confirmation letter from the local authority and an accompanying statement on securing value for money for taxpayers in the use of the grant).
- How your partnership proposes to use the grant.
- An outline of the key priorities for your pilot.
- How your pilot meets the criteria, demonstrates its suitability for funding, and meets the need for additional impact.
- How your pilot will deliver transparency in the use of the grant.

5. How progress will be monitored and impact evaluated;
6. Information on town type and income and employment data (from ONS);
7. Description of Town 'Vision', evidence of local support and how this will be delivered;
8. Evidence of commitment including letters of support, any agreed match funding and the % businesses and landlords signed up to the pilot;
9. Demonstration of the potential for improvement (to show value for money – i.e. what will the Government get for its £80K) – set out key challenges facing the High Street and explain why it has the potential to improve;
10. Innovation – describe how the Town Team approach will be tested, what the priorities will be and whether there are any specific recommendations in the Portas Review that you would like to test;
11. Funding – state how much the pilot is bidding for and what it will be used for. Demonstrate how the use of this money will be innovative and deliver improvement. Also indicate any other Government grants or funding the town centre is already receiving;
12. Upload a video on YouTube to illustrate the proposals and show the challenges and opportunities facing the town.

An Initial Proposal for a Bid for Tonbridge

Why Tonbridge?

It is anticipated that many town centres will take up the opportunity of bidding to become a pilot. We know of at least three others in Kent alone (Ashford, Gravesend, and Sevenoaks). Compared to some failing town centres suffering from high vacancy levels and multiple deprivation indicators, Tonbridge may be considered to be a less deserving case. However, the Government has made clear that it wishes to consider a wide spectrum of town centres with a good geographic representation as part of this pilot. It has also stated that it wishes to see results, quickly so that good practice can be rolled out to other centres.

Those town centres that are in serious decline will require significantly more investment than the funding on offer through this pilot and recovery will take time.

An innovative bid for Tonbridge, demonstrating good value for money by maximising and building on the Town's existing assets, that can show it has the support of the local community could be successful.

Focus for the bid.

The focus of a bid for Tonbridge must be set within a context of its current, relatively poor, economic performance, but with its strengths and opportunities drawn out in terms of the investments that have been made, improvements to public places and the potential for development. It should also be set within an aspiration to improve public access, public experience and environmental quality.

The overriding theme for the bid must be to bring about a positive uplift to how Tonbridge operates and how it is perceived with a view to boosting the potential for increasing interest, footfall and economic vibrancy to the High Street and town centre.

A particularly strong topic in the Portas review has been the role of markets and allied activities in restoring vibrance to High Streets. Tonbridge, of course already has the benefit of markets, but there seems to be potential to capitalise on that tradition.

One way forward on this theme, subject to support from interested parties would be to facilitate a street market in and around the High Street to potentially include elements from existing markets and craft fairs and perhaps other local businesses with a permanent base in the town, focusing on a 'Produced in Kent' theme. This to coincide with complementary leisure and recreational events in and around the town to highlight the Town's heritage as a market town with good transportation links.

This could feature as the main event within a programme of themed events facilitated by the Town Team, which are designed to promote Tonbridge to the widest possible audience, whilst enabling the local community to get behind the bid.

The Town has a long and rich history visibly illustrated by the Castle and a market tradition stretching back to 1296. This heritage provides a draw for tourists who in 2009 made approximately 2.36m day trips to the borough contributing over £77m to the local economy. Together with overnight stays the total income generated by tourists to the borough that year exceeded £112m.

The town is also a transport hub, has reasonably priced car parks and a wealth of other assets, such as the riverside and access to the sports ground and attractions, yet currently is seen as a poor relation to nearby centres such as Tunbridge Wells and Sevenoaks. The most effective response is not to compete with these centres, but instead to combine these assets and develop a niche retail experience for Tonbridge that will encourage more visitors to stay longer.

The Borough Council has a good track record in event management sometimes at very short notice, such as the parade for Kelly Holmes after the 2006 Olympics, which can another asset in support of this bid.

The establishment of a positive and proactive Town Team lies at the heart of the Portas initiative and will feature strongly in our bid. The fact we do not have an established town centre management function like some other Kent bids may work in our favour and early indications show there is the necessary enthusiasm and commitment for this to work.

By building on these assets and coordinating our efforts through a representative Town Team for Tonbridge, this bid could be successful and provide a wealth of information for partners to consider in bringing forward longer term enhancements.

This bid has a number of positive attributes:

- It is a measure designed to test a number of issues that would need to be addressed for any more permanent Town Centre improvements, for example; improved pedestrian access; more central location for markets and other activities; assessing whether such actions would increase footfall for the Town as a whole; and also to identify any adverse implications.
- It has the potential to bring together the various communities and major service providers with a stake in the Town together in the form of a 'Town Team', which could be a positive body for future initiatives (regardless of whether the bid is ultimately successful or not). As Tonbridge does not currently have a strong Town Centre Management function, this will also set us aside from other Kentish bids where this is well established (e.g. Gravesend and Ashford).
- By making the most of our existing assets (good transport links, access to the riverside and open space, heritage attractions like the Castle) and introducing complementary measures (Promoting locally grown/made products, getting young people involved in the event, concessionary fees for sports, leisure and heritage attractions) we can demonstrate value for money to the Government.
- Such an initiative could be achieved using the funding on offer (i.e. for road closures, street cleansing, possibly a dedicated project manager post for the event). Any match funding could then be targeted at the event itself – for example, any planned road improvements could be timed to coincide with the event.
- Results could be collected and analysed quickly (footfall counts, take up of pitches, turnover of local businesses, parking revenues, participants taking advantage of any concessions at leisure facilities, passenger numbers (rail/bus/taxi), satisfaction survey etc.

- It will strike a positive chord with Tonbridge residents by focusing on the market, which has a long association with the town, but is currently held on less than ideal car park sites away from the High Street. Markets and High Streets also strike a chord with the Portas recommendations.
- The bid can be linked to a marketing initiative to encourage increased trade between the market and shop fronts.
- To be successful it would need to be developed and shaped in partnership with local businesses and others and promoted by a 'town team'.

What needs to be done in the next 2 weeks to submit a bid?

1. To meet the bid deadline, we will have to move swiftly towards establishing a bidding partnership or Town Team with relevant stakeholders in the town.

An initial meeting was held on the 14 March at Tonbridge Castle:

- Susan Adams, Susan Adams Business Services
- Jackie Mathias, West Kent Chamber of Commerce
- Fran Long and Howard Porter from Pedestrian Action for Tonbridge High Street (PATHS)
- Cllr Nicolas Heslop (T&MBC)
- Steve Humphrey (T&MBC)
- Julie Beilby (T&MBC)
- Katie Iggulden (T&MBC)
- Ian Bailey (T&MBC)

It was agreed on the 14th that letters seeking expressions of support for a Tonbridge Town bid and joining the Town Team would be sent to key stakeholders week beginning 19 March. The full Town Team could include any of the following (this list is not exhaustive, but the final membership of the Team should be a representative, but manageable number):

- Other local businesses, including Managers of major supermarkets in the town (Waitrose, Sainsbury, Cooperative) and non-retail businesses such as Warners Solicitors;
- The Tonbridge Civic Society;
- T&MBC;
- KCC;
- Local Councillors and MP;
- Landlords and Landowners or a representative;

- Market managers/stall holders/association;
- K College;
- The Rose & Crown Hotel;
- Mark Richardson;
- Steve Wood (Farmers Market);
- Pinners (Saturday Market);
- Tonbridge Lions/Rotary;
- Tonbridge Sports Association;
- Rob Marsh (YMCA);
- Tonbridge School.

2. Agree a Vision for the Town and a Proposal before completing the Application Form.

3. Decide how much are we bidding for and if there is to be any match funding (presumably this could be existing commitments or officer time, possible explore footfall software.

4. Explain how the funding would be spent – i.e. what projects are proposed, can they be delivered quickly so the benefits of the pilot can be assessed, and how these will lead to the improvements sought in the vision.

5. Show evidence of commitment with letters of support from businesses and other stakeholders and any match funding being used to support the bid – This will be included in the letters to be sent week beginning 19th March.

6. Making and uploading a supporting video to YouTube – An approach has been made to K College.

Concluding Remarks

This proposal has been generated in house by T&MBC officers in response to expressions of interest that Tonbridge should make a bid to be a Portas Pilot in the short timescale set by the DCLG. It has been refined and amended following an initial meeting with Tonbridge representatives at a meeting on the 14th March.

In making an application it will be important to demonstrate that the bid is being made by the Tonbridge Town Team, so it is recognised that the proposal may yet

change, but hopefully this represents a good initial suggestion. Those attending on the 14th demonstrated the sort of enthusiasm and commitment, which will provide a good basis for making a bid.

If the bid is ultimately unsuccessful, this exercise will not be in vain since it will lead to the establishment of a proactive Town Team, which could form the basis of bringing forward future improvements for Tonbridge in the spirit of the Pilots.

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