Council checks-out the high street habits

Central Bedfordshire Council is out talking to residents, visitors and businesses about local shops and services as part of a survey to benchmark 11 of its major town centres. The surveys will help the council better understand how its local town centres are changing, as well as identifying any issues, and future opportunities.

The benchmarking report will be used to compare how our local towns are performing against similar locations elsewhere in the country. It will look at the types and mix of retail and services found on our local high streets, and the number of people using town centres and their local car parks. Local residents will be able to give their views and comments via online surveys, and local businesses will be provided with a trading-focused survey to complete.

Over the last few years, the Council has invested up to £4 million in its local town centres as part of its Market Town Regeneration Fund. This investment has seen grants for 21 new shopfronts in seven towns, whilst also providing funding and support for other projects, such as street-cleaning machines, splash parks, more car parking spaces, community bandstands, and improved local signage and events information.

Councillor Kevin Collins, Executive Member for Planning and Regeneration at Central Bedfordshire Council, said: “Our town centres need to be fit for the future. The surveys are a really good opportunity for business and residents to have their say about what they like about their town centres, and what they feel could be better.

“The traditional High Street has and is changing significantly, with new technologies and online competition changing the current and future dynamics of town centres across the UK. Few of us could have not noticed that town centres have now seen several big-name shops close nationally. Other retailers are scaling back, or thinking very carefully where about where they locate their premises. Commentators are putting this down to a shift from physical shopping to the convenience of big online outlets.

“While we as a council are unable to control national chains from closing down and people from choosing to shop online, we are doing our upmost to regenerate our towns and make it them attractive place for residents and visitors. These latest benchmarking surveys will help provide us with data that will help us, the local town councils and local communities better understand the dynamics in our local market towns, and provide ideas for improving them and looking to the future.”

This work will be completed over the summer, with online surveys live until the end of July. A report will be produced for each of the towns in the autumn.

Notes to Editors:

- The online surveys are being overseen by an external organisation, called People and Places, on behalf of the council, and are available at:

  Ampthill: www.surveymonkey.com/r/AmpITCU19
  Arlesey: www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/ArleseyITCU19
  Biggleswade: www.surveymonkey.com/r/BiggITCU19
A survey has recently been completed for Dunstable town centre by the Town Council. An update to this as part of this project will be undertaken in January 2020.

- Over the last few years, Central Bedfordshire Council has put forward £4million to help boost its local high streets, including £1million on facelifts for independent shops and businesses. In partnership with the Town Councils, the £1million of capital funding offered grants to landlords and businesses for up to 60 per cent of total costs of renovating shop fronts, forecourts and making improvements to vacant units, in order to attract more shoppers and visitors onto the high street.