

Redditch Towns Deal

Summary of Consultation with Councillors

"The problem is that Redditch is perceived as not a very nice place, and I don't know why. It's got lovely people and a good community spirit. We just need to up the ante – and hopefully if we spend the money from the Town Deal on the right things it could do that."
(Local councillor, Redditch)

Introduction

To supplement and complement the public consultation on Redditch's Towns Fund bid, Social Marketing Gateway (SMG) was commissioned to engage with local councillors and explore the same set of issues as discussed with residents. SMG asked members to talk about what their local electorates felt about Redditch and what people wanted to see by way of change. As most councillors are also local residents, consequently their own views were also expressed in the discussions.

Methodology

Three online discussion sessions were held in late November with local councillors. A total of 9 members participated across the three sessions, with a good spread of party affiliation and portfolio interest represented. The level of knowledge about the Towns Fund and the proposals by Redditch Town Deal Board varied: some members were very familiar with the investment ideas; others less so.

Findings

There was a close similarity between what the public consultation found from residents and what their elected representatives said about the good and less good things about Redditch.

The positives about Redditch most frequently mentioned by councillors centred on: a good community spirit; it being a relatively young town; the beauty of its natural assets; a good regional location making it easy to access nearby towns and cities; having a decent shopping centre in the Kingfisher; and a range of built assets that reflect an interesting civic and industrial history. All in all, councillors were very much on board with the broader population:

- *"From my point of view, and many of the residents, the greenery is the best thing"*
- *"We have more trees than Sherwood Forest"*
- *"It's very convenient for young working families getting to nearby towns and cities"*
- *"The Kingfisher is one of the best shopping centres"*
- *"We punch above our weight in terms of retail, with supermarkets and big retailers"*

The negatives – i.e. things that were perceived to be less good - included: growing challenges for the town centre, with empty units and the loss of key retail operations (e.g. M&S and Debenhams); having an 'eyesore' for a railway station; pressure on the road system

due to housebuilding; a growth of anti-social behaviour and a fear of crime; low ambitions among many young people; industrial estates that are partly empty and offering premises that modern industry does not want; a large proportion of low-waged jobs; a higher proportion of people on the child protection register than the national average; a general lack of good quality leisure and entertainment attractions; and an unattractive ring road around the town centre.

- *"I'm greatly concerned about the empty units in the town centre, especially with it now looking as if Debenhams – the town's flagship store – is closing"*
- *"The railway station – it's been an eyesore for a long time, and is the first thing seen when coming in and out of Redditch"*
- *"We have plans to build a lot (of new housing) in the next ten years – however, this will put a lot of pressure on the road system that it wasn't designed to take."*
- *"Aspirations are an issue – we have a lower wage economy and a gap in attainment."*
- *"Anti-social behaviour has become an issue recently. Residents bring it up more and more."*
- *"Fear of crime is an issue – there has recently been a murder and knife attack; this has affected public perceptions"*
- *"The ring road inhibits the way the town works and isn't attractive." "The ring road is a concrete collar. It traps the town centre."*

Councillors were more animated by issues to do with education and training than the wider population of residents were. The lack of a local grammar school and a limited selection of training opportunities at the local college were both brought up by several members. There was concern that some families have to move to other areas to access the grammar school-level education they aspire to. And there was frustration that links between the local college and local industry were not stronger, reflecting a desire to see the college being proactive in developing training courses that will support local economic development and enable young people to secure jobs in growth areas locally.

- *"It's a sad state of affairs when we need to send our kids to Warwickshire for a grammar school education. I say this as a parent who had to do so."*
- *"Unless you are tied to a job in Redditch, you may leave to pursue a grammar school education for your child"*
- *"As soon as youngsters with aspirations leave school, they go to universities elsewhere. The college does not offer enough to these young people."*

Investment that councillors would like to see

When asked about the investment they felt local people would like to see, members suggestions largely ranged across the broad themes that the Towns Fund aims to support and demonstrated support for all 6 of the investment ideas contained in the Town Deal bid.

Members pointed out that **regeneration of the town centre** has been 'in the works for some time' and is vitally important for both the local economy and for Redditch as a whole. There was broad, unsurprising support for the Town Deal proposals in relation to regeneration of the town centre, including the creation of a new outdoor public space for events and dining close to the existing shopping centre.

- *"We need to bring life into the town centre – not only in the Kingfisher. We need to better use our derelict areas. It's important to make Redditch a lively place, with an improved night-time economy and more housing around the town centre"*
- *"It's a ghost town at the moment in the centre. With nice housing and cafes it would come to life. We have some lovely old buildings that we'd like to preserve, but we'd want to bring in funky restaurants to complement this."*
- *"We need some prestige names (in terms of shops) to attract footfall. And we need more leisure facilities"*

Support was also strong for **regenerating the district centres**, which were seen to play a different but important role, servicing the needs of residents living nearby, some of whom do not find it easy to get into the town centre.

- *"The district centres are required, and are vital. I hope the Woodrow Centre is next (to be regenerated). It's dingy, dark and very sad. But the people who live in the flats really like living there, but are really concerned that it will be flattened. They don't want this – they want nice little shops and things. A lot of people don't use the district centre when it gets dark because it doesn't feel safe."*

Support for **regeneration of Redditch railway station** was recognised as integral to the broader regeneration of the town. Most members saw this as a vitally important, stressing that this is key, because it's a gateway site - the first thing you see when you come into Redditch.

- *"More trains in directions other than Birmingham would also help to generate footfall, and join Redditch up with the rest of Worcestershire, as it feels separate and like the 'odd one out'."*
- *"It's not appealing. If there's a nice café, a nice feel, people start their day well and it helps the character of the town."*
- *"We also need at least one express train, during peak times, to Birmingham. Because many people only want to go to Birmingham and the hospital. It will improve investment opportunity and people working in Redditch and Birmingham. The second platform could be good, but this needs to happen first."*
- *"There could be improved footfall in Redditch if we had access to Bromsgrove and Worcester. It would be good to see some investment to connect us better to the rest of our county."*
- *"The line is actually already there to connect us to other places in Worcestershire – we need more services to more places."*

There was a strong feeling among members that a lot needs to be done across the areas of **education, skills and enterprise**. Members wanted to see more aspiration created among young people that can be satisfied locally, for example by young people leaving schools to get trained in skill areas that are (and will be) in demand by local businesses. Greater synergy between local training institutions (particularly the college) and the local business community was called for.

- *"There's a lot of youngsters in Redditch that are practical but need to hone their skills – potentially to work in local firms."*

- *"It's a pity we don't have strong links to be able to work with businesses and the college to find out what is out there to bring into our town that the college is excited about."*
- *"We need better and greater cooperation with education providers, to provide what the market needs."*
- *"At the end of the day, our college doesn't serve Redditch well with the skill and courses it needs."*
- *"There needs to be a marriage between the college and the Towns Fund to gain and keep jobs in Redditch."*

Members noted that a lot of existing industrial and commercial space available in and around the town (e.g. on the industrial estates) is not the type of space that is in demand by new enterprise.

- *"There are lots of industrial estates in Redditch, but they all got built at the same time and are all the same design. We need to be brave and empty one of these industrial estates, move it and make it what the market wants. The world has moved on from the 1970s but these buildings haven't."*

Partly reflecting the above, there was support for a facility that would assist businesses to start and grow. Small businesses need flexible, affordable spaces, so having a **digital innovation centre and incubator start up facility** would certainly help.

- *"There's a need for a skills development centre – taking account of the digital revolution and bring that to Redditch, because that's where the jobs are going to be."*

Finally, the creation of a **community hub where multiple public services will be available in the one place** while not universally seen as a vital investment was important to a few of the members, particularly those with an interest social services.

- *"Previously we had social services and DWP under one roof, but social services got moved to Bromsgrove. Our local authority is not local."*
- *"Having all agencies under one roof helps a lot with efficiency, and would free up other spaces, like the job centre and the police station, which we could use for activities."*

Scoring the 6 project ideas

The summary feedback above covers all 6 of the potential areas for investment set out in the Town Deal Board bid. Members were also asked to score (on a 1-10 scale, with 10 being highest) the importance of each. The table below indicates the broad-based support among members for these proposals, with average scores ranging from 6.9 to 9.9. Investment in the railway station, followed by redevelopment of the town centre, were the two highest scoring investment ideas.

Investment idea	Scores (by each individual member)	Average score for idea
Redevelopment in the town centre to create more housing and space for cafes, offices, and retail.	10, 9, 10, 8, 10, 10, 9, 7	9.1
Investment in Redditch Railway station to include a second platform and more trains in and out of Redditch.	10, 10, 10, 10, 10, 10, 9, 10	9.9
Creation of a new public outdoor space that can be used for events and outdoor dining	10, 6, 7, 5, 8, 7, 8, 6	7.1
Creation of a community hub where multiple public services will be available in the one place	10, 6, 8, 6, 4, 8, 8, 6	7
Improvement/regeneration of District Centres (e.g. new homes, shopping facilities etc.)	5, 6, 7, 5, 7, 8, 10, 7	6.9
Developing a site/space where businesses can start and grow and access help and support and network with each other.	10, 7, 7, 8, 7, 8, 8, 10	8.2

NB Data is for 8 of the 9 participants (one member left the online meeting before voting)