

SE15. Following the Public Pound – Falkirk Towns Ltd

The committee considered a report by the Director of Development Services presenting a reporting statement for Falkirk Towns Ltd as it had been funded under the Following the Public Pound (FPP) arrangements for the period 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019.

Falkirk Towns Ltd had received funding of £78,308 to provide town centre management services and run the Falkirk Business Improvement District (BID) its work assisted the Council in achieving its economic development objectives and supported the Town Centre Partnership. A company limited by guarantee, Falkirk Towns Ltd was funded on the basis that it provided services which could not readily be provided by the Council or had not been provided in the past.

The activities of Falkirk Towns Ltd connected with services provided by Development Services to meet priorities and outcomes of the Council and its partners within the key SOLD plan outcomes of:

- Grow our economy
- Improving the neighbourhood we live in
- Promoting vibrant town centres

In supporting Falkirk Towns Ltd and its relationship with the Falkirk BID, the Council additionally helps to meet key corporate priorities of:

- Thinking differently about what our town centres can be
- Promoting town centres as places to live, socialise and participate
- Expanding our approach to safer streets

Falkirk Towns Ltd received £78,309 in 2018/19 to support this work.

The committee discussed the funding of Falkirk Towns Ltd noting that funding had decreased from £108,309 for the period April 2016 – March 2017.

Falkirk BID had generated income of £184,000 for town centre management through a BID business rates levy. It also had additional Council external funding support in respect of the Taxi Marshalling Service. Pete Reid stated that decreasing BID levy funding as a result of increasing town centre vacancies presented a risk to the organisation. It was important to note that external funding was also able to be secured. Falkirk Towns Ltd delivering the Falkirk BID (in its promotional name of Falkirk Delivers) had been successful in securing funding from VisitScotland and the Townscape Heritage Initiative to support delivery of promotional activities in the town centre. The Falkirk BID team has also actively sought funding from various external bodies.

Members remarked that Falkirk town centre looked clean and sought further information on the Child Safe Scheme which looked after lost children in the town centre. Mr Reid stated that ensuring the town centre was safe was key to its vibrancy and one of the BID's core activities. He cited joint working with Police Scotland to utilise the CCTV and radio network – Shop Safe. The company operated a radio link scheme with 26 businesses to allow them to keep informed of security issues in real time.

Members praised the various initiatives but expressed concern over the perceived reduction in footfall. Mr Reid concurred that reducing footfall presented a continuing challenge which had seen a marked decrease since the closure of Marks and Spencer. He confirmed the BID levy was charged over and above Non Domestic Rates payments and applicable only to those to businesses within the BID geographical boundary. It was aimed at promoting footfall and delivering other activities and initiatives set out in the report. Falkirk Towns Ltd nor the Council did not specifically monitor footfall, however it monitored the statistics gathered by retailers. There was a clear need to develop strategies and initiatives to promote town centre activities being delivered through the Town Centre Partnership. In response to a question in regard to a loyalty scheme Mr Reid stated that there were various initiatives in place in towns to promote spend. To date there wasn't a loyalty scheme in place as costs were an inhibiting factor.

The committee then discussed the financing of the Falkirk BID. The Council's funding covered the BID core operating costs which supported the BID business levy of £184k used to deliver projects and services in the area. When the Council's funding decreased there is a knock-on impact on the services provided by Falkirk BID. The BID is rebaloted every five years and at each BID ballot there is a risk of negativity around the value of BID and payment of the levy even though it was balloted on by all businesses within the BID area. Such negativity is from perception of value as to what the BID delivers. It was vital that retailers understood the value and benefits of the BID. The next BID ballot was in 2021 – and there was risk that the organisation's rebalot might not be successful. It was noted that the organisation should ensure that its message and its benefits are clear and understood. It was vital that all retailers understood the benefits of supporting a BID. Members agreed but reiterated that there would be an issue of sustainability if Council funding continued to decrease and the BID did not secure match funding in the 2021 ballot. Mr Reid stated that this was a national issue as Council budgets are impacted. The Scottish Town Centre Partnership offered support as to BID models, funding and how they can be delivered. Prior to 2021 a BID delivery model and objectives would be set out in the business plan and the vote by Non Domestic Rate payers within the defined BID geographical boundary would be based on the strength of the business plan. The Head of Planning and Economic Development stated that concerns over the future of town centres were prevalent across Scotland. A recent report by the Federation of Small Businesses called for a transformation of the town centre model and for funding to support the transformation. Following a question Mr Duff confirmed that Falkirk BID focussed solely on Falkirk Town Centre and the levy raised was from retailers within the defined geographical boundary of the town centre. Funding to Falkirk Towns Ltd supported work in the other

town centres in the Council area. This had decreased over recent years and the service provided had decreased accordingly.

The committee then discussed the objective 'to inspire visitors to enjoy the town centre from day to night. Members questioned whether this objective had been met. The area had a number of attractions such as the Kelpies and the Wheel; however members asked if there was evidence that visitors were attracted to the town centre, in particular at night. Pete Reid suggested that there were signs of successes in this objective. There had been an increase, for example, in the number of European visitors. It was vital to repurpose the town centre from retail solely to for example heritage. There was a 5-star attraction in the town centre (the escape room at Callendar Square). A recent article on the BBC on town centres featured a local gaming business which had moved its operations from online to the town centre. The town had recently been awarded a Ramblers UK national award as the best neighbourhood for walking. Examples such as these, he stated, showed that there were endeavours to attract visitors to the town centre. In response to a question he confirmed that there had been an increase in hotel trade although there had been a slight decrease in retail trade, possibly due to the closure of Marks & Spencer in the town centre. Between 2009 and 2019 there had been a 15% decrease in retail floor space but there had been a 29% increase in service related floor space. Mr Reid pointed members to a Town Centre Health Check report for 2009 – 2019 which was available online.

The Falkirk BID also looks to support the night time economy by assisting in the support of a safe town centre environment and awards. Changing the town centre from a traditional retailing centre to alternative uses such as leisure and residential living and supporting the growing tourism sector remains a key priority for the Council in which Falkirk Delivers assisted and supported.

Decision

The committee approved the report and acknowledged progress by Falkirk Towns Ltd in meeting Council priorities.