



STROUD DISTRICT LOCAL STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

<http://lsp.stroud.gov.uk>

Meeting held on Friday 8 March 2024

Council Chamber, Ebley Mill

Theme: Local High Streets

Present:

Russell Warner (Chair)	Gloucestershire Area Lead, Federation of Small Businesses	Clare Davis	CEO, Longfield
Will Mansell (Vice Chair)	The Grace Network	Dan Morris	Deputy Chairman, Howard Tenens
Adrian Oldman	Director, Transition Stroud	Geoffrey Beckerleg	Chamber of Trade and Commerce, Stroud & District
Anna Herbert	Chief Executive Officer, OPENhouse	James Beecher	Access Bike Project Manager, Creative Sustainability
Beth Whittaker	Third sector / community involvement	Cllr Lindsey Green	Conservative Group Leader, Stroud District Council
Brendan Cleere	Strategic Director of Place	Dr Roma Walker	Stroud Hospital League of Friends
Cate James- Hodges	Leader, Stroud District Youth Council	Tanya de Leersnyder	Chair, Stroud Businesswomen's Network
Cllr Catherine Braun	Leader of Council		

Apologies received:

Anna Bonallack	Chief Executive Officer, Creative Sustainability	Kathy O'Leary	Chief Executive, Stroud District Council
Barbara Piranty	Chief Executive, GRCC	Kevin Hamblin	Group Chief Executive Principal, South Gloucestershire and Stroud College
Carole Stubbs	Job Centre Plus, Avon, Somerset and Gloucestershire District	Lisa Ferneyhough- Moss	Deputy Director Care Operations, Lilian Faithfull Care
Chris Pockett	Head of Communications, Renishaw	Mark McShane	Head, Stroud High School
Elizabeth Hall	Chief Executive, Citizens Advice Stroud & Cotswolds	Max Comfort	Director, Stroud Commonwealth
Helen Edwards	NHS Gloucestershire Clinical Commissioning Group	Sarah Scott	Executive Director Adult Social Care, Gloucestershire County Council
Indigo Redfern	Chief Executive, GL11 Community Hub	Steve Olczak	Partnership Manager, Department of Work and Pensions

Absent and apologies not received:

Alison Truphet	Amberley Shop & Café	Matt Amey	Stroud and Nailsworth Station Manager, Gloucestershire Fire and Rescue Service
Chris Haine	CEO, GAPTC	Cllr Natalie Bennett	Deputy Leader, Stroud District Council
David Owen	CE, Gfirst Local Enterprise Partnership	Inspector Paul Cruise	Gloucestershire Police
Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown	MP, Cotswolds Constituency	Siobhan Bailie	MP, Stroud Constituency
Louise Wilson	Community Engagement Officer, Longfield		

Guests and Support Officers

Alun Davies	Pocklington Trust	Tony Davey	Stroud & District Chamber of Trade and Commerce
Julie Stephens	Gloucestershire Sight Loss Council	Amy Beckett	Senior Economic Development Specialist, Stroud District Council
Rachael Lythgoe	Corporate Communications Officer, Stroud District Council	Steve Miles	Senior Youth Officer, Stroud District Council
Hannah Barton	LSP Coordinator		

1. Welcome, introductions, apologies.

The Chair welcomed everyone and noted the apologies.

2. Local High Streets – The Challenges. The Opportunities. Tony Davey, Stroud & District Chamber of Trade and Commerce (presentation attached)

Stroud & District Chamber of Trade and Commerce are behind multiple brands including visitstroud.uk, which helps promote tourism across the Stroud district.

Tony presented some of the key challenges for local high streets, including productive footfall which is one of the biggest challenges. To some degree, footfall can be monitored, but it is productive footfall that is needed for high streets to thrive. Another challenge for local high streets is the cost-of-living crisis which is impacting customers and people who are running businesses. Many high street businesses have been receiving rate rebates, but this is changing so that is also becoming another challenge. A further challenge for local high streets is misinformation and misconceptions, and this is more in Stroud town than other towns in the district. There is a small but loud group of people who report that there is little to nothing in Stroud town, so there is a need to fight against this misinformation.

Some towns in the county are reporting that they have returned to pre-Covid levels of productivity, but things remain challenging. The Stroud district tends to be just behind the national trends. When national trends increase or decrease, they increase or decrease more in the Stroud district. Over the period March 2020 to September 2023, productive footfall has decreased in all towns in the Stroud district with the exception of Nailsworth.

Some of the reasons for the decline in productive footfall include national retailers shutting down, banks shutting down, a lack or withdrawal of buses, and train strikes. In rural towns like

those in the Stroud district, flexible working also tends to have a negative impact on productive footfall.

Some of the impacts of high street footfall decreasing are properties not being taken care of, an increase in crime and anti-social behaviour, job losses, a lack of inward investment and fewer opportunities.

In Stroud town there is a healthy mix of commercial premises including retail, coffee shops and bars. Although the vacancy rate in Stroud town is 13.08% compared to a national average of 13.8%, this vacancy rate is still concerning. However, some of the vacant units will be filled soon.

Tony also presented the many opportunities for our local high streets. This includes boosting 'happy spending', using social media, and continuing to deliver reasons to visit. One of the campaigns that supports local high streets is Catch the Bus Month, and it is also hoped the Market Towns Vitality Fund will help boost high streets.

The Stroud District Chamber of Trade and Commerce are about to run a pilot called '[Windows of Opportunity](#)', where a display space will be available in empty shop windows for businesses to be able to display a product or information about a service. This is to help businesses who are looking to become the next high street champions but who don't currently have a physical presence in the town. It is hoped that following the pilot, the initiative will be rolled out across the district.

There is also going to be an English Tourism Week campaign later this year, and QR codes and posters are being made available in Stroud car parks to help people find Stroud's main attractions when they arrive in the town.

The Stroud District Chamber of Trade and Commerce's latest initiative involves framed posters that customers can put on their tables in relevant premises to say they are happy to share their table. This is to help support local communities.

Local high streets are important because they provide local jobs and opportunities, they support the local community, they help combat isolation and they support some of the most vulnerable people in society.

Local high streets also help to keep money in the local economy. For every £10 spent in a local independent business, £8 stays in the local economy. This drops to £2-3 when spent in an out-of-town store or national chain.

A question was asked about inaccuracies and negativity in media coverage, and how this can be addressed. Tony responded that most issues tend to come from commentators and members of the public rather than the press, however one way the Chamber have approached this is to provide their news to the press before it is picked up elsewhere, and to provide short updates so the news can't be stripped out or edited.

Another question was asked about whether the Stroud District Chamber of Trade and Commerce have received any feedback about begging in the town centre as OpenHouse receive criticism about people begging if they are technically housed. Tony responded that the Chamber are part of a group run by the police called Operation Unity, which OpenHouse could potentially be involved with.

A further question was asked about the busyness of roads going into towns in the Stroud district, and whether this puts people off visiting. The Chamber have lobbied the County Council to review some of the roads around Stroud town but there is little interest. It is

acknowledged that people don't use Ebley bypass enough, but the County Council are not currently looking to find out why or what can be improved. It was noted that roadworks are also a big problem that stop people visiting towns.

A comment was made that charity shops on local high streets are not always a bad thing, and they can be part of a vibrant local community and retail world. This is particularly true when the charity is local, and the money spent in that charity shop remains in the local area.

3. The impact of town and village centres on people with a visual impairment. Alun Davies and Julie Stephens, Gloucestershire Sight Loss Council

Alun works for a national charity called The Pocklington Trust, which supports blind and partially sighted people. The Trust also supports local engagement and consultation groups who work with people to improve facilities and services for people with a visual impairment. One of these groups is the Gloucestershire Sight Loss Council, and Julie Stephens is a member of this Council.

Within the next 15 years, visual impairment will be the most prominent impairment in Gloucestershire. There will be more people with a visual impairment than with cancer, heart problems or dementia, and this is because of the demographic in the county. Overwhelmingly, visual impairment is an older people's issue, and it mostly affects people over 75. Visual impairment is largely partial sight and total blindness is very rare.

There are three main things that can help people with a visual impairment using towns and high streets:

1. Use yellow paint on obstacles;
2. Make signage Arial font and at least size 14;
3. Remove A boards.

Some people with a visual impairment have phones that talk to them, but not everyone, so there is also an issue of digital exclusion for those with visual impairments. Most people with a visual impairment get their information from BBC local radio and talking newspapers. There are three talking newspapers in the district, and Alun asked whether those present use them to communicate their key messages.

Many people with visual impairments live on their own and some don't have the courage to leave their house, often due to issues such as electric vehicles, electric scooters, cars parked on pavements, A boards, pavement furniture and foliage growing on pavements. The rise in electric vehicles is a particular problem as you can't hear them.

Of all the councils in Gloucestershire, Stroud District Council shows the most involvement with Gloucestershire Sight Loss Council. They have jointly arranged visual impairment simulation walks in eight main towns in the Stroud district and the Council's commitment to this is excellent. Gloucestershire Sight Loss Council are preparing a report for the Council's Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Equity Group and this can be shared with the LSP once ready.

Of the towns in the district, Stonehouse is the best for those with a visual impairment and Stroud is the worst. The number of obstacles and narrowness of the pavements in Stroud are particular issues for white cane users. Stonehouse has the advantage of wide roads, but they have also taken accessibility into account when adding street furniture, and the drop from pavements to roads is gentle.

Alun highlighted the ability of local shop owners and councillors to change and influence things for people with visual impairments. He also highlighted that some changes don't require much

money, including using yellow paint on obstacles such as A boards and scaffolding so that people with visual impairments don't walk into them.

Julie Stephens is the proud and privileged owner of guide dog Heidi. Julie highlighted some of the specific issues for guide dog users including uneven pavements, loose and cracked slabs, and cafes putting tables and chairs outside but not having them behind a barrier. In these instances, Heidi has to establish whether or not she and Julie will fit and if not, they are forced into the road.

A question was asked about whether the County Council's Highways team have been contacted about the issues regarding pavements and road access. Alun responded that Gloucestershire Sight Loss Council have conducted visual impairment awareness training for about half of the County Council's traffic and street team, and they have also done some more specific work in Gloucester city. Alun also responded that whilst Highways' role is important, there is a more local solution for lots of the specific issues that have been discussed today.

Alun was thanked for his presentation and some of the tips he shared including the use of yellow paint. Something so simple can make a huge difference and this tip can be easily implemented moving forwards.

A question was asked regarding the introduction of shared space on Stonehouse high street, as initially this prompted a lot of concern amongst people with a visual impairment. Alun responded that shared space remains an issue, but Stonehouse's actual pavements and getting around the high street are better than in other towns. Alun also highlighted that shared surfaces are a challenge, and changes in use e.g. cycle lanes, need to be properly demarcated so a white cane user can feel them with their cane, and they should also be painted in yellow.

Alun highlighted the particular issue of floating bus stops that have cycle lanes in front and behind them, as people with visual impairments can't hear cyclists. Gloucester are removing shared spaces because of some of these concerns. Alun referenced The Purple Pound which refers to the spending power of disabled households. If you make towns accessible, there is an opportunity to make more money.

4. Market Towns, an overview. Amy Beckett, Senior Economic Development Specialist, Stroud District Council (presentation attached)

Amy gave an overview of the market towns in the Stroud district. As far more people shop online now their expectations of towns and high streets have changed, and more attractions and activities are expected than previously.

Since the pandemic, Stroud District Council have funded market town footfall counters, Shop Local campaigns, social media training with Maybe*, and they have held events including Market Towns Forums where town councils can share best practice.

The Council has also developed a walking app called [Discover Stroud Trails](#) which encourages visitors to visit shops and cafés during their walks. Treasure hunts will be launched on this platform later this year.

The Council continues to work closely with partners such as the Destination Management Organisation, Cotswold Tourism, and they have supported GWR with their marketing campaigns focussing on the district.

This year, the Council will be launching the Market Town Vitality Fund - £150,000 of funding available for market towns in the district to support a wide range of priorities and actions. The

ambition of the fund is to support locally led initiatives that promote the vitality of the high street and address key priorities of the market towns across the district. Engagement with market towns is already under way and it is anticipated that funding will be available from later this calendar year, to cover the next two financial years (2024/25 and 2025/26). Innovative ideas to promote vitality of individual market towns will be sought, as well as cross-district opportunities. The Council plans to use baseline data and footfall counters as a measure of success of the initiatives funded by the Market Town Vitality Fund.

A question was asked about the impact of Stroud Farmers' Market on footfall in the town, and whether footfall decreased significantly on market closure dates. Amy said there is often a correlation between the market and high footfall, and the Council could conduct a deeper dive into the footfall rates to see what the impact of the closure dates is.

A question was raised about exclusions for what the Market Town Vitality Fund can't be spent on. Amy explained that the fund is not prescriptive, the Council is open to lots of different ideas provided that a clear link to economic vitality could be shown and would like applicants to be innovative and consider the legacy of the funding. A follow up question was asked about whether the fund could be used for something that would normally fall to the County Council. Amy confirmed that all ideas will be considered and weighed up in the decision making process.

Tony from the Stroud Chamber of Trade and Commerce highlighted that they are supporting this initiative and are very grateful for the opportunity to put ideas forward. He also followed up about the impact of bad weather on footfall in market towns, as this varies depending on the town. Sometimes bad weather can lead to increased footfall in Stroud as people don't want to go further afield. Tony raised that Nailsworth and Dursley also have markets and the impact of markets can vary across different towns. However, they tend to increase footfall across the board, particularly as markets can be a social gathering as well as a place to shop.

It was highlighted that from 1 April 2024, Stroud District Council are introducing free parking after 2pm in Stroud town, where previously free parking was only available after 3pm. This will hopefully mean people stay in the town for longer as they can use the car parks when the town is quieter, and they will miss school traffic.

A question was asked about whether there has been any analysis into why Nailsworth is bucking the trend regarding footfall. Tony responded that they lost their banks much earlier than other towns in the district, so their recovery is happening sooner, and they also have a broad offering of boutique shops. Typically, when a business closes in Nailsworth it tends to be more under the radar as another business will pop up quickly. Nailsworth also has the advantage of an affluent catchment area, with a fair amount of residential areas close to the town and 'weekenders' from places like Bath.

5. Future LSP meeting themes

The theme of the next LSP meeting will be digital equity and inclusion and two speakers have already been lined up. If anyone has any suggestions for future LSP themes, please let Hannah know on hannah.barton@stroud.gov.uk.

6. Partners' Updates

Tony Davey, Chair, Stroud Chamber of Trade and Commerce:

- The Chamber have conducted a piece of work looking into boosting Wotton-under-Edge's local economy and prepared a 37-page report following this. They are also starting this process in Berkeley.

- The Chamber is a member of Operation Unity which looks at increasing police and agency presence within towns and helping people to feel safer.

Clare Davis, CEO, Longfield:

- Longfield are launching their first community choir.
- They are writing their strategy for the next three years and this will include their wider role in the community. They would like to include stakeholder engagement in the development of this strategy.

Tanya de Leersnyder, Chair, Stroud Businesswomen's Network:

- Tanya noted what a fascinating talk today has been and that the district is a great place to live.

Cate James-Hodges, Leader, Stroud District Youth Council:

- There is going to be a new Stroud District Council officer working on youth which will benefit the Youth Council greatly.
- They are interested in how high streets can benefit youth groups.

Catherine Braun, Leader, Stroud District Council:

- The Council has agreed their budget for 2024/25 which includes the Market Town Vitality Fund.
- Parking spaces in Stroud will be free after 2pm, new secure cycle storage is being introduced, and there is a programme already planned for more electric vehicle charging points across the district.
- The Council is looking to purchase land between Stroud town station and Brunel Mall car park, which will open up access to Stroud station for those walking and cycling. There is also an opportunity to purchase Brunel Goods Shed to secure their future.
- They are working with the County Council to improve the pedestrian area on King Street in Stroud.
- There are additional community funding options such as the Rural England Prosperity Fund which includes £300,000 to distribute over the next financial year and which can fund capital projects. For anyone interested please visit the website or contact the Economic Development team: <https://www.stroud.gov.uk/business/support-for-business/rural-england-prosperity-fund>
- The Council have approved a new proposal for a crowdfunding platform called SpaceHive. Through this platform organisations can launch funding opportunities, and this has worked well for Cotswold District Council.
- New Community Engagement Principles and VCSE Principles have been submitted to the Council's Community Services & Licensing Committee next week. These look to build on existing good work and include taking a more cooperative and collaborative approach when developing policy.
- Equality, diversity, inclusion and equity is an important theme across all policy areas at the Council and it was very insightful to hear about visual impairments today.

Rachael Lythgoe, Corporate Communications Officer, Stroud District Council:

- The Museum in The Park and various businesses across the Stroud district have been nominated for SoGlos Lifestyle Awards.
- The Council are celebrating International Women's Day and have launched a short film on LinkedIn.

Julie Stephens, Gloucestershire Sight Loss Council:

- This is the first LSP meeting that Julie has been involved with and it's been really interesting.

- If anyone would like any support from Gloucestershire Sight Loss Council, please get in touch.

Russell Warner, Federation of Small Businesses:

- Some businesses in the district are still struggling and this may be a reflection of the political environment. There is a bit of a 'wait and see' attitude.

Lindsey Green, Conservative Group Leader, Stroud District Council:

- Cllr Green is passionate about high streets and would like to connect with Tony from Stroud Chamber of Trade and Commerce in her role as a District Councillor for Berkeley.
- Cllr Green noted how informative Gloucestershire Sight Loss Council's talk was and thanked everyone for their contribution to today's meeting.

Dr Roma Walker, Stroud Hospital League of Friends:

- After a slight delay, the League of Friends have opened up the third tranche of their community funding, and applications are open until 26 April. More details can be found on their website: <https://stroudleagueoffriends.org/2024/02/community-funding-2024/>
- Roma noted that it is good to see that attendance at LSP meetings has built up again after the pandemic.

Anna Herbert, Chief Executive Officer, OPENhouse:

- OPENhouse are trying to procure three single independent units for people who use OPENhouse, so they can be part of the solution for the current bottlenecks.

Adrian Oldman, Director, Transition Stroud:

- Transition Stroud are about to launch an eBike library scheme operating out of Stonehouse, Minchinhampton, Brimscombe and Thrupp. This has been funded with a grant from the Council's active travel scheme and the Rural England Prosperity Fund. This will launch in early April and is being run by volunteers.
- Transition Stroud are an umbrella organisation of various groups, and they have recently taken on two other bodies within their umbrella. These are a new Stroud area community energy group, and an art trail in Stroud town that is held on August bank holiday.

James Beecher, Access Bike Project Manager, Creative Sustainability:

- Creative Sustainability have taken on a space in Stroud town centre which used to be an eBike shop. They have identified a social need for a shop in town that is also a much wider community hub. The shop will sell refurbished bike parts.
- They have received some funding from the Council's active travel fund for a wider carbon reduction Hub.
- Creative Sustainability are looking at lottery funding to extend their youth provision.
- They understand there needs to be a focus on commercial businesses on the high street but as a community organisation, Creative Sustainability would like to see a focus on the community use of high streets that can fill the activities and attractions function mentioned previously. This also means people can socialise without the pressure to spend money.

Beth Whittaker, Third sector / community involvement:

- Market towns in the district face similar problems so it is good to learn from each other and know they are not in isolation.
- Many children are leaving school unable to read and this can be linked to financial problems later in life. Beth volunteers with 'Read With Me', a charity which helps primary school children to read. The charity has 250 volunteers in Gloucestershire working with 50 schools, and they make a big difference to improving children's

confidence and social skills. If anyone has any spare time, please consider volunteering with them.

Will Mansell, Founder, The Grace Network:

- Stroud District Kids Stuff and The Great Plate have been named in the top 100 social entrepreneurs nationally.
- Will noted that we need to get better at sharing expertise across the district, including consideration of how we can collectively communicate as a district.
- The Long Table are opening a new site in Cirencester where House of Fraser used to be.

Please send any requests for future agenda items or suggestions for future meeting themes to Hannah Barton, hannah.barton@stroud.gov.uk

Next meeting

Friday 7 June

The meetings are 9:00am for a 9:15am start, with meeting end by 11:30am.