

Bidding high for city's future

Businesses and organisations in central Bradford could soon have a strong new voice with which to help shape its future.

Moves to create a Business Improvement District (BID) for the city centre are now well advanced and it's clear that many feel it is long overdue.

A feasibility study carried out by the BID Development Group towards the end of last year found that 70 per cent of those who took part were behind the plans.

More than 600 city centre retailers, professional services companies and other firms and organisations will get the chance to vote on whether they want the BID to go ahead when ballot papers are issued in September.

Business leaders steering the campaign have just nine months to persuade them to vote in favour of the five-year project to breathe new life into the city centre. If they are successful, about £2.5 million will be raised to improve the safety, cleanliness, vitality and marketing of Bradford's retail heart.

Similar BIDs have already been established in almost 300 towns and cities across the country and most have reported making major strides in improving the fortunes of their areas. Almost all of those who have completed their first five years have been voted in for a second term.

Ian Ward, chairman of the group developing the BID project, said: "the feasibility study gave an overwhelming endorsement to the BID proposal. It's our job now to put in the hard yards to show all those in the BID area that we can use their money to make a real difference to their prospects as city centre businesses."

There is much work to do and several formal steps that must be completed before the ballot can take place.

Following the success of the feasibility study, a Development Board has been established to draw up a Business Plan for the project which tackles the list of issues highlighted by the feasibility survey.

The Board, whose members will be candidates for the actual operating board if the BID is established, include representatives of independent retailers, bars and restaurants as well as local representatives of major national retail chains, such as Boots, M&S, Primark and Debenhams, and the managers of the Broadway and Kirkgate shopping centres and Forster Square retail park.

There are also representatives of professional services firms such as Santander and Gordons solicitors,



The BID Development Board with chair Ian Ward (right) and deputy chairs Sandy Needham and Trevor Higgins in the foreground with the Feasibility Study report.

as well as Bradford Council and the Police. They are joined by other key stakeholders such as the National Science and Media Museum, Bradford City FC, Bradford Civic Society and Little Germany Action Group.

The Board is chaired by Ian Ward, General Manager of The Broadway, supported by deputy chairs, Sandy Needham, chief executive of the West and North Yorkshire Chambers of Commerce and Dr Trevor Higgins, chief executive of Bradford Breakthrough.

The next few months will see extensive consultation with businesses over the proposed business plan and its four key pillars: Clean, Safe, Alive and Promoted.

The aim is to use the funds from an annual business levy to promote and market central Bradford, encouraging investment, bringing in new events, smartening up neglected areas and improving safety and security for shoppers and visitors.

Projects identified in the feasibility study include:

- Improving the appearance of empty shops
- Projects to encourage investment into Bradford
- Marketing and promotion to project the city to a far wider audience
- More major city centre events or

festivals

- Street cleansing and street washing, to include chewing gum removal
- Improvements to problem areas, such as graffiti or fly-tipping removal
- Security improvements
- Greater lobbying, representation and championing of the city
- New seasonal events, including more Christmas activities
- Daytime wardens/hosts/ambassadors

Mr Ward said: "These are just some of the key areas we've identified but during the consultations on the business plan, we'll be calling on those who will be balloted to let us know what else they think we can do to help improve the city centre."

"The BID is all about businesses working together for the future of the city centre and we're convinced we have the energy, innovation and creativity within the BID area to take Bradford to the next level."

The key message for those who will be balloted is that the BID will provide "additionality."

"Although, for convenience and cost control, the levy will be collected with business rates, it will not go to the Council and they will not be responsible for how it is spent," said Mr Ward.

"It's still the Council's job to provide core services and the BID

will not replicate or replace those.

"It's up to businesses, through the BID, to decide how that money should be spent to the benefit of a thriving city centre."

In fact, if the BID is voted through, it will give city centre firms and organisations an unprecedented say in the area's future.

Deputy chair Sandy Needham says that as well as funding and driving improvements, the BID would provide a clear, united voice with which to stand up for central Bradford.

"For the first time, city centre business will have a distinct voice at the table when it comes to working with local and national government and others," she said.

"All of those in the BID area have a stake in its future and they will be putting their money where their mouth is by funding the projects we undertake, so it's only right that they have their say when it comes to changes in its infrastructure, security, promotion and so on."

BIDs can provide extra services over and above those provided by councils but they can also enter into legal agreements with local authorities and other public-sector bodies to ensure that they continue to provide core services.

"The BID will enable us to deliver activity in addition to that which Bradford Council can provide but we can also hold the Council to

account to make sure standards are met," said Ms Needham.

"At the same time, the Council will benefit from being able to discuss changes and improvements with a body that can accurately reflect the wide range of views held by those who live, work and make a living in the heart of our fabulous city."

Following consultation on the draft plan, the final, agreed version will be sent to the Council in June and formally launched for all those in the BID boundary to study.

Formal notice of the ballot will be issued a month later before the voting papers are sent out in September. The ballot will be run by independent specialists and conducted entirely by post.

All the businesses that would be subject to the levy that will fund the BID for five years will then have 28 days to vote.

The BID will only go ahead if a majority of those who take part vote in favour and only if they represent more than 50 per cent of the total rateable value.

The result of the ballot will be declared in October and, if it's a "Yes", a Board of Directors will be formed and key staff appointed before the BID begins its five-year term of operation at the end of the year.

• For further information see: bradfordbid.co.uk