

BID for success

KEEPING CORNWALL'S TOWN CENTRES VIBRANT IS GOOD FOR BUSINESS – AND GOOD FOR COMMUNITIES

Words by Kirstie Newton

How important is your town centre to you? As the place where we work, shop and live, it plays a huge part in our quality of life. A vibrant town centre brings the community together and attracts visitors; a dingy environment (think empty, boarded-up shops) depresses residents and repels outsiders, leading to a downward spiral.

The challenge for Cornwall's towns has been to maintain a lively atmosphere in an increasingly difficult commercial climate. Exciting events, such as winter carnivals and food festivals, have created a positive vibe and increased trade; but these things cost money, and rely heavily on community support.

With pressure on the public sector to make cuts, the onus is falling increasingly on local businesses to fund initiatives that will give our towns the necessary buzz. There are more than 100 Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) throughout the UK, including three in Cornwall.

Truro is now four years into a five-year programme, which will come up for renewal in September 2012; Falmouth is two years in, and the Newquay BID was formed in April

2011. Camborne is currently preparing a proposal for a fourth BID. Each town is different, and will have its own agenda and expectations from its BID.

What is a BID? It's a not-for-profit scheme, led by and funded by local businesses, to improve footfall in a defined commercial area (that could be a town centre or an industrial estate), by providing services above those offered by the public sector. Businesses within the area must vote to form a BID; if successful, all businesses will be charged a nominal levy, say 1% of turnover, meaning all should find this a fair and affordable amount.

The funds raised are ploughed back into initiatives intended to energise the area, ranging from creating a clean and safe environment to crowd-pleasing events. They can also be used to draw down match-funding from other sources. The collective buying power of a BID can also result in cheaper utilities, legal services and other necessary business expenses.

Here we look at why BIDs were formed in Cornwall, and how they have worked to improve town life.



NEIL SCOTT

TRURO

Dynamic, focused and fast-talking, to spend time with Neil Scott, BID development manager at Totally Truro, is to be given an injection of enthusiasm for the city centre.

"The feedback from businesses is that Truro is a lovely city," he says. "It's clean and safe. It's the busiest shopping destination in Cornwall, with a good mix of independent shops and national chains. It has big attractions like the cathedral and the Hall for Cornwall.

"But they wanted people to explore the city in more detail. Most people stick to a very tight area – Pydar and Boscawen Streets, the bottom end of Lemon Street. By walking a few minutes more, you reach eclectic businesses in River, Castle and New Bridge Streets. They also wanted people to stay beyond 5pm, when people flood out of the city after work."

In contrast to resorts like Falmouth and Newquay, Truro footfall is made up largely of residents and commuters. The city rarely sees visitors for an extended stay, but for day trips or two to three-day breaks.

The catalyst for the Truro BID was a dramatic change in the nature of city centre life. "In the past, they had less footfall, so there was less pressure on the infrastructure," Neil explains. "Businesses were more altruistic, freely contributing time and money to help promote the city. But the pressures of the commercial world have taken their toll, and funds have dried up. The cap had gone round several times, and come back empty."

A direct result in Truro was that one year, the Christmas lights didn't happen. "The lights had always been an informal arrangement, funded and installed by local businesses. Then legislation changed and funding dried up. Retail that year dropped by 25 per cent in November and December. Today, that would finish a business off."

To see the annual City of Lights winter carnival is to witness how a potential catastrophe was transformed into a soaraway success. It's all thanks to BID funding, as are events such as Music Truro (in October) and Art in the City in spring.

A further threat to the high street is that supermarkets currently take 40 per cent of retail spend, 14 per cent of which is non-food items including clothes. Online spend is 10 per cent. Both are likely to increase. How to counter this? By making the high street a nicer place to be.

BID funding has paid for 1,400 floral displays in Truro. "It doesn't put people in stores, but it creates a positive, confident environment. It says, 'We care about this place'," says Neil.

A new website was created, with every business having its own dedicated page, the first online presence for some; and an initiative called Pay Day Fridays encourages people to stay in Truro later by offering special deals in bars and restaurants.

What differentiates a BID from other trade organisations? "We have a business plan and a budget, and represent all the businesses in Truro. As such we have influence – we are now being consulted by Cornwall Council for our views on transport and the edge-of-town developments." The latter have caused some concern among city centre traders, who fear a loss of business.

Next June, the decision to renew the BID will be put to the vote. Many of the businesses that voted for the BID in the first place are no longer around, but Neil is optimistic of success. A new BID will focus, among other things, on whether the business community should plug the gap in public services following reductions in policing and CCTV monitoring. →

FALMOUTH

October 2011 was a big month for Falmouth. At the same time as the coastal town was celebrating 350 years since receiving its Royal Charter, business leaders were preparing to lobby the Government about the difficulties facing town centres across the UK.

A direct response to the appointment of businesswoman and TV presenter Mary Portas to review national retail strategy, Falmouth's Save The High Street campaign aims to raise awareness of the issues that inhibit local economic growth, in the hope that other towns will benefit from any action taken.

BID manager Richard Wilcox and his team travelled to Westminster to meet Ms Portas and present a five-point plan, calling for low-cost parking to encourage people to stay longer and spend money; better public transport links; professional town management; more reasonable business rates; and to cut VAT in half to 10 per cent on retail and tourism businesses.

Since its inception in April 2009, around two thirds of Falmouth BID's work has been focused on marketing events. A national PR campaign has swung into action to elevate Falmouth to the same giddy heights as Padstow and St Ives.

"We want people to explore, and see more of Falmouth. We want people to stay longer and spend more money. We want them to come back, and tell their friends they had a great time," says Richard.

New festivals aim to bring visitors in during the quieter months: following the inaugural Autumn Walking Festival in October, look out for Falmouth Food Week (February 18 to 25), with restaurateurs challenged to deliver offers under £10; and the Spring Festival (March 17 to 25), which promises a celebration of open and green spaces through art, music, dance, fashion and more, with guided garden and historical walks to boot.

A major project has been a review of in-town signage. Empty shopfronts have been filled with signs sporting the town's new logo, based on the working boats that symbolise the town's historic fishing trade. Future plans include more information boards for visitors, and the resurrection of the Packet Trail, flagging up Falmouth's art and heritage links.

Car parking is a hot potato for both businesses and their customers. The BID campaign hopes to fund free parking days between January and March, in the hope of enticing

people into the town during the quieter winter period.

Falmouth has become a popular stop for cruise ships, and the 2011 season saw 29 ships dock in town, bearing 21,000 passengers. The BID has persuaded companies to drop passengers off at one end of town and pick them up at the other, thereby encouraging visitors to walk through town, perhaps grabbing a bite to eat or browsing in shops.

Over winter, the picturesque opeways down to the waterfront have been given a lick of paint by a team of volunteers, while a "guerilla gardening" event transformed a derelict area of town called Bells Court, clearing over five tonnes of foliage and rubbish and replacing them with plants donated by neighbouring garden centres. Now a pleasant space for residents and visitors, Bell's Court received a Cornwall in Bloom award.

Such work contributes to a better environment for all those who visit Falmouth, and Richard is keen to point out that a happy high street is of benefit to all. "We are making a huge investment in the public realm," he says. "There's more of a buzz, a feel-good factor. It creates footfall, generates spend and boosts local wealth, and as a result, Falmouth is a better place to live, work and play." →



MAIN PHOTOGRAPH AND TOP RIGHT: FALMOUTH, BY WESTCOUNTRYPHOTOGRAPHERS.COM/SAM MORGAN MOORE

RIGHT: RICHARD WILCOX



VERYAN ARMSTRONG AND EVE WOOLDRIDGE. PHOTO: WESTCOUNTRYPHOTOGRAPHERS.COM/JAMES RAM

NEWQUAY

As mist spreads over Fistral Beach. Veryan Armstrong and Eve Wooldridge are discussing the Newquay BID, which was launched in April. The general manager of the Headland Hotel, Veryan is a fourth-generation Newquay hotelier, running the hotel her father bought in 1979. She is now chairman of the BID board of directors, and as newly appointed BID manager, it will be Eve's job to steer the town on the route to improvement and success.

Veryan sums up the challenge: "We want people to love Newquay again. People forget it has one of the most beautiful stretches of coastline and beaches in the country."

One of Cornwall's most enduring seaside resorts, Newquay's tourism trade is integral to its overall success as a business community – the more visitors, the more trade. But it has suffered much negative publicity surrounding the alcohol-fuelled antics – and tragedies – of its younger clientele. "Newquay has had its problems, but it's no different to Brighton, or indeed any town centre," says Veryan.

The Newquay Safe initiative galvanised local authorities, businesses and emergency services in making the town a pleasant place for all to visit. "What the BID now needs to do is promote what Newquay has, get out there and sing its praises," says Eve.

Having seen the success of the Truro BID, Newquay businesses took to the ballot box in March 2011, with an overwhelming yes vote. Having appointed a BID manager, voted in a board of directors and set up the company, the BID is now looking forward to the next summer season.

"We haven't been seen to be doing lots of things yet, but people need to be aware that the directors are doing this in

their own free time, and July and August are busy months," says Veryan. "We are looking at what we can achieve over the next five years, and we are spending other people's money, so it's important to spend it correctly, on projects that people want."

So what did businesses want? Three clear themes stood out: marketing, events and "streetscape", the latter including better business signage throughout the town, and efforts to jolly the place up. Six banners were trialled at the bus station from September, to see how they would withstand the sea air and brisk winds; following their initial success, more are due to be installed ahead of February half-term.

A 12-month listing has been formed, with a view to promoting events and filling in gaps. The season kicked off in September with a fish festival and the British Surf Film Festival, followed by the Cornwall Film Festival in November.

As a town that sees a low-season population of around 20,000, with a tenfold increase around events like the Boardmasters, the emphasis is on attracting visitors during the quieter times, such as mid-winter. Storm-watching weekends, enticing restaurants, luxury spa treatments and bracing cliff walks are all part of this strategy, along with indoor attractions including the Blue Reef Aquarium and Newquay Zoo.

At a later stage, it is hoped the BID will be able to offer collective leverage in other areas. It will be applying for Seaside Town funding, which will increase a £14,000 spend by a potential £30,000; and hopes to join other BIDS in campaigning for more appealing parking charges. As Veryan points out, sagely: "Together, the three BID towns form a substantial sector of the Cornish economy."

CAMBORNE


While Truro is well known for shopping, and Falmouth and Newquay are popular tourist hotspots, Camborne is perhaps a more surprising candidate for a BID. Its slogan: "Camborne can do."

"We don't have shopping or tourism, but what we do have is a history in mining, and entrepreneurs like Trevithick," says George Le Hunte, chairman of both the BID steering group and Camborne's Chamber of Commerce. "We want to get that message out stronger, so that people will come to Camborne."

The steering group has spent the past year canvassing around 350 local businesses and analysing feedback. The BID proposal will be put to the vote in February, and if successful, will launch in April, running along similar themes to the three larger towns: improving the town's environment, promoting Camborne, increasing its online presence and investigating group savings in areas such as business waste collection.

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"In this day and age, we have to improve ourselves," says George. "To do that, you need money. Through the BID, we hope to raise half a million pounds through local businesses, plus match-funding." The steering group includes representatives from large national chains such as Tesco and Wetherspoons.

"The bottom line is to increase footfall in the town, get more people in shopping so businesses will do better," says George. "Then we can improve the town to make it a nicer place to work, rest and play, for everyone." 



Can do



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