

MARCH INSIGHTS by CHRIS TURNER

We are now well into March, and it is a time of changing weather, and new policies from governments and political leaders in the lead up to both local and national elections. Much of these are optimistic anticipation, others give a sense of a possible future for BID managers and Chief Executives who need to continually horizon scan just in case!

As ever, we give congratulations this month to nine BIDs, Abbey Quarter (Reading), Reading Central, South Bank, Stratford Upon Avon, Garratt Business Park, Huddersfield, Discover Lanark, Soho Road and Royal Tunbridge Wells Together on their successful ballot results, there are three BIDs currently in ballot.

There are of course several BIDs at an early developmental stage, and **accommodation BIDs** are being explored across the country. One such, using an innovative version of the Business Improvement District concept, is the **Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole** area who are looking to raise circa £2m pa for about 70 major Accommodation Providers and take it to ballot very speedily next month.

Local Elections are coming for almost all tiers of government – towns, districts, counties and Mayoralties and for many of us the forthcoming pre-election periods means slows much decision making down.

Many BIDs see **arts and culture** as key drivers of regeneration, development and footfall. It's thus great to see that the **West Midlands Combined Authority** has announced that it is committing funding to arts, cultural, heritage organisations in the region. Investment worth £20 million will be allocated to organisations. By committing this money, the WMCA has doubled its investment into the arts, culture, and heritage sector, with this helping to recognise the significant role that it plays in bringing economic and social value to the region. The combined authority is already supporting the sector as it brings more live events to communities, with the Black Country Festival, Coventry Govida Festival and

Birmingham Weekender all benefiting from £1.5 million of essential investment. Alongside funding for those events, local authorities are to benefit from a share of £2 million so that they can provide more direct support for local activities within their communities. At the same time, a major TV and film studio complex is to be built in **Sunderland** after the government confirmed a devolution package for the northeast of England. Chancellor Jeremy Hunt announced a "trailblazer" deal, which will eventually unlock up to £120m towards the development of Crown Works Studios. About 8,500 jobs are expected to be created by the development. Crown Works Studios, which Sunderland City Council leader Graeme Miller described as "game-changing" for the region, will be built on a former shipyard sites and will be ready by 2027, if planning permission is approved later this month.

In sad contradistinction, earlier this year, the **Music Venue Trust** (MVT), which exists to help and nurture grassroots establishments with an average capacity of about 300 people, published its **latest annual report**. In 2023, it registered the loss of 125 such venues, which had either gone out of business or stopped hosting gigs. The issues that tied everything together centred on soaring rents and energy costs, the economic slipstream of the Covid crisis, and the apparently mounting issue of disputes about noise abatement kicked off by people living in city centres, which were common factors all over the country. By way of illustrating their spread, the case studies in the report included venues in Liverpool, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Bath.

Of course, we still look to the government to give both a steer and actual support for some of these major infrastructural needs. It is thus galling to still report that fewer than a fifth of projects backed by the Government's £3.6bn **Towns Fund** were on track to be completed by the end of February. Out of 973 **towns fund projects**, only 154 are due to be completed by the end of February. Fortunately, this figure rises to 385 – or 40% of the total – by the end of November.

BIDs are often at the real cutting edge of the debates on **green sustainability**, balancing the demands of our national levy payers, local independents and residents. An official study of **low-traffic neighbourhoods** (LTNs) ordered by Rishi Sunak suggests they are generally popular and effective. The review by Department for Transport (DfT) officials **was commissioned** last July. Policies to help people walk and cycle such as low-traffic neighbourhoods can create public health benefits as much as 100 times greater than the cost of the schemes, a long-term study of active travel measures has concluded. The research, based on six years of surveys among thousands of people living in three outer London boroughs that introduced LTNs or similar schemes, found they tended to prompt people to switch some trips from cars to active travel, although the effects were varied. The cumulative public health benefit of people being more active was estimated at as much as £4,800 per local adult over a 20-year period, the authors found, as against a cost per person to build LTNs of about £28-£35, or £112, depending on the type of scheme built.

Some interesting thoughts from **James Timpson**, a stalwart of most of our high streets. He **writes** how the business he joined in 1995, is both successful and takes care of its employees. In fact, he argues that they are successful precisely because they take care of their employees. This year they will open 50 new shops, on high streets and in retail parks, recruiting an extra 160 colleagues. He says “I believe that in any business, if you have a strong culture and keep investing in your colleagues, you can survive disruptive times. We call this culture “upside-down management”. If you sat in one of our board meetings you wouldn’t hear much from Paresh, our finance director, about money, but you’d hear a lot about our colleagues’ happiness, and the levers we use to inspire and care for them. The more money we invest in our culture of kindness, the better the business performs. And so, those colleagues who serve customers have complete authority to do what they think is right. They can ignore guidelines from the office if they stick to our only two rules: put the money in the till and look the part. Everyone else in the business is there to help them, not tell them what to do.

The UK took its first steps out of recession after the **economy** returned to growth in January, raising hopes that last year's contraction is already over. The UK economy grew 0.2 per cent in January, according to figures from the **Office for National Statistics** (ONS), in line with economists' expectations. This followed a 0.1 per cent fall in December. The expansion was driven by a strong performance from the UK's all-important services sector, which expanded 0.2 per cent helping to offset a 0.2 per cent fall in production. Within services, retailers posted a strong month after a poor festive period. Human, health and social activity also saw an expansion of 0.6 per cent in **January**. This is clearly good news, albeit fragile for us all. Sadly, for our levy payers, UK interest rate cut 'remains some way off' says Bank of England chief economist.

Planning permitted development rights and our town centres are critical issues for many of us. **Marks & Spencer** has claimed victory after Michael Gove's decision to block a controversial plan to raze and redevelop its main store on London's Oxford Street was ruled to be unlawful. The levelling up secretary refused permission to redevelop the site near Marble Arch in the West End in July last year, in a win for campaigners concerned about the carbon footprint of the plan. In August, M&S mounted a legal challenge to that decision and in a high court ruling on Friday morning the judge sided with the retailer.

As part of that narrative, In the heart of London, **Primark** is set to write a new chapter on Oxford Street. This bustling thoroughfare, which traces its origins back to the Roman era, stands as a testament to London's relentless evolution. Amidst this continuum of change, Primark announces a groundbreaking £100 million investment to revitalise its flagship stores, particularly on Oxford Street and Stratford, weaving the future of retail into the fabric of history.

As ever, The **British BIDs Academy** continues to be the platform for the training and development of BID staff in the UK. We host a multitude of training courses on a wide variety of subjects, covering all aspects of a BIDs life-span and suitable for all levels of expertise. Our content is consistently reviewed and improved, meaning there will always

be something new to learn on a course and all our courses are brought to you by expert professionals in their field. All training sessions will be held virtually via Zoom or Microsoft Teams throughout 2024. We continue to offer the **Certificate in BID Management** and the **Diploma in BID Leadership**. Do please keep in touch on any of these.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chris". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Professor Christopher Turner, Head of Research, British BIDs