

**Scrutiny Review –Weymouth
Business Improvement District
(BID)**

**Report of the scrutiny working
group on behalf of the Scrutiny
and Performance Committee**

November 2017

1. Decision Required

- 1.1 The Scrutiny and Performance Committee is asked to endorse the findings and recommendations of the review contained within this report for referral to the Management Committee, for consideration and decision.

2. Introduction

2.1 Background – Weymouth BID

“A BID is a business-led initiative supported by government legislation which gives local businesses the power to raise funds locally to be spent locally on improving their trading environment. The BID programme is funded by the businesses themselves through a levy on non-domestic rates. BID schemes usually operate for a period of 5 years. For the BID to go ahead, two conditions must be met: over 50% of businesses that vote must vote in favour; those businesses voting ‘yes’ must represent more than 50% of the total rateable value of all votes cast. If both these conditions are fulfilled, payment of the levy becomes mandatory for ALL eligible businesses, regardless of how they voted.”
(Extract from Weymouth BID Business Plan May 2013)

Following a successful ballot, the Weymouth BID commenced with effect from 1st September 2013, for a term of five years. A BID Board was created which includes a Chairman, Treasurer, Directors and borough council representation, as well as a BID Operational Team including a BID Manager. The Board and Operational Team work to deliver the BID proposal that was subject to consultation during the ballot, as set out in the Business Plan.

In addition to managing the ballot process, the borough council is responsible for collecting the levy from businesses on behalf of the BID, as well as being a levy payer itself. The borough council has two representatives on the Board of the Weymouth BID: the Economic Development and the Tourism and Culture Brief holders.

The current term of the BID runs until 2018 and a re-ballot must be arranged if the BID wishes to run for a second term. At this time, the BID must produce its renewal proposals which will be subject to consultation with levy payers during the ballot process.

2.2 Reason for review

A request for a scrutiny of the Weymouth BID was submitted by Councillor Kate Wheller and at the meeting on 6 October 2016, the Scrutiny and Performance Committee agreed to include the review on their work plan.

The request for scrutiny noted that some issues had been highlighted by various people and businesses – both BID levy payers and receivers of services provided by the BID. Anecdotally the contention is that the BID, in some cases, is not delivering what the contributors want.

There are only a few months left to run on the current term of the BID and there is an opportunity to review what is working and not working and to highlight to the BID, any suggested areas for improvement for the future.

2.3 Membership and meetings

The Scrutiny and Performance Committee established a scrutiny working group in order to undertake the review. Membership of the scrutiny working group was as follows:

Councillors Ryan Hope (Lead Member), Cathy Page-Nash, Claudia Moore and Tia Roos.

The scrutiny working group met on a regular basis during the period of the review to consider the different elements of the review as well as undertaking additional evidence gathering outside of the meetings.

3. Scope and Key Focus Areas of the Review

3.1 The scrutiny working group set the following objectives for the review:

- To examine what is provided by the BID and to seek assurance that the BID provides value for money to levy payers;
- To ensure overall satisfaction levels from levy payers;
- To gain confidence that processes are being followed and that contracts are awarded in an open and fair way and in accordance with the BID Constitution;
- To encourage open communication between the BID and businesses;
- To link where the BID objectives concur with the objectives in the borough council's Corporate Plan;
- To clarify the role of the borough council including borough council representatives;
- To highlight to the BID any suggested areas for improvement in the future to ensure a successful new term for the BID.

4. Summary of evidence considered

4.1 Documentation

The following documents and data were used by the scrutiny working group in the process of carrying out this review:

- Scrutiny request form from Councillor Kate Wheller
- Proposal for review provided by officers
- Weymouth BID Board BIDs briefing note on BID Regulations and their requirements provided by the Senior Economic Regeneration Officer (generic document produced for BIDs)
- Proposal for video conference and list of potential BIDs to visit
- Weymouth BID Business Plan
- Weymouth BID Annual Report 2015/16
- Weymouth BID website: <http://www.weymouthbid.co.uk/>
- Report to Weymouth BID – BID renewal and plan for ballot May 2018
- The 2017 Industry Criteria on guidance for developing and renewing BIDs – produced by British BIDs
- Technical Guide for Local Authorities (DCLG, pub 2015)
- Guiding Principles of Well Managed BIDs (British BIDs 2015)

4.2 Witnesses

The following people acted as witnesses, providing verbal evidence and assistance in the process of carrying out this review:

- Nigel Reed – Weymouth BID Manager during the period of the review
- Steve Newstead – Weymouth BID Chairman
- Ian Ferguson – Weymouth BID Communications Director
- Helen Toft – Weymouth BID Office Admin
- Councillor Molly Rennie – Dorchester Town Council representative on the Dorchester BID from 2007 until 2016
- Trevor Hedger – Senior Economic Regeneration Officer (WPBC)
- Nick Thornley – Head of Economy, Leisure and Tourism (WPBC)
- Representatives of five Weymouth businesses that are BID levy payers, booked a slot to speak to councillors

4.3 Other activities undertaken

- Conference call with Dr Julie Grail of the BIDs Business Ltd
- Informal discussions with some businesses in the BID area
- Existing and past borough councillor representatives on the BID Board contacted to seek their views and experiences of working with the BID
- Survey sent to all Weymouth BID levy payers – responses were received from 52 of the 606 levy payers (a summary is provided as an appendix to this report)

5. Key Findings

- 5.1 In considering the findings of the review, councillors are very clear that there is a general level of support for the principle of having a BID for Weymouth. Even some levy payers that have expressed concerns, supported the principle of Weymouth having a BID.
- 5.2 Councillors note that there will always be a proportion of people who are not happy with either the principle of having a BID in the town or with the activities of the BID. This has been shown through the experience of other towns where there is a BID. In an example looked at by councillors, it was noted that the BID had taken a while to establish within the town but was now undertaking some good areas of work.
- 5.3 However, the review has highlighted some areas for consideration by the borough council, by the Weymouth BID and by those paying a levy to the BID. The key findings from the review can be summarised into the following headings:

5.4 **Weymouth and Portland Borough Council involvement with the BID and feedback to councillors**

Councillors considered the borough council's role with the BID, which includes managing the ballot process, collecting the levy from businesses on behalf of the BID, as well as being a levy payer itself. An officer link with the BID is provided through the council's Senior Economic Development Officer. The BID note that they are in regular contact with, and have regular attendance at meetings by the Senior Economic Development Officer.

The borough council has two councillor representatives on the Weymouth BID Board – the briefholders for Economic Development and Tourism and Culture. The representatives are appointed to attend Board meetings and to provide a two-way link between the BID and the borough council.

As part of the review, councillors noted a set of recommendations made by the Scrutiny and Performance Committee to Management Committee in 2015 following a smaller scale review of the Weymouth BID. The recommendations agreed by Management Committee in 2015 were:

- a) That regular updates on the work of the Weymouth BID be provided for all councillors by the Economic Development Briefholder as the council representative on the BID Board;
- b) That a named substitute for the council representative on the BID Board be appointed in order to attend meetings in the absence of the briefholder, to ensure the council is represented at each meeting;
- c) That the Weymouth BID Manager be invited to provide an all member briefing on the work of the Weymouth BID.

As part of this current review, it was noted that although the council's councillor representatives are engaging with the BID, the Council is not receiving regular updates or feedback from its councillor representatives. It was indicated by some levy payers and BID Board members, that borough councillor representatives do not regularly attend Board meetings. (For information, following the 2015 review, a second councillor representative, the Briefholder for Tourism and Culture, was appointed to the BID Board). It is recognised that the council needs to ensure a close relationship with the BID and that one way for this to happen is through briefholder attendance at BID Board meetings and report back to the Council.

It was also noted that no councillor briefing has taken place on the work of the Weymouth BID.

One other point that came up during a discussion with a levy payer was with regard to how the bills sent by the council on behalf of the BID, are addressed. It was pointed out that the bill did not include the business name and it was felt that this information should be included. Clarification has been sought in respect of this and councillors note that the invoices are issued to the person or organisation responsible for payment of the business rates on the due date (1st September) to their billing address. This is often not the relevant property address. This billing information and billing address is provided by the business rates team each year on 1st September. The regulations require "a *statement of the address and description of each hereditament to which the*

notice relates;” the description in the invoice therefore refers to the address of the hereditament and so complies with the regulations.

Councillors feel that there are several issues which require addressing by the council with regard to how the council links into the BID. It is noted that the BID would value increased input and support from the borough council.

5.5 **Communications between the BID and levy payers**

A common theme running through the review is with regard to communications between the BID and levy payers. The results from the survey and conversations with levy payers showed that many levy payers feel that the BID is not good at communicating with them and is not accessible to them. In particular, levy payers involved with the survey noted that they would like opportunities to be able to meet and speak with representatives of the BID, including the manager, face to face. Levy payers want to be able to make comments on the BID’s proposals and activities as well as being able to make suggestions to the Board with regard to the BID’s plans. The survey indicated a mixed awareness of support available to levy payer businesses including staff training opportunities and subsidised advertising.

Some levy payers also commented that BID Board meetings should be open to all levy payers in order to ensure accessibility to BID representatives and providing businesses with the opportunity to find out about the BID’s areas of work and feed into these if necessary.

Although councillors feel that there is merit in the BID reviewing how they communicate with levy payers, it is recognised that a lot of information about the BID is available on their website www.weymouthbid.co.uk including general information on the BID, latest news, details of events organised, current projects, support available to businesses and contact details for BID members. This information is available to all and can be accessed by levy payers. Information is also included on the website www.weareweymouth.co.uk. The BID has an office in town where levy payers are able to visit and the BID Chairman is available at the office one day a week. In addition, the BID holds levy payer forums at venues in the town, produces an e-newsletter, undertakes regular surveys and levy payers can contact the BID if required. Members noted that the circulation of the newsletter had been reviewed and would be sent to a wide range of organisations including all borough and county councillors.

During the discussion with representatives of the BID, councillors noted that the BID would like to see higher levels of engagement by levy payers including in respect of information sent out by email and through attendance at forums and events run by the BID for levy payers. Councillors were informed that forums were generally poorly attended and courses run were not fully subscribed. It was noted that a member of the Board was now responsible for focusing on communications with levy payers which included visiting levy payers.

There is also a requirement for an annual report including financial summary and forward plan to be issued with each invoice to levy payers. This has been done in each year. It was noted that there was a glitch last year where invoices were dispatched by an external postage service without the annual report. This

was rectified as soon as the borough council was aware of the issue at no additional cost to the council.

It is recognised that levy payers have to take some responsibility for accessing information that is available and finding out things that are relevant to them. It is important that levy payers get involved and engage with the BID, particularly at this time so that they can feed in their requirements from the BID moving forwards.

5.6 Size of the area covered by the BID and where projects / events are run

A concern communicated to members during the review is with regard to the size of the geographical area covered by the BID. The BID area stretches from the harbour/peninsula area, including the town centre area and along the seafront to Bowleaze. Concern has been expressed that this area is too large and that the majority of events and activities are focused in the town centre area. Comments have been made that the BID should consider reducing the size of the area or actively make a point to hold activities in a wider range of areas. Some businesses in the outer parts of the BID area feel that they do not get much or anything back for the levy that they pay. Another concern raised is that the projects and events being run by the BID do not support all levy payers.

It is felt that the BID should review the area that it covers and/or where it is choosing to hold events or activities to ensure a wider spread of benefit to levy payers. The BID has indicated that it welcomes comments on this issue from the borough council.

Councillors also felt that some consideration would be desirable to allow particular businesses to opt out of the BID where there is little proven benefit for them, but recognised that legislation does not permit for this. It is noted that the regulations require for all within the defined area to pay the levy.

5.7 Accessibility to and transparency of the BID Board

During the review, councillors have heard some concerns from levy payers as to how it is perceived the BID Board to be operating. These include:

- The membership of the Board, where it is felt that the Board has a high level of representation from national/chain businesses and not enough representation of independent business;
- Changes to the BID Board Constitution – some concern was raised that there have been changes to the BID's Constitution which have been agreed by the Board without reference to levy payers;
- It is noted that there has been a significant movement in the BID's original budget and that there is a lack of understanding as to how this has been approved;
- Comments were made from some levy payers that information available to the BID Board such as objectives and accounts should also be available to levy payers in order to ensure transparency;
- As previously noted in the section on communications above, some levy payers feel that Board meetings should be open to all levy payers in order to improve two-way communication and transparency.

It is noted that there is no requirement within the BID regulations for Board meetings to be open or for there to be an open annual meeting. It is also noted

that there is no prescription about the Board or its structure. All of these are matters for the Board to consider and come to a view about. However, councillors feel there is merit in the Board reviewing how accessible they are to levy payers and how the Board conducts its business so that the right level of access and transparency can be achieved.

In respect of the membership of the Board, councillors acknowledge that Board members are volunteers. It is noted that some members may have come off the Board due to negative comments or behaviour towards them by some levy payers.

Councillors note that any levy payer can put themselves forward for membership of the Board through a form available on their website.

5.8 Promotion of Weymouth

During the review, councillors heard from some who felt that the BID could do more to promote the town both within Weymouth and in wider Dorset.

Some levy payers were under the impression that other local towns were not made aware of what Weymouth was offering.

The BID has confirmed that it does work to promote Weymouth and this has included attendance at a tourism event at Olympia. However it was noted that there is not a large amount of money available for promotion.

5.9 Ambition of projects in the BIDs Business Plan

The BIDs Business Plan (May 2013) set out its ideas for a 5 year term if a 'Yes' vote was achieved, based on consultation that had taken place with levy payers.

Councillors recognise the successes of the BID over its current term, either running or supporting events and projects in the town. These include the well-received 'Feast' event, Waterfest and Weymouth's Big Christmas event.

In addition to these big events, it is felt that the BID should consider smaller scale projects, for example, pop up cafes or street markets which could potentially result in some quick win achievements for the town. Speaking to other BIDs, this is an area that has really helped to make small but visible progress for a town and has helped to raise the profile of the BID within the town. This could also assist in ensuring a wider area of the town sees benefits.

When councillors spoke to representatives of the BID, they noted some smaller scale projects that had been run such as the Best Bar None scheme and the provision of breathalysers for pubs. The BID recognise that they could be more proactive in seeking publicity for things they are doing including publicising to levy payers where money has been given to an organisation and what has been achieved.

Further consideration also needs to be given to projects aimed at attracting visitors to Weymouth throughout the year and especially out of the summer months.

5.10 The future

Councillors are supportive of the role of the Weymouth BID and look forward to working with the BID in the future. The key findings above have highlighted a number of areas for consideration by the borough council, the BID and levy payers and a number of recommendations and suggestions are set out below.

6. Recommendations and suggestions

6.1 Recommendations for the borough council (through Management Committee)

- (a) That regular updates on the work of the Weymouth BID be provided for all councillors by the Economic Development and Tourism & Culture Briefholders as the council representatives on the BID Board. This could be in the form of bi-annual presentations/written updates to the appropriate body (Scrutiny and Performance Committee or Full Council);
- (b) That the Weymouth BID be invited to provide an all member briefing on the work of the Weymouth BID on an annual basis;
- (c) That the borough councillor representatives attend the majority of BID Board meetings.

6.2 Suggestions for consideration by the Weymouth BID

The following suggestions are presented to the BID for their consideration:

- (a) To consider how accessible the BID Board and manager appear to levy payers and how levy payers can contact and contribute thoughts and ideas to the BID. Some suggestions for consideration are:
 - Opportunities for levy payers to meet and speak face to face with the BID manager and Board members;
 - Opportunities for levy payers to make comments/suggestions, for example through the creation of a project proposal form for levy payers to use;
 - Opportunities for levy payers to attend and participate, where appropriate, at BID Board meetings and AGM and access information, where appropriate, from these meetings.
- (b) To review how information is made available to levy payers in order to raise levels of awareness of support available to levy payers and projects underway and being planned;
- (c) To review the size of the area covered by the Weymouth BID to ensure that there is a fair level of benefit to all areas and levy payers;
- (d) To review where within the BID area, projects and events are run to ensure that there is a fair level of benefit to all areas and levy payers;
- (e) To review the types of projects and events that are run by the BID, in particular to include smaller scale projects such as pop up cafes or street

markets which could potentially result in some quick win achievements for the town and to include a focus on out of season events and projects to encourage people to visit the town during the quieter months;

- (f) To consider how the BID can assist with promoting activities and events both within Weymouth and across Dorset (including linking in with the council's visitor information services);
- (g) To consider whether there are further benefits that can be offered to levy payers, for example, discounted/free pitches at events;
- (h) To review the range of levy payers on the BID Board to ensure that appropriate levels of representation of smaller and independent businesses are encouraged. To consider including a neutral person when applications for Board members are reviewed.

6.3 Note to levy payers

During the review, levy payers have had the opportunity to provide their views on the BID to councillors. The key findings, many of which were raised by levy payers, noted areas for consideration by the borough council and the Weymouth BID and recommendations and suggestions have been made in this report.

However it is reiterated that the BID provide a wide range of information on their website for both levy payers and the general public and in addition hold levy payer forums, circulate regular newsletters and surveys and are available in their office in the town centre. Levy payers are encouraged to contact the BID if they need information or have a question or comment either online or in person and are encouraged to take up opportunities provided by the BID including forum meetings, training and offers. In particular levy payers are encouraged to engage with the BID to say what they would like from the BID moving forward.

In addition, it is highlighted that any levy payer can volunteer to be a member of the BID Board.

7. Acknowledgements

- 7.1 The scrutiny working group would like to express their thanks to those that took time to meet with them and for the information that they provided as part of this scrutiny review.

8. Post scrutiny monitoring

- 8.1 A review of agreed recommendations and suggestions made should be undertaken after 12 months.

9. Appendices

- 9.1 Appendix - Councillors Scrutiny of Weymouth BID: Survey of BID levy payers - Summary of responses received