

Last week at the town hall we held the first meeting of the Town Deal Board since the recent confirmation that we had won £25m funding for the projects in our Town Investment Plan. Since the announcement work has begun on the production of detailed business cases for each project.

It was great to be back in the town hall. I've really missed face-to-face working and popping into the town centre to get some lunch or do a bit of shopping in between working.

St Helens town centre is always a popular topic of conversation and understandably so – we all want it to be busy, attractive, and a source of pride.

Two weeks ago the Star featured a letter from Mrs Annie Warburton about it, including claiming it's a "ghost town". I have to strongly disagree with that assessment. Is the town centre everything we want it to be? Of course not – that's why the council and partners are working so hard to make a success of the Town Deal bid and why we've signed a 20 year partnership deal with English Cities Fund to deliver major transformation, with plans being unveiled later this year.

While the council cannot do it all - we have more than 700 services to run and ever-decreasing funds with which to do so – I absolutely give Mrs Warburton my word that we will work as hard as we can to attract investment and deliver the regeneration we need.

And together we can all make a difference right now. More than 75% of units in the town centre are occupied with nearly 300 businesses and venues open. To help them, we have to use them.

We can shop in independent businesses like ODs, Lewis William Jewellers, St Helens Photo Studio, Momos, Wizzard, Burchall's Butchers, Pickles, Phoenix Plant Based Eatery, Vigour, Sidewalk, Colours restaurant or the dozens of stalls in the market, we can visit the World of Glass, the library, the Theatre Royal, the Transport Museum, the cinema, have a meal or buy lunch on Barrow Street, take the kids to Superbowl or Air Nation, meet friends in Lily's Victorian Tea Room, grab a butty or a coffee from the Daily Grind, get a pizza in Cork and Dough, go for curry or a pint on Duke Street, and visit some of the big names like H&M, Clintons, Game, JD Sport, River Island, The Works, Millets, Kaspas Desserts, Nandos, Pizza Hut, Subway, TJ Hughes, HomeBargains, The Range, New Look, Caffé Nero, Boots, Sports Direct, Costa, Wilkos or USC which all employ local people and contribute to the local economy.

To all those businesses I've not named, I'm sorry but there's too many to mention! Hardly a "ghost town" is it?

Excitingly there's also major private investment taking place in the Barrow Street area, on Bridge Street with the conversion of the old Post Office building, and the Imperial Quarter is nearly completed too.

I agree with Mrs Warburton that's it's sad that town centres are not what they used to be but because of the popularity of online shopping and retail parks, and the arrival of massive superstores like Tesco and Asda with everything under one roof, they never will be the same. But that doesn't mean they can't still be places we can enjoy and which thrive in different ways.

For town centres to succeed we need the sort of private investment we're seeing now, public investment through things like the Town Deal funding and our council's partnership with English Cities Fund, and maybe most importantly it needs people to back it by shopping locally.

Talking down the town centre only makes life more difficult for the hundreds of businesses working hard to make a success of things, and it ignores the many good things on offer there. Let's back local businesses. St Helens is open!