

Cllr Jim Millard: Hello and welcome back to Talk Richmond. I'm your host Jim Millard and in this week's episode we will be talking about the future of our high streets and the importance of making our high streets the heart of our communities in post-pandemic recovery. Joining me for this conversation is Ojay McDonald, the Chief Executive of the Association of Town and City Management, which is a non-profit organisation that helps town and city centres realise their natural roles both as prosperous locations for business and as focal points for vibrant, inclusive communities. Sounds very much like Richmond upon Thames to me. Welcome Ojay!

Ojay McDonald: Hi Jim, hope you're well?

Cllr Millard: I'm very well, how are you?

Ojay: I'm really good. Thank you.

Cllr Millard: It's great to meet you. Thanks for coming, and let's kick things off with an introduction to you and the Association of Town and City Management or ATCM for short.

Ojay: Yeah fab. So, I'm Ojay McDonald, I'm the CEO of ATCM. So, like you say it's a membership organisation, our members are effectively anybody that has a role in managing a town or city centre across the UK and Ireland that includes Richmond Council. So, it will include local government at all various levels, it also includes business improvement districts as well. We run a programme called Purple Flag which is dedicated to best practice in the management of evening and night-time economies, arts and culture, safety, security, things like that. And in terms of myself, I've been CEO now of ATCM for about four years, but I've actually been with the organisation a lot longer, so 12 years in total. And have a Masters in politics as well on the side.

Cllr Millard: Fantastic, wow, I could do with that. OK, well, thank you for coming and you know, obviously your expertise is right in the centre of what we're talking about, and you know, since we came out of the first lockdown obviously this has been really, really important part of rebuilding. The Council has run a shop local campaign to support the reopening of high streets and town centres. People will have seen the banners hanging from lots of lampposts encouraging people to do that. Post-pandemic recovery is obviously underway, and it's time to think about next steps and a vision for the future of the borough's high streets and town centres, so I wanted to ask Ojay using your expertise, could you share with listeners what we mean by post-pandemic recovery and what we mean by the vision for the future of the high streets and town centres and why that's important?

Ojay: Yeah, well, certainly I think in terms of why high streets are important for me, if anything the pandemic has actually underlined it so incredibly well and for me it's almost been made crystal clear by the challenges we've been through. So could consider this, one of the things that the pandemic has done is it's kept people apart and people are desperate for that social interaction to come back together again, and that is effectively the role of the town centre, past, present or future. It is that meeting place. It is the heart of the community that brings people together for different activities. It can well be community, it can well be about social experience, but it can also be for commerce. So, consider the economic implications of a town centre because part of its role is about commerce, is about economy, and as a pandemic that has kept people apart that commerce and economic activity is not being able to take place in town centres properly unhindered for some time. And that's a challenge, economically, because we're such a services-based economy across the UK and because our town centres are so important, the stats from the Office for Budget Responsibility suggests that our GDP declined in 2020 by a massive 9.9%, that's around about 7% higher than the global average in terms of GDP decline. That is massive, and I've no doubt that's a part of the challenges faced by town centres. We also, and this isn't talked about enough in terms of the economic importance of

our town centres and why their key to us in the future, but there is, I think, a small chance, I don't want to panic you Jim, but a small chance of systemic economic collapse, unless we're able to properly sort out the future town centres and economically get them back on their feet again. So, the reason why is, I know, a lot of businesses individually have accumulated a lot of debt over the course of the restrictions. The FT reported back in February that we're looking at about £4.2 billion of debt that sits with landlords at the moment. That then has a knock-on impact on banks because they have their own financial obligations and I think the banks are starting to get nervous about their level of exposure to some of these debts. So, if we don't deal with that debt challenge for our high streets in a considered and planned way, then at any point, the whole chain, the whole house of cards could come falling down. So certainly, from an economic perspective, we need to ensure that we know what that future looks like. And then just finally as well, I think in terms of understanding the importance of high streets, and this probably we haven't talked about enough, is just things like the distribution of key products and services you know they are critical features of any good town centre and they are part of the importance, the part of the future of our town centres certainly.

Cllr Millard So what do you think the solutions are for us?

Ojay: I mean there's so many issues we've got here, but certainly in terms of that economic future, I think what we're hoping is that landlords will engage positively with a lot of businesses to discuss how that debt can be shared in a way which is more manageable for every single party. And it allows those businesses to survive, to get back on their feet. It allows their landlords to start being able to get income back into the coffers and then deal with their own financial obligation. So financially we can make sure the system is healthy and back up and running again.

Cllr Millard: They are really good points and then what you were saying before about how it's affected these businesses. I know the Council's been, you know, closely involved with making sure that grants get out to those businesses, but you know high streets and town centres are clearly where some of the most damaging economic impacts of the pandemic have been felt. But even before the pandemic we had this shift, didn't we, over the years - consumer behaviour is changing, the internet is transforming everything. I think everyone listening will help will know of possibly you know treasure shops have closed down on their high streets. House of Fraser what used to be called Dickins & Jones on the corner of George Street in Richmond is now closing and turning into something else. It seems to have accelerated things, doesn't it, the pandemic? But then I also wanted to ask, has the pandemic brought any the opportunities for Richmond's high streets and town centres?

Ojay: Well, I mean to take the first point, I think you're absolutely right. There are things we've seen in the pandemic which are actually an acceleration of existing trends, so I'll give you an example. It was reported in a, let me see, it was research commissioned by PricewaterhouseCoopers and undertaken by the local data company, that the year of 2020 was the worst year since the financial crisis back in 2007/2008, for retail closures for multiples. However, when you look at the broader trend, so from about 2014/2015, the amount of closures of retailers was increasing year on year, and actually what we saw in terms of retail casualties in 2020 was in line with that trend. So, you could quite easily make the case that actually the pandemic has had little to no impact at all on the loss of some of those businesses, because it seemed to be part of a growing trend of changes in terms of the economy.

I think when you step back and you look at that broader economic and societal change, I think we're actually going through an industrial revolution. So, I think at the heart of this industrial revolution is the rapid growth of digital technology and how that's transformed so much. Important for town

centres is that the digital economy has completely transformed how we think about space, space is different, space almost feels like it's limitless in the current age. There would have been a time where if you wanted a product, if you wanted to engage in some form of commercial activity, you would have needed to be physically in a particular space to exchange ideas or exchange product for cash, however that might take place, and that would often have taken place in the arena of a town centre or a city centre. Digital economy means that doesn't need to happen anymore in a physical area. It's completely redefined the boundaries of what we can and cannot do. Here I am talking to you through Microsoft Teams. I don't need to be with you physically to have this conversation. It's changed so much about the nature of our economy, and it's changed so quickly that I don't think we've actually come to terms yet with what that means for our town centres. I mean, just to give you an example, and it feels abstract, but it is absolutely at the heart of how our business models have changed. Cash is going and it's going quickly, so since the introduction of the that bit of plastic, the debit and credit card, it means transactions can take place anywhere at any time with different stakeholders across the globe. And that is a complete transformation for the type of business models we have, including something like online shopping.

Cllr Millard: Those are very good points. I'm very aware in Richmond upon Thames we have quite a unique offering in that lots of areas of the borough have their own little high streets and there's quite a proportion of independent businesses in there. There's a good blend of the City of London itself and the countryside together, and now with people working from home, what are the other new opportunities that we could see coming forwards?

Ojay: Yeah, absolutely, I think, and it's important to say that when I talk about industrial revolution and digital economy, they're not things which are there and have been created to undermine town centres, they just are. And for some town centres there will be challenges that come from these new technologies and innovations. For others, there may well be opportunities. I think for Richmond, along with other towns in outer London, there is the opportunity that we might not find as many people having to travel into the CAZ, I apologise, I work with acronyms every day, so I'll call it the Central Activity Zone, which is the very heart of London where most of the commerce takes place. For a long time, understandably, it has been a big draw for commuters, and we don't know how much it will continue to be a big draw in the future. There is lots of talk about this move to hybrid models of working whereby people might spend 2-3-4 days in a central office with their team, but maybe work a bit more closer to home and it might well be that a town like Richmond is a beneficiary of that, because what you find is more footfall on the local high street.

I'd also say as well, I think you mentioned about that that almost semi-rural nature to Richmond, which I think is an important benefit going forward and important opportunity. I think one of the things we're getting our heads around in terms of the modern-day town centre is, like I say, because retail can be done in so many different forms in so many different ways in the modern age. The system we used to have retail is a lot of towns and cities would rely on their anchor stores. The type of retail brands you had would be the big draw, the big foot fall generator. But that is not something which any town can necessarily rely on anymore, not as it's sort of main anchor, the main thing that's going to bring people in, because retail can be done in in different forms today. So, towns are trying to understand what that modern day anchor is, what it is that captures the imagination of the community and gets them to spend time in their town. And then maybe they do a little bit of shopping at the same time. Maybe they pop to the cafe, go to the restaurant or whatever, and certainly things like green and blue infrastructure as they call it, you know green space, riversides, they're big draws for community. So, towns are starting to look at how they can start to bring that green and blue infrastructure to the fore because whether it's young families, whether it's young

people, green and blue infrastructure can be something which creates a lot of dwell time. There is something to be said about people's wellbeing if they're in an environment which isn't the usual grey, but is very much different and very much more welcoming and satisfying, so that's certainly an opportunity I think for Richmond as well as looking at that green and blue.

Cllr Millard: Really good points. It's so fascinating to have your expertise on this and those are really good points that I and my fellow colleagues are going to really be very grateful to share with all the businesses that we're working with as we come out of the pandemic and I can see there's some great opportunities there. You know those sort of things we're thirsting for aren't we? Those chances to come back together. It's about you know, eating out, drinking out, meeting people, doing things together as human beings, we been starved of that.

Ojay: Massively, massively. Like I say, there's certain things we can't rely on now because of the industrial revolution. But there's something we can rely on, and that is people's genuine need and desire to come together to share social experiences. The pandemic has made it difficult, but I know that's exactly what people want to do, and certainly when we talk about those shared experiences, arts and culture, and leisure and hospitality and entertainment, they're all a critical part of that. I think we spotted this years ago, which is why we've taken on our Purple Flag programme, looking at how certainly town centres after dark should be less about the usual vertical drinking and more about this sort of broader experience around it might be theatre or cinema or sort of night time events. Those things which should genuinely be exciting for a broad range of people and might well encourage a family. I think for me the test of whether a town centre works 24/7 is if any of us are happy to take our family, our kids out at night time to enjoy the delights that might be on offer in a town. I think that's the critical component of any town centre. So, if retail is a very different beast today than what it used to be, then let's look at the things where you can't really replicate online. You can't, you can't do online. Those are the things which we should be hanging our hats on and then the retailers still based in town centres will hopefully be the beneficiaries of that because it allows you to bring that footfall back in.

Cllr Millard: Increased footfall. Yeah, absolutely. And there's this concept of placemaking and building cities and towns around places to transform public spaces. Ojay, could you explain what we mean by placemaking?

Ojay: Yeah sure, so placemaking, like a good town centre, a good place is very rarely something that just happens. It needs work. It needs effort. It needs coordination. You might have local government, residents, various parts of the community, visitors, transport operators, police, all with their own different perspectives, needs, desires, whatever it might be. For placemaking to happen, it requires good coordination, good partnership and good management structures to allow these various stakeholders to come together to work in unison to develop a vision for the place and to make sure that you have something which hopefully the wider community is happy with.

Cllr Millard: What do you think makes a great place? What are the key things to consider when planning this?

Ojay: It needs to be able to meet the needs of the communities that actually rely on that place, whatever that might be. You know for the West End of London, which is part of our Purple Flag programme, it might be able to satisfy almost a global audience of people who want the very best from arts and culture. For my town, Poynton in Cheshire, just north of Macclesfield, it's about being able to ensure that we've got a place which is family friendly, where we can go, do a local shop, go to the library, go to a GP surgery all in one place, just making sure the very basics of the community

that relies on that place is met. It can be simple as that, and that that will look very different for the type of area we're in.

Cllr Millard: Absolutely well thank you. Well said, you know these are all such great points and we're nearly out of time. But lastly, how can local people get involved in defining the future of their high streets?

Ojay: Well, I encourage them I encourage everybody in Richmond, you know to talk to the good people at the Council. I've worked with officers in the Council for a while and it's a good group. I think in terms of getting involved in town centres, I think people will always be surprised that the people who manage town centres, whether it's in local government or Business Improvement Districts or others, always keen to hear constructive thoughts about what we can do better, how we can improve, quirky ideas. I heard about this idea I think it it's I think I first heard of it in Kettering, where they'd set up a Youth Town Centre Partnership to create a forum for young people to have their say on the activities that happened in their high street. I think a bunch of kids, they wanted more entertainment, they wanted a bit of music, they wanted to be able to put on various shows and I think with a little bit of support from the Council, went we're just going to set up our own Town Centre Partnership and ran with it. And I think having those constructive ideas on how to take things forward would be welcomed.

Cllr Millard: Absolutely, the key to it is to come forward with positive suggestions and we're always happy to hear that and happy to work together with people. Positive partnership working can achieve a lot, and this is a time when we really need it. Thank you so much Ojay. It's been great to speak to you.

Ojay: Thank you very much for the opportunity. It's been great.

Cllr Millard: Thank you so much for sharing your expert knowledge on placemaking and the future of high streets. I for one feel very lucky to live in this borough where there is so much an offer. You know, rich collection of historical sites, sports venues, parks, we've got our cultural organisations we've heard from before in our Save the Arts episode and of course internationally acclaimed organisations like Kew Gardens. And so many inclusive and vibrant town centres and smaller districts centres. The challenge from the pandemic to high streets and towns centres has been huge and to all those local businesses, but placemaking and that kind of planning, that kind of vision that you set out, offers a lot of hope for the future.

As ever, if you have any questions or comments, please send them to talk@richmond.gov.uk. For further information, check the show notes. I hope if you have the opportunity, you can leave a review. I'd like to bag five stars. I'm Jim Millard. Thanks for listening.