

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL
SCRUTINY PANEL 2 -RETAIL EXPERIENCE

Wednesday, 5 December 2012

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillor Matt Lynch (Chair); Councillors Suresh Patel (Deputy Chair); Tony Ansell, Sally Beardsworth, Elizabeth Gowen, Dennis Meredith and Danielle Stone

CO-OPTED MEMBER:- Sheridan New

WITNESSES: Stephen Chown – Chair of Northampton BID Item 5 (A)

OFFICERS:

Marion Goodman	Head of Customer and Cultural Services
Derrick Simpson	Town Centre Manager
Tracy Tiff	Scrutiny Officer
Joanne Birkin	Democratic Services Officer

OBSERVING: Councillor Beverley Mennell

PUBLIC: Mark Unwin

1. APOLOGIES

There were none.

2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 29th October were approved and signed by the Chair.

3. DEPUTATIONS/ PUBLIC ADDRESSES

At the start of the meeting, the Chair Councillor Matt Lynch, informed the Panel that it had been recently announced that the Council was making £50,000 available for a Town Centre facelift. The money was to be spent on a general upgrade of street furniture.

Councillor Beverley Mennell addressed that Panel on the importance of ensuring that transportation was properly considered as part of the Review. Good public transportation was vital to bringing life into the town centre. Bus services should run later and link up with the outlying areas and provide a low cost service.

Although bus services are normally a County Council function, one member of the Panel said that she had been in Manchester recently and there was a free bus service which was promoted and provided by the local Council. Members thought that provision of a “town bus” could be a recommendation from the Panel. It would be particular useful if the service could include Sundays and evening/night services.

Expanding bus services on a Sunday could also be linked to providing Sunday markets.

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING)

There were none.

5. WITNESS EVIDENCE

(A) STEPHEN CHOWN CHAIR NORTHAMPTON BID

The Panel received a presentation from Mr Stephen Chown, Chair of Northampton bid.

The main points of discussion were as follows:-

The BID Directors had considered the core questions and divided them into 5 main topics. These were:-

- Partnership Working
- Retail issues, marketing and promotion
- The Internet
- Building Projects
- 5 Year Plan / Vision

Partnership Working

Two Councillors, Councillors Hadland and Nunn, are BID Directors, which provides a two way process. The Northampton Forum involves many partners including the Borough Council, Highways and the Police. BID is also committed to Northampton Alive project.

There was concern over rigid adherence to planning policy, particularly in terms of use class designation and maybe change of use should be considered particularly in terms of potential short term uses.

Enterprise cleaning targets need to stay in the spotlight and cleaning standards need to be consistently applied. .

With regard to a potential town, the bus Stagecoach are already involved as partners in publicising events on the buses and they are keen to encourage more people into the town centre for their own commercial reasons.

Retail Issues, Marketing and Promotion.

There needs to be a focus of improvement and that should be on the Abington Street and Market Square Area.

Consideration could be given to providing Shop front Improvement Grants- this was done in Rugby on a match funding basis.

There was some work done on the Drapery on refurbishing street furniture, litter bins and sign posts. In the New Year BID would be doing some work on street clutter. Consideration should be given to putting distances on street signs.

Traffic messaging signs could also be used to give information on events and parking availability. Signs should also give as full information as possible i.e. road closed until, which helps people to plan future journeys etc.

One longer term aim could be the creation of specific "quarters" with arches over the road to announce them. There could also be signs to these quarters around the town. These would create a better sense of space.

Encouraging longer shopping hours; particularly in the 5-7pm slot between work and theatre, entertainment etc.

Parking costs are a perceived problem - and free first hour parking and free parking after 3pm are promotions that have been introduced to try to overcome this. Extending the 1 hour bays to 2 hours would allow shoppers time to shop/browse and enjoy the town, rather than "dash".

Provision of street stages - particularly in the Abington Street and Market Square locations.

Parking Permits for town centre businesses are available, but they are not particularly well promoted and could be extended.

There should be more flexibility towards shop front vinyl advertising which could generate advertising revenue.

Pop up shops should be encouraged. A "made in Northants shop would shortly be opening on St Giles Street"

Street Lighting could be improved in certain areas as there had been some concerns expressed.

The Police and PCSO'S do a good job, but additional PCSO's would be welcomed.

The Internet

The Internet should be seen as an opportunity to sell goods to a wider client group. High Speed Internet should also be encouraged. The Free Wi-fi the Market Square is a good start but should be more widely promoted.

Love Northampton website should also be supported as a way of getting information about events and promotions to as wider group as possible.

Building Projects

The BID embraces the projects unreservedly and it is positive to see the bus interchange work underway. Liaising with business is the key to delivering successful projects, as

much notice as possible is vital. It is also important to make sure that town centre users are aware of changes that might affect them such as parking restrictions or road closures.

5 Year Plan

The BID has 3 remaining years to run. Their focus will be around the Abington Street Market Square area. They would like to see positive changes to the Market Square layout to make a central stage area and stands to allow events and performances to have a permanent space. Varied events programmes would increase footfall.

It is also wishes to encourage the expansion of the retail day to 7pm, by encouraging town centre workers to stay after work and use the shops and facilities.

BID itself has reorganised which has freed director time which will allow directors to go out to the local big companies and ask about their future programmes. These could then be co-ordinated with BID projects to maximise their effectiveness.

The BID has no official influence outside its boundary; however it is very involved in the promotion of best practice.

Mr Chown considered that the various projects would all increase footfall but felt that new quality retailers would only come to new units in the Grosvenor scheme, which emphasised the importance of continuing negotiations with Legal and General.

Members of the Panel felt that it was very important to encourage a much wider town centre experience, rather than just concentrate on the retail offer. It was important to promote a sense of place and having specific events helped to do this. There could also be a wider tie in to National and International events or “days”.

It was also felt that de cluttering of street furniture/signage was very important and gave a much better perception if the street scene was cleared.

Whilst generally very supportive of the Town Centre Managers Office it was felt that they could be a better reporting system of cleansing problems etc. More people could be involved in the reporting system if it was easier to send in photographs of problems. Members were informed that there was a system by which pictures could be taken on a mobile phone and sent through to Enterprise for action. The Panel were informed that this application was already in use, but could be more widely promoted.

There were suggestions as to how the “Face lift” money could be spent and whether the BID should determine how it was spent. Mr Chown confirmed that there would be a contribution from the BID and they would be involved in how the money would be spent.

The Panel thanked Mr Chown for his very informative presentation.

(B) PAUL BRUERE, CHAIR OF THE HACKNEY CARRIAGE AND PRIVATE HIRE ASSOCIATION

Mr Bruere was not present at the meeting.

AGREED:- That the Scrutiny Officer contact Mr Bruere and invite him to attend the next meeting of the Panel or send a written response to the core questions.

(C) DEBBIE FERGUSON COMMUNITY SAFETY MANAGER, NBC

The Panel received a written answer to the core questions from Debbie Ferguson, Community Safety Manager.

The main points of discussion were as follows:-

There was concern that there were issues with the reporting of beggars and street drinkers which was felt to deter people from coming into the town centre and assurance was sought that they are reported to the Police. Generally it was felt that it would not be useful to simply move people on but engage with organisations and individuals to provide a proper level of assistance.

AGREED: The Chair of the Panel write to the Cabinet Member with responsibility for the Town Centre and ask them how they are tackling these issues.

(D) NEIGHBOURHOOD WARDEN (TOWN CENTRE), NBC

The Panel received a written answer to the core questions from the Northampton Borough Council Neighbourhood Wardens.

AGREED: - that the written response be noted.

6. BACKGROUND INFORMATION CENTRE FOR PUBLIC SCRUTINY (CFPS) - POLICY BRIEFING - HIGH STREET AND TOWN CENTRE REGENERATION

The Panel received background information from the Centre for Public Scrutiny –Policy Briefing on High Street and Town Centre Regeneration.

AGREED: - that the background Information be in added to the evidence informing the Review.

7. SITE VISITS

The Panel received feedback from the following site visits:-

Peterborough

Councillors reported back on the visit to Peterborough. They felt that it was a good example of a mixture of old and new. There was a new shopping centre and other streets with a mixture of older buildings. The bus station opened straight into the shopping centre which gave good weather protection. The city seemed very clean and tidy. The Information Centre was part of a shop which sold local products. The Councillors had met the centre manager and publicity manager who had been very helpful. There appeared to be a good mix of shops.

Market Harborough

Councillor Tony Ansell reported on his visit to Market Harborough. The population is 20,000. There were no beggars and no empty shops. There appeared to be a mixture of niche shops.

Certain parking spaces were designated as free 30 minutes pop in parking spaces for people who just wanted a very short visit.

There is a market which operates 3 days a week and has 87 stalls. There were good recycling bins and notice boards and public toilets.

The photographs showed an attractive area, with no clutter or litter.

Milton Keynes

Councillor Sally Beardsworth reported on Milton Keynes. She felt that it is very easy to get to, with good train and bus connections. There are a wide variety of eating establishments and plenty of facilities for those wishing to spend the day there. It is very big and it is not the sort of place that she felt encouraged short term visits. It reflects the fact that it was built as a shopping centre and as such she felt that there was a lack of atmosphere.

Southall Greater London

Councillor Patel commented that he had recently visited Southall and it was clean, rubbish was continually cleared so there was no unsightly build up. Shops are open later and there was a good retail offer. He reported that the railings in the town centre had been painted black, which he felt added to the aesthetics of the town centre.

8. DESKTOP RESEARCH

The Panel considered desktop research on Stoke and Walsall.

AGREED: The desktop research exercise informs the evidence base of the Review.

The meeting concluded at 7:50 pm