

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF SCRUTINY PANEL 2 -RETAIL EXPERIENCE

Wednesday, 27 June 2012

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillor Matthew Lynch (Chair), Councillor Suresh Patel (Vice Chair) Councillors Tony Ansell, Sally Beardsworth, Elizabeth Gowen, and Danielle Stone

CO-OPTED MEMBER: Sheridan New Former Manager, Grosvenor Centre

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

1. APOLOGIES

There were none.

2. MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 25th April 2012 were approved and signed by the Chairman.

3. DEPUTATIONS/ PUBLIC ADDRESSES

There were none.

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING)

There were none.

5. BASELINE AND PERFORMANCE DATA

The Panel considered data on: -

- National and local statistics
- Demographics- Local and National
- Definition of the Town Centre
- Vision for the Town Centre
- Town Centre Footfall
- Car Park Statistics

The main points of the discussion were as follows: -

There are lots of different statistics available and the Panel needed to determine which ones would be most useful to the aims of the Review.

Vacancy rates will not just give a number of vacant shop fronts, the town centre now encompasses a wide range of businesses, alongside shops there are cafes, restaurants, leisure providers, and service industries. All of these make up the attractions to draw people into the town centre.

Specific events can bring a lot of people into the town centre. The safari event in 2010 attracted over 500,000 people in a very short period of time. There were visitors from overseas and the event was featured on news programmes, including Japanese television. Many people were made aware of the event through Facebook and there had been a lot of positive feedback.

Although the statistics show that quality events will bring people into the town centre there are no statistics available to see if that then meant that any more money was spent and if so by whom and what they spent it on.

Footfall statistics show that there has been an ongoing decline since 2008. Market Square numbers have also been declining, but to a lesser extent.

There are a number of variables affecting footfall, for example April 2012 was exceptionally rainy which will have affected the footfall numbers. This did not necessarily mean that there were not any people in town; they may have chosen to stay in the Grosvenor centre.

Over the past five years there has been a change in the demographics of the town. There have been some major employers who have left the town centre, for example the loss of Barclaycard removed 3,000 office workers from the town centre.

Individually there are some very good businesses in town, which are good at being able to identify and serve their customers, however work needs to be done in bringing that together.

There has also been a change in the culture surrounding after work activities. Before the relaxation of licensing hours then the pubs and clubs opened earlier and there was less of a break between the daytime and the evening town centre activities. Now that nightclubs and pubs are open longer then people are not returning into the town centre until later, affecting the earlier evening leisure based activities.

Car Parking Statistics

The Panel received statistics regarding the numbers of cars parking off street, the total numbers using the one hour free parking and a breakdown by car park.

Free parking is having an impact on the numbers of people using the town. Every survey that has ever been conducted by the Town Centre management has referred to the perception that parking is expensive. Often this is not the case and parking in several other towns is more expensive than Northampton.

Currently there is work going on with the County Council to expand the free parking scheme to off street parking.

There has also been a perception that there are problems with anti social behaviour in the town centre. There have been problems with beggars and drunks in the town centre and youngsters pursuing inappropriate activities such as skateboarding on the town centre streets. It is hoped that the skateboard park will provide an alternative venue.

It was strongly emphasised that more has to be done within partnerships. Obviously the Police are key partners in controlling anti social behaviour in the town centre. Comparisons were made between the town centre and the Grosvenor centre in terms of cleanliness and security, but it was pointed out that to maintain the shopping centre standards in the rest of the town centre would require a massive increase in resources. Rugby was mentioned as a town which was very clean and had dedicated teams of wardens within the Town Centre. The Panel were advised that these town centre rangers were paid through by additional monies raised through the town centre businesses and their BID programme.

Members of the Panel felt that it was important that any negative perceptions of the town centre were dealt with, but at the same time everyone should be made to feel welcome in the town centre area, it was particularly encouraging to see activities such as the Northampton by the Sea event which had been held in summer 2011 as it encouraged families into the town centre.

Members also felt that the local shopping areas around the town displayed a much wider range of cultures than seemed to be available in the town centre and considered that it would be useful to talk to some of these retailers.

Members also asked for information on business rates to see whether they posed barriers to certain retail types setting up in the town centre.

Members were well aware of the threats to traditional retailing that has already come from the expansion of the Internet for shopping. It was emphasised that there would be further threats due to forthcoming changes in technology.

It was suggested that further background data be provided to a future meeting:

Details of business rates

Age analysis of footfall data

AGREED: - (1) that the information be included in the evidence base for the Review.
(2) That further background data as detailed above be presented to a future meeting of the Panel.

6. BRIEFING NOTE: POTENTIAL SITE VISITS

The Panel considered a report on potential site visits.

The purpose of the site visits would be to allow the Panel to assess the offer of the city/town centre its profile, image and catchment. The Panel was keen to find somewhere

which most closely matched Northampton in terms of population size. They felt that Cambridge would not be a good choice as it was too closely associated with the historic sites connected to the University and people would visit there for a wider experience than retail.

It was also felt that it would be useful to visit places that had similar problems or experiences. To this end it was believed that Peterborough had built a bus exchange similar to the one proposed in Northampton, Walsall would experience specific difficulties in attracting shoppers because of its proximity to Birmingham, reflecting the proximity of Northampton and Milton Keynes.

It was considered that it would be useful if the Scrutiny Officer undertook some desktop research on a couple of the proposed sites in order to give the Panel some additional insights.

Panel members were also encouraged to make their own visits to other towns and if to note those aspects that they particularly liked. It was emphasised that it should be borne in mind that not all places can adopt the same strategies and that sometimes what works well in one area will not work somewhere else with a different population make up or geographical location.

AGREED:

- 1 That the Scrutiny Officer, in consultation with the Panel members arranges site visits to Norwich and Peterborough.
2. That the Scrutiny Officer undertakes desktop research on Stoke and Walsall.
3. That a report back on the findings of the site visits be presented to a future meeting of the Panel

7. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT FOR THE REVIEW

The Panel considered the draft Equality Impact Assessment for this Scrutiny Review.

AGREED:

- (1)A full impact assessment is not required as any changes proposed as a result of the review will be impact assessed before implementation.
- (2) That the Equality Impact for this Scrutiny Review be approved and published on the Scrutiny page of the Council's website.

8. BACKGROUND DATA- EXECUTIVE SUMMARIES OF PUBLISHED DOCUMENTS

The Panel considered a series of précis's of published documents.

It was pointed out that the West Northamptonshire Joint Core Strategy and the Sustainable Community Strategy for Northampton 2008-2011 were both in the process of being reviewed. When they are available summaries will be made available to the Panel.

The Panel was informed that the Town Centre Managers Association had produced a 10 point action plan in response to the Portas Review. This would be made available to a future the meeting.

AGREED: -

1. That the information be included in the evidence base for the Review.
2. That a summary of the updated documents referred to in paragraphs 2.6 and 2.7 of the report be provided to the Panel when available.
3. That details of the Association of Town Centre Managers (ATCM) – 10 Point Plan be provided to a future meeting of the Panel.

The meeting concluded at 7:00 pm