

NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

MINUTES OF SCRUTINY PANEL 2 -RETAIL EXPERIENCE

Wednesday, 8 August 2012

COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillor Matthew Lynch (Chair), Councillors Tony Ansell, Sally Beardsworth, Elizabeth Gowen and Dennis Meredith

CO-OPTED MEMBER: Sheridan New

Witnesses Councillor John Caswell -Cabinet Member for Environment
Councillor Tim Hadland -Cabinet Member for Regeneration Planning and Enterprise.
Chris Cavanagh – Head of Regeneration and Development

Officers	Marion Goodman	Head of Customers and Cultural Services
	Tracy Tiff	Scrutiny Officer
	Joanne Birkin	Democratic Services Officer

Members of The Public Mr Tony Mallard.

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence from the meeting were received from Councillors Suresh Patel and Danielle Stone.

2. MINUTES

The minute of the meeting held on 5th July 2012 were approved and signed by the Chairman.

3. DEPUTATIONS/ PUBLIC ADDRESSES

Mr Tony Mallard addressed the Panel. He stated that it was no good dwelling in the past, but believed that there were some areas of Northampton that were now looking very run down. He considered that there were too many pound shops and betting shops.

He stated that Northampton did not offer anything unique to attract people in. He was personally taking a coach party to Melton Mowbray who offered a framers market with crafts and antique/ bric a brac stalls. He told the Panel about a town in Massachusetts which when facing severe economic problems decided to concentrate on selling arts and crafts and small artisan tea shops/cafes.

Councillor Penny Flavell, who was unable to attend the meeting, through the Chair, asked that the Panel to consider improving the aesthetics of the approaches to the town centre by planting trees.

The Panel was informed that the provision of trees in tubs was under consideration.

4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING)

There were none.

5. RESPONSE TO CORE QUESTIONS TO CABINET MEMBER FOR REGENERATION ENTERPRISE AND PLANNING , CABINET MEMBER FOR ENVIRONMENT AND THE HEAD OF REGENERATION AND DEVELOPMENT.

The Panel received a joint written response to the Core questions from Councillor Tim Hadland, Cabinet Member for Regeneration, Enterprise and Planning, Councillor Caswell Cabinet Member for Environment and the Head of Regeneration and Development.

The Panel considered the written responses to the core questions, as appended, and the main points of discussion and responses to the supplementary questions were as follows:-

Supplementary responses

How can NBC support local businesses throughout the development period of any major building projects in and close by to the town centre?

It was considered vital to make information available to any affected businesses as soon as possible. This had been done in relation to the fire damage to Bridge Street, and would be applied to the residents affected by the building of student accommodation at St Johns.

What effective marketing and promotion would benefit the town's retail sector and how do you feel the profile of the town centre could be raised?

Members felt that it was very important to raise the profile of retailing as a career and that it should not be seen as a job of last resort. They referred to the presentation that they had received from Skillsmart who provide retail training opportunities. Since this presentation, Skillsmart confirmed that it would liaise with Northampton BID to see how retail training could be promoted within Northampton.

Members also referred to "pop up shops". These being relatively low cost short term leases to get a retail property back into use. One member had been negotiating with a lettings agent about the possibility of creating some pop up shops on the town centre fringes. It was pointed out that owners of the shops had to agree to them becoming short term lets and that might be more difficult to do in the town centre. There were some negotiations underway in relation to a couple of town centre locations.

It was also pointed out that the pound shops do fulfil a need in times of recession and that in accordance with planning legislation there was not a distinction between retail offers of pound shops or other stores.

It was also felt that there should be work done to make the town centre a more visually attractive place. There is a shop front policy and the Central Area Action Plan but changes can only be implemented at a slow rate when property becomes vacant and with the

involvement of the shop owner. Creating better shop fronts may be an expense that cannot be afforded for some small retailers, it might therefore be necessary to decide which should be given priority getting a shop back into use or having an improved shop front.

How can retailers, landlords, prospective developers and agents develop the town's retail sector?

There are very few retail properties directly owned or controlled by the Council and none within the primary retail area.

Work can be done with developers with regard to shop fronts as and when opportunities arise and there may be monies available from Section 106 Agreements but these are dependent upon the timing of developments.

The Council can also make direct impact by improving the Public Realm.

How can regulations and advice regarding the retail sector be utilised and accessed more by retailers?

The purpose of BID is to encourage the retail sector to access advice. The BID is still in its infancy but is developing connections with more retailers.

What other activities could have a more positive impact on retailers?

Members asked whether there had been any progress on the opening of Abingdon Street. It was emphasised that any traffic changes would have to be considered as part of the redevelopment of the town centre, beginning with the new bus interchange and associated works to the Grosvenor Centre.

It was acknowledged that there were still questions about how the Grosvenor Centre redevelopment might now look. Panel members were assured that Legal and General was revising its scheme to make sure that it was deliverable and cost effective. There were fortnightly meetings between Legal and General and the Council. However, it was likely that it would be a smaller scheme.

Concern was expressed that the old Greyfriars bus station should be removed as soon as practicable as it would not be good to have the building fall into a state of disrepair. In terms of timing it was hoped that work would begin on site by Christmas and the project completed by Christmas 2013.

There is more than £100 million being invested in Northampton through the delivery of Northampton Alive projects. This was money that had been attracted in by other partners/developers.

Members asked which elements could be directly influenced by the Council. These were items such as car parking, fees and usage were constantly monitored and other aspects of what could be offered were also being looked into. Public realm improvements were also very important.

Special events such as Lady Godiva and the Olympic torch had brought many people into the town and efforts would be made to attract and promote similar one off events.

How can independent retailers compete with both larger multiples and internet shopping?

Independent retailers' strength can be in their ability to deliver tailor made customer service. They should also consider the use of the internet themselves as a way of reaching other customers.

What would you like the town centre to look like in 5 years' time?

Members praised Rugby town centre, particularly because of the town rangers that were present. These were paid for through the Town Centre BID and it was felt they were a very positive feature.

It should not be assumed that all of the property that is currently retail will remain as retail, some could be returned to residential use.

It was felt that more use could be made of the All Saints square.

How good are the communication channels from the Borough Council regarding new town centre developments?

There has been a change in the planning process. It is anticipated that there will be some massive applications in the near future and people will be involved in the consultation process as soon as possible. It was felt that there was a more dynamic relationship with the media, with the Council being proactive in media on Northampton Alive.

Has there be any occasion where you have used the Internet to buy any item and why?

Members had used eBay to buy items, and generally used the Internet as a source of information such as price comparisons if items could not be found locally they would be more inclined to purchase them on the Internet.

Additional questions to Cabinet Member (Environment)

What impact does the level of cleanliness in the town centre have?

There are difficulties in obtaining sufficient information to obtain evidence. The Cabinet Member encouraged members of the public to report any incidents.

Concern was also expressed at the number of closed public toilets. It was pointed out that there was a Community Toilet scheme in operation.

Additional questions to Cabinet Member (Planning, Regeneration and Enterprise) and Head of Regeneration and Development

Please provide details of support available to retail businesses

Members were advised that the Enterprise Loans Panel offered small loans to businesses and Members asked for details about that scheme and how it was publicised. There was also on-going work with the market to assist traders in improving customer service, presentation etc.

6. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS -PRECIS' OF PUBLISHED DOCUMENTS

The Panel received a précis of information on:-

- Central Area Action Plan
- Northampton Town Centre Health Check 2009
- Northampton Town Centre Shopping Survey June 2010.

AGREED :- That the information inform the evidence base of the Scrutiny review.

The meeting concluded at 7:30 pm

Scrutiny Panel 2 – Retail Experience

CORE QUESTIONS

How can Northampton Borough Council (NBC) further develop partnership working with the town centre business community?

The Regeneration and Enterprise team helped to set up two Business Improvement Districts (BID), both in the town centre and at Brackmills Industrial Estate. NBC are supporting both the BIDs as they go forward

Northampton Town Centre Business Improvement District (Northampton Town Centre LTD) is a newer BID operating since October 2010. Their aims are to improve the Management in the Town Centre, Promote the town centre and attract more visitors and ensure Value for Money through shared services. Successes to date include:

- Promoting and sponsoring events in the Town Centre such as Northampton By the Sea, Frost fair, Go Safari and the Riverside Festival
- Britain in Bloom won Gold last year and will represent the East midlands in the National competition this year.
- Town Centre Hosts are being introduced onto the streets of Northampton with the remit of assisting people with their needs in the centre
- Christmas trees and decorations around the town
- Additional PCSOs are now on the streets
- Loyalty card introduced into the town
- Voucher booklets created for events
- Newsletter circulated on a quarterly basis

The Town Centre BID gets much support from the Town Centre Manager and team with one member of NBC staff now working on the BID full time in a supporting role as well as another employed for admin assistance.

Business Improvement Districts are a great way of encouraging businesses to work with the Council and together to improve an area not just for themselves but for their business, customers and visitors.

How can NBC support local businesses throughout the development period of any major building projects in and close by to the town centre

Ensure that the local businesses are kept informed on progress of any developments that will be happening and that disruption is kept to a minimum. Ensure alternative routes are set up if needed and access is available to all shops and businesses. Communicating this information to the businesses prior to any development taking place will ensure that they can stagger their deliveries and inform their customers to minimise impact to their business.

How can Northampton's retail experience be supported and the impact of low inflation and the economic downturn be mitigated?

NBC will continue to pursue a broader retail offer in Northampton.

Parking is an issue which is discussed at all consultations with the public. If this could be improved in any way that may assist the town centre.

How can the independent retail sector and multiple/larger chains work in partnership to ensure work towards sustaining the viability of the retail sector?

The Town Centre BID works with all of the retailers in the town centre. They are working in partnership to ensure the town centre has a diverse offer.

What effective marketing and promotion would benefit the town's retail sector and how do you feel the profile of the town centre could be raised?

Northampton Alive and Love Northampton are two successful brands, which can continue to be promoted and marketed to ensure a wider audience. Northampton Alive shows the different regeneration projects that are planned, or in progress in the town.

Love Northampton outlines what Northampton has to offer including: Sport, Arts, Music, Food, Shops, Heritage, Offers and Learning amongst others. This includes events and exhibitions and promotes the town to both locals and potential visitors.

The BID also promote Northampton as part of their website and the 1 hour of free car parking helps to encourage people into the town .

How can retailers, landlords, prospective developers and agents develop the town's retail sector?

- Improve the offer in the town centre
- Encourage more niche retail shops into the town.
- Offer competitive rents
- Attract an anchor store

How can regulations and advice regarding the retail sector be utilised and accessed more by retailers?

The Town Centre BID should be keeping their members informed of any changes which will affect them.

What other activities could have a more positive impact on retailers?

- Reducing car parking charges
- Improve offer
- Niche Retail

- Public realm improvements – Market Square improvements completed, Abington Street will be designed and delivered.
- More advertising
- More events
- Encourage retailers to

How can independent retailers compete with both larger multiples and internet shopping?

Improve their offer and ensure competitive pricing.

What would you like the town centre to look like in 5 years time?

- A broader retail offer in the town centre
- More niche retail
- Build on success of events such Christmas 2011 to improve the town centre experience
- Less betting shops
- Less pound shops
- Anchor stores
- Improved retail offer
- Better transport network as the Bus Interchange is delivered
- Promote the whole town
- More emphasis on Wellingborough Road, Kettering Road and Abington Square as part of the retail offer

How good are the communication channels from the Borough Council regarding new town centre developments?

- NBC issue press releases on all the major projects
- Northampton Alive promotes the town
- NBC work in conjunction with the Town Centre BID to promote the town
- NBC are also involved in the Love Northampton Campaign

What do you feel would enhance the retail experience to attract new visitors / shoppers and increase the number of return visits to the town centre

- Broader retail offer with units in line with the current and future market
- More niche retail on offer
- Encourage partners to contribute to and promote events in the town working with the BID
- Less betting shops
- Less pound shops
- Anchor stores
- Improved retail offer
- Better transport network as the Bus Interchange is delivered.

Has there be any occasion where you have used the Internet to buy any item and why?

N/A

Any other comments

Additional questions to Cabinet Member (Environment)

What impact does the following have on the levels of cleanliness in the town centre:

Seasonal variation
Enforcement and legal powers
Resources available
Partnership working with local businesses for overall presentation of retail areas
Guidance available for new shops and businesses
Positioning of waste bins to encourage use
Vacant premises

Additional questions to Cabinet Member (Planning, Regeneration and Enterprise) and Head of Regeneration and Development

In terms of Planning and Regeneration:

Please provide details of support available to retail businesses

NBC are involved in an Enterprise Loans Panel which offers small loans to businesses at a competitive rate. The loan panel is an opportunity for those who have struggled to get finance elsewhere to obtain a loan. The panel meet on a 6 weekly basis where potential candidates present their business.

Northampton Town Centre Ltd support the local retail businesses in a variety of ways such as:

- Loyalty Card – Free cards are distributed at certain outlets people have a card it gives you different offers and discount in a town.
- Love Northampton Website promotes Northampton and allows free listing for all retail businesses in the town centre
- Voucher booklets for events
- Value for money offers – reduced insurance rates and waste collection reductions
- Christmas trees/Northampton in Bloom/Go Safari and other events to bring people into the town

Northamptonshire Enterprise Partnership hold a variety of events and forums to encourage business to business working in the town.

What are the key elements required for successful town centre regeneration

- Niche retail
- Decent retail offer
- Easy access

- Attractive public realm
- Good signage
- Events to bring people into the town
- Innovative Marketing campaign
- Use Social media to promote the town
- Arts, Culture and Entertainment
- Good quality office space
- Open green space
- Restaurants, Cafes and bars
- Leisure facilities
- Affordable car parking/park and ride system
- Good business community
- Partnership working
- Good mobile signal
- Town centre wide WiFi

Please supply details of whether the role of retail investment can be a catalyst for regeneration

Investment into the retail sector can be a catalyst for regeneration in the town. Ensuring there are a good mixture of good quality floor space and perhaps reducing rent/rates would help ensure a better retail offer. Brining more people into the town with a better offer brings investment therefore is a catalyst for regeneration.

Any other comments