

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