

# **NORTHAMPTON BOROUGH COUNCIL**

## **SCRUTINY PANEL 2 -RETAIL EXPERIENCE**

**Monday, 29 October 2012**

- PRESENT:** Councillor Suresh Patel (Deputy Chair – in the Chair); Councillors Tony Ansell, Elizabeth Gowen and Danielle Stone.
- Witness:** Mr Raymond Overall, independent business owner and former director of Northampton BID.
- Observer:** Councillor Jonathan Nunn.  
Richard New and one further member of the public.  
A member of the local press.
- Officers:**
- |                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| Marion Goodman  | Head of Customer and Cultural Services |
| Derrick Simpson | Town Centre Manager                    |
| Tracy Tiff      | Scrutiny Officer                       |
| Peter Storey    | Democratic Services Officer            |

### **1. APOLOGIES**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Matthew Lynch (Chair), and Sally Beardsworth, and Sheridan New (co-opted member). In the absence of the Chair, Councillor Suresh Patel (Deputy Chair) took the Chair.

### **2. MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 8<sup>th</sup> August 2012 were approved and signed by the Chair.

### **3. DEPUTATIONS/ PUBLIC ADDRESSES**

There were none.

### **4. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST (INCLUDING WHIPPING)**

There were none.

### **5. WITNESS EVIDENCE**

#### **5.A CHAIR NORTHAMPTON BID - STEPHEN CHOWN**

The Chair stated that Mr Chown was unable to attend this meeting but would be present for the Panel's next meeting, to be held on 5<sup>th</sup> December 2012, when his responses to the core questions would be considered. The Chair then read out a statement from Mr Chown which he had requested be brought to the Panel's attention.

Mr Chown's statement referred to the three "elephants in the room", being car parking, penal business rates and street cleanliness, which he stated represented 90% of the issues affecting the retail experience in Northampton. He stated that shoppers wanted free parking in the town centre, business rates were ever increasing and the town centre was dirty, although the standards of cleanliness were improving.

The Town Centre Manager stated that local authorities had no powers to ameliorate business rates which were set by Government. Local authorities could give discounts to charities for shops but then had to make up that discount themselves when paying business rates to the Government.

## **5.B CHIEF EXECUTIVE, NORTHAMPTON CHAMBER OF COMMERCE - PAUL GRIFFITHS**

Mr Griffiths was unable to attend the meeting so was not able to respond to the core questions. This item was deferred until the next meeting of the Panel, on 5<sup>th</sup> December 2012.

## **5.C MR EVERALL, FORMER DIRECTOR, NORTHAMPTON BID**

Mr Everall was both an independent business owner and a former director of Northampton BID. His responses to the core questions were contained in the agenda and he gave a detailed overview of his comments, as summarised below.

- Mr Everall believed that developing Northampton as a market town was the key to its growth, and that it was unlikely there would be many new shops coming into the town centre, particularly as he could not see the economic downturn improving within the next five years. He suggested encouraging village groups to come into the town centre to put on community events and sell items on the market.
- He suggested developing small business units in the town centre and on the Kettering and Wellingborough Roads.
- Keeping traffic moving in the town centre and managing noise and pollution from traffic would be helpful to businesses.
- Mr Everall supported Mr Chown's comments about "elephants in the room" (made at minute 5a above). Car parking numbers had increased but income had fallen. Business rates were ever increasing and the impact of this was made worse for business when car parking charges were increased. Cleanliness was also an issue in much of the town, particularly in the stairwells of many of the car parks, especially the Mayorhold and Grosvenor Centre. Localised car parking was an issue which he suggested should be investigated.
- Many of the issues related to housekeeping – where cleaning, maintenance and upkeep could be improved – and people's perceptions. People wanted to come into an environment which they considered to be safe, clean and welcoming. There was scope for improving how things were done in these areas and in continuing cleanliness and anti-social behaviour campaigns on an on-going basis.
- The internet was here to stay and was out of the control of shops and businesses. Customers would decide how much they spent on items and where.
- Many of the town centre services tended to be reactive rather than proactive and there was room for some improvement in that area and also in terms of communication.
- Channels of communication between the Borough Council and the business community had improved over the last year and this was welcomed.

Mr Everall then answered questions from members of the panel as summarised below:

- He considered that people wanted to visit and spend time in a pleasant and attractive environment, such as in Olney or Market Harborough, and this was the route Northampton should consider, through developing the strengths of the traditional market here.
- Town centres should be cultural and leisure experiences as well as a retail one. There were opportunities for Northampton to make use of the market square, which was one of the largest in Europe and to make more of residential opportunities in the town centre.
- The loss of Barclaycard and other employers in the town centre had adversely

affected the viability of the town centre.

- Car parking issues and charges meant that many people who had previously travelled into the town centre from other towns now no longer did so. There were also issues regarding car parking charges, enforcement and the issuing of penalty tickets which Mr Everall felt should be reviewed.
- Issues regarding safety, anti-social behaviour and alcohol fuelled behaviour also needed to be addressed on an on-going basis to allay people's perceptions of the town centre.

Mr Everall was thanked by the Panel for his presentation and for answering their questions.

Councillor Stone enquired about the possibility of having hotels and conference facilities around the edge of the town centre to encourage greater use of the town centre.

## **5.D UNIVERSITY OF NORTHAMPTON**

The Scrutiny Officer reported that the answers from the University of Northampton to the core questions had only been received on the day of the meeting. They had been brought to Members' attention at this meeting for information and any questions on the responses would be reported back to the University who would be happy to respond to them.

It was agreed that if Members of the Panel had any supplementary questions for the University of Northampton that they forward these to the Scrutiny Officer.

## **6. SITE VISITS**

The Scrutiny Officer reported that Councillor Lynch had made a site visit to Norwich on 10<sup>th</sup> August 2012, looking at both the daytime and evening environment of the city. Photographs he had taken of the city centre were shown to the Panel. It was reported that the city centre was very clean and pleasant but did not have extensive parking nor a park and ride system. There were street entertainers giving a pleasant atmosphere and a Litter Warden who gave out penalty tickets to people dropping litter.

Reports on site visits to Peterborough and Market Harborough would be made to the next meeting of the Panel on 5<sup>th</sup> December 2012.

The meeting concluded at 7:12 pm