

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of the Review was to:

- To investigate how NBC can support the town centre business community
- To investigate how NBC can support local businesses throughout the development period of any major building projects in and close by to the town centre (i.e. Grosvenor; bus interchange; university accommodation etc.)
- To identify and examine good practice from other boroughs
- To identify ways to develop greater involvement / engagement with local, regional and national businesses in public land improvement initiatives

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed at its work programming event in March 2012 to include a review of the retail experience at Northampton. This was an issue that had been identified by a number of members of the public as a key suggestion for a future Scrutiny review. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee commissioned Scrutiny Panel 2 to undertake the review. An in-depth review commenced in May 2012 and concluded in May 2013.

A Scrutiny Panel was established comprising Councillor Matt Lynch (Chair); Councillor Suresh Patel (Vice Chair); Councillors Tony Ansell, Sally Beardsworth, Elizabeth Gowen, Dennis Meredith and Danielle Stone and Sheridan New, former Grosvenor Centre Manager, (Co-optee.)

This review links to the Council's corporate priorities - Priority 1 – Northampton on track – a vibrant town.

The Scrutiny Panel established that the following needed to be investigated and linked to the realisation of the Council's corporate priorities:

- Context:
 - Local statistics
 - Demographics – local and national
- Baseline data:
 - National statistics
 - Definition of the Town Centre
 - Vision for the Town Centre
- Synopses of various research documents and other published documents
- Evidence from expert internal witnesses
- Evidence from residents
- Evidence from Councillors regarding their shopping experience
- Evidence from the Town Centre Challenge Event

- Best practice data
- Site visits
- Desktop research

CONCLUSIONS AND KEY FINDINGS

A significant amount of evidence was heard, details of which are contained in the report. After gathering evidence the Scrutiny Panel established that: -

- 5.1 After all of the evidence was collated the following conclusions were drawn:
- 5.1.1 The Scrutiny Panel acknowledged that evidence from both the Policy Briefing produced by the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) that as the recession continues, the health and vitality of local high streets is likely to be an issue which scrutiny will wish to investigate. One of the approaches suggested by the Policy Briefing that Scrutiny may wish to look at is local issues. This was the approach that this Scrutiny Review concentrated on – looking at Northampton town centre and focusing on a range of key issues.
- 5.1.2 The Scrutiny Panel highlighted the Central Area Action regarding town centre regeneration, in particular the section “Delivering a Vibrant Retail Centre:
- Defining and strengthening Northampton’s Primary Shopping Area (as shown on the ‘Proposals Map’) is vital if the Central Area is to fulfil its role as a town centre (as defined by PPS4: Planning for Sustainable Economic Growth) and the principal shopping centre for Northamptonshire. To show the distinction between the types of use classes within Northampton Central Area, the Primary Shopping Area has been broken down into Primary and Secondary Frontages :
- Primary Frontages are the focus for retail uses
 - Secondary Frontages will have a retail focus but provide opportunities for a greater diversity of uses away from retailing, such as financial services, restaurants and drinking establishments “
- 5.1.3 It was realised that 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.
- 5.1.4 Evidence collated indicated the need for more to be done to make the town centre a more visually attractive place. The Scrutiny Panel acknowledged that de-cluttering of street furniture/signage was very important and gave a much better perception if the street scene was cleared. The Scrutiny Panel welcomed the announcement that was made during the evidence gathering of this Review that the Council was making £50,000 available for a town centre face lift. This funding will be spent on a general upgrade of street furniture.
- 5.1.5 The Scrutiny Panel felt that it was very important to encourage a much wider town centre

experience, rather than just concentrate on the retail offer. It is 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”.

- 5.1.6 The Scrutiny Panel 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.
- 5.1.7 The Scrutiny Panel welcomed the introduction of “pop up shops”, acknowledging that “pop up shops” are relatively low cost short term leases to get a retail property back into use. The Scrutiny Panel felt that it would be beneficial for services, such as the voluntary sector, to be signposted to the opportunity for pop-up campaigns.
- 5.1.8 During one of its meetings, the Scrutiny Panel heard of the town rangers that Rugby Town Centre BID had introduced. The Town Rangers were felt to be a very positive feature.
- 5.1.9 The Council’s good communication methods were acknowledged. It was felt that there was a dynamic relationship with the media, with the Council being proactive in media on Northampton Alive.
- 5.1.10 The Scrutiny Panel acknowledged that free parking is having an impact on the numbers of people using the town. Every survey that has 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.
- 5.1.11 It was emphasised that more needs to be done with partnerships. The Police is a key partner in controlling anti-social behaviour in the town centre. The Scrutiny Panel noted the responses from Northants Police that a cared for town centre can alleviate misuse of the environment and anti-social behaviour.
- 5.1.12 The Scrutiny Panel recognised that it is important that any negative perceptions of the town centre are 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. Northampton had used an approach to attract consumers to the town during the Christmas shopping period 2012 by providing Christmas entertainment, such as the ice rink. The benefit of this initiative was welcomed by the Scrutiny Panel.
- 5.1.13 Town Centre events have an impact of increased footfall.
- 5.1.14 The Scrutiny Panel acknowledged the enthusiasm of students of the recent student lock in at the Grosvenor Centre and noted from the evidence received that should future events be held that the overall success of such events be promoted.
- 5.1.15 The evidence collated alluded that people would like a vibrant town centre comprising both chain stores and independent traders, with a variety of good eating and drinking venues and is family orientated at the weekends. A number of respondents made reference to the town becoming a centre for culture.

Northampton has some attractive architecture and should be promoted to its full advantage.

- 5.1.16 Like a number of towns and cities, Northampton has a number of vacant shops. Evidence received suggested the erection of artwork, created by local artists, on display boards, would enhance the aesthetics of the town centre.
- 5.1.17 From the evidence collated, the Scrutiny Panel is aware of the threats to traditional retailing that has already come from the expansion of the Internet for shopping. It was realised that there could be further threats due to forthcoming changes in technology.
- 5.1.18 It is highlighted that street entertainers in Norwich gave a nice atmosphere to the shopping experience and the Scrutiny Panel felt that this could be investigated for Northampton.
- 5.1.19 The Scrutiny Panel supported the provision of Litter Wardens that were employed in Norwich.
- 5.1.20 During the visit to the car park area at the Grosvenor Centre, it was noted that some lights were not working. A boarded up window was observed, as was an out of date maintenance sign. The advertising boards inside the lifts were empty. The Scrutiny Panel felt that the area around the lifts could benefit from a deep clean.
- 5.1.21 The evidence obtained from the site visits that the Scrutiny Panel undertook determined that a number of town centres visited had good signage in situ. The signage in the Grosvenor Centre, Northampton, was felt to be very good. Initiatives to enhance the retail experience that take place in the Grosvenor Centre were supported.
- 5.1.22 The Scrutiny Panel acknowledged that the public is encouraged to report incidents in relation to street cleansing.
- 5.1.23 The Scrutiny Panel noted that reduction of signage work is on-going and is a key initiative not only within Northampton but across the county.
- 5.1.24 The Scrutiny Panel acknowledged the experience gained from the witnesses and the co-optee to this Review, particularly the wealth of knowledge and experience of the retail sector. It was recognised that it would be useful to continue this invaluable relationship to assist with the implementation of the recommendations of this Review.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The above overall findings have formed the basis for the following recommendations: -

- 6.1 The purpose of the Scrutiny Panel was:

- To investigate how NBC can support the town centre business community
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- To identify and examine good practice from other boroughs
- To identify ways to develop greater involvement / engagement with local, regional and national businesses in public land improvement initiatives

Scrutiny Panel 2 recommends to Cabinet that:

Retail Experience

- 6.1.1 The wider town centre experience is promoted and includes retail, leisure, culture, events and eating out.
- 6.1.2 Improved promotion of National and International events/activities.
- 6.1.3 Improved marketing of Northampton in relation to events held in the town centre.
- 6.1.4 Review the possibility of street entertainment (buskers) in the town centre.
- 6.1.5 Ensure town centre retailers and residents are informed on any proposed major developments/building projects in the town centre
- 6.1.6 Actively promote the hour's free parking and free parking on Sundays to Community Groups and Residents' Associations.
- 6.1.7 Investigate the opportunity to display local artists' artwork in vacant shop front windows in the town centre.
- 6.1.8 Promote Enterprise funding to the retail sector, Northampton BID and the University of Northampton.
- 6.1.9 Review Planning Policies with a particular focus on restricting changes of use from retail to other use particularly where there is saturation.
- 6.1.10 The success of the current Pop-up Shops is widely advertised and further promoted. It is also promoted to the Voluntary Sector so that it can run short-term campaigns using the Pop-up model.
- 6.1.11 A Town Centre Czar is appointed, in an advisory capacity.

Cleansing

- 6.1.12 The standard of street cleansing is maintained at a consistent level across the town centre.
- 6.1.13 Appropriate systems are in place to monitor the street cleansing contract.

- 6.1.14 Enterprise Management Services (EMS) works closely with partners (i.e. Town Centre BID) to improve engagement and understanding of partners' needs.
- 6.1.15 NBC works with town centre businesses around trade waste and where necessary takes the appropriate enforcement action.
- 6.1.16 Any cleaning matters be reported immediately to EMS to ensure a swift response is delivered.
- 6.1.17 An additional Town Centre Ranger is employed with a particular focus on litter. The Town Ranger is issued with a smart, clearly identifiable uniform and where possible existing Rangers are also issued with smart, clearly identifiable uniforms.
- 6.1.18 The "Report It" App is promoted to the wider community.
- 6.1.19 Northampton Borough Council has dialogue with retailers regarding the cleanliness of their forecourts.
- 6.1.20 The current status of Byelaws in relation to cleansing is investigated and enforced as appropriate or where Byelaws do not exist, consideration is given to the implementation of suitable Byelaws.

Partnership Working

- 6.1.21 NBC works closely with the Town Centre BID regarding any new business initiatives/opportunities.
- 6.1.22 NBC continues to work closely with all partners.
- 6.1.23 NBC develops an education package for primary schools around the importance of recycling and the prevention of littering.
- 6.1.24 Councillors and Officers from Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) and NBC work closely with town centre businesses around traffic and pedestrian movement throughout the redevelopment building projects in the town centre.

Recommendation to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

- 6.1.25 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee, as part of its monitoring regime, reviews the impact of this report in six months' time.