

REPORT OF THE TOWN CENTRE WORKING PARTY

1. CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

The Town Centre Working Party was established by the resolution of Council on 14 December 2016;

This Council resolves; to consider the challenges to town centres of internet shopping, out of town shopping centres and the specific opportunities which Kingsgate 2 and HD1 and town centre living can afford to Huddersfield.

To achieve this objective form an all-party group to work with the Cabinet Member for Economy, Skills, Transportation and Planning to explore all facets of town centre development in Huddersfield.”

2. TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Terms of Reference of the Working Party were;

1. To explore the challenges and trends facing Huddersfield Town Centre, such as the significant changes in the way people carry out retail and business transactions and use their leisure time and the impact this has had on Town Centre usage.
2. To look at opportunities and challenges, for Huddersfield Town Centre presented by significant planned private sector investment such as Kingsgate Phase 2 and The HDONE and the increase in town centre residential.
3. To hear evidence on overall retail trends in respect of town centre activity and the impact of a range of factors, to include:
 - Trends from a customer and business perspective
 - Rental values/commercial yields/vacancy rates
 - The potential impact of major developments planned in and around the town centre
 - The impact of transport infrastructure changes and the balance between different modes of transport, including public transport on the town centre
 - Parking and enforcement issues
 - The increase in residential activity within the town centre
 - The impact of the evening economy, major sporting activity and Sunday trading
 - The economy as a whole, including consumer and business confidence and opportunities to attract investment
 - Competition from the internet and out of town retail centres
 - The impact of austerity on the town centre environment

- The impact of population changes and habits, including leisure activity, attitudes to shopping and town centres being promoted as leisure destinations.
 - Crime and safety issues
 - The quality of the town centre streetscape and environment
 - The impact of the University and Kirklees College
 - Bus gates
4. To report to the Cabinet and Council on the Working Party's findings with a view to informing future policy development, planning and decision making impacting on the town centre.

3. THE WORKING PARTY

The Working Party comprised of the following Elected Members;

Councillor Carole Pattison (Chair)
 Councillor Donald Firth
 Councillor Richard Smith
 Councillor Amanda Pinnock
 Councillor Julie Stewart-Turner
 Councillor Linda Wilkinson

Councillor Shabir Pandor (Deputy Leader) attended the meetings as the representative of Cabinet.

The Working Party held a series of meetings between February and May 2017 in order to receive information and evidence from a cross-section of key witnesses who were selected by the Working Party to represent a range of local businesses and town centre users.

4. CONTEXT

Prior to discussions taking place with witnesses, at its first meeting the Working Party received information that gave a context to the viability of Huddersfield Town Centre. Significant points of note were;

- Huddersfield was ranked as 70th (2015/2016) on Venuescore retail ratings (which demonstrated that it was the 70th most active retail centre in England in Wales). To be in the top 100 is deemed as good.
- There had been changes to footfall in the town centre, based on statistics dated 13/2/17
- There were currently 71 vacant units in the town centre, which is higher than the national average of 10%.
- Comparisons of footfall in neighbouring town centres
- There had been notable developments in in the town centre, which included retail churn, residential development and the expansion of Kingsgate.

- While there had been some decline in retail footfall (notably on Saturdays), leisure operators were indicating a level of growth.
- Across the town centre, the number of food establishments was increasing.
- With regard to the busgates, initial traffic restrictions were put in place in 1983, with subsequent reinforcements in 2002 and 2017 aimed at moving traffic away from Westgate. Several factors for the implementation of bus gates contributed to the decision; existing traffic regulations weren't enforced by police, the Area Committee Action Plan consultation exercise reflected public preference for increased pedestrianisation, air pollution levels needed improvement, and bus companies wanted to be able to run buses according to timetabling or would withdraw services.

5. WITNESSES

The Working Party considered a range of potential witnesses and agreed to invite the following persons whom they felt would be able to add a valuable contribution to the Working Party's information gathering, across a board range of professions and specialisms.

The following witnesses agreed to attend one of the sessions, where they were asked to provide evidence, answer questions, and contribute to discussions regarding the activity within the town centre.

David Price Baghurst – Queensgate Market
 Mark Smith – Queensgate Market
 Paul Wright – New River Retail
 Sarah Cooper – Boots/Lead – Huddersfield Healthy High Street
 Jonathan Hardy – Kingsgate
 Brent Wood – Media Centre
 Lydia Blundell – Huddersfield Students Union
 Vernon O'Reilly – Huddersfield Piazza/Chair of Huddersfield Partnership)
 Andrew Wilson – Making Spaces
 Karen O'Neill – Lawrence Batley Theatre
 Andy Croughan – Rail Station Manager, Huddersfield and Dewsbury
 Paul Keighley – Bramleys/Huddersfield Town Centre Action Group
 Alisa Devlin – La Fleur//Huddersfield Town Centre Action Group
 Gina Henselman – Merrie England//Huddersfield Town Centre Action Group
 Cllr Peter McBride – Cabinet Member – Economy, Skills, Transportation, Planning

6. OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL – TOWN CENTRE STRATEGY

The Working Party gave consideration to the content of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Development and Environment) Town Centre Strategy Report, dated March 2015, which identified a number of issues which are being, or have now been, addressed. It was noted that the main recommendation arising from the report is that a concept of a 'shared vision' for the town needed further work, and that this should be led by businesses.

7. FINDINGS OF THE WORKING PARTY

The Working Party gave detailed consideration to the information that had been provided by the witnesses who had attended the sessions, and identified the main themes which they considered to be the greatest challenges to the town centre on the basis of the information that had been provided.

The key themes for focus were;

- (a) Vision and Identity
- (b) Location/Diversity/Safety
- (c) Footfall
- (d) Signage
- (e) Customer Experience
- (f) Residential Living
- (g) Huddersfield University
- (h) Cultural and Leisure Opportunities
- (i) Evening economy
- (j) Transport/Connectivity/Bus gates/Car Parking

8. CONSIDERATION OF EVIDENCE AND CONCLUSIONS

The Working Party considered each of the key themes as set out above and the information, comments and input that was provided by witnesses. In the basis of the evidence and information the Working Party were of the view that;

Vision and Identity

The town centre would benefit from a clearer vision, which should be business led, and the Council could provide a facilitation role in terms of helping to deliver a clear and strategic vision to provide the town with an identity and 'selling point.'

There is potential to create a brand for the town and improve its appeal – it needs to be bigger, and braver, demonstrated and achieved through strategic actions. The development of the brand with a Unique Selling Point would allow the town to sell its diversity, and a vibe that it is smaller and friendlier than a big city, as a key attraction.

Location/Diversity/Safety

The benefits of the town being conveniently located between Leeds and Manchester, with good connectivity links, need to be better promoted, along with connectivity to smaller, local towns. The town needs to promote its 'Independent Yorkshire' vibe and build upon it, particularly the number of independent traders and restaurants that the town can offer. The town cannot compete with Leeds or Manchester and it needs to

create its own identity and not be perceived by potential retailers as declining and fragmented.

Providing an improved streetscene was considered key in improving the general perception of the town, and would also promote an improved feeling of safety. It was recognised that the low crime rate within the town was a key reason as to why the University attracted so many international students.

Footfall

There was a national decline in footfall which was being reflected within the town centre. In order to address this decline, it was essential for the town to become less focussed on 9am to 5pm opening, provide more flexible shopping hours to suit the needs of customers, and promote an 'open for business' vibe, rather than as a town which offers minimal shopping and leisure opportunities after late afternoon.

The demise of the town has been well documented, and there is little confidence in some parts of the town, which struggles to compete with out of town shopping centres and city based shopping areas.

Signage

The signage both to and within the town centre required improving in order to enhance the experience of town centre users. In terms of car parking and access it was acknowledged that there was scope for greater directional signage, and that it could be particularly difficult for visitors not familiar with the ring road or car parking options to navigate the road network.

Within the town centre, there would also be benefits from improving pedestrian signage to key zones which may be of interest, including shopping and market areas, and providing information boards and cultural interest information, eg, the Huddersfield Trails.

Customer Experience

There is much scope for improving the customer experience of visiting the town, particularly in terms of improving the streetscene as well as cultural, leisure and shopping opportunities. There would be much advantage from the town developing the appeal of being a leisure choice rather than an essential shopping experience, and that in order to achieve this, the offer of a shopping/eating/drinking/theatre venue needed to be developed and effectively delivered. There are currently many empty retail units which creates a poor appearance of the town. First impressions of the town are important to visitors and much improvement to the streetscene is needed, including maintained planters and bins, to create a clean and tidy appearance. There is much impressive architecture within the town but currently the streetscene detracts from this and the benefits that could be derived from it.

Residential Living

The advantages of increasing the residential living options within the town were recognised as being key to developing an evening economy, by creating a 'feeling of ownership' of the town, and developing a residential and recreational hub of activity and play a significant role in achieving an evening economy and driving retail. The town has the potential to grow and re-brand as a residential and recreational hub. Residential living in the town centre would increase vibrancy, increase town centre

shopping and increase footfall and safety at night.

Huddersfield University

The importance of the University, and the benefits that it brings to the town, were acknowledged, particularly by retailers. However, it was felt that there was still greater potential for improved connectivity, and that the University should be encouraged to better promote links to the town amongst its students.

Cultural and Leisure Opportunities

There is a large creative economy currently in and around the town, and cultural regeneration needs to be reinvigorated.

Evening Economy

The current lack of an evening economy is a significant issue for the vibrancy of the town. Many of the businesses currently operate on restrictive/traditional hours which do not lend themselves to the shopping needs of customers. The town needs to encourage customers to come to the town in the evenings, and be perceived as 'open for business' beyond 6pm.

The lack of hotel accommodation choice within the town was noted, particularly the impact that this has upon the university. The benefits that would be brought to the town by increasing the numbers of hotel/evening visitors were recognised as also playing an important part in the development of an evening economy.

Transport/Connectivity/Busgates/Car Parking

There are a number of car parking areas within and outside of the ring road which are not well utilised, and for a number of cited reasons; poor directional signage, narrow spaces, unkempt, unsafe, and payment methods. Whilst there was no evidence that car parking charges appeared to be a concern, it was felt that parking needed to be much smarter and able to provide a good parking experience. It was felt that the provision of free parking would not offer a solution to town centre vibrancy as it would be occupied by commuters of town centre based workers.

Train link connectivity for Huddersfield is good, with 18000 commuters travelling to Leeds on a weekday. The town was considered to be the greatest beneficiary of the transpennine route and very much puts Huddersfield 'on the map', being the second busiest rail station in the West Yorkshire region.

The introduction of bus gates had created both positive and negative reactions. While evidence suggested that they were considered to have freed areas of the town from traffic congestion, allowed improved traffic, taxi, and bus replacement service movement around the railway station area, and encouraged pedestrianisation, it was noted also that there was a fear of accessibility that needed to be considered within the wider transport strategy, and that concerns regarding navigation around the town centre needed to be noted, alongside the concerns of traders that footfall around the Westgate area had fallen following the installation of the busgates.

Notwithstanding the concerns presented in terms of the impact of the busgates upon trade within the town, the Working Party noted the evidence as detailed in the Impact

Assessment which demonstrated that the scheme had had the desired effect in terms of improving journey time savings for public transport users, removing circulating and rat running traffic from the town centre, and improving the standards of air quality.

In addition to the key themes identified, the Working Party also considered;

- (a) There is a role for the Council in terms of increased support for traders, who alone cannot deliver a renewed vision and town centre strategy. Improvements would be delivered by establishing improved connections between assets, and visible links and communications into the Council need to be embedded. The Council needs to take on a facilitation role, aid the development of cultural hubs, and assist in providing a supportive environment for independent businesses.
- (b) There is a visible disconnect between the town and its large (circa 20,000) student population. Developing improved links with the University would encourage student spend, and bring cultural diversity, to the town centre. The town can benefit greatly from the close proximity of the University and a Premier League Football Club, which both need to invest in the town for their own gain.
- (c) The cost of premises within the town centre is a concern, with rateable values being high. It was noted that a unit on King Street at 123sq.m would cost £26,000 per annum, and that this created a barrier to attracting independent retail as it is not viable. On New Street, rents had halved in the past three years but units continued to be vacant, and rateable values had dropped due to the low demand. However, the indoor market provides an ideal opportunity for start-up businesses with cheaper rent options for business to become established.
- (d) There are various factors which have contributed to a decline in town centre retail including; competition from supermarkets, the increase in online shopping, the size and cost of vacant units, and a lack of identity to the town which is competing between two large and vibrant cities.

The inner ring road is large and hubs within it move and change. Traders in the town need to work together and not operate in isolation as closed outlets have a negative impact upon the town as a whole. Business may benefit from being located closer together, making the customer experience more pleasant without lengthy walks between different areas of the town.

There is a lack of student awareness in terms of local businesses and the retail that is available. Interaction could be improved through the better promotion of student discount schemes, particularly amongst independent shops, to develop local relationships between students and traders.

Users of the town centre are currently mostly residents within a five mile radius, and 95% of visitors to Kingsate have previously visited. The town needs to grow further than this, and current shoppers also need to be retained

through having 'positive experiences.'

(e) There are many positive opportunities for the town centre;

- Queensgate Market has space to develop and has a good range of businesses. It would benefit from 7 day opening as specific Sunday openings (eg, second Sunday of the month) do not draw enough trade. All traders need to embrace the benefits that this could bring rather than 'opt out', as currently happens with late night Thursday openings in the run up to Christmas by recognising the positive impact this could have for trade within the market. There needs to be a renewed confidence within the market. Currently outlets are busy, some particularly with students.
- The town centre needs many more places to socialise, opportunities to have coffee with friends and allow people to enjoy the experience of being in town, which could be enhanced through increased outdoor seating areas and pedestrianisation.
- The town needs to embrace the benefits of having a local, popular theatre located within the ring road. In the past five years, the theatre has brought in £4m of investment and the 2015 Economic Impact Study showed that audiences brought in £700k annually.
- The development of Kingsgate will have a major positive development on the town, and the benefits that it will bring to the town as a whole need to be recognised and embraced.
- There is great potential for Kirklees College to integrate into the town centre, particularly the support that local businesses could provide to students by offering work placement opportunities.
- There is a growing national demand for leisure activities, including food and drink, and the town centre needs to quickly respond to this, being able to have 'an offer' that is appealing to customers who want a shopping and/or leisure experience.
- The town has many high growth businesses, particularly technical and digital, which have an increasing number of employees. The town would benefit from being seen as 'having an edge' for such industries and encourage other businesses into the area.

(f) The content of (a) the report of Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee – Huddersfield Town Centre Accessibility Scheme (Bus Gates) and (b) the Huddersfield Town Centre Access and Connectivity Project Impact Assessment Report. In particular the Working Party noted (i) the positive impact of recent changes to town centre traffic management (ii) that the benefits brought to the town centre by introduction of the bus gates scheme, including improvements in air quality and reduced congestion, outweighed the concerns that had been presented (iii) the need to give consideration to supporting 'click and collect' shopping methods, particularly in the Westgate area of the town centre (iv) the need for new ways of town centre living and operating to be supported (v) the need to consider how further traffic management options can be used to improve the standard of town centre living and (iv) the need to work with local business to support them in adapting to operating within a safer and healthier town centre environment.

9. WORKING PARTY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There needs to be a clear, communicated vision for the town, which should be business led, in order to drive the town forward and overcome the current lack of agreement and direction in how to achieve this. The town needs to establish itself as a brand and be visually appealing in order to attract investment.
2. The Car Parking areas within the town need to be smarter, with improved car parking experiences, for example, with ANPR facilities (within privately owned car parks), brighter, safer, colour coded, marked zones, which will provide customers with an 'easy parking' experience and attract more visitors to travel into the town by car.
3. There needs to be improved signage, both in and around the town, particularly it was considered that the town centre would benefit from increased and well positioned signage to car parks, and on the approach roads.
4. The town needs to adhere to standards of up-keep and there needs to be an enhanced awareness of retailers that shopping is a leisure activity. The town centre needs to be attractive and appealing, and develop an evening economy - the challenge is to create a town that is vibrant until 9pm and flexible in terms of delivering an evening/weekend shopping experience.
5. There is a need to reinvigorate cultural regeneration, support local talent development and take advantage of the existing large creative economy.
6. There are many opportunities for the town, and the Council, University and Football Club, as major beneficiaries of a vibrant and sustainable town centre, to work together, with businesses, to create and improved and thriving town centre location.
7. The Working Party supports further progress and improved measures to increase the appeal of the town centre, and encourages the partnership working of key stakeholders to continue to work together and create a safer and healthier community for residents to live and work in, and to enjoy the amenities of the town centre.

ATTENDEES/WITNESSES AND SOURCES OF EVIDENCE

The Working Party would like to convey thanks to all attendees/witnesses for the input that they have provided;

David Price Baghurst – Queensgate Market
Mark Smith – Queensgate Market
Paul Wright – New River Retail
Sarah Cooper – Boots/Lead – Huddersfield Healthy High Street
Jonathan Hardy – Kingsgate
Brent Wood – Media Centre
Lydia Blundell – Huddersfield Students Union
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Gina Henselman – Merrie England//Huddersfield Town Centre Action Group
Cllr Peter McBride – Cabinet Member – Economy, Skills, Transportation, Planning

Documents;

Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Development and Environment) Town Centre Strategy Report, March 2015
Huddersfield Town Centre Access and Connectivity Project – Impact Assessment Report, July 2017
Report of Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee – Huddersfield Town Centre Accessibility Scheme (Bus Gates), September 2017
Huddersfield Town Centre Access and Connectivity Report, September 2017