

Supporting local businesses and the High Street

Briefing note for the Communities and Partnership Scrutiny Committee.

1 Introduction

At its meeting held on 28th November 2012, the Scrutiny Committee asked the Panel of three Councillors dealing with this issue (Councillors Clack, Wilkinson and Wolff) to return to the next meeting with the following information:-

- (1) The Panel should return to the next meeting with a proposal for the way forwards; focussing on 1 or 2 district centres and including some exploration of issues around small and independent shops;
- (2) Panel members will decide which and how many district centres to examine

2 How many district centres shall we look at?

The Panel decided to look at **two** District Centres in more detail.

Reason: Members felt that all the centres were very different and it was necessary to investigate more than one in order to get a good feel for what is happening out there. In addition, the Panel wanted to monitor, compare and contrast their chosen centres.

3 Which ones?

The chosen centres are Headington and Cowley Road.

Reason: These sites were chosen because of their differences. Headington is a place that people tend to pass through on a main route into Oxford (although clearly local people do go there); whereas Cowley Road tends to be more of a destination that people seek out (but again, local people do go there). Cowley Road also has a night-time economy, which Headington for the most part does not.

The Panel acknowledges that in general terms the retail sector in Oxford is satisfactory in terms of premises usage, but it believes that there is still room for improvement. The City Centre may be healthy, but there is a desire to improve shopping and community facilities in the outlying areas

4 Themes

The Panel has had a useful and informative meeting with Tom Morris (Principal Planner) and Gordon Reid (City Centre Manager) which has helped it to focus on key issue themes.

Following that meeting, the Panel has identified **four** key themes that it suggests are worth exploring in more detail:-

A Local leadership and its role in promoting district centres.

The Panel noted that, at present, the Council cannot directly influence the retail offer in Oxford. But it might be possible for the Council to:-

- work with landlords to recommend the types of shop that are preferred for a particular area by those who live and work there;
- explore the possibility of persuading landlords to lower rents in order to attract tenants, especially those from the independent sector;
- ask landlords about the use of empty shops for community purposes, even short term, possibly for lower rent;
- approach retailers direct to try to attract them to district centres.

The Panel believes that a key to any improvement in a district centre, whether by the measures above or any other is leadership.

Potential questions to ask

- What local leadership exists in the 2 chosen district centres?
- What local/business organisations are there?
- Who do we need to speak to?
- What interest is there in alternative and community use of empty shops?
- Are we able to contact landlords and is there scope for working with them? If we did, what should we aim to achieve from it?
- Is there a case for the Council appointing a Champion (either an officer or perhaps an elected Member who would take a special interest) for District Centres?

B Balance of shops

The Panel was made aware that there are different types of shopping: “purposive” and “comparison”. The first can be described as the type of shopping you must do – for example, for groceries – whilst the second is more a leisurely browsing and choosing and comparing one brand with another.

The Panel wishes to examine the case for encouraging more purposive shopping for District Centres in order to encourage footfall, and thus benefit all retail outlets. It notes that a review will be held in the medium term of district centre frontages which will include examination of the balance of use classes

The Panel is currently seeking an accurate definition of the word “independent”. (One definition given is that an “independent retailer” is one with 7 or fewer retail outlets.)

Potential questions to ask

- Do we have the right balance of shops in our chosen areas?
- How can we best define “independent retailers” in our area?
- Can we have data related to the balance of shops detailing the % of independents and retail offer?
- How do people use their District Centres, and is there a case for us to seek to promote more purposive shopping?

C Accessibility

The Panel has noted that two factors that encourage people to shop in an area are (1) the quality and quantity of the retail offer and (2) accessibility

By accessibility we mean how easy it is to travel to the shopping area and how easy it is to stay and use it once you are there, so this would cover issues such as transport and parking by those who live or work in the area.

The Panel believes that accessibility is one measure of the **vitality** of our retail sector. Other measures include mix of uses and balance of shops, vacancy rates, car park usage, footfall, and site/rent values.

The Panel noted that there are electronic footfall counters at three locations within the City Centre.

Potential questions to ask

- Is there a case for use of electronic footfall counters at our District Centres?
- How do people travel to our District Centres? If by car, how easy is it to park nearby?
- Could accessibility to District Centres be improved– how far is lack of accessibility a barrier to their use?

D Council working together.

The Panel noted that there seems to be several sections of the Council dealing with retail issues in Oxford. Planning, economic development, parking asset management, finance and communities and neighbourhoods all potentially have an interest in or direct influence over one or more issues that affect our District Centres.

The Panel would like to know what data the Council, as a body, collects about District Centres, and for what purpose.

The Panel also would like to know what incentives the Council can (and does) offer to assist retailers, including business start-ups.

Potential questions to ask

- Is it possible to combine all the data that we hold about District Centres so that pieces of information are not considered in isolation?
- Is there a need to incentivise shopping? If so, what incentives can we, as a Council, offer to retailers and shoppers?

Next steps

The Panel will speak with:

- Relevant Council Officers;
- Iain Nicholson (Headington)
- Local traders
- Chamber of Commerce and similar business organisations
- Ward Members

The Panel may also undertake site visits.

The Panel intends to bring back to the Committee one or more recommendations at the end of its work.

Lois Stock
Democratic and Electoral Services Officer
01865 252275

On behalf of the Scrutiny Panel; Councillors Clack, Wilkinson and Wolff