

Next Steps for Revitalising High Streets

Issues Pertinent to Biggleswade

I attended the above conference on 12th October and the following are notes where speakers' comments were relevant to the situation in Biggleswade and are prepared for the Town Centre Management committee of Biggleswade Town Council.

What is Biggleswade?

The first point to make is what type of shopping centre is Biggleswade? As a market town, servicing not only its own population but its hinterland of villages, Biggleswade would be classed as a 'Convenience' shopping centre. This means that:

- Retailers should expect a steady footfall, not seasonal
- Focus should be on the community served, with relevant offers and flexible opening times
- Needs to be accessible (parking) and locally connected (public transport)
- Customer service is key, to encourage repeat business
- Services as well as retail are vital — food outlets/restaurants, banks, hair and beauty

The clearer the town is about its role, the more likely it is that visitor numbers will go up.

(The new A1 Retail Park is a 'Comparison' shopping centre, not in direct competition to the town centre. In any case, the floor space of the units in the town centre is not sufficient for large retailers.)

A large market town is defined as having a population of between 10,000 and 30,000 — Biggleswade is clearly in the middle of this range.

The Basics

The sub-title of the conference was 'in the Digital Age' and much of the focus was on how High Streets can thrive alongside online shopping. However, many speakers began by saying that, since high street regeneration has been an area of concern for some time now, they were assuming that the 'basics' were in place. The basics referred to were:

- A welcoming environment — cleaner, safer, greener
- Sufficient parking

Biggleswade has neither.

Whereas it would be unusual to feel unsafe in Biggleswade (except perhaps late on Friday or Saturday night), the environment is not welcoming - too much street furniture, some damaged; uneven paving everywhere; paving replaced with lumps of tar; empty shops; inadequate public toilets; generally jaded air about the place.

Both on and off-street parking is insufficient and time limits on some spaces do not allow proper access to shops and services.

The Town Council has discussed both points ad infinitum, is not afraid of investing in the

town centre and has tried many solutions, including the purchase of Rose Lane car park and an unsuccessful regeneration bid to Central Bedfordshire Council.

The problems faced are exacerbated because the Town Council does not own the Market Square and does not have the relevant highways powers, so has to try to work with the principal authority. Although the Town Council has some rights of compulsory purchase, finance would be a problem in the town centre.

However, the Town Council does run the Charter Market and other markets but they, too, have suffered from the lack of access to the town centre.

The Digital Challenge

“Sustainable economic development is dependent on digitally-skilled businesses” — the Cabinet Office

Discoverability — people need to be able to find out about retailers, services and what is going on in the town through their smartphones and computers

Content — the offer needs to be attractive.

Although much business is done online, ‘Click and Collect’ is thriving — which encourages people into town centres.

However, businesses do need to have an online presence, with the basic minimum being contact details and an indication of their offer. Customers do pre-purchase research online but only some 50% of businesses have a website. Businesses should also have a professional email address, e.g. NOT hotmail.

The availability of Wi-Fi and compatibility with mobile phone apps are both important. As well as the right digital infrastructure, appropriate digital skills are needed.

Large, national retailers are way ahead with this — as will be the shops on the retail park. Small retailers are being left behind.

Encouraging Business Start-Ups

Traditional landlords tend not to be very flexible. Start-up businesses often need support to get going. Buildings with hot-desking space for when a business can't afford an office have been very successful. For retail, the equivalent is pop-up shops, where a high street shop is divided into small units for people to try out their business model. In both cases, they may be rent-free for a short period, then a period below market rate. After that, the business should be able to enter the free market for accommodation.

The High Street Pledge

The Future High Streets Forum is a national group bringing together leaders across retail, property and business to better understand the competition town centres across the country face and to drive forward new ideas and policies. They are asking companies to sign a High Street Pledge -

"I pledge to use the leadership expertise, skills and resources of my business to help UK high streets achieve their full potential."

Marks & Spencer, J.D. Wetherspoon, Boots, Wilkinsons, Greggs and the Post Office are among those who have signed up so far. Could these larger retailers be our business champions to help us set up a Business Improvement District across the whole town?

Teenage Markets

Nationally:

Markets have shrunk by a third

Employment within markets has gone down 40%

70% of market traders are aged 50 or over

Individuals and small traders are doing business online, though, on sites like eBay and Etsy. This inspired the founders of The Teenage Market, which started in Stockport, Cheshire, in 2012. It is now, effectively, a franchise which can be used to hold markets run by 13 — 21-year-olds in other towns across the country. Some 25 local authorities have signed up and all the organisation is done online.

There has been some opposition from market traders (who don't like specialist markets in general) but, over time, traditional traders and the Teenage Market traders have learnt from each other. Teenagers have learnt the skills of selling from their elders and market traders have learnt to professionalise their stalls.

Teenage Market can run alongside a normal market or be held as a separate event and can include both stallholders and performers.

This is a way of making young people part of the delivery in the town centre rather than doing things for young people.

Where to from here?

We should be aiming for a town centre full of vitality and viable businesses where people go for leisure as well as retail and services. To get there will require leadership, vision and a strategy.

We need to engender a sense of pride in the town. The perception of the place is key. Why should people shop in town rather than online? - There needs to be a sense of enjoyment and leisure and engagement with our community.

The town centre needs to be re-imagined for a different purpose and staged events are very important because they encourage a different kind of visitor to the town centre.

We need to evolve — not stand by as the town centre dies.



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www.biggleswadechamber.org.uk