

OUR ROLE IN SUPPORTING THE PROSPERITY AND VITALITY OF THE MARKET TOWNS

The future for Britain's High Streets and whether or not they can survive is often in the press and often presented in the context of general doom and gloom. So it's important that we begin our debate tonight with a little Huntingdonshire specific context and ask ourselves....

...How are our towns actually doing?

- Information on footfall and vacancy rates, the two most common measures of town centre vibrancy, has been circulated to members for this purpose. Clearly these show Huntingdonshire's market towns are all, to varying degrees, actually doing better than towns nationally. And it is important that during this debate we do not lose sight of this fact.
- It is for this very reason that, during the recessionary period, when precious little private investment in town centre development has been forthcoming nationally, Huntingdonshire has secured the development of the Cinema in St Neots, at least £25m of private sector town centre investment in Huntingdon and in St Ives.

So, what are the problems that need addressing?

- Although we are doing better than most, our towns are not immune to issues faced by market towns across the country.
- The recession has exacerbated the difficulties faced in some towns, but gladly ours have been somewhat protected from this impact.
- The more critical issue is the fundamental restructuring of the retail sector and cultural shift in the way we, as customers, chose to shop in the modern world. Whether we like it or not, this is increasingly on-line.
- Research shows the need for town centres to change and evolve to take into account this cultural shift. It focuses on the need to encourage in town centres, those activities that will attract our residents now and in the future. We have to accept that these activities will not be the same mix as in years gone by and will not necessarily be the same in each town.

The question is, what can we, as a council do to assist with this evolution of our towns?

We have a number of tools we can and do employ:

- As the Planning authority we implement a 'town centres first' philosophy. The Local Plan will protect the areas where each town's main shops are concentrated.
- At the same time we can actively discourage new out of town retail which diverts people and spending away from town centres.
- To promote flexibility, temporary changes of use without planning permission were introduced in May 2013 to allow (under certain circumstances) premises to switch between shops, cafes, restaurants, financial and professional services and offices.
- Access is important and the Council can promote routes into and across town centres for walking, cycling and public transport to ensure shops and services are accessible to as many people as possible.
- We have played an important role for many years in providing high quality public car parking to serve all our town centres and will continue to do so in the future as it is a vital tool in supporting the town centre economy
- Free parking is not necessarily the answer to town centre vibrancy but it is an easy assumption to make. High quality, well-maintained, well located, good value provision with charging levels set appropriately, is the key. Regular turnover and availability of spaces is a must to encourage visitors to return regularly.
- The council's has also recently made multi-million pound investment in its leisure centres in St Neots and St Ives. These will have also contributed to improving the quality and diversity of activities on offer in these towns help to attract visitors.
- Another important town centre support mechanism recently made available to us is the discretionary power to award up to £1,000 rating relief to certain small retailers in the district. The discount has been introduced as a temporary measure for all occupied retail properties with a rateable value not exceeding £50,000 but subject to other applicable reliefs. This is not limited just to "the High Street" and so it can be a boost for rural retailers too. We are actively encouraging as many retailers as possible to take up this offer.
- Cabinet has also approved another (50%) discount for businesses that move into retail premises which had been immediately previously empty for a year or more. This relief can apply for up to 18 months.

As well as what we **can** do, we must also be mindful during our debate of what we **can't** do:

- It is a common misconception, for example that we can control exactly how many shops of each kind as located in each centre. Charity shops are often a focus for attention. But, planning can only control the formal use class of premises, not the specific occupier. It is irrelevant in planning terms

whether the occupier is a shoe shop, a phone shop or a charity shop – this decision belongs to the owner or landlord of the property.

- Similarly, the Council cannot prevent a shop from closing down either because it isn't economically viable or its lease has expired. We can influence what alternative uses that property is put to, for example, we can prevent it changing use to a house but we **cannot** influence the commercial decisions of landlords and retailers.

As we discuss the options available to us in supporting our towns it is important to remember that our role is, and should be led by the business need. It is not our place to determine what is best for business but to try to ensure that the business environment in Huntingdonshire is as conducive to business growth as possible: to help businesses to help themselves. Our support in establishing the Business Improvement District in Huntingdon is a perfect example of this. The first BID to be set up in Cambridgeshire now generates an income of around £200,000 for businesses themselves to spend on improving the business environment in the town.

There is one more support mechanism available to us in terms of what we, as individual councillors can do?

Although we may not all realize it, our role as Councillors is perhaps one of the potentially most effective in supporting our town centres. Research indicates that promotion, in all its many forms, is critical to the success of a market town. We should all be acting as ambassadors for our Market Towns focusing publically on the best that they have to offer in terms of events, history, culture, leisure and shopping. By talking our town up (rather than down), a public perception that our towns are worth visiting is encouraged, visits are more likely to be made and vitality more likely to be achieved. If we as Councillors only focus vocally on what is wrong with our towns the perception created is unnecessarily negative and becomes self-perpetuating. Our towns are doing remarkably well and we should be celebrating that fact: shouting as loudly about it as possible.