

TOWN CENTRES WORKING PARTY MINUTES

Minutes of a Meeting held in the Walter Gidney Pavilion,
Recreation Ground, Soham on Wednesday, 17th October 2012
At 2.10pm

PRESENT

Councillor Tom Kerby (Chairman)
Councillor David Ambrose Smith
Councillor Sheila Friend-Smith, MBE
Councillor James Palmer

OTHERS

Parish Councillor Rosemary Aitchison
Parish Councillor Will Burton
Parish Councillor John Yates
Caroline Bosworth
Tracey Harding – Team Leader Tourism & Town Centre Services
Jonathan James
Sarah Ratcliffe – Forward Planning Officer
Shirley Blake – Principal Sustainable Development Officer
Doug Perkins – Economic Development Officer
Janis Murfet – Democratic Services Officer

11. **PUBLIC QUESTION TIME**

There were no public questions.

12. **APOLOGIES**

There were no apologies for absence.

13. **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

14. **CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

There were no Chairman's announcements.

15. **MINUTES**

Further to Minute No 8 (Town Centres Issues – Feedback From Town Centre Representatives) final sentence on page 3, Councillor Yates thought the reference to "lagging behind" was unfortunate. He asked and the Working Party agreed that the sentence be amended to read "Councillor John Yates stated that the Ely City Forum had been set up as a sub-committee of the City Council". Whereupon,

It was resolved:

That subject to the agreed amendment, the minutes of the meeting held on 26th July 2012 be confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

16. **TOWN TEAM UPDATES**

Ely

Councillor Yates stated that there had been two meetings of the Ely team and things were now moving forward. They were working on the primary processes for the BID and Doug Perkins' work on the Levy would be taken back to the team for discussion, along with a number of wider aspects.

The "App" proposal presentation had been very favourably received and would go ahead. There had been discussions with the Ely traders and Police regarding CCTV and a possible enhancement to extend the hours.

The City Council had been given a presentation regarding the "Shopwatch" scheme, and this would be fed back to the Forum.

It had been agreed that the Market Place needed further discussion because there was a desire to change the culture there; ADeC was to put forward some ideas. The Principal Sustainable Development Officer reminded Members that a tender regarding the market place was due back on 19th October. The owner of the buildings had said he would look to redevelop the frontage if the market square itself was redeveloped. Councillor Yates said that the vision was to have a continental-style market place.

It was noted that the Forum had met to discuss the proposed development of the Tesco/Angel Drove area, and what impact, along with the arrival of the Marks & Spencer shop, this would have on Ely's city centre. Councillor Yates remarked that there was a need to have an equal playing field for all, in order that the City Centre was not disrespected. He also reported that Section 106 money had been allocated for improved signage to assist visitors coming to Ely. The Forum had also discussed enhancing the current bus service and extending it out to the new developments to try and attract more footfall to the city.

It was reported that on 16th October 2012, the City of Ely Council had recommended that the bulk of the Sainsbury Section 106 money should be spent on Forehill.

Soham

Caroline Bosworth informed the Working Party that at the last Soham Town Team meeting, the PCSOs had given a presentation on crime and safety, which had been well received. Real progress was also being made towards the resurrection of the weekly market, but much hard work would be required because the market was subject to a number of ancient laws and several people held the rights to the market.

It was noted that the traders in Soham were working well together as a cohesive group, and some were doing linked offers. Public awareness of what the High Street was, and what it could offer needed to be raised and the Town Team was working with the Newmarket Retailers Association to learn from how they worked.

Littleport

Councillor David Ambrose Smith spoke in his capacity as a Member for Littleport and said that the town centre was in a desperate state, with more shops about to close. He had been to many of the retail outlets in Littleport and it was clear that retailers were keen to work with the Council and Working Party.

It was noted that Councillor Ambrose Smith and the Chairman wished to attend Caroline Bosworth's meetings. Councillor Ambrose Smith said it would be useful for the Working Party to see just how bad Littleport had become and to learn from the town by not having too many out of town retail centres. In contrast, he believed that Soham was vibrant and had turned itself around. He felt that it would be important to try and get somebody from Littleport Parish Council to attend the Working Party meetings and all present should be listening to each other.

Councillor Palmer reiterated that this forum was to ensure the District Council listened and facilitated where it could. There was no money available, but it would do what it could. Each town had its own issues, but it would be essential to make sure that people used the facilities in their town so that they did not end up as dormitories.

Councillor Yates supported this view, adding that it would also require businesses and organisations to buy into the commitment, with contributions being made by all parties. Mr James said that trying to get retailers to attend forums was like trying to herd cats but he agreed that it needed to be a team effort. The Chairman said it would also be important to show that the Working Party was more than just a talking shop.

Councillor Ambrose Smith asked if businesses would have their hands tied because of the Conservation Areas. Councillor Yates believed not, saying that it was part of keeping the character of a town centre, however there was a problem attracting larger retailers to Ely because of the small floor space in some premises. Councillor Aitchison concurred, adding that it could be difficult to update shops when they were located in the Conservation Area.

Councillor Palmer enquired whether floor space was hampering people in Soham, and Mr James replied that it was nothing insurmountable. The smaller shops were quite quirky but the bigger the space available, the bigger the retailer. Smaller premises could be knocked through to increase floor space; it was about creating a need which needed to be harnessed. He thought that a proper retail expert should be brought in to look at the demographics. It would be essential to ensure that the flow of traffic and footfall was reinvigorated, and a retail expert could use the information from the Masterplans to help bring the economy together. Councillor Palmer reiterated that the District Council had to be very wary when spending taxpayer's money. The Working Party then discussed a number of ways in which they could obtain the necessary information. A number of options were put forward and it was duly agreed that Shirley Blake and Doug Perkins should contact St Edmundsbury Borough and Huntingdonshire District Councils to arrange for the Working Party to pay a visit to Bury St Edmunds and Huntingdon and speak to relevant officers from those Authorities.

The Working Party also agreed that it would be useful for a retail consultant to come and address them; Mr James said he would investigate this.

17. **TOWN CENTRE PROJECT UPDATES**

The Principal Sustainable Development Officer gave a verbal update on the Town Centre projects:

- As of September the “Absolutely” bus service had had some of its routes slightly tweaked; some buses now stopped at Ely Railway Station, and Kingfisher Drive had been incorporated into one of the routes. It was now possible to purchase a combined rail and bus ticket.

Councillor Palmer asked for details regarding the cost of funding the service and the levels of passenger usage. The Principal Sustainable Development Officer said she could provide him with the figures. Funding would decrease over three years and then move onto a contract basis, but the aim was for the service was to be self sufficient.

- With regard to the Traffic & Environment Study, it was noted that Jane Thompson, ECDC’s Infrastructure Programme Manager, had reported the consultant’s results to the last meeting of the Development & Transport Committee. As a result it had been agreed that there was to be a shorter list of projects, more work with the City of Ely County Council, and further consultation.

Councillor Yates added that the City Council had discussed the Study and agreed that Forehill should be given priority. A Working Party would be set up to deal with this.

18. **TOWN CENTRE ECONOMIES – PRESENTATION**

At the invitation of the Chairman, Doug Perkins, Economic Development Officer, gave a presentation on town centre economies and made comment under the following headings:

- National Retail Overview – the issues discussed included vacancy rates, loss of shops, rise of internet shopping, Smartphones and 4G, and retail hierarchy;
- District Wide Comparison – there was less than 10% retention of bulky goods expenditure, an opportunity for significant “clawback”, and a projected need for 6,373 sqm of additional comparison floorspace to 2031;
- Breakdown – East Cambs Comparison Expenditure 2011 – the pie chart showed that 72% of non food expenditure went outside the District.
- East Cambs Comparison/Bulky Goods Expenditure 2011 – These two slides showed the amount of expenditure that was leaving East Cambridgeshire, both in terms of monetary value and by percentage.
- District Wide Convenience – there was a high retention rate indicating that people preferred to shop for food close to home. There was a need to safeguard the town centre convenience offer because retail centres outside the District posed strong competition.
- Ely – Strengths – Ely was a primary district comparison/convenience destination, with the added attraction of tourism. The City received 1.5 million tourist visitors each year. Vacancy rates were low and vacant premises tended to be taken up quite quickly.

- Ely – Weaknesses – Ely had a high churn rate, with one of the main issues being lack of space, both in terms of larger retail floorplates to meet national multiple requirements, and city centre business floorspace. There was also pressure for out of town retail development.
- Soham – Strengths – Soham was a local centre with a strong independent sector and an above average town centre convenience offer. Opportunity sites and redevelopment of the railway station had been flagged up as part of the Masterplan process.
- Soham – Weaknesses – The town had a high churn rate, with few national multiples and a lack of external demand for units. The linear layout of the town was also a disadvantage.
- Littleport – Strengths – Littleport had a strong independent sector, with edge of centre units, a low vacancy rate and stable rents.
- Littleport – Weaknesses – The town suffered from a lack of national multiples, limited footfall, and a low demand for units. There was also limited comparison offer and over-representation of hot food takeaways (A5 use class). It was considered that the town centre was being propped up by health and beauty premises and takeaways, and it was unfortunate that some shops had been converted to dwellings.

On behalf of the Working Party, Councillor Yates thanked the Economic Development Officer for a very concise presentation.

19. **LOCAL PLAN – TOWN CENTRE STRATEGIES**

At the invitation of the Chairman, Sarah Ratcliffe, Forward Planning Officer, addressed the Working Party regarding the initial working draft policies relating to Ely and Soham, which had been circulated prior to the meeting.

With regard to the draft retail strategy, it was noted that there was a proposed change for the policy in Ely. It was suggested that the primary frontage be extended all the way along Market Street and down Forehill, incorporating all the alleyways. The Council's vision was for the city centre to be expanded and improved, offering opportunities to bring additional people in, encouraging a more lively evening economy as well as a more viable retail offer.

Councillor Yates said the City Council wanted the economy to reach down as far as the riverside because, at present, this area was disconnected from the city centre. Councillor Palmer observed that the bottom of Forehill and down to the river was mainly residential, with only a couple of businesses located there. Councillor Burton responded by saying that this area was part of the tourist trail and had heritage buildings.

It was noted that Soham's town centre appeared to be underperforming given the population of the town and its catchment area. Footfall was relatively low and the turnover of retail units was high. Regeneration would require action on a number of levels, and from a variety of sources. The Town Council would continue to play a leading role in the process, and in helping to co-ordinate local action. The recent establishment of a new Soham Town Team should also help to focus community efforts and make changes.

The Forward Planning Officer said that she would be happy for the Working Party members to send her their comments and asked that they do so before 6th November.

Councillor Ambrose Smith expressed concern that everything seemed to be focussed on Ely, and it should be remembered that Littleport too had its own waterfront problems. Councillor Palmer suggested that the Working Party could have a meeting to specifically discuss Littleport in detail, and the Forward Planning Officer informed Members that a draft policy for Littleport was being worked on.

20. **BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICTS**

The Working Party received a report which provided information on the opportunities offered by a potential Business Improvement District (BID) within East Cambridgeshire.

The Economic Development Officer explained that a BID was an arrangement whereby businesses got together, decided what additional improvements they would like to see in their area, how they were going to manage and deliver those improvements, and what it would cost. This formed the basis of a business plan that was then voted on by all those who would have to pay as part of the BID.

Once projects and services had been agreed by businesses, they were costed up on a pro rata basis to each business; this was the "BID Levy".

It was reiterated that BID money could only carry out projects and services that were additional to those that public agencies had to provide; it could not provide funding for things already in place.

The BID business plan should set out specific key performance indicators in order to allow the BID Board to monitor performance and inform contributing members of progress on a regular basis. A successful BID held a mandate for a maximum of 5 years after which businesses had to be balloted again with a new Business Plan.

Members noted that the BID process could take anywhere between 12 and 18 months, and depending on the level of support involved, the finance needed could range from anything between £15,000 - £50,000.

The Economic Development Officer drew Members' attention to section 4 of the report which set out the findings of initial feasibility modelling of town centre rateable values with an overview of the approximate funding that could be raised from individual, joint and District-wide BIDs. Paragraph 4.2 of the report set out the pro's and cons for each model and paragraph 4.3 gave an indication of the annual levy that could be raised from across the study area if a percentage based levy was applied.

The Working Party also noted that there were a number of issues that needed to be kept in mind:

- Any final BID levy amount, and consequently the unit amount a business might pay, would be determined by what projects were proposed;
- Further detailed analysis and cross checking of the non domestic rating list would need to be completed for any proposed BID within the study area; and

- It might be prudent to make exempt from payment of any proposed levy those with very low rateable values, as administratively it might be more expensive to collect than the benefit achieved. However it should be noted that those who were exempt would not be entitled to a vote in any BID process.

During the course of discussion Mr James said he believed that it would be better to have a District-wide BID, and time was of the essence. Councillor Yates agreed but made the point that there was a reluctance to spend money and the Working Party should have no illusions about this.

Councillor Palmer supported Mr James' view regarding a District-wide BID, but said it should be recognised that the needs of Littleport were greater than anywhere else. Mr James replied that any BID levy money raised by Littleport should be ringfenced for use in the town.

Councillor Yates stated that Ely had already been pursuing some aspects of the BID process, but everything came back to the question "Is this worthwhile?" He wished to see a paper go to the next Forum meeting setting out all the details so that the Ely businesses could decide whether or not the matter was worth pursuing.

The Principal Sustainable Development Officer reminded Members that they would first need to have a plan of what they would spend the money on, they could not set the levy and then decide. She said that if Members were so minded, someone from Huntingdonshire District Council could be invited to come and give a presentation. The Chairman thought this to be a good idea. He wished to look at all three towns as an entirety, rather than one town being pitched against another.

It was duly agreed that the Principal Sustainable Development Officer should follow up with St Edmundsbury Borough Council regarding a potential visit to Bury St Edmunds, and that Mr James should contact a retail consultant with a view to him/her coming to talk to the Town Centres Working Party.

It was resolved:

That the information on BIDs be noted.

21. **FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS**

The Principal Sustainable Development Officer reminded Members that the next Working Party meeting was scheduled for 23rd January 2013. She suggested that the following items be included on the agenda:

- Someone from Huntingdonshire DC to attend the meeting;
- Tracey Harding, Team Leader Tourism & Town Centre Services, to give an update regarding the Town Forum;
- Getting the visions – retail/town centres focus and goals down on paper.

The meeting closed at 4.15pm.

