

## **BRIEFING NOTE –TOWN CENTRE INITIATIVES FOR EMPTY SHOPS**

The Chair and the vice-Chair of the Economic Development and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee met with Officers on 6<sup>th</sup> September 2012 to discuss initiatives for empty town centre shops. A summary of the meeting follows:

- The Council is proactively promoting empty units. To Let boards are put in all empty units and are advertised on the Council website but only rarely advertised in the Sentinel due to the expense. The Council has endeavoured to create ties with Staffordshire and Keele universities. New ways of attracting tenants are needed.. It was questioned whether there is a website that is commonly used by business students – Officers would look into this.
- The Borough owned units within the town centre have a range of rent levels that are competitive. Furthermore, any unit with a rateable value of less than £6,000.00 a year does not pay business rates at the present time this is funding by central government.
- Lettings of industrial units are doing well; it is the letting of units in the town which are proving problematic. This is partly due to the current economic climate and that there are national issues with town centres.
- With the Police remaining in Newcastle and Staffordshire County Council bringing jobs to Newcastle by relocating to the Civic Offices, this means more people in the Town at lunchtime.
- Pop-up trading was noted as a new and innovative way to trade.
- Councillor Taylor is to be on the board of the Town Centre Partnership and it was agreed that the smaller businesses within the town needed to develop a stronger association and be more united. In Stafford there is a £99.00 per year fee for businesses within the town centre partnership. It was noted that for all of the town centre businesses combined this would be a significant sum.
- The vice-Chair would like to see more creative industries that are different from what is provided by out of town retail and questioned whether there was a sector of companies who the Council wanted to attract to the town centre. The Council would welcome and want to attract anybody who would like to come to the town centre. However, the Council would like to see entrepreneurs and graduates setting up business within Newcastle Town Centre.
- Officers pointed out that when the former St Giles and St Georges school site was purchased the intention was to have incubator units for design and creative arts. However, now Advantage West Midlands is no longer in existence the funding for these incubator units has gone.

- Officers highlighted the Strategic Investment Framework (SIF) -a copy of which is attached which is a previously developed vision for the town centre. The SIF resulted in the fledgling events programme and the town centre partnership being established. However, there is little funding at the present time for other projects.
- Newcastle is the most attractive town centre in the local area and has the best potential which needs to be made the most of. Newcastle town centre is a great setting for small independent businesses. It was noted that the former Sainsburys site would be perfect to cater for larger businesses that can't be accommodated in existing units. A strategy is being developed to attract developers for the former Sainsburys site. It was agreed that there were not enough big names in Newcastle and the former Sainsburys site could be a significant shopping development with big names to attract people to the town centre. Officers confirmed that when asked through surveys, the public want to see a department store in the town. It was noted that ladies fashion provision needs to be improved within the town. Furthermore, the Sainsburys site is central to the town.
- There is no mid-week night-time trade in Newcastle. Businesses need to work together to stage events. The town centre has a bad reputation for the evenings that is perhaps not justified. Newcastle has the potential to have a good night-time economy – there is potential for success.
- It was suggested that residents and businesses could put on their own events.
- It was noted that 'vintage' was currently very popular and this was something that could be taken forward.
- It was felt that an improved events programme was key. Councillor Taylor indicated that there are performers who would be happy to perform in the Town Centre. The bandstand in the Queen's gardens could be utilised for this purpose. Once the Town Centre Manager is in place they could organise these events.
- The question was raised whether the idea of living in the town could be incentivised and rooms above shops be used for accommodation. Officers noted that this week the Government has changed planning regulations to allow change of use to two dwellings above shops without planning permission. However, independent access to the upper floors of shops is an issue. If accommodation could be provided above shops it would create a community in the town to spend money in the Town Centre. Residential planning permission has been granted on the former Titleys and Zanzibar sites, but the planning permissions had not been implemented due to lack of demand for the accommodation.
- Properties within the town centre conservation area have benefited from shop front grants that consist of partly Borough Council and partly English

Heritage funding. These grants bring buildings within the conservation area either back into use or rejuvenate them.

- The discussion progressed to the market stalls. Officers confirmed that the market more than covers its costs. The town centre market is protected by market rights. Again, Officers are more than happy to receive new ideas regarding improving the market. The possibility of car boot sales on the Midway has been investigated but could not be taken forward due to the Fire Safety Officer not approving with the plans. The market is going to be refurbished and the intention is that the market stalls will trade outwards towards the shops. Food stalls are doing well. Newcastle's market is well known and is advertised regularly.
- The pedestrianisation of Hassell Street should produce a better market. The daytime taxi rank will move to outside Brassingtons and there will be larger market stalls facing outwards towards the shops by NatWest. The aim is to concentrate on where people walk. There will be market pitches on Hassell Street and there is scope for new traders which will be advertised. It was questioned whether the market could once again extend onto the Ironmarket. The problem however is that vehicular access is permitted on the Ironmarket up to 10am. It could however be included in a second phase of improvements for the market.

In conclusion:

- The town centre needs to be considered strategically and for the long term. It was noted that if fuel prices continue to rise, then people will want to come to their local town centre. There are initiatives that the Chair and vice-Chair weren't aware of and they felt that there were lots of good initiatives in place.
- Officers emphasised that these are unprecedented times and they would listen to any new ideas. They want to attract entrepreneurs with business drive, business acumen and determination.
- Newcastle Borough Council is doing well considering the resources available. Jobs have been brought back to the town and businesses are supported.
- Please find the documents considered at the meeting attached.