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SCRUTINY REVIEW PANEL - DISTRICT AND LOCAL CENTRES - BEST PRACTICE AND BUILDING UPON IT

Meeting: 4 November 2024
At: 6.00 pm

PRESENT

Councillor James Frizzell (Chair) in the chair; Councillors Jake Austin, Micheala Meikle, Dena Ryness and Matt Wynne.

1 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 17 September 2024 were agreed as a correct record.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillors and officers were invited to declare any interests they had in any of the items on the agenda for the meeting.

No declarations of interest were made.

3 UPDATE FROM PANEL MEMBERS ON DISTRICT CENTRE VISITS

The Panel received updates from members who carried out visits to district centres. The aim of the questionnaire was to seek the views of local business owners to inform the review on best practice, and whether work could be replicated to support the vibrancy of other district or local centres.

The following feedback was given in relation to each of the questions put to local business owners in several district centre locations:

1. a) *Have you noticed any positive changes or improvements to this district centre over the past couple of years?*
 - It was reported that in Houldsworth Square (Reddish district centre) that the responses to this question were 'yes', given the noticeable increase in events in the district centre. It was felt that business owners had great pride in their shopfronts, and were making them bright, attractive and colourful. Shutter Art had brightened up the centre, making it livelier. Planters were well-received and occupancy rates appeared to be good.
 - Positive news was reported from Cheadle district centre, although this did not seem to be linked to changes being made. It was noted that local events and markets helped with footfall and presentation of the area.
 - There was a strong feeling that the holding of events helped district centres a great deal.
 - Similar findings had been reported for Hazel Grove in relation to events and markets having a positive impact on the district centre. However, it was felt that heavy traffic impacted the district centre given the A6 running directly through the centre. When Commercial Road was turned into an event space, this had a positive effect on the

district centre and further increased footfall. However, footfall was not always translated further along the district centre, given the nature of its geography. Larger events like the Hazel Grove Festival was an exception to this, and the whole district centre appeared to be lively on this occasion. It was noted that some vacant properties were derelict.

b) What could be better?

- In one district centre, mixed views were reported in response to this question, with no consistency in responses. A concern was raised in relation to anti-social behaviour, although this appeared to be as a result of a specific issue and impacted how safe the business owner felt being in the shop. A further concern was raised in relation to vandalism and the cost of repairs via service charge. It was felt that there could be a larger variety of businesses in the centre, including a gym, a bank, somewhere to buy vegetables and a halal meat shop. Some restaurants had closed, whilst others had opened. It was also felt that things were expensive, and rents were high; landlords had recently raised rent and electricity costs.
- There were further reports about a lack of variety in type of shops e.g., too many nail bars. In some areas, low rents enabled an influx of shops able to take advantage of these lower rents, even though the shops generally had a lower footfall. It was noted that another local authority in the south of England wanted to increase rent to enable a larger variety of shops within an area.
- It was felt that spaces could be cleaner, so that businesses on corners could make better use of the spaces outside their shops.
- It was felt that more regular events could take place in Reddish district centre e.g., a monthly market, a Saturday market, or a smaller version of 'Foodie Friday'. A 20mph limit was established in the district centre and it was felt that signage for the speed limit could be clearer and more priority could be given to pedestrians e.g., less waiting for pedestrians at traffic lights. It was also felt that more parking provision should be available, but no suggestion was given as to where this could be located. Further, that communication from the council to business owners could be improved. It was noted that the district centre only had independent shops, and that having some branded chain shops could help to draw more people to the district centre. It was reported that business rate support was due to come to an end, and that this should be continued.

2. Is there anything in particular that makes this district centre special/different to others?

- It was felt that Cheadle district centre had an upmarket feel to it, and that local events in Cheadle and Gatley were positive, brought footfall to the area, made people want to visit the centre and gave people a sense of pride in the district centre.
- The clock was an important part of the heritage of Reddish district centre; it was the focal point for the centre and events tended to be held in this space. It was suggested that holding an event specific to the clock could bring a greater sense of community e.g., installing a sign detailing the history of the clock. It was felt that businesses communicated well with each other in the district centre.
- Large events held locally e.g., in Torkington Park, supported a higher footfall than usual in Hazel Grove district centre. It was felt that the main road increased footfall in the district centre, but also led to traffic and leaving the district centre feeling unattractive. Businesses reported feeling a good sense of community in the district centre.

3. *Do you feel as though the cost-of-living crisis has impacted the district centre?*

- All business owners in Cheadle district centre reported 'yes' to this question, as to how they elaborated on their response appeared to depend on their type of business. Businesses that provided a service reported that their suppliers had put up prices, which had led to their own prices needing to be increased. Businesses selling non-essential luxury items had noticed a difference in footfall and spending.
- It was reported that people were buying more goods from charity shops and social supermarkets in Reddish district centre, and again, spending less on non-essential luxury items. It was felt that customers were worried about spending money, and lacked confidence about what the future might bring. Businesses were putting on more offers to try and attract a higher footfall. It was also felt that local supermarkets had had a lasting impact in relation to drawing footfall away from the district centre.
- Business owners in Hazel Grove reported similar concerns, with their costs increasing, in turn increasing costs to the customer. This was felt across the district centre as a whole, with a sense of churn and instability in the district centre.

4. *Is there anything you have seen in other district or local centres in the borough or elsewhere that you would like to see replicated in this district centre?*

- In Hazel Grove, businesses largely focussed on the need for green space, as they felt that this was limited in the district centre. Flowerpots had helped some of the side streets to be greener. Overall, businesses owners wanted to be able to use outdoor space and felt that other district centres benefitted from more outdoor green space.
- Business owners in Cheadle were positive about the district centre as it was. One business owner suggested that Altrincham indoor market had greatly improved the feel of Altrincham town, giving it a new lease of life, and that lessons could be learnt from this particular market.
- It was felt that Reddish district centre could be improved with more bars and restaurants, monthly markets, Saturday markets and more regular events. The Worker Bee Market in Broadstone Mill was very popular, but too far away from Houldsworth Square to attract more people into the square itself. It was also felt that the centre could benefit from more use of colour, and that local groups could be involved in the design. It was suggested that a Christmas tree competition for businesses could foster a sense of community in the district centre, and that this is a popular competition used in Wilmslow district centre. Businesses decorate in line with a theme relating to their business and the competition is judged by members of the public, including children.

5. *Do you know how to contact the council if you have an issue or question?*

- Businesses in Hazel Grove felt that they knew how to contact the council but would appreciate more engagement from the council. A number of businesses were involved in the local vision group and felt positive about this engagement. It was felt that, sometimes, it could be difficult to get the answer they wanted easily when contacting the council, and that it would be beneficial if officers were on hand to answers any questions they may have.

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- Business owners in Cheadle agreed that they knew how to contact the council, and they felt that there was 'someone at the end of the phone.'
- Similar findings were reported from Reddish district centre. Many businesses would type their questions in a search engine online or contact their local councillors for answers. They felt that navigating the council's website was easy. The idea of a business information portal was well-received.

The following other key points were highlighted:

- It was noted that District Centre Managers were working with local business owners in Marple to address thefts in the district centre, which had been a cause for concern. It was also noted that planters had had a positive impact in the district centre.
- A bakery had recently opened in Bramhall district centre and the panel were interested to know how the bakery would be received.
- It was reported that other councils had established design guides for their district centres, and it was suggested that these could be considered to help make Stockport's district centre areas more cohesive. It was felt that an equivalent to the Town Centre Residential Design Guide would support district centres.

RESOLVED – That the update be noted.

4 PROPOSED QUESTIONS TO LOCAL CENTRE BUSINESS OWNERS

As part of the evidence-gathering phase of the review, members planned to speak to local centre business owners between the 4 November 2024 and 11 December 2024 meetings of the Panel.

The suggested questions contained in the supplementary agenda were noted.

5 EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE

The report outlined an approach to collating best practice from other local authority areas.

The following comments were made/issues raised:

- It was reported that the Institute of Place Management used Stockport as a best practice example to other local authorities, namely, its use of District Centre Managers.
- It was noted that Whitby was a vibrant town that held many events throughout the year and had thriving independent businesses. It was suggested that Whitby be reviewed as an example of best practice.
- The topic of district centres was a regular focus of the Scrutiny Committee, demonstrating its importance. Good work was going on to support the vibrancy of Stockport's district centres, but it was felt that perhaps the recurring nature of the topic indicated that there was more work to be done. It was felt that the speed of changes to district centre improvements was frustrating. Having the District Centre Managers in post, and their role as medium between the council, members, members of the public and important stakeholders, was reportedly the best decision made by the council thus far in its work to support district centres. It was felt that the District Centre Managers

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had a small budget of £5,000 per annum to support the work in district centres, which hindered their progress. It was reported the Edgeley district centre was quite 'hemmed in' by virtue of its location, and there wasn't much outside space for local business owners to utilise. It was felt that a joined-up strategy for Edgeley would attract more businesses and further support the district centre as a whole. Further, that collaborative working between council departments would relieve the pressure on local ward councillors to progress priorities and work important to the district centre. It was reported that Withington, Manchester, had received UK Shared Prosperity Funding as a result of the council's strategy for the area. Members agreed that further funding was needed to support the vibrancy of district centres, and that strategies would support bids for funding.

- Members agreed that the district centre visits had helped them to build important connections with local businesses owners.

The Panel agreed that:

- a) Councillors James Frizzell, Jake Austin, and Micheala Meikle be involved in best practice meetings with other Local Authority areas; and
- b) that Whitby local authority area be explored as an example of best practice.

The meeting closed at 7.11 pm