

EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL COMMITTEE MINUTES

Committee: Local High Streets Task & Finish Panel **Date:** 24 February 2020

Place: Committee Room 2, Civic Offices, High Street, Epping **Time:** 7.00 - 8.10 pm

Members Present: J Share-Bernia (Chairman), R Jennings, J Jennings, H Kauffman, P Keska, D Plummer, S Rackham, C Roberts and J H Whitehouse

Other Councillors: N Bedford and H Whitbread

Apologies: H Kane

Officers Present: M Chwiedz (Senior Project Manager), J Houston (Strategic Partnership Specialist and Economic Lead) and G Woodhall (Democratic & Electoral Services Officer)

1. CHAIRMAN & APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIRMAN

The Panel noted that Cllr J Share-Bernia had been appointed as the Chairman by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

The Chairman requested nominations for the position of Vice-Chairman, as the Overview & Scrutiny Committee had delegated authority to the Panel to appoint its own Vice-Chairman. Two nominations were proposed and seconded: Cllr J Jennings; and Cllr S Rackham.

Resolved:

- (1) That Cllr J Jennings be appointed as Vice-Chairman for the Panel.

2. TERMS OF REFERENCE

The Panel noted its Terms of Reference, as agreed by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee at its meeting held on 28 January 2020.

3. WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2019/20

The Panel noted its Work Programme for 2019/20, as agreed by the Overview & Scrutiny Committee at its meeting on 28 January 2020.

4. UPDATE REPORT TO THE LOCAL HIGH STREETS TASK & FINISH PANEL

The Task & Finish Panel received a presentation on the evidence pack for local high streets from J Houston and M Chwiedz.

J Houston reassured the Panel that the full evidence pack would be available for Members before the next meeting, and an on-line survey was being developed to complement the on-street surveys being undertaken, which could be sent to local Town and Parish Councils if the Panel wished. There was concern at a national level about the impact of online retailing on high streets, but the high street vacancy rates within the District were generally better than the national picture. However, it was emphasised that footfall was critical in maintaining the vibrancy of local high streets, including the social interactive element that was not available on line. Officers welcomed any suggestions or questions from Members.

In response to a number of questions from Members, J Houston and M Chwiedz stated that surveying shopkeepers would be considered, and information would be sought regarding the current levels of business rates being levied. Data was being obtained regarding the number of shops that had closed in the last year, and a high turnover of retail units was being seen in some areas. The two biggest high street growth sectors in the District were currently Vaping shops and Turkish Barbers. In addition to surveying local shopkeepers, the Panel could also hear evidence from other partners, such as the local Chamber of Commerce.

Cllr J H Whitehouse stated that shopkeepers in Epping had voiced concerns about the cost and availability of car parking in the town, and Cllr D Plummer also highlighted the large increase for car parking fees for Waltham Abbey, which was exasperated by poor public transport in the area. There were currently not many stalls in Waltham Abbey Market, but the pop-up shops in the empty retail units were usually good. Cllr J H Whitehouse also enquired about the effect of rental levels for retail units on the high streets and who also owned all of the retail units. J Houston stated that the Council had more information regarding rental levels and ownership in some areas, such as The Broadway in Loughton. However, every high street in the District was subtly different so one common approach would not necessarily work equally well in the six centres.

Cllr H Kauffman informed the Panel that if the rateable value of the unit was less than £15,000 then no business rates would be levied, and charity shops would only pay 20% of their business rate charge anyway. The Councillor felt that heritage retail units performed better than non-heritage units, and that a strategy for the owners of the retail units was required to encourage longer-term rental of units within the District. The Councillor would like to see each high street in the District ranked from the worst performing to the best performing, and enquired if there was a separate budget for this work which could be used to fund surveys that would garner a better response.

J Houston stated that it might be possible to rank the different high streets as the work progressed, which could include a 'stress test' for each high street. It was acknowledged that if a particular high street had some character then it generally was more successful.

Cllr R Jennings recommended that Members of the Panel should watch the recent Panorama programme on high streets on BBC iPlayer. It featured Southend in Essex, and how they were using former large shop units which were now empty for multiple uses – including community uses. It would be useful for the Panel to learn what measures had worked and what measures had not worked in other areas.

Cllr P Keska reminded the Panel that Business Rates were not levied on a sliding scale: if the rateable value was £15,001 then the full business rates would be levied. In relation to car parking fees, the Councillor felt that the fees should be tailored to each location. With regards to Ongar, the closure of the bank forced many residents

to go elsewhere to do their banking which in turn meant that they were more likely to use the shops there instead of in Ongar. The Sainsbury store was the only main retail outlet left in Ongar now, the rest of the retail units were either cafes, nail bars or restaurants. J Houston countered that it was the availability of car parking, as well as the cost, which was an important issue for high streets and that the Panel should not forget that high streets have always evolved throughout history. It was acknowledged that a SWOT analysis of each high street would be useful.

The Panel was keen to examine some age specific data for the local high streets, as it was highlighted that Loughton Shopping Park was constructed to keep a greater proportion of the younger retail spend within the District. Cllr H Kauffman commented that if the amount of retail space within the District was known, and where it was, then the demographics within each catchment area could be analysed. Cllr J H Whitehouse also highlighted the continued closure of public toilet facilities, and that not every shop was signed up to the various community toilet schemes (whereby shops allowed people to use their toilet facilities without obligation), was an issue as well.

J Houston reiterated that any suggestions or measures to improve the offering of the high streets within the District were valuable and important. For example, market day in Epping always attracted shoppers into the town as the coffee shops were always full on a Monday! However, Officers were also looking to future shoppers hence the consultation exercise with members of the Youth Council. M Chwiedz added that the Youth Council had praised the retail offering in Loughton, but not the retail offering in Waltham Abbey or Ongar.

Cllr D Plumber highlighted that the town centre in Waltham Abbey was pedestrianised and there were no coffee shops chains there either. The Market Square was very attractive, but it needed a vibrant market to occupy it. Cllr R Jennings pointed out there was a perception that car parking did not attract shoppers, yet every shop keeper wanted free car parking in their high street! The Councillor felt that the retail choice offered by the high street was probably more important, as illustrated by the perception of Loughton in comparison to Waltham Abbey – although Loughton did have an automated toilet facility in the High Road. Cllr J Share-Bernia also stated that some people preferred small village-like high streets to the more monolithic Westfield or Lakeside type shopping centres. J Houston added that the night-time economy was also important to high streets.

Cllr H Whitbread added that the John Lewis store was the anchor for the shopping centre in Chelmsford, and enquired how could such anchor stores be attracted to the high streets in the District. J Houston agreed that stores such as John Lewis or Waitrose had traditionally been anchor outlets for shopping centres, which the District should be able to attract, but these businesses were beginning to direct more of their sales to online channels. 'Pop-Up' shops in empty retail units performed a useful function in making a high street seem more vibrant and exciting to draw people in, but the Panel should not forget the growing importance of tourism to the vitality of our local high streets.

Cllr N Bedford suggested that the local Epping Forest Chamber of Commerce could offer free membership to small local shops, instead of the usual membership fee of £50 per annum for small businesses. In addition, the Councillor suggested that local shops could offer price-matching, whereby they offered to match the prices available on the internet. Cllr S Rackham emphasised the importance of The Only Way Is Essex (TOWIE) tours in Brentwood, where the tourists would use and spend money in the same hairdressers and public houses seen in the television programme.

Cllr D Plumber drew the Panel's attention to the fact that there were two large hotels outside Waltham Abbey, but none in the centre of the town. Cllr J Share-Bernia added that Travelodge had recently announced they were planning to open up to 200 new hotels in the London area. J Houston acknowledged that people were staying in suburban hotels to explore London as it was cheaper than staying in a city centre hotel; this could also be an opportunity for the District as the current overnight spend within the District was very low.

Cllr H Kauffman felt that the main centres within the District needed more core businesses to encourage footfall in the high streets at lunchtimes, and was unhappy with the recent proposals for the Gunpowder Mills in Waltham Abbey to adopt more of a theme park approach. Cllr P Keska also highlighted the number of former business centres that had been converted into residential accommodation following the worldwide economic downturn in 2008.

J Houston concluded the meeting by recounting the example of Leeds City Council, who had moved all of their staff to cheaper premises outside the city centre. However, this was found to have such a negative effect on the retail shops within the city centre that the Council was bringing its staff back to the city centre. J Houston also opined that superfast broadband also needed to be offered in the District's high streets as well. The Panel was thanked for their comments and suggestions, all of which would be examined.

Resolved:

- (1) That the presentation given by Officers on the evidence pack for local high streets be noted.

5. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

The Panel noted that there had been no other urgent business received for consideration following the publication of the agenda.

6. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The Panel noted that future meetings of the Panel would be held at 7.00pm on the following dates:

- Thursday 19 March 2020;
- Wednesday 15 April 2020; and
- Thursday 14 May 2020.

CHAIRMAN