

Waltham Abbey Regeneration Study and Proposals

“The most successful high streets and town centres will need to change to reflect the communities they serve by transforming themselves into community hubs, playing to their strengths of offering human interaction and a unique sense of place and community”

HM Government response to an enquiry into High Streets and Town Centres in 2030 (presented to Parliament in 2019)



Prepared by: **Paul Messenger**
Studio 3 Ltd
Email: pm@studio-3.co.uk

Date: **26 October 2020**

Contents	Pages
Foreword	3
Introduction	4
1. Town Management	5-6
1.1 Town Centre Leadership	
1.2 Town(s) Centre Manager	
1.3 Establishment of a Town Team	
1.4 High Street Chamber of Commerce	
1.5 Attracting New Businesses and Brands	
2. Town Offer	7-11
2.1 The High Street: Sun Street and Market Square	
2.2 Market Square	
2.3 Shops	
2.4 Waltham Abbey Market	
2.5 The Library, Museum and Old Police Station	
2.6 Tourist Destination	
2.7 Waltham Abbey Community Hub	
2.8 Love Waltham Abbey Residents Card	
2.9 Public Facilities	
3. Appearance	11-12
3.1 Shop Fronts	
3.2 Trees and Planters	
3.3 A Boards	
4. Access	12-15
4.1 Pedestrianisation	
4.2 Cycling	
4.3 Buses	
4.4 Parking	
4.5 Town Curfew	
4.6 Wi-fi and Digital Presence	
5. Consultation	15-16
5.1 Market Research	
5.2 Discounted ideas and thoughts	
5.3 Sources of Additional Support	
6. Action List	17
Appendix 1 – Bronze, Silver and Gold list proposed by Paula Maginnis	
Appendix 2 – Waltham Abbey Town Appraisal by Paul Messenger 15/09/2020	
Appendix 3 - Retailer Consultation	

Foreword

Epping Forest District Council are reviewing a number of their town centres with the objective of regenerating them and making them a better and more attractive place to live, work, visit and play. There have been numerous projects over the years to generally improve the amenities, however the UK as a whole is now in the midst of a new era which will undoubtedly change high streets up and down the country. Covid 19 has unexpectedly changed the way we live and also as a result, our relationship with our local high street and/or town centre. More people are now shopping locally and more people are working from home, which in turn is encouraging them to use their local amenities on a more regular basis. The Grimsey Review advises that high streets need to be re-invented as unique community hubs, designed around health, education, culture, housing, leisure and arts and crafts, along with retail shops. If towns can get it right, consumers should emerge from the pandemic with a stronger sense of community and a desire to support their local town centre. Strong high streets can build communities, keep crime at bay and foster civic pride and togetherness.

A YouGov poll revealed that only 9% of Britons want life to return to “normal” after the coronavirus outbreak is over. The positive from the above is that this is a great time to engage with our local communities and reinvent our town centres while the focus is on them and before things automatically revert to the “old” normal.

The Grimsey Review goes on to advise that for town centres and high streets to thrive and rediscover their community purpose we need to see:

- 1) Localism - A massive shift in power to local communities and a renewed focus on localism. Local people must be empowered to redesign their own high streets and have a say on the businesses, services and amenities that occupy it.
- 2) Leadership - Local leaders should be valued and recognised. Candidates for leadership roles should be selected for having a broad range of dynamic and collaborative skills in order to get the best out of communities. Local leaders who embrace change and are brave enough to imagine a new world have a better chance of succeeding.
- 3) Fewer cars, more green spaces - fewer streets and a huge expansion of green space, parks and town squares. Our towns must no longer be designed around the car as people learn to appreciate the benefit of open spaces.

Other important takeaways from the Grimsey Review that should be considered is the fact that there is a growing view among young adults that businesses need to be accountable to more than their bottom line and for the wellbeing of people and communities. It goes on to confirm that 72% of millennials (aged 24 to 38) would rather spend their money on an experience or an event than buying things and that this is reflected in the shift towards leisure, arts, culture and dining on the high streets. Deloitte’s 2019 Millennial Survey showed that millennials will patronise and support companies that align with their values and make a positive impact on society. Generation Z’s (aged 5 to 23) are also socially focussed with their opinions on companies formed by their ethics, practices and social impact.

The Grimsey Review confirms that town and high street plans should put sustainability and the environment at the heart of everything; should base their development on quality of life and experiences and not blind mass consumerism; should recognise and reward great local leadership; and allow local communities to develop their places to compete for people to live, work, visit and play.

Introduction

Waltham Abbey is a great town to develop for the future and adapt to the changing needs mentioned above. It already has a superb town centre and market square and an abundance of green spaces. The town just needs to be remodelled around the community to make a more vibrant and relative space and its residents and businesses encouraged and empowered to make the transformation into a town they can be proud of. Success is about breathing life back into Sun Street and Market Square, about giving consumers other reasons to visit the town centre other than just the shops and making the experience enriching and the town centre a place to be seen in.

Waltham Abbey has the second largest population of any of the towns governed by Epping Forest District Council and as such deserves due recognition and attention. Waltham Abbey isn't a town that you would visit or pass through unless you were going to a specific destination within it. Although it is accepted that Waltham Abbey is seen as a tourist destination which undoubtedly adds to the local economy, there is little within the town which would encourage people to stay there and more importantly, spend money, beyond seeing specific attractions.

As a result, it is felt that the emphasis should be very much on developing a town in the first instance for residents and businesses. This regeneration and renewed enthusiasm in the town will result in a town centre that local people can be proud of with a brighter more buoyant market, new shops and a range of interesting activities and events. This in turn will provide for a more interesting place for visitors and tourists and a place where they will be happy to dwell and frequent more of the town's shops, businesses and attractions. The other benefit is that the town will also become more attractive for people looking to move to the area, which in turn will increase the local economy.

So, how do we go about it?

1. Town Management

1.1 Town Centre Leadership

Town centre regeneration is about localism and local leadership and the way to make this work is to provide local leadership with its finger on the pulse and with a connection to the local community. Therefore, and accepting that this project is being driven by Epping Forest District Council, it is suggested that buy in, action and leadership should be provided by Waltham Abbey Town Council, with the support of a Town(s) Centre Manager appointed by the District Council.

All Town Councillors live in Waltham Abbey and as a result should be able to bring the local community and businesses together and develop a strong visionary plan to reinforce the distinctive heritage of the town and assist in making the town centre a real community hub. However, the role of an independent Town Centre Manager will be critical to provide professional expertise and an unbiased view on what is needed locally.

Recommendations:

- 1) Engage with Waltham Abbey Town Council (WATC)***
- 2) Obtain WATC commitment to the scheme and to providing leadership and support***
- 3) Work with WATC to establish and action a realistic plan***

1.2 Town(s) Centre Manager

It is suggested that the Council commits to the appointment of a Town Centre Manager initially on a two-year fixed term basis., initially to be based in Waltham Abbey. The manager would act as a single point of contact to receive ideas, thoughts and views from local stakeholders and as such, would be known and trusted by businesses, retailers and residents. They would work with the Town Council to ensure that standards are adhered to and that the town is as vibrant and attractive to local people and visitors as possible. A review of the post would be undertaken after 12 months to assess progress against the Town Centre action plan and the success of interventions and extended if necessary.

NB. As a part of their regeneration, Stockton-on-Tees council has pulled together a multi-disciplinary team of market management, street licensing, civil enforcement and business support to manage their town centre. Stockton is a much larger town than Waltham Abbey, however the principles of hands on organisation and management are much the same.

Recommendations:

- 4) Write Job profile and agree responsibilities for Town Centre Manager post***
- 5) Post to be part of EFDC Economic team within Strategic Planning Directorate***
- 6) Town Team establishment to be priority***

1.3 Establishment of a Town Team

To achieve the required changes, considerable two-way dialogue needs to be sought from the towns' residents and businesses. Buy-in from the community is important to ensure that there is a need or requirement for any proposed changes and that as a result these are carried out with the support of the town. Waltham Abbey already has a Town Partnership and it is thought that this could be used as a catalyst for pulling together a formal Town Team.

It is important that the Town Team is made up of a cross section of the community including residents, businesses and retailers. A fair representation of age, sex and race should be included and input should

be encouraged from organisations such as educational establishments, religious groups, social groups (e.g. Scouts etc) together with members of the town council and tourism & visitor groups.

The library/museum could be used to establish a community hub base and a place where public opinions could be shared and discussed and a centre of community well-being for the town.

Recommendations:

- 7) Decide with WATC the make up of a Town Team and what it will be called.**
- 8) If utilising current Town Partnership, engage with and obtain commitment and support from Chairman and current Town Partnership.**
- 9) Arrange initial meeting to establish parameters and put in place plan for town team development and action.**

1.4 High Street Chamber of Commerce

To develop the town centre retail offer and motivate and drive retailers, I would recommend the formation of a Chamber of Commerce. This would provide support to retailers, agree and advise on events and town centre services and pull together some enthusiasm for retailers to build and grow their businesses and make a constructive change to the retail environment.

Recommendations:

- 10) Test retailer appetite for town centre Chamber of Commerce – if positive response, arrange first meeting and agree perimeters.**

1.5 Attracting New Businesses and Brands

In conjunction with the Town Team, work could be done to identify key brands, businesses and/or other organisations to attract to the town and then steps taken to secure them.

Recommendations:

- 11) Put in place programme to encourage new businesses.**
- 12) Target prospective businesses.**
- 13) Communicate requirements to commercial agents.**

2. Town Offer

2.1 The High Street: Sun Street and Market Square

The interesting thing in Waltham Abbey is that unlike many other high streets up and down the country the retail units in Sun Street and Market Square are well occupied and have a vacancy rate of circa 5%, which is well under half of the national average. Further, having spoken to a local commercial agent, it is understood that the currently empty units have new tenants lined up and will be occupied shortly.

With the general opinion being that town centres should move away from being mainly retail and be made up with a larger combination of other components such as health, education, culture, housing, leisure, arts and crafts, this may be a worthwhile consideration in high streets where retail is dying but a little more difficult in high streets such as Waltham Abbey. Having said that, it is felt that Waltham Abbey lends itself nicely to becoming more of a community hub. Its layout provides an ideal spread of venues for a range of events and activities and there are properties available which could be used for a range of community activities including start-ups, pop ups, demonstrations, arts & crafts, shows etc.

2.2 Market Square

This is a large open space which other than on market days does no more than provide a free car park, mainly I understand, for retailers. In the short term at least, the gate should be fixed/replaced in order that the square is clear (this item is being attended to as a part of the “quick wins” mentioned above).

My suggestion in this space to add interest and take away from an empty square would be to erect covered structure in the middle. I have been informed by EFDC Museum Officers of the former existence of a medieval moot hall, which became a market hall and painted by Rowlandson in the early 1800s. This historic reference could form the basis of a new structure to be used as an exhibition/performance space and utilised by the market as a feeder into shop trading to diversify the offer. It would provide a focal point for the square providing some interest and would also provide a further venue to put on events and assist in achieving the towns objective of becoming a Community Hub.

Recommendations:

- 1) *Decide on viability of adding some form of covered structure to Market Square.***
- 2) *Instruct architect/designer and look at options and costings.***
- 3) *Build suitable choice.***

2.3 Shops

Waltham Abbey is a good high street from the point of view that it has a low retailer vacancy rate. It is considered that there is an issue however in respect of the type of shops available and their attractiveness from a visitor perspective. In general terms, 25% of the town centre is general retail, 24% are food and beverage and 19% hair and beauty. There is little in the way of branded shops from the larger chains, which in the current environment is why the town centre is generally buoyant.

My observation is that the general retail is more day to day and resident focussed, as is the hair and beauty offer. It would be nice if the general retail sector could attract more in the way of antique and curiosity shops, gift shops, art gallery's and perhaps boutiques and home interior type shops which would encourage more in the way of general interest and in turn browsing.

The food and beverage offer is limited in its range and attractiveness to visitors and there is little in the way of premium coffee shops, bars and restaurants which would prove attractive to both the local community and the visitor and tourist market.

Although it is hard to shape the type of tenants within the high street, perhaps through consultation and ongoing contact with the retailers, the existing businesses could be developed to offer innovative and distinctive food and also experiential and community-based services.

The good news is that at the current time people are tending to shop nearer to home and using their local town centres as opposed to going to the larger out of town shopping centres. Retailers should take advantage of this and go that extra mile to ensure a clean, safe and welcoming environment offering a comprehensive range of products and services. If customers can see the benefit of shopping local and enjoy it, they are less likely to change their habits when the pandemic is brought under control.

2.4 Waltham Abbey Market

The Grimsey Review highlighted the importance of markets and their positive effect on residents. In a report by the Institute of Place Management (2015) it explained why markets are economically,

socially and politically critical for town centres. The report also confirmed that markets can generate footfall increases of circa 25% and have been shown to increase retail sales with market visitors spending money in other shops. The report then goes on to explain that markets provide low barriers to entry and as result can encourage new businesses and nurture retail innovation.

Waltham Abbey has a great market history and still supports two markets per week – on Tuesday's and Saturday's. Although it's promoted through the Tourist Information as the "Historic Waltham Abbey Market", it is in fact disappointing and badly supported. On most days, it has less than ten stalls and is rather untidy with traders vans parked all around market square.

Talking to the Town Council and the Market Manager, it would appear that very little is done to develop the market and that little effort is made to attract and encourage new and more frequent traders. We know, from the success of North Weald market that, particularly in the current climate, markets are generally successful, well supported and attended. Waltham Abbey has an ideal market location in and around an accessible, spacious and attractive market square.

A busy and successful market will add to the attraction of Waltham Abbey as a destination, whilst at the same time providing additional footfall for other town retailers, attractions, services and facilities.

In addition to the general markets on Tuesdays and Saturdays, there's the opportunity to bring in speciality markets such as a farmers, french, italian, arts & crafts, antique markets etc.

Recommendations:

- 4) WATC to review town markets and make proposals for their development.***
- 5) Review market layout, pitches and parking arrangements for traders.***
- 6) Put in place a calendar of feature markets i.e. Farmers, antiques, French, Italian etc.***

2.5 The Library, Museum and Old Police Station

I have seen the plans for the Museum and Library and am fully on board with the idea behind it and the proposals being made. Although, from what I understand, the proposal for the purchase of the old police station have been discounted. I really think that this decision should be reviewed.

The purchase of the old police station would be a worthwhile community and council asset. It would ensure that the site be used for the benefit of the community whilst at the same time providing for an element of residential accommodation and an extension of the museum and library site. This unit could bring an additional area for regular town-based activities and community events and could also provide space for adhoc events, such as pop up food stalls, shops and businesses, art exhibitions, workshops etc – activities which support meaningful work, local trade, well-being and belonging.

Recommendations:

- 7) EFDC to purchase Waltham Abbey Police Station***
- 8) Develop police station site as a community asset and combine with museum/library proposals.***
- 9) Plan and execute various community events, including pop up shops, markets, arts & crafts, community business events etc.***

2.6 Tourist Destination

Waltham Abbey is promoted quite heavily as a tourist destination. Although it has a beautiful church and gardens, the Epping Forest Museum and is within easy reach of Lee Valley Regional Park, I feel that the towns position as a tourist destination is very much secondary to Waltham Abbey being a town for its residents and businesses. Having said this, tourism and visitors to the town are clearly an

important element of the town's economy. Increasing the town's viability for residents, will also have the knock-on effect of making it a more attractive town for visitors.

With the general shift away from consumerism, more people working from home and the requirement for increased experiences, local tourism will become even more important. As a result, work should be done to develop close partnerships between the town centre and the tourism sector with a view to reducing the reliance on retail shops, whilst at the same time increasing the generally footfall around the town. It is understood that work has been done to develop a town trail and to tie this in with a number of promotions and discounts from town centre retailers – this is exactly the sort of thing which should be developed and extended.

Recommendations:

10) Town Team and Chamber of Commerce to liaise with the tourism team and pull together joint ventures and program of events.

2.7 Waltham Abbey Community Hub

The key to a community hub, much the same as in the “20-minute neighbourhood” is to have a full range of services and facilities within easy reach of each other. This comprises of homes, shops, businesses, green spaces, schools, medical centres, play areas etc together with function space within which community events can take place. To my mind, Waltham Abbey has three clear spaces for community and town events; the Town Hall at one end of the town centre, Market Square in the middle and the Museum and Library at the other end, all interspersed with shops, pubs and restaurants.

The nice thing about this is that events and therefore the people can be spread out across the town utilising a combination of indoor hall, outdoor Market Square and the museum and library depending on the events being put on. This in turn will encourage people to move around the town and in doing so visit a wider range of shops and facilities.

Although Waltham Abbey town centre is to the west of the town and not terribly central, it is fairly accessible within a relatively short time for all. The plan would be to develop this accessibility and then to arrange for a continual series of events, markets, demonstrations and attractions to draw people into the town centre and for the local community to gel, bond and become a community as a whole.

Recommendations:

11) Set up community hub base within museum/library and man it on agreed days/times.

12) Publicise Community Hub.

13) Pull together program of events and activities for the year.

2.8 Love Waltham Abbey Residents Card

As a way of communicating with and building relationships with local residents, perhaps a Love Waltham Abbey card scheme could be developed. The facility would offer residents discounts, offers and preferential rates on various products, services and facilities throughout Waltham Abbey on production of the card – which would in turn encourage residents to use their local area and town centre.

The card could also be used as a library card, to allow resident discounts at the local leisure centre and used in the town's car parks to obtain the aforementioned free parking rates.

Shop local campaigns and marketing could also be formulated around the Love Waltham Abbey residents card – Love Waltham Abbey, Shop Waltham Abbey!

This idea could also be rolled out on a larger scale – i.e. Epping Forest Resident Discount Card – offering a range of discounts, special offers and promotion across the Epping Forest district.

Recommendations:

14) Agree that Love Waltham Abbey Resident Card is viable proposition.

15) Design programme, implement and process.

2.9 Public Facilities

If the town centre is going to meet people's needs both Sun Street and Market Square should be reviewed to ensure that there are the required public facilities. These facilities would include adequate seating for all sections of the community in all areas, open, clean & functional public toilets, adequate lighting at all times across all areas of the town centre, bike racks/hoops in easily accessible places including Market Square and Sun Street and dog poo bins.

Recommendations:

16) Add benches and seating within town centre and ensure adequate for needs of town.

17) Add bike racks/hoops within Sun Street and Market Square and at other destinations.

18) Repair faulty street lighting in Sun Street and ensure adequate lighting across all areas.

19) Add dog poo bins in Sun Street and Market Square and other areas as appropriate.

20) Service public toilets and ensure clean and functional at all times.

3. Appearance

My overall feeling about Waltham Abbey town centre is that it looks sad and unloved. Elements of it desperately require attention and I think these are key to making the town a better place to live and work and also to make the town a community hub which residents, businesses and retailers can be proud of. Some of these matters have already been identified as "quick wins" (see appendices 1 & 2) which can be attended to quickly and at relatively low cost.

"Quick Wins" already underway and to be carried out by Highway Rangers:

- ***Repainting railings***
- ***Replanting trees***
- ***Replacing waste bins***
- ***Repainting Quaker Lane bike racks***
- ***Refurbishing benches***
- ***Attendance to uneven paving***
- ***Replacement of Market Square gates***
- ***The enforcement team are also reviewing the recent dumping of rubbish in Sun Street***

3.1 Shop Fronts

Some consideration should be given to standardising the shop fronts and making them appropriate in colour and design to the town centre. The town centre falls within the Waltham Abbey conservation area and as such therefore should require local authority consent to any change in shop front.

There is of course no obligation for landlords or retailers to renew their shopfronts, however perhaps a scheme could be developed where the local authority does some sort of match funding to assist in the renewal and updating of shop fronts.

Recommendations:

- 1) Consult with retailers and consider options in respect of Town Centre shop fronts and making them more in keeping with the town centre.***
- 2) Consider match funding or other scheme to assist in and encourage updating of town centre shop fronts.***

3.2 Trees and Planters

The whole of Market Place and Sun Street are calling out for trees and planters to make the space softer, more appealing and bring some of the areas open spaces into the town centre. Proposals in this respect have been made and are currently under consideration.

Tree line pedestrian routes and landscaped areas all contribute to civic pride and generally make them more attractive.

Recommendations:

- 3) Review current townscape and carry out recommended planting.***

3.3 A Boards

Looking down the length of Sun Street, you see a messy array of A boards – some in the middle of the street. The importance of these boards is understood, however I feel that some form of regulation should be imposed to ensure their positioning and maintain the overall appearance of the town.

Considerations should be given to some form of demarcation outside each store which seating, A boards and other retail paraphernalia cannot overstep. This would ensure that the centre of the street is kept clear for pedestrians.

Recommendations:

- 4) Put in place demarcation markings for shop A boards, seating and retail paraphernalia.***

4. Access

Town centres need to recognise that Co2 emissions have to be reduced and as a result there is much more emphasis on ensuring a reduced reliance on cars. To this end, town centres need to ensure their accessibility via other methods of transport and provide for these methods accordingly. In addition to reducing carbon emissions this will also encourage the use of the town centre by a wider range of the community via numerous methods of transport.

Simply stopping car access and reducing or taking away parking spaces, doesn't resolve this problem. Undoubtedly people will still want to access the town centre by car however there is a balance to be had between encouraging pedestrian and cycling access to a town centre and then gradually reducing provision for motor vehicles as other methods of travel develop and gain traction.

For generations urban areas have been designed exclusively around the car. This now has to change and town centres developed to provide attractive, walkable and cyclable physical space

4.1 Pedestrianisation

Pedestrianisation isn't always considered to be the most suitable adjustment to a high street. Waltham Abbey however lends itself nicely to it particularly as Sun Street is fairly narrow and even with one-way traffic would leave very little in the way of pavement space – which obviously is of the utmost importance in view of the current pandemic. The other obvious benefit of pedestrianisation is the ability for pubs and restaurants to lay table and chairs out onto the pavement. This encourages a busier and buzzier environment and overall a much more continental feel.

What lets Sun Street and Market Square down is the use of clay pavers used to pedestrianize it. They are badly laid, uneven and are also in numerous places have weeds and grass growing out of them. In an ideal world these pavers need to be replaced with a paving more sympathetic to the age, environment and layout of the town. The ground also needs to be relevelled to ensure a safe walking environment and accessibility for all, whilst at the same time ensuring adequate drainage in all weathers.

Recommendations:

- 1) Remove clay pavers in Market Square and Sun Street and re-lay in paving more sympathetic to the age, environment and layout of the town.***

4.2 Cycling

In a town the size of Waltham Abbey, all residents should be able to access the town centre, the towns various green and public spaces, leisure centre and attractions such as The Royal Gun Powder Mills, White Water Centre and Lea Valley Regional Park via a network of secure, safe and clearly marked cycle paths and routes.

In addition, the town should also provide for cycle racks/hoops at the various destinations to enable the bikes to be safely secured. Unlike the current provision at the end of Sun Street and in Quaker Lane car park, these racks/hoops should be made available at various points along Sun Street, in Market Square and at other appropriate locations in and around the various attractions and destinations.

Although it is accepted that cycling down Sun Street isn't appropriate it is felt cycles should be welcome within the down centre and actively encouraged.

Recommendations:

- 2) Review cycling accessibility to Waltham Abbey town centre, attractions and green spaces and make arrangements to provide a network of secure, safe and clearly marked cycle paths and routes.***

4.3 Buses

Bus routes should also be reviewed to ensure all residents have easy access to buses to bring them into and take them out of the town centre. It is suggested that residents should be within a 400 to 500 metre walking distance of a bus stop. Services should also be reliable and punctual. It is understood that the buses used to commute to the stations in Loughton and Waltham Cross are unreliable and also few and far between. If the town wants to promote itself to new residents it is essential that the town is commutable into and out of London.

Recommendations:

- 3) Review/discuss bus routes with Arriva/TfL and amend accordingly***

4.4 Parking

Although use of other methods of transport into the town centre is important, as previously mentioned, it is inevitable that a section of the community will continue to use a car for a variety of reasons. To encourage car drivers into the town centre, it is recommended that the first period of parking (1 hour) be allowed free of charge with normal charges applying thereafter.

It is understood that parking for town centre businesses is also difficult. With this in mind, perhaps one car park could be allocated for business parking with business parking permits being provided to businesses by the town council.

Recommendations:

4) Reduce resident parking charge to first hour free.

5) Consider business parking car park and permits.

4.5 Town Curfew

It is understood that some form of curfew has been put in place within the town centre. Further details should be sought in this respect and the terms of the curfew reviewed.

To my mind, a curfew discourages people, particularly young people, from using the town centre. Although crime, anti-social behaviour, vandalism and general rowdiness cannot be tolerated, it doesn't seem fair or reasonable that the majority of people are penalised for the actions of the few. If we want Waltham Abbey to become a community hub it has to be attractive to all sections of the community at all times.

Recommendations:

6) Review town curfew consult stakeholders and amend appropriately.

4.6 Wi-fi and Digital Presence

The digital age and the need for connectivity is increasingly important for numerous sections of the community and as a result I would suggest a free wi-fi availability within Waltham Abbey town centre.

It should be acknowledged that people are now shopping differently and that circa 30% of retail sales are being done online (Office of National Statistics, Aug 2020). This figure is up from 21.9% at the beginning of March 2020 and the beginning of the Covid 19 lock down. Regardless of the pandemic, online sales will continue to grow, and retail experts KPMG predict the figure rising to 50% by 2025. As a result, retail businesses need to adjust their business models accordingly and develop their offer for both markets.

As a part of adding a wi-fi option to the town centre a social media presence should be developed enabling Waltham Abbey retailers and businesses to market their products and services to town centre visitors and build a link between their online and offline businesses. Mobile technologies and virtual shopping should be used to enhance the consumer town centre experience and in turn increase footfall.

Consideration should be given to bringing in a third party contractor such as Maybe (www.maybetech.com) to develop social media/town centre/retailer collaboration.

Recommendations:

- 7) *Put in place free WIFI within Waltham Abbey town centre & publicise.*
- 8) *Agree way forward in respect of Social Media strategy/presence and execute accordingly.*
- 9) *Arrange for assistance and support for retailers in establishing an online presence.*

5. Consultation

5.1 Market Research

Market research is underway to ascertain the general feelings of residents, retailers and businesses. Surveys have been put onto Survey Monkey aimed at residents and visitors and a separate one for the town's businesses.

Recommendations:

- 1) *Review feedback and incorporate where appropriate.*

5.2 Discounted ideas and thoughts

As a result of discussions with stake holders, there are a number of ideas and considerations which I don't feel require further consideration. Some of these are:

- The idea of developing a new town within Waltham Abbey in addition to the current "old town". It is considered that the town isn't big enough to support this and that this would result in two areas of the town being poorly supported and tenanted.
- Development of the Quaker Lane Car Park to provide for car parking at the ground floor level and further retail space on the first-floor level. This may be something for future consideration, however the current town centre requires regeneration before adding further/additional retail options outside of Sun Street and Market Square.
- Development of some of the Town Mead site to provide further housing and/or commercial space.

5.3 Sources of Additional Support

Sustrans (www.sustrans.org.uk) – charity making it easier to walk and cycle

High Streets Task Force (www.highstreetstaskforce.org.uk) – supporting communities and local government to transform their high streets.

Maybe (www.maybetech.com) – A smarter approach to social media

Action List	Priority
<i>Highway Rangers to complete “quick wins”</i>	1
<i>Discuss with and establish Town Leadership Team</i>	1
<i>Form Town Team / refocus Town Partnership</i>	1
<i>Appoint Town Centre Manager</i>	2
<i>Form Community Hub in Library</i>	1
<i>Re-pave Sun Street and Market Square</i>	2
<i>Clear town centre of all rubbish and weeds in Sun Street & Market Square</i>	1
<i>Provide for additional seating, bike racks/hoops, dog poo bins as appropriate</i>	2
<i>Ensure public toilets are clean and functional</i>	1
<i>Consult on and plan structure for Market Square</i>	2
<i>Plan and implement tree and planter program for Sun Street & Market Square</i>	2
<i>Establish retail Chamber of Commerce</i>	1
<i>Talk to retailers re shop fronts, A boards, demarcation lines etc</i>	1
<i>Review town markets and put in place plans to re-establish and grow them</i>	1
<i>Put in place plans to review town cycle paths and implement findings</i>	2
<i>Review bus routes and timetables</i>	3
<i>Review parking charges and reduce to first hour free</i>	1
<i>Review parking arrangements for businesses</i>	3
<i>Review town tourism and pull a plan together encompassing town businesses</i>	3
<i>Review town WIFI proposal and put in place findings</i>	2
<i>Develop town centre social media presence</i>	2
<i>Consider Love Waltham Abbey Residents Card – implement and publicise</i>	2
<i>Complete research on thoughts and considerations of residents and businesses – incorporate and implement where appropriate</i>	1
<i>Review new businesses required in Waltham Abbey and take steps to attract</i>	3

**Appendix 1 – Bronze, Silver and Gold action list proposed by Paul Maginnis
Waltham Abbey – Items for Consideration/Funding**

BRONZE	Comments
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Improve signage <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ NO CYCLING ▪ NO PARKING in Market Square 2. Replace/Repair Gates – Sun St, Market Square, Entrance to Square off Church Road <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Keys to be held only by WATC 3. Street furniture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ornate Victorian lampposts, some repairs and a lick of paint ▪ And lightbulbs!! ▪ Replace/Repair/Paint rubbish bins ▪ Replace/Repair/Paint benches 4. Paint Railings Black <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sun St ▪ Market Square ▪ Foxes Parade ▪ Highbridge Street 5. Plant trees in Market Square (mindful of market stall locations) 6. On Market Days (Tues & Sat) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ban vans from the square – provide free alternate locations ▪ Banners advertising Market <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Top of Sun St • Top of Church road 	
SILVER	Comments
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ban A-Boards 2. Bunting in Sun St – Red/White/Blue 3. Flags for Christmas Tree holders down Sun St (Union Jack, English St George, Essex) 	
GOLD	Comments
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Set a standard for acceptable colour schemes and size/scale of Fascia Advertising (it is a conversation area). Non-compliant businesses to be offered financial assistant to comply 2. Add benches in Market Square 3. Replace market stalls with new modern frames and table. Have a standard colour scheme for stall covers and tarpaulins 4. Replace Cycle Rack at top of Sun St with modern alternative (with CCTV coverage) 5. Provide Cycle Rack in Quaker Lane car park 	

Initial review and town appraisal for

Waltham Abbey

Carried out by Paul Messenger
Studio 3 Ltd
Tel: 07973 418 001
Email: pm@studio-3.co.uk

Date: 16 September 2020

Introduction

Studio 3 Ltd have been invited by Epping Forest District Council to carry out a feasibility study and make recommendations for a number of towns within their catchment area. The first of these is Waltham Abbey. This document details our initial findings and makes recommendations for some immediate “quick wins”.

Our approach to this project is to understand, engage and create; understanding the objectives of Epping Forest District Council, engaging with local residents, businesses, retailers and other key stakeholders to form a consensus of opinion and then to make recommendations and work with the Council to create a vibrant mixed use town centre pulling together a range of commercial, leisure, cultural/heritage and community businesses, services and activities. The objective behind this is to not only make Waltham Abbey a more attractive town for its existing residents and businesses, but also to be attractive to new residents and businesses and also to tourists and visitors. This in turn will have the effect of increasing the commercial viability of the town, providing more employment opportunities and generally making Waltham Abbey a more attractive and better place to live and work.

There have been a number of studies on the future of the high street, including the Portas Review (2011) and The High Street Report (2018) and we also now have the benefit of the ongoing findings and recommendations of the High Street Task Force as a result of the High Street Report. Although the Covid 19 pandemic now overshadows everything and contributes greatly to the way we live our lives, it is clear from these aforementioned reports that the high street as we have always known it has gone and is now making way for new mixed use town centres incorporating commercial, retail, residential and leisure uses and also both day and night time economies.

Initial Findings

Waltham Abbey is a suburban market town in the Epping Forest District of Essex. The town is 14 miles from central London and lies on the outskirts of North East London. It has a population of circa 22,500 from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds and an average house price of circa £404,000.

Waltham Abbey stands very much on its own and although there are various bus connections, the nearest railway links are in Waltham Cross (7 Minutes by bus), Theobalds Grove (11 minutes by bus) and Loughton (27 minutes by bus). Although the town is within the commuter belt to central London, its transport links make it less attractive with public transport commutes being fiddly and taking over an hour. The town is well situated for road users with easy access to 2 junctions of the M25 and “A” roads into and out of London.

The shopping centre in Market Square and Sun Street is surprisingly buoyant and only has a shop vacancy rate of circa 6% (National Average – circa 11%). I would suggest that it caters primarily for local trade and is predominantly made up of general retail – 25%, food and beverage – 24% and hair & Beauty – 19%. Unlike other high streets, less than 1% of shops here are charity shops. Out of the town centre, there is a large Tesco and a Lidl and on the other side of the town a retail park consisting of Costa, McDonalds, Poundland, Home Bargains, Pets at Home and TK Maxx. Within the town centre itself the only brands are Greggs, Lloyds Pharmacy and Ladbrokes.

Waltham Abbey is promoted as having a “historic” market on Tuesday’s and Saturday’s. This I found however a little disappointing, particularly as it only had a handful of market stalls with a minimal range of products available. I’m not clear on what the situation is with Market Square outside of market days; it appears to be available for general parking – which I think is a bit of a shame.

On the edge of town, running alongside the M25 there is an industrial estate offering a range of products and services, together with 2 large serviced/virtual office providers for smaller businesses. With the exception of one unit which had obviously suffered a fire, the whole estate appeared to be occupied, busy and bustling.

Beyond the business park is a recreation area offering a golf driving range, multiple football, rugby and cricket pitches, a skate park and numerous other sporting opportunities. There is also the Town Mead Sports and Social Club which is open to all.

Waltham Abbey is promoted as a visitor/tourist destination, but with little attention being paid to what is actually on offer. I found the town centre to be unloved and a little bit scruffy, was disappointed at the “historic” Waltham Abbey Market and although Waltham Abbey Church is quite magnificent, I found its grounds, again lacking some love and attention.

Overall, Waltham Abbey has a nice feel to it and for locals, is fairly self-sufficient in respect of the range of shops, products and services available.

Waltham Abbey has the potential to be a great town and has the infrastructure and potential to grow. For a town so close to London, it has relatively low property prices, has the country feel that people are looking for following the pandemic and is a great place for families and businesses to grow and develop. To do this however some work needs to be done and some attention to detail needs to be applied.

There are a number of “quick wins” which would quickly and cheaply lift the town and put some life back into it:

- ***Undertake regular/daily sweep of Market Square, Sun Street and the town centre car parks utilising an automated/sit on sweeping machine. The council road sweeper is doing a good job but needs support to keep the town looking good.***

- ***Ensure that all rubbish around the town is cleared regularly. There is a growing number of rubbish bags collecting along the railing opposite the Town Hall, there was dumped rubbish outside the Police Station in Sun Street with "Council Aware" labels on them for the best part of a week, there are sacks of rubbish in the walkway running from the car park to Sun Street, next to the Co-Op. There is also accumulated rubbish that needs to be cleared from the rear of the Police Station.***

I would also suggest that traders are checked to ensure that they have up to date waste clearing licences and that their rubbish is being regularly cleared from their premises – this would particularly apply to the businesses who back onto Darby Drive.

- ***The street furniture, lamp posts, bollards and gates in Market Square and Sun Street need to be repaired and/or repainted.***
- ***Consideration should be given to the addition of further seating, particularly around Market Square***
- ***On Friday night (approx. 20:30) one third of the lamp posts in Sun Street weren't working. This needs to be addressed and fixed.***
- ***Sun Street and Market Square are soulless. There are no planters or hanging baskets. At numerous places there are circles in the paving which I think would have once had trees growing out of them. These have been left to weed over and should either be planted or paved – planting would be my preference.***
- ***There does not appear to be any provision within Sun Street or Market Square for bikes and/or dogs – i.e bike racks to lock your bike to, dog bowls, dog poo bins etc.***
- ***The council should talk to the owner of the old Police Station to see what can be done about making the frontage tidier/more presentable.***
- ***Parking in the town centre car parks should be changed to first hour free, thus enticing people into the town centre without having the need to pay and display – particularly when they only want to be there for a short period of time. I note that for Covid 19, the parking charge has been reduced to 20p for the first 2.5 hours – why have a charge at all??***
- ***The whole of Sun Street and Market Square need weed killing to get rid of the weeds growing out of the paving slabs.***
- ***Retailers should be spoken to to encourage the upkeep of their premises fronting Market Square and Sun Street. The Sun Inn for example has an old chair and a broken sign in Sun Street. It could also probably consider clearing up the cigarette butts in Sun Street left immediately outside the pub by their customers.***
- ***Some of the grounds of Abbey Gardens, particularly those behind metal fencing are littered with plastic bottles, cans, crates etc. These should be cleared.***

Although the items listed above are fairly superficial these are important steps to encourage the people who work and live in the area to have pride in it and also to make the town more attractive for visitors and also for potential business occupiers and their staff.

Commercial Agents

I have spoken to some commercial agent contacts and am awaiting calls back from some others. The general feeling so far is that the demand for retail units is high – mainly from smaller independents who aren't saddled with the responsibilities of the larger chains and are also wanting to take advantage of the relatively lower rents. This is also aided by the relaxation in planning laws relating to restaurants, surgeries etc.

There is an ongoing demand for office space mainly for smaller units, but also for larger businesses which are looking to downsize their office space. There is also a demand for businesses which wish to convert office space into service businesses such as doctors, dentist, vets, physio's etc.

This I feel is good news for Waltham Abbey as it provides opportunities to make good use of empty space and attract new businesses to the area.

Moving forward

Moving forward and with a view to obtaining a full and complete appraisal of the area, I would propose in the first instance consulting with the following people/stakeholders:

- Paula Maginnis, Director, Epping DC
- Carly Hammond & Tony O'Connor – Museum, Heritage and Culture, Epping DC
- Paul Violet, Town Team, Waltham Abbey
- Members of Waltham Abbey Town Council
- Shopkeepers/Retailers
- Local Estate Agents
- Local residents & visitors to Waltham Cross
- Managers of Pixel Business Centre and Biz Space
- Bryn Elliott, Market Manager, Waltham Abbey TC

I will be reaching out to the above over the next week or so.

Having pulled together current knowledge, insight, and intelligence we can then start to look at the bigger picture and think a little more "out of the box" about what can be done and what targets should be set.

Local surveys

Appendices 1 & 2 below are proposed survey questions for use with residents/visitors and businesses.

Appendix 1: Proposed High Street Survey Questions

We would now like to ask you about your experiences of using this high street/town centre.

Q1. Thinking about the high street or town/city centre you visit the most, on average, how often do you visit?

1. Daily
2. 2-3 times a week
3. Once a week
4. 2-3 times a month
5. Once a month
6. Less often than monthly
7. Never
8. Don't know

ASK ALL WHO CODE 4, 5,6,7 AT Q1

Q2. What prevents you from visiting your high street or town/city centre more often? Please list up to three factors.

- 1
- 2
- 3

ASK ALL WHO CODE 1, 2, 3 at Q1

Q3. What encourages you to visit your high street or town centre regularly? Please list up to three factors

- 1
- 2
- 3

ASK ALL EXCEPT THOSE THAT CODE 7 IN Q1

Q4. How satisfied or dissatisfied, if at all, are you with the high street or town/city centre you visit the most?

1. Very dissatisfied
2. Quite dissatisfied
3. Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
4. Quite satisfied
5. Very satisfied
6. Don't know

ASK ALL EXCEPT CODE 6 AT Q4

Q4a. You said that you are {insert answer from Q4}. Why do you say that?

ASK ALL EXCEPT THOSE THAT CODE 7 IN Q1

Q5. Please rank the three most important things to you from the list below for your high street or town/city centre to have.

1. The shops and services are open when I need them
2. It is clean and attractive
3. A good variety of shops
4. The public services I need are there
5. The shops sell the products I need
6. Sufficient car parking
7. Sufficient facilities such as toilets, benches etc.
8. Everything I need is within walking distance of each other
9. Accessible for those with impaired mobility or with a pram/pushchair
10. Good variety of leisure and entertainment facilities
11. Attractive to visitors as well as locals
12. The shop fronts are well-maintained
13. Range of events to attend such as markets, festivals, carnivals etc.
14. Good recreational space
15. Feeling of safety
16. A good place to live
17. People from different backgrounds can meet and mix
18. None of the above
19. Don't know

ASK ALL EXCEPT CODE 7 AT Q1

Q6. From the list below, please rank the top three things that you feel could be improved for your high street or town/city centre?

- a) Better community spaces for people to mix/meet
- b) Better green spaces
- c) A greater variety of shops
- d) More restaurants
- e) Fewer empty/boarded up shops
- f) Public services hubs, e.g. council services
- g) More GP services/Health care services
- h) Free from cars
- i) Better transport links
- j) Regular bus services
- k) Better parking facilities
- l) More residential areas (e.g houses and flats to live in)
- m) Other (please specify)
- n) Nothing
- o) Don't know

Q7. We'd now like you to imagine that you are a town planner, involved in planning the facilities and services for a new high street/town centre. Which of the following would be most important to you to include in the plans? Please rank your top 5.

- a) GP surgery
- b) Library
- c) Dentist
- d) Health care centre
- e) Post office
- f) Leisure facilities (e.g gym, swimming pools)
- g) Grocery store/ supermarket
- h) Bars/pubs
- i) Restaurants/cafes
- j) Cinema
- k) Bank
- l) Pharmacy
- m) Clothes shops
- n) Newsagent
- o) Barbers/hairdressers/ beauty salon
- p) Book store
- q) Coffee shop
- r) Department store
- s) Electronic goods store
- t) Food takeaways
- u) Music/movies/video games store
- v) Charity shops
- w) Travel agent
- x) Off licence
- y) Launderette/dry cleaners
- z) Estate agent
- aa) Petrol station
- bb) Bookmakers
- cc) Community centre
- dd) Council services
- ee) Housing
- ff) Green space
- gg) Public toilets
- hh) Parking
- ii) Excellent phone signal and wifi hotspot availability
- jj) Free from cars
- kk) Other (please specify)
- ll) Don't know

Q8. How important is it to you that a high street or town/city centre has residential areas within walking distance?

- 1. Not at all important
- 2. Not very important
- 3. Quite important
- 4. Very important
- 5. Don't know

Q9. Please rate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements?

1. The community and voluntary sector should play an active role in the design and delivery of the high street.

- Strongly agree
- Tend to agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Tend to disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

2. Young people should have a greater say on the future of their high street and town centre

- Strongly agree
- Tend to agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Tend to disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

3. A safe and welcoming high street and town centre will enable and empower children and young people to use it more

- Strongly agree
- Tend to agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Tend to disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

Q10. Do you live or work in Waltham Abbey

Live
Work
Both
No

If no, where/how far away do you live and why are you here today?

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS TO BE ASKED (included as standard, except for disability)

SD1 - Gender: Are you?

Male
Female
Other
Prefer not to say?

SD2 - Please indicate your age...

16-24

25-34

35-44

45-54

65-75

75 and over

SD3 - What is your ethnic group?

White

Mixed/multiple ethnic groups

Asian/Asian British

Black African/Caribbean/Black British

Other ethnic group

Appendix 2: Proposed Business Survey Questions

Q1. What is your line of business?

Q2. How many people do you employ?

Q3. How long have you been based in Waltham Abbey?

Q4. Do you have business premises elsewhere?

Q5. Why is Waltham Abbey attractive to your business?

Q6. Do you/your employees use Waltham Abbey Town Centre?

Q7. Are your employees from Waltham Abbey?

Yes, mainly

No

Don't know

Q8. What could Waltham Abbey do to assist you in growing your business?

Q9. What facilities/services would make Waltham Abbey more attractive to your business?

Appendix 3: Waltham Abbey - Retailer views/opinions

20 retailers were consulted within Sun Street and provided the following comments and all of these would consider being involved in a town centre/retailer Chamber of Commerce – but it would need to be worthwhile.

Market

- Town needs an improved/larger market – more stalls
- Town could do with a food market and/or more food stalls on the current market
- Market should not be allowed to set up directly outside shopfronts
- More speciality markets – food, farmers, antiques etc
- Market should run down Sun Street
- More unique stalls

Age Groups

- Waltham Abbey has a lot of old people in it
- Need to attract more younger people
- Town needs to attract younger people
- There are a lot of young people in Waltham Abbey – need to meet their expectations

Pubs

- Pubs can be rowdy (especially Fridays)
- Pubs rowdy on Friday nights

Council Related

- Towns bodies, such as Town Partnership, Council etc is made up of older generations
- No communication from or with Town Council
- Council not focussed on residents
- Council is wasting money on tourism and not on residents
- Business rates are high
- Rubbish collection needs to be addressed – particularly opposite Town Hall where residents have nowhere to dump their rubbish other than along the railings
- Council should monitor shops to ensure not too much repetition
- During recent filming – no courtesy of comms with retailers, no consideration for shops – car parked closed without any notice
- Issue with fly tipping in town centre which needs to be resolved
- Sun Street street lights out of action – making the town centre dark and uncomfortable when leaving in the evening
- Some sort of mouthpiece is required to keep shops informed of what's going on
- More No Cycling signs are needed
- Want to paint shop front to match brands colours, but told they can't by Council

Parking

- Parking situation needs to be resolved – free to park at Tesco, Lidl or retail park but costs in town centre.
- Market Square should be opened up to free short-term parking – to enable people to nip into the shops to pick things up
- Parking area and/or business permits for retailer parking

- Keep Market Square as general parking
- Short term free parking
- 20 minutes free parking in Market Square
- Market vans should be parked away from Market Square
- Market square should allow access for deliveries

General

- Town needs to be more vibrant to draw in residents
- Town needs an uplift - it's been left to decay
- Town centre could do with some brand names/ retail anchors to draw people in
- Town needs more attractions and also things that are attractive to children – as they bring their parents, who spend money
- Town could do with and Outreach centre / fight academy/gym for younger people to take them off of the streets
- Town centre needs more life in it
- Nothing in the town to pull people in
- Encourage different shops so there is a wider variety
- Town needs to be livelier
- Increase awareness of Waltham Abbey shops
- Town could be made more attractive
- More shops of interest
- More variety of shops
- Too many hair and beauty shops and similar type restaurants
- Town has a nice community – just need to work out how to bring them into the town
- Too many cafes and hair & beauty
- Sun Street should be opened up to one-way traffic on certain days of the week
- Town centre could do with a greater Police presence
- Town could do with more offices for local businesses
- Not a lot of my business is from Waltham Abbey – I use social media and attract business from a variety of sources as a result
- I'd like more business from Waltham Abbey
- Police station needs buying and developing
- Mainly Waltham Abbey customers – recommendations

Town Appearance

- Town could be made to look prettier/more inviting
- Sun Street and Market Square needs investment in trees and planters
- More benches needed around the town
- Make the town look pretty – more trees and plants

Attracting New Businesses

- Deals on rents
- Work out how to encourage new and different businesses
- Incentives to attract start up businesses
- Incentives for new businesses to come to town

Tourism

- Tie tourism events up with shops
- Make more of tourism

Banks

- With the banks going, shops now need to go to Waltham Cross to bank – Post Office has a limit of £2k
- Now banks have gone – nothing to bring people in to town
- Last bank is going in 2021 – where do shops bank?

Buses

- Buses after 7pm go quiet
- Shuttle bus needed from Waltham Cross to Tesco's Waltham Abbey

Christmas

- Festival of light has deteriorated over the years
- Town needs a Christmas Market