



MORPETH NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN - TOWN CENTRE WORKSHOP

MONDAY 13 JANUARY 2014

NOTE OF WORKSHOP

Facilitated by Colin Haylock, Architect Planner and Urban Design Consultant and Ian Campbell, Chartered Town Planner

Attendees

Apologies: The Mayor of Morpeth

1. Welcome and Introduction

Ian Campbell (MNP Project Coordinator) noted that as a successful rural market town the town centre could provide the economic dynamic for change. The purpose of the workshop was to consider the contribution of the town centre to Morpeth's future role and, in particular, to explore how we can maintain and further develop the vibrancy of the town centre and also further develop its tourism role

2. Role /functions of the town centre

How can Morpeth maintain and further develop its role as a "retail destination" over the plan period?

Medi Parry (Manager Sanderson Arcade) introduced this session highlighting how the competitiveness of the retail offer might be maintained over the 20 year lifetime of the plan and in relation to directly competing centres.

Morpeth doesn't exist in a vacuum – there will always be new competition emerging and whilst Morpeth currently punches above its weight it has to be prepared to change and adapt to reflect customer preferences whilst maintaining its local distinctiveness. It has done this successfully on the basis of a strong mix of independent stores and multiples, the development of Sanderson Arcade and the new Morrisons supermarket; specifically reference was made to significant investment at Cramlington where a new cinema has opened and a new M&S under construction. The former Morrisons site represented a key opportunity for retail development.

The MNP would need to consider what capacity there is for retail expansion (and where); the demographics of current customers and future target markets; and how pedestrian circulation might be improved. The possibility of “double-fronting” Newgate Street properties (eastern side) was raised.

Morpeth should capitalise on its natural assets to promote its lunchtime and evening economy as well as encouraging an increase in day visitors

There was a need for complementary and consistent branding and marketing initiatives (“More in Morpeth”; website; loyalty cards; shopping guide; events and promotions) – but again need to understand what works and what are our target markets.

What other uses or functions beyond retail will add to the vibrancy of the town centre and help Morpeth develop as a key hub in the region’s tourism economy?

There was strong support for increased levels and improved quality of visitor accommodation; the re-opening/refurbishment of the Queens Head seen as an early priority but also family good value accommodation (though recognition that Premier Inn type operations might prefer edge of town / A1 location).

There was similarly strong support for a multi-use arts / heritage centre (cinema, theatre restaurant, performance area), with examples of such facilities being found in comparator towns.

There was also support for a modern leisure centre (though no consensus emerged on its location –town centre or alternatives on edge of town) and improved leisure recreational facilities in Carlisle Park. Carlisle Park and its riverside setting were cited as key assets within the town. The possibility of a sculpture trail was put forward as a means of exploiting our attractive riverside setting as well as a town trail

3. Functionality of the town centre

What is broadly the best pattern of parking – in numbers and location – to support the various functions of the Town Centre in the future?

Would it be beneficial and practical to pedestrianise or part-pedestrianise Bridge Street?

Colin Haylock considered some of the key parking and circulation challenges faced by the town including the possibility of reducing through traffic on Bridge Street and a second crossing to replace or supplement Telford Bridge.

Whilst it was recognised that the new Morrisons supermarket had provided considerable additional parking there was perceived to be a shortage of parking serving Newgate Street and Oldgate. 2/3 storey parking may be solution but would probably face financial and design obstacles. There was also seen to be a third category of user (as well as short and long stay) – the tourist or day visitor who may want half day parking. These users may also wish convenient access to the riverside. Effective complementary signage is required to support any parking strategy.

It was also suggested that additional parking provision could act as footfall drivers.

There was a general resistance to the possibility of full or partial pedestrianisation of Bridge Street (*n.b this was not wholly consistent with responses to the Issues and Options consultation feedback*). The pinch point of Telford Bridge may need to be addressed but it was recognised that significant alterations to highway infrastructure or traffic management were unlikely before the impacts of the Morpeth Northern Bypass were understood.

Generally public transport connectivity by bus and rail with neighbouring towns and the Tyneside and Gateshead was good although evening services could be improved. The presence of a mainline station on the edge of the town centre was a key asset of the town, but better integrations with bus services should be explored (local shuttle service?)

What contribution could the Town Centre make towards meeting local housing needs and reducing the pressure on other parts of Morpeth?

The possibility of providing Living over the shops (LOTS) and Live/work units was raised. It was also recognised that housing could be a high value element of mixed use developments in and around the town centre.

4. Where and how do you make it happen?

David Lodge (CEO, Greater Morpeth Development Trust) provided a brief overview of key development and redevelopment opportunities in and around the town centre as well as highlighting possible delivery mechanisms in respect of town centre marketing and promotion.

The Town Team had developed out of the town response to the Portas initiative and was seeking to develop a more cohesive approach to marketing and promotion based on partnership working between the Trust, the Chamber of Trade, Sandersons Arcade and the Town Council.

MIM website has been developed by Town Team and addresses some of the marketing and potential loyalty opportunities identified.

David also indicated that the Trust was proposing an office development at Morpeth Railway Station, subject to the necessary funding being secured.

The MNP Issues and Options Consultation Report had highlighted a range of town centre development opportunities whilst also noting that several of them were long standing. Nevertheless in terms of adding to the retail and tourism offer, and strengthening community assets and visitor attractions there appeared to be a number of key opportunities

The former Morrisons supermarket – understood that this property was required to have a retail end use

The former Benfields Garage site, Castle Square – attractive edge of town centre / riverside location

Court House / Police Station – the proposed closure of Morpeth Police Station has recently been announced

(If two above were parcelled and masterplanned would increase greatly scope to create new southern entrance to Morpeth).

The former Queens Head Hotel – central location

Willows and other vacant properties sites, Gas House Lane – attractive riverside location

Former Post Office, Oldgate and Telephone Exchange, Newgate Street – “historic” uses in attractive town centre sites

5. Concluding Remarks / Key Messages

- Morpeth town centre can provide an economic dynamic for the Morpeth Neighbourhood Plan Area. The Neighbourhood Plan provides the opportunity to shape and promote change that reflect community and local stakeholder priorities
- There need to be complementary town centre and tourism strategies for the town, supported by consistent and marketing and promotional strategies
- Further developing Morpeth as a key retail destination in the region forms a key building block in developing Morpeth as a tourism hub for the county
- It will be necessary to develop appropriate transport and community infrastructure over the plan period and visitor accommodation and attractions to realise its tourism role
- A coordinated approach is advocated in respect of realising the key development opportunities in and around the town centre

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