

Economy Scrutiny Committee – District Centres Subgroup

Minutes of the meeting held on 28 November 2016

Present:

Councillor Shilton Godwin – in the Chair
Councillors Appleby, Hacking and S Judge

Councillor Priest, Deputy Leader

Professor Cathy Parker, Institute of Place Management, Manchester Metropolitan University

Stephen Chandler, Moston Lane Traders

Carol Thompson, Chorlton and Didsbury Traders

Andrew Slater, Andrew Graham Shoes, Didsbury

Alan Williams, Unicorn Grocery, Chorlton

Victoria Crane, Makers Market

Sue Devlin, Rusholme and Fallowfield Civic Society

Amar Choudhry, Rusholme Community Traders

Apologies:

Councillors Richards and A Simcock

ESC/OSG/16/14 Minutes

Decision

To approve as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 27 October 2016.

ESC/OSG/16/15 Evidence from External Guests

The Subgroup welcomed Stephen Chandler from Moston Lane Traders, Carol Thompson from Chorlton and Didsbury Traders, Andrew Slater from Andrew Graham Shoes, Didsbury, Alan Williams from Unicorn Grocery, Chorlton, Amar Choudhry from Rusholme Community Traders, Sue Devlin from Rusholme and Fallowfield Civic Society, Victoria Crane from the Makers Market and the Council's District Market Manager.

The Chair reported that the traders' representatives had been sent a series of questions in advance of the meeting. She advised that they had been asked to consult with local traders and feed back the responses at the meeting. The questions sent to the traders' representatives were:

- Location and types of businesses you represent
- Why you based your business in its current location/ what do you see as the main benefits of that location for your business or another business like yours?
- What are the main drawbacks of that location for your business?

- If you were relocating your business to another district centre, what would be the key attributes of the area that you would be looking for and why?
- Name one thing you think the Council does well which supports businesses in your area.
- Name one thing you think the Council has the opportunity to improve to support businesses in your area.

Mr Slater reported that he was representing Didsbury Traders' Association and informed members of the responses he had received from local traders to the Subgroup's questions. He reported that the main benefits of the location included that it was a vibrant location with independent shops, good transport links and high footfall. Other benefits included the customer demographics and, for some types of businesses, close proximity to competitors.

Mr Slater reported that all traders who had responded had cited business rates as a drawback of the location and that rent levels were also an issue. He advised that some businesses had located their business on a side street because the cost of rent and rates on the High Street were prohibitive. He informed members that most small independent businesses in Didsbury had not benefited from changes in the business rates system, which had been intended to lift small businesses out of paying business rates, because of their high rateable value. Other drawbacks included parking issues and close proximity to a church charity coffee shop as they did not have to pay business rates and used free volunteer staff. He reported that, if re-locating their businesses, traders would look for a busy location with a balance of independent shops, restaurants and chain stores and of day-time and night-time economy.

Although some traders could not think of anything the Council did well, Mr Slater reported that others mentioned street cleaning, police presence, good transport links, well-kept parks, improvements to parking arrangements and councillor involvement in the Didsbury Traders' Association. He advised that areas the Council could improve were reducing business rates, including making business rate relief permanent and introducing parity between independent and charitable businesses, more parking spaces and improved communication and consultation.

Mr Williams provided an overview of the responses from Chorlton traders. He reported that the main benefits of the location included thriving independent shops, high footfall, the area's reputation and that it was a creative, liberal-minded, arts-based area. He informed members that traders had cited lack of free parking, congestion at school pick up time, varied footfall across different parts of Chorlton and business rates and rents as some of the drawbacks. He advised that, if traders were re-locating their business elsewhere, they would look at the local demographic, rent and rate levels, parking facilities, traffic, good public transport links, good footfall, other small independent businesses and well-maintained pavements.

Mr Williams advised that rubbish collection had been named by Chorlton traders both as something the Council did well and something that they could improve. He reported that other things the Council did well were the library service in Chorlton and the two-way dialogue with a local ward councillor. He informed members that the Council could improve free parking, cycle lanes and facilities such as public toilets.

Mr Williams further advised members that there were three large development areas within Chorlton – the former Chorlton Leisure Centre, Chorlton Precinct and the former Social Services District Office and that these developments presented both a concern and an opportunity for local traders. He reported that declining diversity of businesses was a concern and advised that independent businesses were important to the prosperity of the local economy and strengthening the community.

Ms Thompson informed members that Didsbury and Chorlton had a high proportion of independent, specialist businesses but that they were facing a range of challenges which threatened their sustainability, including increasing costs (such as business rates and statutory sick pay for staff no longer being reimbursed) and increasing administrative work to meet the requirements of HMRC (Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs). She reported that the community supported these businesses and that it was important to have a community-focused plan for district centres and not just an economic-focused plan. Mr Slater advised that the number of independent businesses in Didsbury and Chorlton was reducing and that the Council should support them.

Mr Chandler reported that the responses from Moston Lane Traders had been similar, with issues such as good transport links, high footfall and parking being considered important. He advised that traders on Moston Lane had good support from local councillors and were in contact with the Council's Regeneration Team. He advised that there was a problem with litter in the area but that the Council did their best to tackle this. He advised that the area was fairly busy and that, following investment in buildings, he hoped that it would get busier. A member who was also a ward councillor for Moston advised that there was an aspiration for Moston Lane to have more diverse businesses, like Chorlton and Didsbury.

Mr Choudhry reported that he was representing Rusholme Traders, which included a range of businesses such as jewellers, restaurants and takeaways. He informed members that Wilmslow Road was a well-known road but business was declining. He advised that congestion was causing a problem for businesses which relied on the roads for deliveries from suppliers and for customer access. He advised that the cycle lane scheme should be reviewed as there had been collisions between cyclists and pedestrians and incidents of bags and mobile phones being snatched by cyclists. He outlined his suggestions for how the cycle lane scheme could be improved. The Chair reported that the cycle lane scheme was being reviewed and that she would provide him with details of this.

Mr Choudhry reported that traders wanted more parking, business rate relief, the public toilets to be re-opened, improved street cleaning, including alleyways and a reduction of the threshold at which potholes were repaired. He also advised that traders wanted an increased police presence and jewellers wanted walkie talkies to communicate with the police in the event of a robbery, which he reported had been introduced successfully in Birmingham. The District Market Manager reported that one of their markets had had problems with crime and, having obtained funding from Greater Manchester Police (GMP), they had set up a Business Watch Area and also introduced a StoreNet radio scheme and security guards. He reported that this had been successful in reducing crime.

Mr Choudhry advised that the Council needed to listen to traders and residents and outlined some of the work that local traders had done, for example, to help homeless people and to increase cyclist safety. A member welcomed this work and advised that it would be useful to have a Manchester-wide traders group to share knowledge and ideas.

Ms Devlin reported that challenges facing businesses in Rusholme included high rents, congestion deterring customers from visiting the area and shisha bars which, she advised, were driving families away. She emphasised that each district centre was different and that it was important to listen to traders and other local people who, she advised, had the best understanding of local problems. She reported that the Rusholme District Centre Steering Group involved a range of representatives and that she felt it should meet more frequently and take into account learning from Professor Parker's work on district centres. She expressed concern that Marketing Manchester did not market Rusholme as a destination and suggested that one of the free city centre buses should extend its route to Rusholme. The District Market Manager suggested that traders' representatives work with their local councillors and consider applying for cash grants to run local events, however, some guests reported that grants were difficult and time-consuming to apply for.

The District Market Manager advised that Manchester Markets had a number of long-established markets and also held smaller street markets. He reported that, when considering where to hold these, the service considered the location, the size of the land, parking availability, footfall and local demographics, including consulting with the local community and tailoring markets to their requirements, for example, the Eid event in Longsight. He reported that market days brought additional people to the district centre and had a positive effect on other traders but that it was important to consult with the existing traders beforehand. He reported that Manchester Markets undertook a cost benefit analysis of markets, as they needed to be profitable. He informed members that Manchester Markets measured footfall and carried out customer surveys and mystery shopper surveys and that they would outline to traders any improvements needed. He advised that he had worked with Ms Cane regarding bringing the Makers Market to Manchester.

Ms Cane reported that approximately 850 small independent businesses traded at Makers Markets, which took place at a range of locations in Manchester and across the region. She advised that the Makers Market provided an opportunity for fledgling businesses to assess the demand for their products and that some then went on to open their own shops. She advised that, when starting a market in a new location, the Makers Market liaised with local businesses to ensure that they complemented existing retail provision, rather than competing with it. She reported that local stallholders traded at the markets, which gave the markets a sense of place. She advised that the Makers Market was approached to run markets in particular areas as it improved footfall to the area. She advised that important considerations on where to base a market included the space available, the local demographics and that it was central to a main shopping area and in a high population area.

In response to comments from Mr Chandler that he had problems recruiting and retaining staff for his hairdressing business, a member advised that he could liaise

with organisations which helped prepare people for work. Mr Chandler reported that he was working with colleges but that students were not prepared for the hard work involved in working in hairdressing and many left. A member asked if the other traders' representatives had any staffing issues. Mr Slater reported that the costs and additional administration involved were a burden for small businesses, highlighting that they were required to contribute to pensions and pay sick pay.

A member noted that business rates had been a common thread through the discussion, raised by traders' representatives across different areas. The Strategic Director (Development) reported that the government had proposed to allow the Council to retain 100% of the business rates it collected. He advised that the full details of this had not yet been disclosed but that it was unlikely to solve the problem of the high rateable values in areas like Didsbury and Chorlton. The Deputy Leader reported that, although the Council would retain business rates in future, this would be off-set by the loss of other funding.

The Deputy Leader reported that the Council had had an ad hoc strategy for district centres which had been evolving slowly but that the Council now needed to move more quickly in producing an updated strategy. He advised that some of the issues raised were not under Council control but the Council could facilitate improvements on some issues.

The Chair thanked the guests for their contributions which, she advised, had provided the Subgroup with useful background information on the current situation which would inform this ongoing work. She reported that there were both similarities and differences in the issues raised by different district centres, some of which reflected national trends and issues. She advised that it was important that the Subgroup was aware of these, including the issues outside the Council's control, in order to understand the current situation and to consider what levers the Council could use to support and develop good, viable district centres. She highlighted a number of the key points from the discussion including transport infrastructure, the marketing of district centres, the importance of good communication and the role of markets in district centres. She advised that the final outcomes of the work would be shared with all the guests, when completed.

Decisions

To thank the guests for their contributions, note that the issues raised would inform this ongoing work and to send the guests the final outcomes of the work, when completed.

ESC/OSG/16/16

Terms of Reference and Work Programme

The Chair noted that at the previous meeting it had been agreed to remove the issues of Rent To Own companies and the Fair Tax Mark from the Terms of Reference, subject to the identification of a suitable alternative mechanism through which these issues could be progressed. She reported that it had been agreed that the Rent To Own issue would be incorporated into the work on the Family Poverty Strategy, which Economy Scrutiny Committee would be considering at its next

meeting on 7 December. She advised that she was still looking into how the Fair Tax Mark issue could be progressed.

Decision

To note the Terms of Reference and work programme.