

Overview and Scrutiny District Centres Subgroup

Minutes of the meeting held on Thursday, 28 November 2019

Present:

Councillor Shilton Godwin – in the Chair
Councillor Stanton

Councillor Richards, Executive Member for Housing and Regeneration
Councillor Rahman, Executive Member for Skills, Culture and Leisure
Councillor White, Ward Councillor for Old Moat
Councillor Wills, Ward Councillor for Withington
Jennifer Smith, Love Withington Baths
Dr Steve Millington, Institute of Place Management (IPM), Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU)
Helen Power, Levenshulme Market founder

ESC/OSG/19/13 Minutes

The Chair reported that the Scrutiny Support Officer was liaising with Marie Hodgson from Manchester Life regarding a visit to Ancoats.

Decision

To approve as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 31 October 2019.

ESC/OSG/19/14 Withington District Centre

The Subgroup received the Vital and Viable Withington report produced by the IPM which provided key insights about Withington emerging from the Vital and Viable District Centres project, drawing on centre audits, footfall data, meetings with the neighbourhood team, and a workshop with local stakeholders. The report also provided the context and background to the analysis of Withington.

Dr Steve Millington from the IPM gave a presentation on this work referring to the main points and themes which included:

- Key strengths and weaknesses of the district centre identified from the workshop with local stakeholders;
- Key priorities for the district centre identified by stakeholders;
- “Quick win” approaches to improve Withington district centre;
- The role of the Withington Village Partnership and We Are Withington group;
- The project to improve the appearance of the area through commissioning street art;
- The impact of “Withington By Night”, an evening of late night opening of shops with entertainment, food and drink; and
- The wider policy implications of this work.

The Ward Councillor for Withington welcomed the progress that had been made over the previous two years and that the work had been led by local traders and residents, in accordance with the Our Manchester approach. He reported that the workshops had looked at the detail of what kind of place the stakeholders wanted Withington to be, while having regard for the challenges presented by the busy bus route of Wilmslow Road and the limited public realm. He highlighted the shutter art project, events such as “Withington By Night” and the forthcoming re-development of the former Nat West Bank as positive changes. He welcomed the increased footfall since the refurbishment of Withington Library which, he reported, was now a major community hub. He informed Members that the Christie Hospital had “walk-in Wednesdays” when staff and other hospital users were encouraged to walk to and use the district centre but that he felt that the Christie could get more involved and that it would be beneficial to have more trees along the route from the Christie to the district centre.

The Ward Councillor for Old Moat thanked the IPM and Council officers for supporting the work in Withington. He informed Members that a Withington Action Plan had been developed in 2010 but that the aspirations for the area had been affected by austerity. He reported that some of the ideas from this original plan were still being pursued but that it was recognised that the Council could not achieve these on its own and that a partnership approach was needed, involving local traders, residents, housing associations, the Withington Civic Society and other stakeholders. He advised that this work was building on the heritage of the area, including conservation area status and the cultural history of the area, and he highlighted the good work which had taken place so far. He advised Members that the footfall data had been useful, reporting that a local trader had changed her opening hours to reflect the footfall levels and that this had increased her trade. He reported that the crowd funder for the street art had been successful not only in raising the money but in generating a lot of comments and ideas about how to improve the area.

The Chair commented that the importance of the library to Withington reflected information from other areas which suggested that public buildings and spaces were important in drawing people into the district centres.

Jennifer Smith from Love Withington Baths reported that Withington Baths had been due to close due to the opening of a new leisure centre at Hough End. She reported that, following a petition and march by local people, the Council agreed to keep the baths open for a further twelve months and that, during that time, the community had put a business plan together to run the baths as a charity, with a board of volunteer directors. She informed Members that a bid had been submitted to the National Heritage Fund to make improvements to the building and the pool. She reported that the aim was for the facility to be a community hub, not just swimming baths, and that they had a community advisory group to ensure that the directors were doing what the community wanted. She informed Members about the co-working space located at the baths. She outlined her role in getting local traders working together and the organisation of events such as “Withington By Night” and projects such as the Withington Walls Project, reporting that local people were being consulted on the images for the street art. She reported that future plans included working more with the Christie Hospital, to increase links between the hospital and the district centre, including have pop-up shops within the Christie and maps to show users of the

Christie the local amenities. In response to a question from the Chair, Jennifer Smith confirmed that she was employed part-time by Withington Baths and this included recruiting and supporting volunteers and working with other organisations that complemented their work, such as health services, and bringing them into the baths.

A Member, who was also a Ward Councillor for the neighbouring ward of Didsbury West, highlighted the impact of the busy traffic, particularly double decker buses, and questioned whether anything could be done to mitigate the impact. He suggested that those involved in creating a map for Withington liaise with Councillor Andrew Simcock who had led on the creation of a map for Didsbury. He also questioned whether the forthcoming re-development of part of the Christie's site would include shops and the impact of this on the district centre. The Neighbourhood Manager advised that the original plans for the Christie's new building had included commercial space on the ground floor but that this had been revised, following feedback from local people and Ward Councillors. The Ward Councillor for Withington advised that the building would now only have a café.

The Subgroup discussed the type and longevity of the businesses investing in the area. The Neighbourhood Manager reported that some businesses were planning to make a long-term, significant investment in Withington district centre. The Ward Councillor for Old Moat highlighted some of the changes which were impacting on the type of businesses in Withington, for example, a reduction in students in the area and changes in the way people found new homes impacting on the number of takeaways and letting agents in the area. He informed Members that the area's empty unit rate was similar to the national average.

The Executive Member for Housing and Regeneration reported that some of the key learning from the work in Withington was the importance of a broad stakeholder group, including residents, traders and wider partners, the challenge for the Council in how to engage with, support and sustain such a group and how to develop a strong sense of place and a vision for the area.

The Planning and Infrastructure Manager reported that since 2009 surveys had been carried out every two years in each district centre on the number of units and the type of businesses occupying them. He offered to share this information, which highlighted changes in the nature of some of the district centres, with the Subgroup Members, to which the Chair agreed.

In response to a Member's question, the Executive Member for Housing and Regeneration advised that it would be difficult to identify one type of business or amenity which was most important as an anchor for district centres. Dr Steve Millington reported that it would depend on the area and that the IPM's approach was engaged scholarship, working with local communities to identify the problems and solutions for that particular area. Helen Power, founder of Levenshulme Market, who also worked for CLES, the national organisation for local economies, advised that an important factor was whether an organisation ensured that money remained circulating in the local economy, for example, through using local procurement chains and recruiting local people.

The Chair summarised some of the key learning from Withington. She highlighted the important role of the local community and how a negative event (the proposed closure of Withington Baths) had been turned into a positive. She advised that the challenge was to continue to sustain this work and keep people engaged which could be done through people taking on tasks such as putting on an event where they could quickly see the impact, for example the increased footfall. She also highlighted the importance of Withington Library and the impact of the public realm, including the challenges presented by the narrow, busy road.

The Ward Councillor for Withington reported that there was a longer-term aspiration to improve the public realm, including making the area more pedestrian and cyclist friendly, as well as ensuring it was Age Friendly.

Following Withington's unsuccessful bid to the Future High Streets Fund, the Chair asked whether there was any news about a second round of funding. Dr Steve Millington advised that this was likely to be in the summer of 2020.

Decision

To note that the Planning and Infrastructure Manager will share information from the surveys of the district centres with the Subgroup Members.

ESC/OSG/19/15 Markets

Dr Steve Millington from the IPM delivered a presentation on markets. The main points and themes included:

- Footfall data from Gorton and Harpurhey which demonstrated the impact of the markets;
- That extending market opening hours correlated with increased footfall;
- The central role that markets could play in revitalising an area, including giving creative young people the opportunity to trade for little or no cost; and
- The opportunity to experiment at a low financial cost, for example seeing if a food market would be successful in an area with a limited food offer.

The Executive Member for Skills, Culture and Leisure emphasised the importance of markets to the vibrancy of district centres and that the markets needed to be relevant to that area and cater to the needs of the local community.

Helen Power delivered a presentation on Levenshulme Market, of which she had been one of the founders. The main points and themes included:

- That the Council had piloted a market in Levenshulme in 2011 but that this had been financially unsustainable;
- That local residents had subsequently worked with the South Manchester Regeneration Team to establish a community-led market as a social enterprise which had opened in 2013;
- That this had been successful and had subsequently expanded;
- That the market had aimed to help address the deeper economic issues in the area;

- The Levenshulme Market Fund, which provided grants to people who wanted to make a difference to Levenshulme high street and that a report on the impact of this was available on the market's website;
- Work with community groups, including groups from black and minority ethnic (BAME) communities, to get them more involved in opportunities relating to Levenshulme Market;
- Work to develop a High Street Health report for Levenshulme;
- The key findings from the Social Value Report produced to assess Levenshulme Market's first five years, which was available on the market's website; and
- The diversity of the market traders, including the number of women starting micro-businesses.

The Neighbourhood Manager reported that it had been challenging at the beginning to develop a sustainable market in Levenshulme. He informed Members that this had involved a lot of work from Helen Power and the other market directors and a small amount of investment from the council, in the region of £30,000 to £40,000, but that the risk had been worth it due to what had been achieved. He advised that the Council should consider how it could empower local people to take risks.

The Executive Member for Housing and Regeneration reported that the Levenshulme night markets had provided a focal point and led to local people going out in Levenshulme rather than the city centre.

Helen Power reported that, through the market, an informal network of traders had developed which supported new businesses onto the high street. The Chair commented that there were similarities between the work in Levenshulme and in Withington, in particular the partnership approach and local people driving change using their understanding of the area.

In response to a question from the Chair, Helen Power reported that she had only become aware that a footfall counter had been installed at a meeting approximately three months' ago. She informed Members that anecdotally traders would say that part of the reason they had chosen the area was the sense of community, demonstrated through the market, and the community of support amongst the traders. She advised Members that Levenshulme Market was rooted in the place it represented, being run by and having traders from the local area and being sensitive to the needs of the local community.

The Executive Member for Housing and Regeneration advised that it was important to ensure that footfall data was being shared with relevant stakeholders.

The Head of Wholesale and Retail Markets informed Members about the Council-run Manchester Markets. The main points and themes included:

- That Manchester Markets operated as a business unit within the Council and ran the retail markets at Longsight, Gorton and Wythenshawe;
- That there had not been any investment in the markets' buildings and infrastructure for several years;

- That the retail sector and markets were facing challenging times and that nationally market footfall had decreased;
- That there had been a shift from traditional markets to markets offering food and services;
- That markets supported local communities, acting as places for social interaction, facilitating community cohesion and inclusion, supporting areas' distinctive characters, providing deprived areas with affordable and fresh produce and supporting traders;
- That the Council had commissioned a consultancy company, Ekosgen, to produce a report on the social and economic impact of the three retail markets and that it was hoped that the report would underpin any requests for funding for the markets in future;
- That business plans were being produced to develop and cosmetically improve the markets at Longsight and Gorton; and
- That Wythenshawe Market faced additional challenges and that plans for the next five years were being discussed in relation to this.

The Chair commented that the benefits of the markets were not limited to the financial benefits for the Council as, for example, they could improve wealth distribution in the city.

The Executive Member for Housing and Regeneration asked whether there was a role for markets in meeting the needs of under-served communities. The Head of Wholesale and Retail Markets advised that this would not necessarily be achieved through establishing a permanent market due to the costs of this but that it could be achieved in other ways, for example, by working in partnership with other providers of markets to provide ad hoc markets in those areas. Helen Power advised that bringing in market stalls from elsewhere, for example through agencies, would miss the opportunity to add social value and keep money and employment within the local area. The Chair commented that a larger market with more stalls would generate more interest and questioned whether a mixture of local stalls and those brought in from elsewhere was possible. The Development Manager for Manchester Markets advised that markets were flexible and adaptable so a mixed approach could be used.

Dr Steve Millington advised Members that, while markets could be important drivers of footfall, the IPM's Markets Matter report had found that there were some "dead" markets which had not adapted to the changing retail environment. He suggested that regulations for markets could be eased, diversity improved and young entrepreneurs, who could not afford to open a shop, could be encouraged to trade on markets. The Head of Wholesale and Retail Markets commented that setting up a market was not a panacea for everything and that there were challenges in attracting traders and creating a successful market.

In response to a Member's question, the Head of Wholesale and Retail Markets reported that there were challenges with Wythenshawe Market and that Manchester Markets was currently subsidising this market. She reported that Gorton Market was bucking current trends as it was still a traditional market but continued to be popular. She outlined the improvements planned for Gorton Market, including night markets

and evening events, and for Longsight Market, including a food market and new seating area.

The Chair commented that the partnership approach had been very successful in Levenshulme and could be emulated elsewhere, noting that some areas would need longer-term investment than others depending on the level of community engagement and local capacity.

Decision

To thank the guests for their contributions.

ESC/OSG/19/16 Underserved and Emerging Communities

The Subgroup received a report of the Strategic Director (Growth and Development) which considered underserved communities.

Officers referred to the main points and themes within the report which included:

- Communities that surrounded an existing district centre which was underperforming;
- Communities without reasonable access to a district or local neighbourhood centre;
- Emerging communities without reasonable access to shops and other community facilities or to a designated district centre;
- Key findings to date including the latest trend in the District Centre Survey: Planning Use Classes; and
- The on-going centre audit which had evolved from the IPM's Vital and Viable pilots.

In response to a Member's question about decisions on new housing development in relation to their distance from district centres, the Planning and Infrastructure Manager advised Members that the location of new housing developments was partly determined by the availability of housing sites. He outlined the considerations for areas where there was expected to be an increase in housing development and how new residents could be encouraged to use the facilities in their local area. The Head of Local Planning and Infrastructure and City Policy reported that district centres tended to have better transport links so this was another argument for having higher density housing around district centres.

In response to a Member's question on what the Council could do to fill vacant business units, the Head of Local Planning and Infrastructure and City Policy advised that there could be some opportunities to use business rates relief to address this and that he would look into this.

Dr Steve Millington reported that, while vacancy rates were used as a Key Performance Indicators for district centres, their usefulness as an indicator of centre performance was affected by "sticky leases", where businesses had ceased trading but continued to pay rent to the landlord. Furthermore, he advised, if there were no

vacant units in a district centre for different types of businesses to move into, this restricted the district centre's ability to change.

Members discussed where people who lived in areas which did not have a local district centre currently went for shopping and leisure activities. The Chair commented that creating a local district centre could impact negatively on other areas which would lose their business. Dr Steve Millington advised that sometimes the solution could be cheaper public transport to district centres. The Head of Local Planning and Infrastructure and City Policy agreed that public transport was important.

The Executive Member for Housing and Regeneration informed Members that the information in the report was a starting point and that further work needed to be done. She advised that this information could then be used to inform Council decisions on where capital investment was most needed and would have most impact. She reported that more work needed to be done on ensuring that people in all areas of the city had access to fresh produce. The Chair supported these comments.

The Chair advised that partnership working tended to be easier in more affluent areas but that these were not the areas most in need of investment. She reported that future housing development was primarily in areas which were served by district centres but that some of these district centres needed to be enriched. She commented on the impact of the improvements to Withington Library and advised that the Council should consider what other opportunities there were to enrich other district centres. She advised that consideration should also be given as to how local neighbourhood centres could be augmented to improve the local services to people who did not live near to a district centre.

Decision

To note the report.

ESC/OSG/19/17 Terms of Reference and Work Programme

The Subgroup received the terms of reference and work programme.

Decision

To note the terms of reference and agree the work programme.