

Economy and Enterprise Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Review of retail support provided by DCC

Diane Close

7 December 2018

Altogether better



Review of Retail Support provided by DCC

Focus of Review:

- Examine and understand DCC's responsibilities for regeneration, economic development and planning with a specific focus on the retail sector including provision in the emerging County Durham Plan to encourage development in town centres.
- Examine trends in relation to the retail sector nationally, regionally and locally identifying challenges.
- Consider the role of DCC and key partners including AAPs, Enterprise Agencies, FSB in developing, promoting and delivering retail support in the county.
- Examine with Commercial Letting Agents in the county the retail offer and the challenges/issues in the county.
- Identify any gaps in current retail support in the county and examine any actions identified by DCC and partners to tackle gaps in provision.
- Examine and understand Durham City BID

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What we did –

- Received evidence via meetings (11 meetings) from DCC officers (Real and Resources), AAPs, Commercial Letting Agents, South Durham Enterprise Agency, Retailers and Developers (4 Large Town centres), NELEP and the Durham City BID.
- 4 visits to Large Town centres in the County (Barnard Castle, Chester-le-Street, Seaham and Stanley).



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Key Findings: The County Durham Town Centre Survey 2017

- Spatial Policy monitor the performance of town centres.
- Annual town centre surveys provide detail of changes in retail units in the county.
- The Survey is an evolving document and mapping tool.
- Used to inform the emerging County Durham Plan.



Recommendation 1

(a) That DCC continues to further develop the County Durham town centre surveys to include detail of DCC owned buildings, hotel and bed and breakfast provision and tourist attractions in relation to the 13 largest centres, 2 district centres and 3 retail parks in the county.

(b) That a member's seminar is arranged to discuss and consider the information provided in the County Durham Town Centre Survey 2018.

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Key Findings: County Durham Plan Retail Hierarchy (CDP)

- National guidance advocates the need to develop a retail hierarchy.
- The County Durham Retail and Town Centre Uses Study - Recommendations for a retail hierarchy.
- Emerging County Durham Plan contains detail of a retail hierarchy for the county.

Sequential Test and Local Thresholds

- DCC's current planning policies are dated and therefore we rely on more up to date national planning policy guidance via the NPPF and NPPG.
- The NPPF requires a Sequential Test and impact test to be undertaken (currently DCC uses the measure in NPPF to determine if an impact test should be undertaken).
- Emerging County Durham Plan includes the use of the Sequential Test and introduces Local Impact Thresholds. The County Durham Retail and Town Centre Uses Study recommends the introduction of Local Thresholds

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Key Findings: Flexible Planning Policy

- Need for a flexible planning approach in relation to change of use for empty retail units – DCC Officers, visits, Commercial Letting Agents.
- The emerging County Durham Plan recognises the need for a more flexible approach in relation to the change of use for empty retail units in town centres.

Recommendation 2

That the ReaL Service Grouping continue to monitor robustly the number of vacant retail units in our town centres and consider introducing an appropriate indicator to monitor performance on a quarterly basis.

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Key Findings: IT Connectivity

- The change in shopping habits has been driven particularly by the growth in smartphone ownership.
- Important for town centres to have access to superfast broadband to capture online custom and to encourage families to locate to area.
- DCC currently running in Bishop Auckland and Stanley town centres free public Wi-Fi schemes.
- Connectivity proposals in the CDP in relation to connectivity.

Recommendation 3

(a) DCC ensures that as a result of the Utilities, Telecommunications and Other Broadcast Infrastructure Policy within the emerging County Durham Plan, all new build developments or renovations (both residential and commercial) are served by high speed and reliable broadband connection.

(b) That DCC continues to work with broadband providers to ensure that residents and businesses throughout County Durham have the opportunity to access superfast broadband provision currently available.

(c) That pending a successful evaluation of the Bishop Auckland and Stanley pilot schemes to provide free public Wi-Fi, the scheme is rolled out where appropriate to other town centres in the county.

(c)
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Key Findings: Masterplans

- 12 masterplans for the 12 largest town centres in the county.
- All masterplans follow a broadly similar format and are developed using a multi-disciplinary group of staff
- ‘First round’ of masterplans has been delivered for all 12 of the Council’s largest towns. ‘Second round’ of masterplans has commenced delivery.
- In ‘second round’ of masterplans, Chester-le-Street have included signage in the development of the plan – signage raised as an issue during visits to Large Town centres in the county.

Recommendation 4

That as part of the ‘second round’ programme of masterplans, a signage audit is undertaken across all 12 large town centres in the county with a view to making improvements to town centre signage.

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Key Findings: Retail support provided by Durham County Council

Business Support

- DCC's provides direct business support to the retail sector, a mix of support including assisting with business start-ups, improving shop frontages, training for business owners and employees etc.
- Issue with organising events in town centres, process complex.
- 'Managing Our Town Centre' project currently running in Durham City – one point of contact for arranging events in city centre.
- Retailers receiving short notice of events to be held in town centres – Stanley - Christmas Market and Armed Forces Day.

Recommendation 5

(a) In order to encourage future events in town centres DCC rolls out the 'Managing Our Town Centres' project across the county, and promotes the project with relevant DCC colleagues and partners including the AAPs.

(b) That DCC's Communications and Marketing Team in conjunction with partners including Parish and Town Councils and AAPs, actively promote community events to be held in town centres ensuring awareness amongst local businesses and subject to appropriate regulations regarding the promotion of third party events being satisfied.

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Key Findings: Targeted Business Support

- DCC offers a scheme of Targeted Business Support to support small retail businesses.
- Issue with how Targeted Business Support currently promoted – Commercial Letting Agents not aware of this funding.

Recommendation 6

(a) That a link to the DCC's web pages providing detail of DCC's business support service and the Targeted Business Support scheme is sent to all Commercial Letting Agents operating in County Durham.

(b) That DCC's web pages providing detail of the business support service and the Targeted Business Support scheme are in a clear format and easily accessible when using search engines to access information on potential grant funding currently available.

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Key Findings: Training Opportunities

- DCC working with Durham Employment and Skills an in-house training provider have developed training courses for employers and employees – digital marketing (2), Health and Safety, customer services, window displays
- Training sessions have been well attended with approximately 50 attendees at each session.
- Visits highlighted the importance of training – need for future training to be made available highlighted by FSB.

Recommendation 7

That DCC continues to develop training opportunities for the retail sector which are informed by local retailers, with a focus on digital marketing, window display/dressing and good customer service and that the training offer is promoted by various key partners in the county to SMEs and micro-businesses.

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Key Findings: Business Rate Relief

- Revaluation of all rateable properties in 2017 and a new rating list coming into effect on 1 April 2017.
- Government in 2017 made changes to Small Business Rate Relief (SBRR) threshold, increasing the amount of rate relief and the thresholds for awarding SBRR from April 2017 – a small core of businesses in the county eligible for SBRR are not claiming.
- DCC offers Discretionary Rate Relief (DRR) which is mainly targeted at providing rate relief to those organisations that operate on a not for profit basis such as charitable organisations and voluntary groups/community interest companies.
- Govt has introduced new reliefs directed at specific types of businesses such as pubs and businesses adversely affected by the revaluation.
- Govt introduced the Supporting Small Businesses Relief (SSB) and the Discretionary Fund.



Recommendation 8

That the Business Rates Team and the Enforcement Team re-target all businesses eligible for Small Business Rate Relief who have not applied to date, publicise all forms of business rate relief available and the associated eligibility criteria via the DCC website, Business Durham and the AAPs.

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Key Findings: Traffic and parking management

- Car parking issues raised in visits to Large Town centres in the county including: Traffic queues at Seaham and the need for more car parking, need to make car parking spaces available at Stanley (regulate occupancy availability/turnover), car parking signage, options for car parking payment.
- Car parking provision across the county is a mix of privately and DCC owned car parks. DCC currently controls over 3,133 parking spaces across the County with the County Durham Parking Policies Document setting out DCC's approach to parking in the county.
- Essential that car parking occupancy and availability/turnover rates are managed. Maximum stay periods can be used to free up car parking spaces for visitors to the town centre.
- DCC has introduced 29 contactless payment machines in Durham City centre which have been well received.
- DCC operates 2 parking schemes to support town centres and retail sector - 'Free after 3pm' (Free car parking after 3pm) and 'Small Business Saturday' (free car parking after 10.00am).



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Key Findings: Traffic and Parking Management

Recommendation 9

(a) That DCC considers introducing to some DCC town centre car parks alternative payment options such as contactless payments.

(b) That DCC reconsiders when car parking initiatives such as 'Free after 3' are offered to ensure that any initiative is of optimum benefit to retailers and limits the length of free car parking in town centres to allow availability/turnover of spaces working with local stakeholders including DCC Councillors.

(c) That car parking provision in the 12 Large Town centres is an area of focus in the development of the 'second round' programme of masterplans.

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Key Findings: Area Action Partnerships

- Since 2009 AAPs have supported 104 projects linked to town centres and retail/business. Highlighted that town centre projects linked to retail projects have the lowest match rate with each £1 of AAP funding spent bringing back 71p to the town centre.
- AAPs work closely in partnership with the Community Economic Development Team and key partners to develop and deliver local projects.
- AAPs had identified a number of future opportunities to support our town centres and business.



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Key Findings: Area Action Partnerships

Recommendation 10

- (a) That information in respect of AAP town centre projects are shared across the AAP network.
- (b) That the review group receives detail of progress made in relation to ongoing AAP projects focusing on supporting town centres and business.

Recommendation 11

That a review of this report and progress made against recommendations will be undertaken six months after the report is considered by Cabinet

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