

# Town Centre Vitality

Overview and Scrutiny Task and Finish Group



# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## **Background**

In March 2009, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee undertook a “review of the year” event, from which emerged a number of suggestions for topics for scrutiny during the current municipal year. The topic of the town centre was selected as one of the top two issues to be scrutinised during the year and a Task and Finish Group was, accordingly, set up to examine issues around the vitality and viability of the town centre.

The Task Group has met on nine occasions since August 2009 to consider carefully the various issues and material considerations related to the following five project areas identified for scrutiny:

- Marketing/Promotional Issues;
- Markets Issues;
- Gateways into Town Centre/Signage/Car Parking;
- Use of Vacant Properties;
- Improvement of the Cultural Offer.

## **Terms of Reference**

1. To investigate, consider and evaluate issues and factors relevant to the review of the vitality and viability of the town centre.
2. To make recommendations where appropriate.

## **Key Aims and Objectives**

While the discussions at the Task Group meetings were focused within the overall framework agreed at the outset of the inquiry, the remit and objectives of the Task Group were widened over the course of the inquiry.

Ultimately, the Task Group’s deliberations and suggestions encompassed an extended range of matters related to the main topic areas, concluding in proposals being formulated in respect of the following areas:

- Formulation of a comprehensive marketing action plan;
- Improvement of the evening economy;
- Signage strategy;
- Car Parking strategy;
- Town Centre living;
- Vacant property policy;
- Development and delivery of short and long term action plans for the Markets;
- Development and delivery of a Pavement Café policy.

The Task Group’s findings and proposals are detailed and explained in the later sections of this report, with the Group’s recommendations being summarised on the following pages of the report.

## **Group Membership**

Councillor Peter Wilson (Chair)  
Councillor Julia Berry  
Councillor Anthony Gee  
Councillor Pat Haughton  
Councillor June Molyneaux  
Councillor Geoffrey Russell

Councillor Alistair Bradley  
Councillor Marie Gray  
Councillor Harold Heaton  
Councillor Mick Muncaster  
Councillor Stella Walsh

## **Officer Support**

Lesley-Ann Fenton (Director of Partnerships, Planning and Policy)  
Jamie Carson (Director of People and Places)  
Cath Burns (Head of Economic Development)  
Simon Clark (Head of Environment)  
Martin Walls (Head of Streetscene)  
Zoe Whiteside (Head of Housing)  
Louise Finch (Acting Communications Manager)  
Peter McAnespie (Planning Policy and Design Team Leader)  
Conrad Heald (Town Centre and Markets Manager)  
Lee Boyer (Sports, Play and Physical Activity Manager)  
Christopher Bryan (Arts Development Officer)  
Tony Uren (Democratic and Member Services Officer)

## **Meetings**

The agenda papers and minutes for each of the meetings of the Town Centre Overview and Scrutiny Task Group can be found on the Council's website ([www.chorley.gov.uk](http://www.chorley.gov.uk)) by following the respective links from the Council and Democracy page.

## **Contribution of Evidence**

The Chair and Task Group would like to thank all the Members, Officers and invited witnesses who have presented evidence and contributed to the Inquiry.



<b><u>Objective 2: Improvement of the Evening Economy</u></b>	
2. That a review of the pricing structure and bureaucracy relating to the Lancastrian Room and the publicity/promotions strategy be undertaken, with the aim of making the facilities on offer more affordable and making local and regional groups more aware of the facilities.	* (see note at foot of schedule)
<b><u>Objective 3: Signage Strategy</u></b>	
3. That a recommendation be made to the Lancashire County Council for the erection of brown motorway advertising signs to promote the Markets and other visitor attractions in Chorley.  4. That a review of the directional signage to and within the town centre for motorists and pedestrians be undertaken.  5. That the Task Group supports and commends the need for an adequate and effective number of signs directing visitors to each of the town centre car parks to be placed at strategic locations within and around the town centre.  6. That the Officers undertake a review of the current location of existing gateway signs, with a view to suggesting the location and estimated cost of any required additional signs.  7. That the Officers be requested to liaise with the County Council to examine issues around the current state and security of pedestrian access routes to the town centre, particularly through underpasses and across car parks.	* (see note at foot of schedule)
<b><u>Objective 4: Car Parking Strategy</u></b>	
8. That the Council's Officers be requested to examine the possible extension of the scheme currently operated with Booths, under which £1 vouchers are awarded by the Supermarket retailer to shoppers at the store as a discount off parking fees, with appropriate retailers being approached to ascertain if they would be willing to participate in a similar scheme.  9. That the feasibility of the introduction of a herring-bone parking system on Market Street and St George's Street be considered..  10. That needs of disabled drivers be taken into account when any revision of the car parking strategies are considered.	* (see note at foot of schedule)

<b><u>Objective 5: Town Centre Living</u></b>	
<p>11. That residential usage of town centre properties be encouraged by the following means:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the Neighbourhoods Directorate be requested to offer an advice service to owners of properties in the town centre that are capable in whole or in part of conversion to flats, in order to clarify the relevant regulations, directives and standards which require to be complied with;</li> <li>the Strategic Housing Services Section be requested to offer assistance in the marketing of new affordable housing units provided by Registered Social Landlords in the town centre, and provide details of applicants on the housing working list to the owners of the housing units;</li> <li>developers of new schemes in the town centre be encouraged to consider mixed use developments (comprising retail, storage, residential units, etc) whenever practicable.</li> </ul>	* (see note at foot of schedule)
<b><u>Objective 6: Vacant Property Policy</u></b>	
<p>12. That an Officer be identified to undertake the role of Lead Co-ordinator responsible for the implementation of an Empty Property Policy setting out the practices and procedures to be adopted and implemented in relation to vacant town centre properties, including a package of advice and guidance to prospective developers on relevant planning application procedures, licensing regulations, funding sources and business support services, etc.</p>	* (see note at foot of schedule)
<b><u>Objective 7: Develop and Deliver Short and Long Term Action Plans for the Markets</u></b>	
<p>13. That a short term action plan containing realistic and viable measures aimed at enhancing the appearance and vitality of the Flat Iron Market; achieving maximum occupancy of stalls; and reducing arrears of stall rents be compiled and costed. The action plan should include practical measures to encourage a uniform charging policy and offer of subsidies or discounts to market traders paying rents by direct debit or in advance, or occupying more than one stall, etc. The plan should also take into account the current economic situation and not impose any undue financial burden that would discourage traders from the market.</p> <p>Several suggested measures that could be explored for possible inclusion in the action plan are itemised in the Task Group's findings report.</p>	* (see note at foot of schedule)



<p>14. That the long term action plan seeking to achieve the following objectives be approved in principle:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Replace existing stalls (5m x 5m) with <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) Gazebos stalls (3m x 3m)</li> <li>(b) Umbrella stalls (3.5m x 3m)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Examine the introduction of a standard pattern for market stall canopies, with a choice of colours being made available for individual stall holders;</li> <li>• Review the markets layout in conjunction with the Flat Iron urban regeneration scheme for integration into the Market Walk Phase II design scheme.</li> <li>• Install powerpoints for Flat Iron market stalls.</li> <li>• Pursue the provision of new transport (electric) equipment to move market equipment and waste.</li> </ul>	
<p><b><u>Objective 8: Develop and Deliver a Pavement Café Policy</u></b></p>	
<p>15. That the Task Group supports and wishes to participate in the production of the projected Pavement Café Policy, which the Members hope will take into account the need to balance the aim of preventing clutter and obstructions in the town centre with the need to protect commercial interests and the vibrancy of the town.</p>	<p>* (see note at foot of schedule)</p>

- \* The development of plans can be undertaken within existing resources. Whilst some costs are specified, it will not be until the full plans are in place that a detailed costing exercise can be carried out. Any detailed cost proposals will require further Executive Cabinet approval.

## **2. METHOD OF INVESTIGATION**

### **Documentary Evidence**

The Task Group were presented with and considered a number of documents and reports during the course of the inquiry. This documentary evidence included:

- Town Centre Audit and Urban Design Strategy;
- Findings reports of recent scrutiny inquiries into the Chorley Markets and Parkwise;
- A summary note of the range of cultural and sport/leisure activities organised or assisted by the Council in, or within the general vicinity of, the town centre;
- The People and Places Directorate's Business Improvement Plan for 2009/10;
- The Executive Summaries of the Market Plans for Chesterfield and Ludlow.

### **Witnesses**

The following Executive Member and external witnesses participated in discussions with the Task Group and contributed to the inquiry:

Councillor Peter Malpas (Executive Member (Business))  
Eileen Bee (Disability Forum Co-ordinator)  
Malcolm Allen (Chorley Town Centre Retailer)  
Nigel Clare (Chorley Town Centre Retailer)  
Peter Morgenroth (Chorley Town Centre Retailer)



### 3. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### **A: Formulation of a Comprehensive Marketing Action Plan**

A note prepared by the Head of Communications, Marketing and Tourism gave details of the work and action that had been instigated by the Council's Communications and Marketing Team since the publication of the findings of the last scrutiny review of the Markets in 2004, which highlighted all the measures and initiatives which had been implemented subsequently.

The Task Group accepted the benefits that had accrued from the enhancement of the marketing of the Markets and considered that future strategies should aim to encompass the whole of the town centre.

During the debate with the Acting Communications Manager, the Task Group focused on ways in which future initiatives and actions could complement and improve the current advertising and marketing strategies. Several suggestions were put forward and these are reflected in the following recommendations.

The recommendations have also taken account of the open discussions with a few selected Chorley town centre retailers, during which a number of worthwhile, innovative suggestions on ways in which the Council could collaborate with local retailers in the promotion of the town were put forward as a means of attracting more visitors and shoppers to the town centre.

#### **Recommendations**

That the following concepts and ideas put forward by the Task Group be assessed by a Task Group of the Town Centre Workshop, with a view to the formulation of a comprehensive Marketing Plan for the Town Centre with the ultimate aim of attracting more shoppers and visitors to the town centre (eg through quality and attractive environmental improvements; reasonable car parking fees structure; provision of sufficient restaurants and cafes (operating to accommodate evening shoppers):

- selected coach operators (eg Shearings) be reminded of the Markets and other attractions within the town centre and requested to contact the Town Centre and Markets Manager for information on available coach parks;
- examination of the means of enhancing the localised nature of the Farmers' and other themed markets to improve their distinctiveness by, for example, naming them "Chorley Farmers Market" or linking them to relevant themes (eg Cake Fairs, etc) with more effective advance promotion and advertising;
- the expansion of the present marketing and promotional campaigns and strategy to encompass the whole of the town centre, with the wider distribution of promotional leaflets throughout the town centre;
- address the currently insufficient co-ordination of town centre promotion and marketing between the Council and High Street and independent traders;
- accept that the degree of business experienced by town centre traders is to a large extent, dependent on the commodity sold (eg shoppers are attracted to Markets on Tuesdays and Fridays; certain shops' business is brisker on Wednesdays, etc), and target future promotions accordingly;
- promote the wide variety of shops available in the town centre, particularly the number of quality independent retailers, in an attempt to attract both residents who do not normally visit the town

centre and other visitors from the surrounding catchment area through the production of a user friendly A4 promotional leaflet and Parish Council newsletter inserts;

- promotion of the late night opening of shops on Thursday evenings will be reliant on more town centre retailers being persuaded to extend their opening hours;
- Council's Officers be requested to consider the production of a small single sheet to promote the town centre, which could be used by retailers to accompany goods despatched to customers;
- Council's Officers be requested to consider the viability and cost implications of advertising the wide diversity of shops and goods available in the town centre on local commercial radio stations, particularly during the period leading up to Christmas;
- the costs and manpower implications, and likely effectiveness, of producing an occasional Directory of forthcoming cultural and sports events and activities across the Borough as a means of improving the co-ordination, promotion and take-up of the events, be examined.

## **B: Improvement of the Evening Economy**

As part of the Group's assessment of the cultural offer within the town centre, the Council's Sports, Play and Physical Activity Manager and Arts Development Officer were invited to participate in a Group discussion.

The Members accepted that, within the limited resources and facilities available, the Council was pursuing a satisfactory arts and cultural programme in conjunction with the Chorley Arts Partnership and Chorley Little Theatre; particularly through its organisation of the Mid-Summer and other Arts Festivals. The festivals provide a range of free performances and street entertainment and the Arts Partnership provide numerous arts activities and music workshops for young people in particular.

A number of Members of the Task Group considered that the Lancastrian Room was not currently being used by the community as effectively as it might and was not realising its full potential. The Members did, however, appreciate the constraints on the use of the facility (eg limited seating and changing facilities; the inflexibility of the space available; lack of disabled persons' access to the stage; lack of catering facilities; heating costs, etc). The Task Group concluded after the debate to support a recommendation aimed at enhancing opportunities for the future use of the Lancastrian Room.

The Task Group also acknowledged the consequential benefits to the cultural life and the general economy of the town of the strengthening of the town centre's night-time economy. In this regard, the Planning Policy and Design Team Leader confirmed that the Town Centre Strategy recognised this aspiration and that the Strategy included appropriate targets and action plans to achieve the goal.

While minimal sports activities are organised within the town centre itself, the Council's investment in, and promotion of, grass roots community sports activities, including the annual "Get Up and Go" programme and the Play Day event on the Coronation Recreation Ground, were highlighted.

## **Recommendations**

That a review of the pricing structure and bureaucracy relating to the Lancastrian Room and the publicity/promotions strategy be undertaken, with the aim of making the facilities on offer more affordable and making local and regional groups more aware of the facilities.

## **C: Development and Delivery of a Pavement Café Policy**

The Task Group was reminded of the role of the Neighbourhood Officers in helping to maintain a clean and tidy town centre. The Head of Streetscene advised the Members of the current negotiations with the Lancashire County Council to produce a practical enforcement policy to apply to the town centre in relation to Café and street furniture, “A” boards and potential distractions in the town centre.

The Task Group was also informed of a concurrent review of the Pavement Café Policy introduced in December 2007 in the light of past concerns at the encroachment of market stalls and café tables on to pavements in some instances.

### **Recommendation**

That the Task Group supports the current review of the Pavement Café Policy, which the Members hope will take into account the need to balance the aim of preventing clutter and obstructions in the town centre with the need to protect commercial interests and the vibrancy of the town.

## **D: Signage Strategy**

The Task Group’s discussions on access and signage issues highlighted the lack of signs both to direct visitors to nearby car parks and to assist motorists and pedestrians seeking specific landmarks and locations around the town centre.

The Task Group supported representations for the installation of brown motorway signs to advertise Chorley’s markets and other attractions, together with a prioritised programme of improvements to gateway signs, bearing in mind the wide variation in the appearance and attractiveness of gateway notices.

The external witnesses also drew attention to the unsatisfactory condition of the Chorley East Ward underpass and the pedestrian accesses to the town centre from the Chorley Interchange and the railway station.

### **Recommendations**

1. That a recommendation be made to the Lancashire County Council for the erection of brown motorway advertising signs to promote the Markets and other visitor attractions in Chorley.
2. That a review of the directional signage to and within the town centre for motorists and pedestrians be undertaken.
3. That the Task Group supports and commends the need for an adequate and effective number of signs directing visitors to each of the town centre car parks to be placed at strategic locations within and around the town centre.
4. That the Officers undertake a review of the current location of existing gateway signs, with a view to suggesting the location and estimated cost of any required additional signs.
5. That the Officers be requested to liaise with the County Council to examine issues around the current state and security of pedestrian access routes to the town centre, particularly through underpasses and across car parks.

## **E: Car Parking Strategy**

The Task Group accepts that the vitality and viability of the town centre is largely dependent on the availability of sufficient easily accessible car parking areas.

A number of worthwhile proposals for ways of assisting a improving car parking facilities for shoppers and visitors to the town centre emerged from the discussions with the Disability Forum Co-ordinator and selected town centre retailers. The majority of the suggestions are reflected in the following recommendations.

### **Recommendations**

1. That the Council's Officers be requested to examine the possible extension of the scheme currently operated with Booths, under which £1 vouchers are awarded by the Supermarket retailer to shoppers at the store as a discount off parking fees, with appropriate retailers being approached to ascertain if they would be willing to participate in a similar scheme.
2. That the feasibility of the introduction of a herring-bone parking system on Market Street and St George's Street be considered.
3. That needs of disabled drivers be taken into account when any revision of the car parking strategies are considered.

## **F: Town Centre Living**

The Head of Housing informed the Task Group of Adactus' plans to make 8 flats at Halliwell Street in the town centre available for social rented housing. The Members were also reminded of the provisions of the Purchase and Repair scheme and Empty Property Management Orders, which authorised the instigation of measures aimed at converting vacant properties into residential use.

Whilst accepting the limited funding and resources available, the Task Group considered that concerted efforts should be made to convert as many available premises as possible to residential use, particularly as a means of providing affordable accommodation for young people.

### **Recommendations**

That residential usage of town centre properties be encouraged by the following means:

- the Neighbourhoods Directorate be requested to offer an advice service to owners of properties in the town centre that are capable in whole or in part of conversion to flats, in order to clarify the relevant regulations, directives and standards which require to be complied with;
- the Strategic Housing Services Section be requested to offer assistance in the marketing of new affordable housing units provided by Registered Social Landlords in the town centre, and provide details of applicants on the housing waiting list to the owners of the housing units;
- developers of new schemes in the town centre be encouraged to consider mixed use developments (comprising retail, storage, residential units, etc) whenever practicable.

## **G: Vacant Property Policy**

A note circulated by the Town Centre and Market Manager revealed that the number of vacant retail square metres in the town centre had reduced over the past quarter period. Out of a total of 315 units, 31 were vacant at the time of the Task Group meeting in December 2009.

The Task Group proposed the formulation of a specific policy to define and guide future practices and actions in relation to empty town centre premises, under the leadership of an identified officer.

### **Recommendation**

That an Officer be identified to undertake the role of Lead Co-ordinator responsible for the implementation of an Empty Property Policy setting out the practices and procedures to be adopted and implemented in relation to vacant town centre properties, including a package of advice and guidance to prospective developers on relevant planning application procedures, licensing regulations, funding sources and business support services, etc.

## **H: Development and Delivery of Short and Long Term Action Plans for the Markets**

The Task Group were reminded of the recommendations from the previous Markets Overview and Scrutiny Inquiry that had so far been implemented.

A number of the Task Group members consider that action is required, in particular, to enhance the appearance and character of the Flat Iron Market. In this context, the Members were advised to take account of the Flat Iron Improvements Scheme Design Strategy being undertaken by Landscape Projects. The objective of the study is to complement the Chorley Town Centre Audit and Design Study and enhance the Flat Iron Market by allowing it to evolve into a multi-functional market/car park/civic space linked to the Market Walk Phase 2 plans.

At the conclusion of a comprehensive debate, the Task Group proposed the preparation of both a short-term and a long-term action plan for Chorley's Markets, with particular emphasis on the Flat Iron Market. The long term plan should seek to express the Council's aspirations for the future of the markets, including a review of the fees structure to reflect any future improvement works undertaken in the event of an economic upturn. The Task Group expects that any long-term proposals will be linked with and incorporated within the objectives and schemes within the Consultants' study report.

### **Recommendations**

1. That a short term action plan containing realistic and viable measures aimed at enhancing the appearance and vitality of the Flat Iron Market; achieving maximum occupancy of stalls; and reducing arrears of stall rents be compiled and costed. The action plan should include practical measures to encourage a uniform charging policy and offer of subsidies or discounts to market traders paying rents by direct debit or in advance, or occupying more than one stall, etc. The plan should also take into account the current economic situation and not impose any undue financial burden that would discourage traders from the market.

The following measures are suggested actions and initiatives that might be explored for potential inclusion in the action plan:

- Repair and maintain existing stall frames – Flat Iron
- Sign the central aisle stall fronts with Market branding
- Review payment methods to be easier to understand by

- (a) Weekly pricing/invoicing
  - (b) Incentives for paying by direct debit
  - (c) Payment in advance of standing
- Review pricing structure
  - (a) Differential between permanent and casual
  - (b) Reduced charges for using own stall
  - (c) Stratified charges for primary locations
  - (d) Transparent charging based on stall area
  - (e) Concessions for multiple stall occupancy
- Review efficiencies in stall erection/dismantling Flat Iron
  - (a) Saving in labour costs
  - (b) No stall storage required
  - (c) No use of vehicles/trailers required
- Evaluate feasibility of traders bringing own stalls, boards and canopies of specific design for co-ordinated appearance
- Install signage to indicate market location when used as car park for 6 days a week
- Trail new stall designs (see long term) with rent free periods for any trialists
  - (a) Can also be used for Farmers Market
  - (b) Can also be used for Covered Market pitches
- Promote markets as a group travel destination
- Move Flea market onto Thursday to ensure full offer in Covered Market

2. That the long term action plan seeking to achieve the following objectives be approved in principle:

- Replace existing stalls (5m x 5m) with
  - (a) Gazebos stalls (3m x 3m)
  - (b) Umbrella stalls (3.5m x 3m)
- Examine the introduction of a standard pattern for market stall canopies, with a choice of colours being made available for individual stall holders;
- Review the markets layout in conjunction with the Flat Iron urban regeneration scheme for integration into the Market Walk Phase II design scheme.
- Install powerpoints for Flat Iron market stalls.
- Pursue the provision of new transport (electric) equipment to move market equipment and waste.



