

Overview and Scrutiny Task Group - Town Centre Vitality

Thursday, 14 January 2010

Present: Councillor Peter Wilson (Chair) and Councillors Alistair Bradley, Anthony Gee, Marie Gray, Pat Haughton, Harold Heaton, Mick Muncaster and Geoffrey Russell

Also in attendance: Conrad Heald (Town Centre and Markets Manager) and Tony Uren (Democratic and Member Services Officer).

10.TCG.01 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Julia Berry, June Molyneaux and Stella Walsh, Cath Burns (Head of Economic Development) and Peter McAnespie (Planning Policy and Design Team Leader).

10.TCG.02 DECLARATIONS OF ANY INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interest by any of the members of the Task Group in any of the meeting's agenda items.

10.TCG.03 MINUTES OF LAST MEETING

The minutes of the last meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group held on 3 December 2009 were confirmed as a correct record for signature by the Chair.

10.TCG.04 MARKETS ISSUES

The Chair reminded the Task Group that the primary purpose of the meeting was to consider issues around the importance of the Markets to the vitality of the town centre.

The Task Group had previously been supplied with a copy of the final report of the Overview and Scrutiny Inquiry into Chorley Markets published in September 2004, but an additional copy of the Executive Summary and Recommendations extracted from the final report had been provided to aid discussion.

Conrad Heald (Town Centre and Markets Manager) gave an overview of the current position in relation to both the Covered Market and the Flat Iron Market, during which the following points were highlighted:

- Current Market stall and cabin rental fees had been frozen for the past 2 years and were considered to be competitive in comparison with neighbouring districts.
- On most market days, all of the Covered Market cabins were occupied and the average occupancy rate for Covered Market stalls had risen over past years to 70%.
- The rental fees for 78% of the Flat Iron market stalls were paid in advance by regular traders, leaving 18 stalls vacant for use by casual traders. The availability of sufficient stalls to accommodate casual traders helped to safeguard the diversity of goods for sale.

- Occupancy of the stalls on the Flat Iron market was very much reliant on weather conditions, but the average occupancy rate was steadily increasing.

Conrad also reminded the Task Group of the recommendations from the previous Markets Overview and Scrutiny inquiry that had so far been implemented, with an indication of additional measures that might reasonably be adopted in the current climate.

A number of Task Group members considered that action was required to enhance the appearance and character of the Flat Iron Market in order to revitalise the market. In this context, a briefing note prepared by Peter McAnespie (Policy and Design Team Leader) was circulated on the current position regarding the Flat Iron Improvements Scheme Design Study being undertaken by Landscape Projects. The objective of the study, commissioned in September 2009 to complement the Chorley Town Centre Audit and Design Strategy, was to enhance the Flat Iron Market and allow it to become a multi-functional market/car park/civic space linked to the Market Walk Phase 2 plans. The Consultants' findings were due to be presented to the Strategy Group in February 2010, with a view to a preferred option being agreed for consultation purposes.

During the ensuing debate, the following suggestions and issues were raised in particular:

- While it was likely that the Council would be reluctant to increase market stall or cabin rents in the present economic conditions, a future review of the fees structure could be undertaken. This could include the Task Group's earlier consideration of Flat Iron market canopy provision and stall design, and a review of the fees structure within the Covered Market to allow parity between stalls by, for example, a charging system based on floor area.
- Discounts could be offered to Market traders opting to pay stall or cabin fees either in advance or by direct debit.
- Arrears of stall or cabin fees should not be allowed to accumulate to an unreasonable limit.
- Provision for adequate access by emergency services vehicles would need to be made if the Market was extended into Market Street and/or Fazakerley Street.
- The viability of Flat Iron Market traders being required to erect their own stalls as a cost savings measure could be explored.
- Any ultimate proposals affecting the Flat Iron Market would need to be linked with the development plans emerging from the current Design Study.
- The feasibility of reducing the frequency of the current monthly Farmers Markets to a quarterly cycle; extending them over a weekend or a number of weekdays; and linking them with a Craft Fair or similar event, could be examined.
- The viability of future Continental Markets appeared to be waning.
- The feasibility of the Christmas Markets being expanded into areas such as the Town Hall/Magistrates Court forecourt could be investigated.

Recommendations

At the conclusion of the comprehensive debate, the Task Group **AGREED** to request the Officers to prepare for submission to a future meeting both a short-term and a long-term plan for Chorley's Markets, with particular emphasis on the Flat Iron Market.

The short-term plan should contain 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 fees. The suggested action plan could include practical measures to encourage a uniform canopy policy and the 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 account of the current economic situation and not impose any undue financial burdens that would discourage traders from the markets.

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 is mindful of the impending issue of the Flat Iron Improvement Scheme Design Study findings by the Consultants, Landscape Projects, and expects that any long-term proposals recommended by the Task Group will be linked with and incorporated within the objectives and schemes within the Study report.

10.TCG.05 WITNESSES

The Task Group was reminded of its agreement to interview and/or consult the Executive Member (Business), the Disability Forum Co-ordinator and selected representatives of town centre retailers and market traders as part of the review process. The Members' instructions were sought on the most appropriate means of obtaining and considering the evidence.

The Group had also requested at an earlier meeting the submission of performance and activity reports from the Sport, Play and Physical Activity Manager and the Arts Development Officer to complement their earlier presentations.

It was hoped that the collation of evidence and review would be completed in sufficient time to enable the draft final report to be presented to the 22 March 2010 meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

It was **AGREED**:

- (1) That the views and comments of town centre and market traders and the Disability Forum Co-ordinator be sought on the various town centre themes considered by the Task Group.
- (2) That the Task Group, at its next meeting on 23 February 2010, considers the performance and activity reports of the Sport, Play and Physical Activity Manager and the Arts Development Officer, together with the views of consultees.
- (3) That the Executive Member (Business) (Councillor Peter Malpas) be invited to participate in the discussions at the next meeting.

10.TCG.06 TOWN CENTRE VISIT

The Task Group, at its last meeting, had accepted an invitation to visit Macclesfield town centre to learn at first hand the measures being taken to improve the town centre.

The Members were advised that, with the consent of the Chair, arrangements were being made for the visit to take place on 2 February 2010.

10.TCG.07 DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

It was **AGREED** that the final two meetings of the Town Centre Task Group be held as follows:

- 23 February 2010 to consider outstanding performance and activity reports and consultees' views with the Executive Member (Business);
- 4 March 2010 to consider the draft final report in advance of its submission to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 22 March 2010.

Chair