

# Overview and Scrutiny Task Group - Town Centre Vitality

**Thursday, 3 December 2009**

**Present:** Councillor Peter Wilson (Chair) and Julia Berry, Alistair Bradley, Anthony Gee, June Molyneaux, Mick Muncaster, Geoffrey Russell and Stella Walsh

**Also in attendance:** Simon Clark (Service Manager (Environment), Zoe Whiteside (Strategic Housing Services Manager), Ian Aldred (Housing Enabling Manager), Cath Burns (Economic Development Manager), Conrad Heald (Town Centre and Markets Manager) and Tony Uren (Democratic and Member Services Officer).

## **10.TCG.35 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Marie Gray and Pat Haughton, Peter McAnespie (Policy and Design Team Leader) and Louise Finch (Acting Head of Communications, Marketing and Tourism).

## **10.TCG.36 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.37 MINUTES OF LAST MEETING**

The minutes of the last meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Task Group on Town Centre Vitality held on 5 November 2009 were confirmed as a correct record for signature by the Chair, subject to the correction of Minute 09.TCG.33 (Gateways into the Town Centre (Signage etc)) by the clarification that the Pavement Café Policy (referred to in the fifth proposed recommendation) was, in fact, introduced in December 2007. The Service Manager (Environment) confirmed that the policy was currently being reviewed by the Licensing Team and that Members would be consulted as part of the review.

## **10.TCG.38 USE OF VACANT PROPERTIES/ENFORCEMENT ISSUES**

The Chair reminded the Task Group that the primary purposes of the meeting was to consider issues around the number of vacant retail and commercial properties in the town centre.

The Chair welcomed in particular, Simon Clark (Service Manager Environment), Zoe Whiteside (Strategic Housing Services Manager) and Ian Aldred (Housing Enabling Manager) who had been invited to attend the meeting to advise Members on current policies and practices on the enforcement of statutory or discretionary obligations and the residential usage of town centre property.

### **(a) Residential Usage of Vacant Property**

Zoe Whiteside reminded the Task Group that the Strategic Housing Services Section was responsible for the strategic planning policies in relation to the provision of differing types of housing units across the whole of the Borough. Zoe referred to the money currently being invested in the Purchase and Repair scheme operated with Registered Served Landlords, under which the RSL's aimed to provide a number of 2

and 3 bedroomed affordable housing units through the refurbishment of 13 or so empty properties in the Borough.

Zoe also referred to the general reluctance of RSL's to invest in the conversion of empty properties or flats above retail premises in the town centre for residential use, principally because of the difficulties in attracting scarce funding and the potential future management problems. However, Adactus was currently planning to make available 8 flats at Halliwell Street in the town centre for social rented housing.

Simon Clark advised the Task Group of the reactive role of the Neighbourhoods Directorate in responding to complaints regarding empty properties in the Borough. Simon explained the processes adopted by the Directorate in contacting the owners of the properties to seek their intentions. The Directorate was currently involved in the examination of 46 vacant properties throughout the Borough (none of which were located in the town centre), including 13 properties currently being renovated under the Purchase and Repair scheme. Simon also referred to the provisions of Empty Property Management Orders, which sanctioned the local authority to assume the management of a property from the owner; repair the property and rent the property to an occupant. However, this measure imposed a future management role on the authority.

A member of the Task Group, whilst accepting the limited funding and resources available, considered that concerted efforts should be made to convert the flats and spaces above the large Victorian premises in the town centre to residential use, particularly as a means of providing affordable accommodation for young people. In response, Simon Clark intimated that the Neighbourhood Directorate could be willing to provide practical advice to owners of suitable properties wishing to convert empty space into residential units and Zoe Whiteside offered assistance in the marketing of the additional units provided.

(b) Vacant Town Centre Properties

Conrad Heald (Town Centre and Markets Manager) circulated a note drawing attention to 10 retail or food businesses that had either recently opened, expanded or relocated to new premises in the town centre. The note indicated the current property vacancy rates within the town centre, which revealed that whilst the total of vacant square metres had increased since the last quarter, the number of vacant retail square metres had reduced slightly. Out of a total of 315 units, 31 made up from the following sectors were currently vacant:

Retail	13
Pubs/Leisure	6
Development	7
Offices	5

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

In addition, a number of measures and proposals were put forward by the Task Group members to address differing aspects and problems associated with empty properties.

(c) Recommendations

At the conclusion of the debate, the Task Group **AGREED** that the ideas and suggestions as outlined below be considered and reviewed by the Task Group at a later stage, with a view to firm recommendations on vacant town centre premises issues being formulated.

- That the Adactus scheme to provide 8 affordable housing units at Halliwell Street, Chorley be monitored by the Strategic Housing Services Section, with a view to Registered Social Landlords being encouraged to develop other similar feasible schemes in the town.
- That 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.
- That 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.
- That developers of new schemes in the town centre be encouraged to consider mixed use developments (comprising retail, storage, residential units, etc) whenever practicable.
- That a specific policy document on the practices and procedures to be adopted and implemented in relation to vacant town centre properties be compiled, the package to include advice and guidance to prospective developers on relevant planning application procedures, licensing regulations, funding sources and business support services etc.
- That an officer be identified to undertake the role of Lead Co-ordinator responsible for the implementation of the Empty Property Policy,
- That owners of vacant town centre premises be encouraged to enhance the appearance of the empty property by an appropriate window dressing (eg advertisements for other businesses or attractions in the town or the promotion of prospective retail/business occupants).
- That owners of empty shops in the town centre be requested to consider more robust means of marketing the available retail premises.
- That, in order to reduce the negative perception created by the profusion of large 'For Sale' notice boards attached to vacant town centre premises, the vendors agents be requested to examine means of mitigating the negative impact by, for example, reducing the size of notice boards or reducing the number by combining two or more properties on one board.

## 10.TCG.39 TOWN CENTRE VISIT

Conrad Heald sought the Task Group's instructions on a suggestion that the Group visit either Chesterfield or Macclesfield as part of the inquiry's evidence gathering exercise. The Task Group would benefit by visiting and assessing one of the new development schemes currently being pursued in both towns.

It was **AGREED** that Conrad be requested to agree arrangements with the Chair for the Task Group's visit to Macclesfield town centre on a suitable date in early January 2010.

#### **10.TCG.40 DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

It was **AGREED** that the next meeting of the Town Centre Task Group be held on Thursday, 14 January 2010 at 6.30pm to consider Market related issues.

Chair