



Portsmouth
CITY COUNCIL

**ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, CULTURE &
LEISURE SCRUTINY PANEL**

**Scrutiny Review of the Economic Development
& Regeneration Strategy focusing on High
Street Direction**

Date published: 15/03/2024

Under the terms of the Council's Constitution, reports prepared by a Scrutiny Panel should be considered formally by the Cabinet or the relevant Cabinet Member within a period of eight weeks, as required by Rule 11(a) of the Policy & Review Procedure Rules.

PREFACE

Short introductory statement to the report from the Chair. To set out context and purpose of the review, quotes from any relevant legislation or other publications, a thank you to witnesses, the panel and finally commending the report to Cabinet/Cabinet Member.

Preface to follow

Councillor Russell Simpson
Chair, EDCL Scrutiny Panel

Date:

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Purpose of the Report

Since the Economic Development and Regeneration Strategy was written pre Covid-19 the Economic Development and Regeneration Strategy concerning High Streets needed to be reviewed. The Economic Development, Culture & Leisure Scrutiny Panel reviewed the strategy focusing on the High Street direction and this report is to present Cabinet with the recommendations therein.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Cabinet/Cabinet Member:

- (i) Consider creating a 5-year plan for the high streets.**
- (ii) Consider providing support for an independent Business Improvement District (BID) through a consultant employed to lead communication between Portsmouth City Council and the BID, to help drive a business plan based on the needs of the retailers to achieve deliverable results for businesses and Portsmouth residents.**
- (iii) Consider providing support for the BIDs in high streets across the city, with funding from the Local Authority in the region of up to £100k.**
- (iv) Consider re-instating a High Street Co-ordinator and team for all of Portsmouth's high streets to work with and for local businesses, as a central point of contact, to ensure the high streets are kept at a high standard of amenity including, but not limited to, street furniture, CCTV, cleansing and maintenance.**
- (v) Consider creating further street entertainment sites across the city to encourage increased footfall and recommend increased communication and awareness of those sites to the general public.**
- (vi) Consider creating a central shared store of resources to be used by all services when creating cultural displays and events across the high streets, with a list of available items communicated effectively across the council.**
- (vii) Consider delivering improved communication and awareness of cultural events in high streets to encourage increased footfall and spending in local businesses.**
- (viii) Consider improving access to Port Solent facilities including public transport and a taxi rank.**
- (ix) Consider the creation of a trial of semi-permanent structures for hire for market stalls to improve the amenity and layout of markets, particularly in Commercial Road and Palmerston Road.**

Background

The Panel initially consisted of the following Councillors:

- Councillor Russell Simpson (Chair)
- Councillor John Smith (Vice-Chair)
- Councillor Leo Madden
- Councillor Peter Candlish
- Councillor Yinka Adeniran
- Councillor Emily Strudwick.

Standing Deputies were:

- Councillor Matthew Atkins
- Councillor Stuart Brown
- Councillor George Madgwick
- Councillor George Fielding
- Councillor Mark Jeffery
- Councillor Benedict Swann

At the Full Council meeting of 17 October 2023, it was agreed for Councillor Emily Strudwick to become a standing deputy with Councillor George Madgwick becoming a full member of the committee.

The Panel meet 7 times on:

- 20 July 2023
- 29 September 2023
- 26 October 2023
- 29 November 2023
- 14 December 2023
- 8 January 2024
- 2 February 2024

The Economic Development, Culture and Leisure (EDCL) panel met on 20 July 2023 to consider potential topics for review by the panel, (see Appendix A). Topics considered were:

- Town Centres and High Streets - Economic Development.
- Culture in the north of the city - a balance

The topic chosen was:

'Scrutiny of our town centres and high streets to establish what may be done to improve them, including dealing with empty properties and consideration of any cultural aspects'.

The Scrutiny Management Panel agreed this topic for review at its meeting held on 26 July 2023.

At its subsequent meeting on 29 September 2023 (see Appendix B), there was further discussion around the agreed topic with panel members questioning whether the scope was too broad. The panel considered the following report at this meeting:

- Economic Development, Culture & Leisure Scrutiny Panel - Scoping paper (Appendix C)

The Panel met again on 26 October 2023 and further considered the scrutiny topic (see Appendix D) and agreed to refine the topic in order to make it more focused, to a review/refresh of the Economic Development & Regeneration Strategy (see Appendix E) focusing on the High Street element and key objective 5.3. At this meeting the scrutiny topic was finalised as:

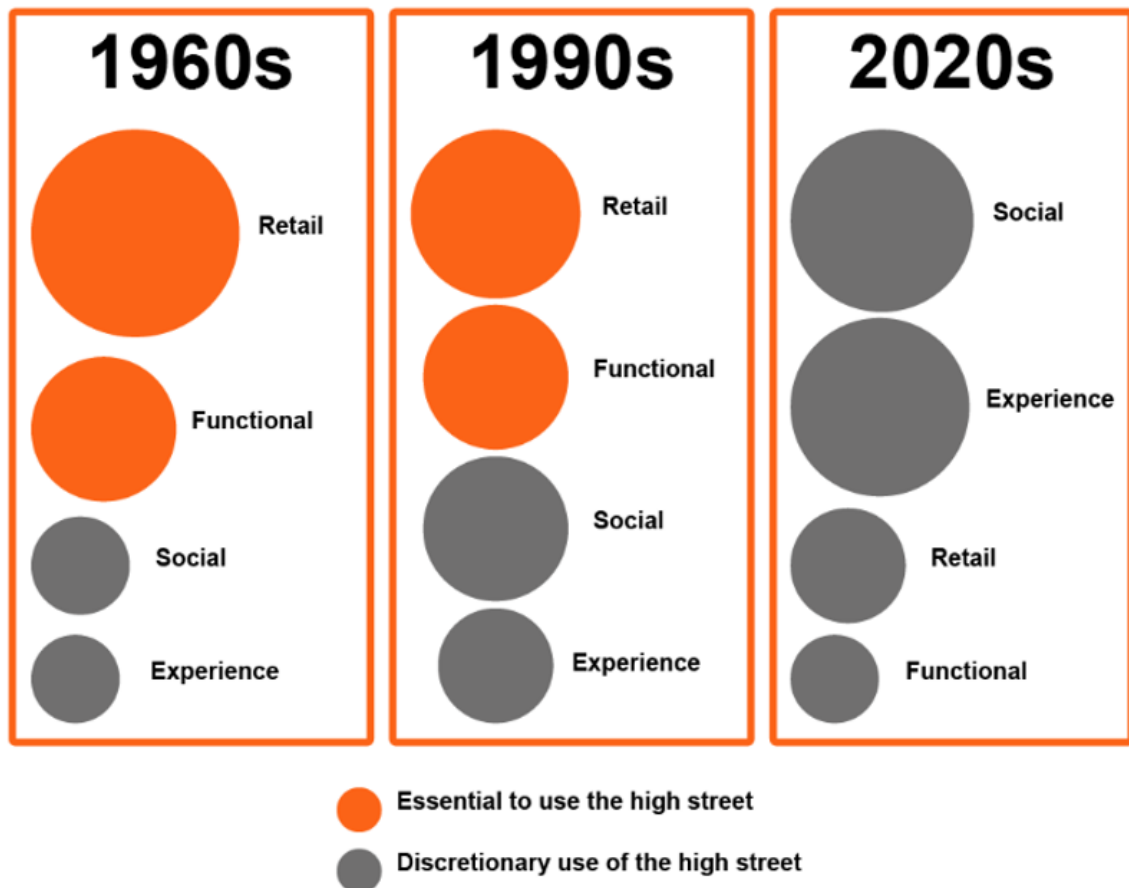
'Review of the Economic Development & Regeneration Strategy focusing on High Street Direction'.

The national context

Nationally, high streets across the country have been in decline for a number of years due to the current economic climate, the changing shopping patterns of consumers with the increasing use of online shopping, crime, shoplifting and anti-social behaviour. This has led to extensive store closures and the subsequent decline in footfall to town centres across the country. Shops have moved to out of town shopping centres with their ample free parking and this too had led to a decline in the traditional high streets in city centres.

The Covid pandemic accelerated the change that had already begun prior to 2020 and caused considerable economic damage to the high street nationally.

This change in needs and demands of local consumers and employers is clearly illustrated in this infographic by the Local Government Association in their publication '[Creating resilient and revitalised high streets in the 'new normal' | Local Government Association](#)'.



This demonstrates the trend is moving away from just the traditional retail function of high streets to something more akin to a 'conglomerate' of experiences with social and experiential a higher priority than retail and functional (banking, postal and medical services). These social and experiential functions are the 'pull' for consumers who then are likely to visit the retail elements of the high street (if they are present).

The local picture

Portsmouth is no different to the rest of the country having seen a huge decline in the attractiveness and economic decline of the high streets across the city with numerous shops now empty or repurposed as charity shops or increasingly hospitality venues such as restaurants, fast food outlets or coffee shops.

Whilst it is better to have some form of business present rather than an empty, boarded up shop, there is still a long way to go to restore or revamp local high streets so they can compete with those out-of-town centres.

The Panel review is focused on the high streets within the Portsmouth City boundary although it is noted that working with Gunwharf Quays as a commercial outlet centre, is central to promote circulation of visitors and should continue.

The review is centred on the Portsmouth City Council Economic Development & Regeneration Strategy and the key objective 5.3.

5. Create a thriving and competitive business environment

Key objective 5.1 Invest in and strengthen the visitor and creative industries sector.

Key objective 5.2 Diversify the economy into more knowledge based sectors.

Key objective 5.3 Revitalise the city centre, and high streets across the city.

Key objective 5.4 Make Portsmouth the most business-friendly city with the best support for businesses.

Key Objective 5.3 is described as follows:

The strategy will drive the transformation of the city centre and all high streets such as those in Southsea, Fratton, North End and Cosham. It will make the digital high street a reality. It will embrace bold architecture. Our city centre and high streets will be re-purposed with more high-quality city living, leisure, restaurants, hotels and co-working spaces.

Evidence

The panel heard evidence, both verbal and written, from witnesses across three meetings on 29 November 2023, 14 December 2023 and 8 January 2024.

EDCL meeting - 29 November 2023

Evidence was received from:

- Nickii Humphreys, PCC Licensing Manager
- Andrew Phillips, Manager, Cascades Shopping Centre, Commercial Road.
- Julie Carolan, Manager, H&M, Commercial Road.

Nickii Humphreys had provided a brief report, (see appendix F) with maps, on the various busking sites across Portsmouth. The Panel heard that the busking scheme was run by the Licensing department and that it was free of charge for people to register and book sites when required but there was no marketing of the sites. No income was generated for the Council from the permits. The spaces in Palmerston Road and Commercial Road were well used but there was a lesser demand in other areas. Licensing work closely with Rebecca Alexander, the PCC Places and Markets Manager, particularly during seasonal times, to promote as much entertainment as possible in the retail areas.

The Panel considered that additional sites could be added across the city such as in Copnor Road and Allaway Avenue.

Evidence was heard from Andrew Phillips and Julie Carolan regarding Commercial Road, the main points being:

- The now disbanded PCC City Centre Management Team had been the 'glue' between other areas of the council, such as the cleaning contractors and landscaping and they had worked to ensure that what was best for the city centre was put first. This team had a marketing and maintenance budget and were in place for the well-being of the city centre.
- Since the team was disbanded in 2016, there had been no-one pushing the needs of the city centre, to its detriment. Retailers such as Marks & Spencer had cited the removal of the City Centre Team as a key reason for leaving the city centre, as they saw no investment or ambition from PCC.
- The city centre had become an afterthought for PCC as most of the marketing was centred on Gunwharf and bringing in tourists.
- In relation to crime, investment in infrastructure for the city centre had been minimal with the CCTV cameras being too old for the Crown Prosecution Service needs, as the images were not good enough for prosecutions.
- The trees in the city centre blocked out two of the CCTV cameras for 8 months of the year as they grow to a point where they are touching the buildings on both sides and do not give a clear view so are not used by the Police.
- Overall, the investment in the city centre had not always been the wisest and not what retailers would think was the most necessary.
- The poor turnover of trade and visitors to the city had led to a reluctance by H&M to invest in a store refit.
- The city centre was not somewhere you would be proud to bring your family or friends to shop, with broken seating and an uninspiring environment.
- The Visit Portsmouth website advertising Commercial Road was embarrassing and does not showcase the retail options very well.
- The placement of the market stalls in the centre was haphazard and did not permit easy navigation from one side of the street to the other.
- If nothing was done about the downward shift in culture, further retailers would leave Portsmouth.
- Commercial Road should not try and compete with Gunwharf as they are two completely different shopping areas with Commercial Road selling the affordable everyday items. Regular shoppers should be encouraged more.
- The reinstatement of the City Centre Manager to be the point of contact for any matters that arise on the high street would be beneficial.
- Pre-covid, footfall had been on a 3% per year decline. Since the pandemic that had slowed and, whilst still low, was recovering. Online shopping was

starting to plateau and charges for returns were driving consumers back to the shops.

- Changes in planning use classes with its aim for more diversification in the high street was encouraging people to stay longer.

Andrew and Julie told the panel that retailers were now considering setting up a Business Improvement District (BID) focused on the city centre with retail central to the BID. The BID would provide a budget, marketing, focus and co-ordination for the city centre and would bring in retailers to ascertain problems and consider if there was a commonality that could be worked on. BIDs had been successful in other cities. A BID would need someone from the city council to head up the BID.

In relation to mixed use on the high street, Andrew highlighted a new initiative in Redhill, called [The Light](#) , which was a cinema and leisure park with bowling, shuffleboard, axe throwing, and various other leisure activities. This type of venue would have the potential to add about 40% footfall to the city centre and would encourage footfall into the evening trade.

The Panel considered a potential recommendation would be to advise the Cabinet Member to support an independent Business Improvement District bid, through enhanced communication and initial seed funding of up to £100k. The panel also considered, with a potential BID, this may be a good time to try and re-engage Marks & Spencer to encourage them back to the city centre, even if just the food hall.

The Panel also considered two further reports:

- CLED Scrutiny Panel - Looking at the Regeneration and Economic Development Strategy, what recommendations can be made to further support the high street in its refresh in 2024. (Appendix G)
- Briefing Paper from Culture & Leisure Services (Appendix H)

Minutes of the meeting, outlining the evidence can be found at Appendix I.

EDCL Meeting - 14 December 2023

Evidence was received from:

- Tim Keeping, Manager, Port Solent
- Phil Salmon & Les Pink, Project Team for the former Debenhams site, Commercial Road
- Louise Whitmore, Love Southsea Market

A written statement had been received from Alice Masterman, Surveyor and Commercial Property Agent from Flude. Her key concerns for the high street were:

- The state some buildings are left in over time which leads to the area becoming run down.
- Not knowing the bigger picture e.g. a tenant still in occupation but left early, caught in planning, under offer with solicitors etc.

- Parking - Portsmouth is okay but in Southampton that is something that can deter people as it is expensive with one-way systems and closed all the time.

She considered the following was working well:

- Events and markets
- Condensing the space, e.g. everyone moving into the main areas of Commercial Road
- Destination spaces rather than traditional retail

Her comment on what Portsmouth City Council could do to support further was 'quicker planning'.

Phil Salmon and Les Pink updated the panel on the current plans for the extensive former Debenhams site in Commercial Road which included the former Station Street car park. The plans were for a major tall building incorporating high quality private rented residential housing for local people which included retail space (see appendix J). The main points arising from the presentation were:

- The development would include 3000 square metres of retail space on the ground floor with as much frontage onto Commercial Road and Arundel Street as possible.
- The main drivers for the scheme were the private rented sector and would be a building with a hotel style reception, work areas, café, bar, coffee shop and retail. The design was focused on creating a sense of place in the heart of the square actively fronted by cafes and a grand reception to the residential and the rest of the retail buildings.
- The design had considered the 'desire lines' in the surrounding area. Connectivity into the site from Commercial Road had also been considered.
- The aim was to gain full occupancy and to generate income and spending offsite in the city centre.
- There would be limited car parking, encouraging residents to use the good public transport access links in the city centre.

Tim Keeping updated the panel on how Port Solent had successfully weathered the pandemic and current cost of living crisis, due to the unique way in which the tenure of Port Solent was held and made some observations on the challenges that may occur in the future. He provided some ideas on how Portsmouth City Council could help with maintaining footfall at Port Solent including help with the overflow car parking and public transport to the site.

Tim then provided the panel with his insight into the successful elements for a Business Improvement District (BID) as Chair of the Southampton BID. These were:

- To write a manifesto based on what people say they want and then setting out to deliver those elements. A successful BID was about delivering realisable results in a timeframe that most levy payers would understand.
- Key to the BID is the people on the board. There should be a corresponding officer within the City Council which gives the ability to be agile and to deliver once a decision has been made.
- A successful BID must remain relevant and continually review the needs of the levy payers with a good strategic representation on the Board. Diversity is key and should include representatives based on sectoral size, geography and size and type of business, including food and beverage and independent retailers.
- It was important the start comes from the Local Authority but should be quickly passed over to the private sector to move forward. Initial funding of up to £100k - should come from the local authority to pay external consultants to keep the BID on track. It should not just become another branch of the city council.

The panel then heard from Louise Whitmore of Love Southsea Market. She observed that Palmerston Road had been a thriving high street with John Lewis and Debenhams when the markets had started. The market had bought in a lot of independent retailers. She noted that Palmerston Road had now changed into more of a coffee culture area.

Louise suggested that, to allow for the continuation of the successful Love Southsea Market, PCC could provide a more permanent covered structure making it easier for market retailers to set up and that would still allow for movement between the market stalls and the local shops and cafes. She noted that Southsea shoppers were more inclined to buy from independent traders rather than corporate traders. In Commercial Road she envisaged a market selling items that are typically sold in Tik Tok shops or in the old Charlotte Street market.

Minutes of the meeting outlining the evidence can be found at Appendix K.

EDCL Meeting - 8 January 2024

The meeting on 8 January was centred around the cultural engagement with the context of the high street.

Evidence was received from:

- Christine Taylor - Curator of Natural History, Cumberland Museum
- Grace Scott - Museums Engagement Officer
- Ross Fairbrother - General Manager, D-Day Story
- Cathy Hakes - Head of Museums Service
- Dave Percival - Libraries and Archive Services Manager
- Catherine Ramsay - Business Development and Projects Manager

A written statement from Katherine Webber was considered (Incorporation of Youth Engagement Programmes into a 'Pop-Up' Collaborative (Museums, Libraries, Archives and The Hive) Project Model) (see appendix L)

The witnesses updated the panel on the following:

- The plans for the D-Day Story 80th anniversary programme for 2024 and the plans for bringing this out into the city, the high streets, and libraries.
- The highly successful pop-up museum that had been set up in Cascades shopping centre during the Covid lockdown. 60,000 people viewed the exhibition with over 700 activity sheets distributed.
- The in-person events by the Museums, such as street performing artists, which can bring a vibrancy to an area and encourage footfall.
- Pop-up museums present a real opportunity to engage with people who would not normally come to museums or who do not think it is for them.
- Pop-ups provide a good opportunity to cross promote other cultural services across the city.
- The work the library service was doing and the positive impact it had across the city especially those libraries based in or close to the high streets.
- The work of the HIVE based in the city library.
- They felt it would be useful for key items needed for pop-up displays or exhibitions to be stored in a communal resource for reuse and repurpose by all as and when needed.
- Good communication about cultural events or empty retail units would be highly beneficial and having the resources to move quickly to fill that space after engagement with the public once it had been ascertained what they would be interested in.
- The fantastic support the council provides for cultural events and activities across the city was noted.

Minutes of the meeting outlining the evidence can be found at Appendix M.

Conclusions

The panel recognised that Portsmouth City Council officers work tirelessly to maintain and manage Portsmouth's high streets and are doing their best with limited resources. Where Portsmouth has so many high streets, it was clear, from the evidence provided by witnesses, that they need more support to do so.

Having heard all the evidence it was clear that a major factor in the deterioration of Commercial Road in particular, apart from the national factors, had been the dissipation of the City Centre Team, leaving a void in communication in relation to the central management of the area. Witnesses had detailed how retailers felt there was no one person they could contact when problems arose, and how this had directly impacted on the loss of one of the major retailers. Also of note was that the City Centre Team, had, however, not been actively involved in the management of any other high streets across the city which was why the panel considered recommending a team that glues them all together.

The Panel agreed that supporting a Business Improvement District would be highly beneficial for Portsmouth, if done in the right way and targeted wisely. Having heard from Tim Keeping his recommendations for a successful BID, the panel considered this to be prime recommendation for Cabinet.

The Cabinet Member could consider supporting an independent BID through a consultant employed to lead communication between Portsmouth City Council and the BID and help drive a business plan around the actual needs of retailers in the area, to deliver realisable results in a time frame the levy payers of the BID would understand; to form a committee that included senior leaders of institutions across the city, treasury representatives from across various businesses and representatives from retailers including small and independent businesses.

The Cabinet Member would also be advised to support the BID with initial funding from the local authority in the region of up to £100k with the running of the BID swiftly moving to the private sector to ensure no delays in implementing solutions to matters and communicate group strategy.

Other conclusions from the evidence heard were:

- The need for a High Street Co-ordinator and team for all Portsmouth high streets, including Commercial Road, Palmerston Road, Cosham, North End, Fratton, Copnor, Milton and Albert Road to work with and for the local businesses. They would be a central point of contact for matters arising to ensure a conducive environment including dealing with issues pertaining to CCTV, landscaping maintenance, street cleaning and street furniture.
- The need for a central store of resources that could be used by all teams, when creating cultural displays and events across the high streets. Central to this would be the creation of a central list of items that was communicated out effectively to all.
- The use of Street Entertainment sites to encourage increased footfall in an area needed to be better promoted and to include extra sites across the city with the heightened use of pop-up shops.

- There was a need for better communication in an open forum and awareness including of cultural events across the city to encourage footfall in the high streets and encourage more spending in local businesses.
- There was a need for better layout of market stalls, particularly in Commercial Road and consideration should be given to semi-permanent structures in both Commercial Road and Palmerston Road for market stall holders. As noted in the meetings, this may have implications for planning, business rates and anti-social behaviour which would need to be considered if funding was identified.

Update 26 February 2024

The panel had become aware that meetings had previously been attended by Portsmouth City Council officers, including with the Leader of the Council, to commence discussions on a BID process. BIDs had been consistently discussed over a number of years with partners and recently had been led by the Place and Markets Manager.

The Panel were pleased that this positive step had commenced and were pleased that the information heard from witnesses on 29 November 2023 and 14 December 2023, had provided supporting evidence about the need for support from Portsmouth City Council to begin the process.

The scrutiny panel had organically concluded that, within a 5-year plan, a BID would enhance the future prosperity of the high street for both residents and retailers, and it was clear that in order to support successful BIDs in the city, a recommendation would be made for PCC to support the independent BIDs with funding of up to £100k.

The topic of review had originally seemed wide ranging and difficult to bring to a focus point. However, the panel were pleased that a clear main recommendation had emerged and that this had already commenced, and the panel were keen to do all they could to recommend positive support from PCC to see the BID to fruition.

Integrated Impact Assessment

An integrated impact assessment would be carried out when the Cabinet makes its decisions based on the recommendations set out in this report.

Budget and policy implications of the recommendations

The following table highlights the budgetary and policy implications of the recommendations being presented by the panel:

	Recommendation	Action By	Budget & Policy Framework	Resource Implications
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				

