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ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, CULTURE AND LEISURE SCRUTINY PANEL

MINUTES of the meeting of the Economic Development, Culture and Leisure Scrutiny Panel held on Wednesday, 29 November 2023 at 1.00 pm at the Guildhall, Portsmouth

PRESENT

Councillor Russell Simpson (in the Chair)

Councillors John Smith
Yinka Adeniran
Leo Madden
George Madgwick

ALSO PRESENT:

James Daly, Culture, Development and Projects Officer
Claire Watkins, Business Development and Projects Manager
Jane Lamer, Head of Economic Growth and Skills
Rebecca Alexander, Places and Markets Manager
Allison Harper, Democratic Services

Witnesses

Nickii Humphreys, PCC Licensing Manager
Andrew Phillips, Cascades
Julie Carolan, H&M

10. Apologies for absence (AI 1)

There were no apologies for absence.

11. Declarations of Members' Interests (AI 2)

There were no declarations of interest.

12. Minutes of Previous Meetings (AI 3)

The minutes of 29 September 2023 and 26 October 2023 were approved as an accurate record.

13. Licensing Busking Report (AI 4)

Nickii Humphreys, Licensing Manager, PCC attended to answer questions from the Panel on Busking in Portsmouth's high streets.

The busking scheme run by the Licensing Service is for applicants to register with the council to busk at allocated spots around the city including the city centre and other high streets. There are no charges to register. People are able to book a spot at any of the city sites but there is not a great deal of marketing of the sites from a licensing perspective.

The spaces in Commercial Road and Palmerston Road are well used with a lesser demand for any of the other areas. Nickii noted that on occasion

certain performances can give rise to nuisance in stores in terms of the entertainment and this comes under the remit of Rebecca Alexander.

The length of time to obtain a license depends on the licensing services resources but can be done electronically via email with a photograph but at the most would take a few days.

Nickii advised that licensing work closely with Rebecca Alexander, particularly at seasonal times in markets where the busker comes as part of the market. They work together to promote as much entertainment as possible in that environment.

Rebecca advised that at the moment there are more bookings than would normally be dealt with by licensing due to the Christmas Markets and other events and it makes sense for her team to handle the bookings. She noted that people generally want to go to Commercial Road or Palmerston Road and will decline the offer of other sites should their preferred choice not be available. Feedback had been received last year from market traders and businesses in Commercial Road and Palmerston Road requesting a limit on the number of buskers due to the them sometimes being very noisy.

Nickii advised that the age limit for licenses is 17 and above.

In response to a question about promoting to sixth form colleges who have music courses and other art courses, Jane Lamer noted that there is no budget for promotion but it might be appropriate for the panel to make a recommendation to use Portsmouth Creates and ask them to engage with colleges to increase the opportunities. That would be at no cost.

Nickii advised that the only division within the city is that the seafront comes under the Seafront Management team and observed that there are no specific sites on the seafront that allow busking. That area was withdrawn from the remit of the street entertainment licensing probably due to management issues, particularly in the summer when there are events on the Esplanade.

Councillor Madgwick stated he was not sure that a space in Allaway Avenue would be successful but noted that in the Paulsgrove Community Centre there is a music scheme/music hub so it could be beneficial to link with them to attempt to liven up the Paulsgrove shops area.

The Chair suggested identifying a space in Copnor Road and Allaway Avenue and considered schools may benefit from a good rehearsal space, especially as Copnor has wide pavements. Councillor Magwick also identified College Park as a potential site.

Nickii advised that the buskers regulated by licensing are on the highway and if it was on any other land the engagement would have to be by colleagues in Property Services on how that land was utilised. The minimum age under the Children's Employment Act is 17 and any person under 17 would not be able to busk.

Nickii further highlighted that busking is for people who are collecting money for themselves. If there was to be a collection of funds going to a charity or any goods are sold as part of the busking, that technically becomes a commercial enterprise for the sale of goods which would mean street trading and any proceeds to charity would require a permit. All this information is provided to buskers when they make an application.

Nickii advised that even if young people had an adult with them, it would require a different licence and this could be checked with the Employment Officer in Children's Services.

Rebecca advised that when people book there is a conversation about the activity that is going to take place and then a connection can be made with other services in the council should it be needed e.g., Children's Services. They try and enable activities if possible.

The other witnesses were asked their views on busking in the city centre.

Julie Carolan (H&M) stated she was not aware that there were specific sites in the city centre but stated that from a business perspective, music playing outside the store can often conflict with the music being played in store. However, she considered it important to try and enliven the high street and have a variety of entertainment where possible. She thought the spots should be called 'Entertainment Spots' rather than 'busking'.

Andy Phillips (Cascades) stated they often have school choirs in the centre at this time of year which are always popular. They link entertainment in with their promotional items for certain spots on certain weekends. Being an indoor site, they have to be mindful of volume levels. He noted that busking in the high street could sometimes be very loud especially if there were one or two competing. He asked if there was any monitoring of amplification.

Rebecca advised that applicants are sent a formal email regarding various things including volume levels being acceptable. In terms of monitoring, it depends on resources whether levels are checked. She noted, however, that there are often a number of un-booked activities, and the council has very limited enforcement capabilities in that respect. They will be directed to the formal booking process.

The Panel suggested a recommendation that additional sites are considered across the city such as in Copnor Road and Allaway Avenue.

14. Briefing Paper - Economic Development. (AI 5)

The Panel noted the briefing paper.

15. Briefing Paper - Culture and Leisure Services (AI 6)

The Panel noted the briefing paper.

16. Scrutiny Review of the Economic Development & Regeneration Strategy focusing on High Street Direction (AI 7)

The Panel heard evidence from Julie Carolan, H&M and Andrew Phillips, Cascades.

Andrew Phillips - Cascades

Andrew told the Panel he had been working in Cascades since 2015. At that time Portsmouth City Council had a City Centre Management Team with 3 full time employees. He observed that they were the 'glue' between other areas of the council such as cleaning contracts and landscaping and they worked to ensure that what was best for the city centre was put first. This team also had a marketing and maintenance budget and were in place for the well-being of the city centre.

In 2016 the team was disbanded, and items devolved out to other services in the council and other contractors and since then there has not been anyone pushing the needs of the city centre. Retailers such as M&S had sited the removal of the City Centre Management Team as a key reason for leaving the city centre as they saw no investment or ambition from PCC. M&S leaving left a massive hole in the high street.

He considered that the city centre had become an afterthought for PCC as most marketing is targeted on Gunwharf and bringing in tourists. However, local people don't shop in Gunwharf every week, they shop in the main high streets. Gunwharf is for aspirational purchases for birthdays and Christmas.

In relation to crime, Andrew observed that investment in infrastructure for the city centre had been minimal with the CCTV cameras being too old for Crown Prosecution Service needs with the images not being good enough for prosecutions. In addition, the trees in the city centre block out two of the cameras for 8 months of the year as they grow to a point where they are touching the buildings on both sides. The Police come to the Cascades to use their cameras as they are lower down and give a better view.

He noted there has been some money spent on the cobblestones a while ago but that had been a bit of a disaster because they had to be planed back because people were falling over them.

He considered that, overall, the investment that had been made in the city centre had not always been the wisest and not what the retailers would think was the most necessary. Not having the central focus from a City Centre Management Team had led to disorganisation and money spent could have been better spent in area to actually benefit the retailers as well.

Julie Carolan, H&M

Julie advised she had worked for H&M in the city centre since 2001 and had seen it go from a thriving city to a huge decline. She considered Portsmouth was one of the worst cities that H&M operate in for turnover of trade and visitors to the city. This has led to a reluctance by H&M to invest in the store

for a refit with visitors from Sweden not only looking at the store but also the city and consider how a £2million refit investment will go.

- Julie observed, as someone who works and shops in the city, it is not a place you would be proud to bring your family shopping for the day. It is not an easy or safe place to shop most of the time with broken seating and an uninspiring high street.

She drew attention to the Visit Portsmouth website and noted that the main store highlighted was Specsavers and included Debenhams and Top Shop, both of which have now gone.

The advertising of the city centre, she considered, was quite embarrassing when we should be proud of what is around. She noted the placement of the market in Commercial Road can make it difficult to easily cross the precinct from one shop to another with the stalls not being grouped together in a coherent manner. She considered the city centre had turned back the years by more than 10.

Julie advised she had recently called a meeting with Councillor Pitt and the Police with 47 attendees from the city, including retailers and noted the culture had been encouraged downward rather than upward. She considered that if nothing is done the remaining retailers will go.

She considered Commercial Road should not try and compete with Gunwharf as they are two completely different shopping areas. The turnover of two of the biggest stores in Commercial Road would outreach the turnover of stores in Gunwharf and there are more visitors that go to commercial road regularly - local shoppers - as Commercial Road sells the affordable items and is an affordable place to shop. These regular shoppers need to be encouraged.

- Andy advised that most of the retailers, were now considering setting up a Business Improvement District (BID) that is focused on the city centre with retail at the heart. This would provide everything that the disbanded City Centre Management Team provided in terms of people who are answerable to retailers to demonstrate focus and effectiveness. The BID would provide a budget, marketing, focus and co-ordination for the city centre. The BID would bring in retailers to ascertain the problems and see if there is a commonality to the problems that could be worked on. The booking of busking sites could also move across from the council. BIDs have been successful in other cities.

The Panel asked about the loss of the big anchor stores in Commercial Road and in particular M&S.

Andy advised that M&S still own the building they were in. Julie thought it would be beneficial to try and contact M&S to try and encourage them back.

The Panel asked if they would like to see the City Centre Manager post reinstated?

Julie said they needed a nominated person they could direct problems and ideas to. She had been frustrated, as a retail manager, at what was happening around her, the city dying and the shoplifting. The retailers need someone who could head up that part of the BID as it is important to get the feedback from the retailers on how to make changes, what is positive and how the city is doing. She noted that online shopping does bring people into the city centre with H&M currently holding 400 parcels through the click and collect schemes.

Andy noted that, pre-covid, footfall in shopping areas was on a 3% per year decline. Since the pandemic that has slowed and whilst low is recovering. Online shopping has stopped growing at the same rate and is starting to plateau as retailers are starting to charge for returns which is impacting and driving consumers back to the shops. Retailers will always have to battle the convenience of online shopping so the provision of the experience with shopping is so important. Andy also noted the changes in Planning use classes with its aim for more diversification in the high street encouraging people to stay longer.

Jane Lamer welcomed all of the honest feedback that had been provided by Julie and Andy. She stated the service had had to adapt the markets they are now dealing with and noted the change they had thought would take 10 years had taken place in 2 with the pandemic. The changes in Planning Class use had impacted as well allowing for a mixed-use economy. The service had restructured earlier in the year and were currently recruiting for a city centre co-ordinator. The service will be refocusing and will cover all the cities centres with the new city centre co-ordinator and two part time market assistants. This would have to meet a zero-budget position or the service would make a loss and have to reduce services. Limited budgets impact.

Jane noted BIDs had been encouraged in several areas so it was positive that the City Centre was proposing to go ahead with one - it was very welcome, and the council would do everything it could to help facilitate but noted it has to be driven by the businesses.

Andy noted a good example of a mixed use in the high street with a new initiative in Redhill called The Light, which is a cinema and a whole leisure park, with bowling, shuffleboard, axe throwing, mini bowls, karaoke and rock-climbing walls. Something like this in Commercial Road would add about 40% to the footfall and encouraging footfall into the evening trade.

The Panel considered providing a City Centre Manager in partnership with the BID could be a recommendation. There was also a suggestion of a link between Gunwharf and Commercial Road, with a bus link or hopper bus. They considered this may be a good time to try and re-engage with M&S to encourage them back to the city centre, even if it was just the food hall. Andy and Jane provided some information on previous negotiations with M&S which had stalled but with the BID things may change for them.

Claire Watkins asked whether Andy had considered the recent Cultural 'World of Wonder' pop-up in Cascades a success. She noted there had been 66,000 visits through the QR codes.

Andy replied it was and that they had replicated it several times with other people, other museums. His preference would be to have a pop-up or interesting window display rather than just an empty unit as it benefits the centre either financially or experientially. He was happy to discuss further ideas for pop-ups.

The Chair ended the meeting at 14:15 and thanked the witnesses for attending.

The meeting concluded at 2.15 pm.

Councillor Russell Simpson
Chair

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