



Vitality of High Streets and Town Centres Task and Finish Forum

Final Report
September 2012

Preface



Councillor Tim Wood

Chairman of the Vitality of High Streets and Town Centres Task and Finish Forum

Members: Graham Brown; Roger Giles; Pat Graham; Steve Hall; Sheila Kerridge; and John O'Leary

There is little doubt that town centres are under increasing pressure from the competition coming from out of town trading. This pressure is certainly not confined to East Devon but nevertheless the shops in the towns of East Devon are, in general, suffering as significantly as those elsewhere.

With the present recession, many shops, that would be barely profitable in better times, are not getting sufficient income to cover their costs. Some are simply surviving because shop owners are relying on the income of a spouse to enable them to carry on and are hoping for better times in the future. Others have gone to their landlord and managed to agree a rent reduction while times are difficult.

It would be foolish to believe that the present problems experienced in our town centres will disappear once our economy begins to recover. Many town centres have been facing steady decline over the last fifty years. Supermarkets have had a big impact, but the problems have been compounded in some areas as older towns were not designed for the car and local authorities have increasingly perceived parking charges as a useful source of income.

The suggestions made in the Portas Report offer ways in which towns can improve their prospects and, for example, town teams may do much to stimulate the attractiveness of town centres. However, the truth is that small town centre shops are facing increasingly difficult prospects. In this district, Tesco has well over 70% of the food market in Exmouth, Otter Nurseries appears to have vastly more shoppers than Ottery St Mary, and the new Tesco in Seaton looks likely to be entirely dominant in Seaton. To a degree Axminster is having success through the attractions of the River Cottage, Sidmouth with its large hotels, its Fields department store also has magnets to attract the shopper and the relatively high income levels of many Budleigh Salterton residents help to support some excellent small shops.

This report identifies some issues that may help town centre vitality but the fundamental matter that needs to be addressed is the lack of competitiveness of town centre shops compared with out of town shopping. Despite the view of valuation officers, we conclude that rate valuations favour large out of town stores. Such stores also provide free convenient parking compared with expensive and sometimes inadequate parking in town. This is an issue that has to be resolved if town centre shopping is to survive.

Recommendations

The Forum recommends the following, based on their interviews, findings and consultation;

- (1) Raise awareness of the right to appeal a rateable value to local businesses, particularly in respect of recent supermarket builds in the Seaton and Ottery St Mary Town areas;
- (2) Promote advice on how businesses can get help with business rates, covering both the appeal process to the Valuation Office, and the business rate reliefs available;
- (3) That the Council pursue with Government the case for either introducing a rateable value increase on the basis of private parking spaces or allowing councils to make an annual charge for such spaces;
- (4) Explore the viability of pay on exit schemes at the Council's car parks located close to town centres; and introduces a pay by phone system as an interim step to offer the choice to users to top up their parking ticket;
- (5) Those town centres with difficulties for very short term parkers should be looked at with a view to providing some extra parking spaces for stops of half an hour;
- (6) Plans should be pursued for the provision of extra parking close to the town centres of Exmouth and Sidmouth, possibly involving the building of multi-storey car parks in those locations;
- (7) In a review of parking charges, consider the provision of periods of much cheaper or free car parking, such as having the first half hour free, to encourage more substantial numbers of shoppers into the town centres; and consider coach parking fees and arrangements to encourage coach operators to bring passengers into towns;
- (8) Lobby Government to permit councils to obtain income either from rating income or more specific charges from out of town shops and retailers providing free parking, with such income being used to reduce town centre parking charges;
- (9) Ensure robust monitoring both of charity shops to ensure the permitted proportion of new goods to second hand goods for sale is not exceeded; and of farm shops to ensure the percentage of local goods sold meets the requirements set out in policy E15 of the Local Plan;

- (10) Work with and stimulate town councils to develop their own vision for the development of shops or activities that might act as a magnet to encourage visitors and shoppers to their town centre;
- (11) Where appropriate, modify planning policies to reduce the size of town centre shopping areas to enable the smaller number of shops to be fully commercially viable;
- (12) Work with the County Council and town councils to prioritise improving signage to and in towns to highlight location of town centres and key attractions;
- (13) Where there are empty premises over shops, it is recommended that the District Council, under its **Empty Homes Strategy** (Sections 10.5 and 10.6), takes a more proactive stance in investigating, where possible, with the owners of premises what possibilities there might be for their empty premises being brought into residential use.

Review Approach

How does the review relate to the Council Plan?

The Council Plan states that the Council is here to accommodate, guide, and work with the local business community across the District. In light of the current economic climate and recent media attention on high streets following the Mary Portas Review, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee felt it was desirable to look at the viability of town centres to see what may be needed to improve the prospects of those businesses located in the centre of our towns.

Scope of the review

The Forum agreed the scope at their first meeting, making clear what was included; but also just as crucially, what was not. The agreed scope of the review is set out below:

Broad topic area:	Vitality of High Streets and Town Centres
Specific area to explore within topic area:	<p>Current health of each of the high streets/town centres in the District;</p> <p>Consideration of current planning policy for shop type location, termed as “primary” and “secondary” and if still relevant for the current high street context;</p> <p>Cost to businesses, such as rent and rates</p> <p>Cost to the customer, such as car parking charges</p> <p>Impact of online shopping and out-of-town shopping centres</p> <p>Suggestions for attracting additional footfall to high streets/town centres that are experiencing a significant downturn.</p>
Areas NOT covered by the review:	<p>General regeneration of wider town areas;</p> <p>Crime and disorder aspects;</p> <p>Location for additional car parking</p>
Desired outcomes of the review:	<p>An understanding of the current “health” of each High Street/Town Centre;</p> <p>Recommended measures to assist areas that are experiencing a significant downturn</p>
Who should be consulted for evidence	<p>Chairman and Town Clerks of main towns</p> <p>Ward Member local knowledge</p> <p>Chamber of Commerce of main towns</p> <p>Landlords of retail premises</p>

<p>What evidence already exists (consultation, good practice examples)</p>	<p>East Devon Retail Needs Study – Original study 2008 and Update 2011 for Local Plan The Portas Review Understanding and supporting the resilience of market towns Number/percentages of vacant premises in retail areas Scrutiny reviews from other authorities – summary of common themes</p>
<p>What experts are needed to help with the review:</p>	<p>Business Champion Portfolio Holder for Strategic Development and Partnerships Member Champion for Seaton Town Head of Finance Head of Environment Economic Development Manager Planning Policy – Retail needs study/Local Plan Town Managers</p>
<p>What other resources are needed:</p>	<p>Democratic Services to service</p>
<p>Timescale including start date:</p>	<p>Six meetings in total, starting in March 2012 with completion in July/August to report to OS September 2012</p>

Evidence sources

The Forum took into account contributions from:

- Town Councils
- Chambers of Commerce
- Exmouth Town Team
- Local Landlord
- Valuation Office

Existing reports were also considered, including:

- Mary Portas Review
- GVA Grimley Retail Needs Study April 2008 and subsequent update 2011
- Draft Local Plan
- Scrutiny reports from authorities nationally on high street reviews
- Dorchester BID Business Plan

Individual Forum Members visited two towns in the District outside their own Ward, to get a view of the town centre and talk to local traders and shoppers. Each followed criteria on which to evaluate their visit:

- Was the high street/town centre easy to find?
- Was it well signposted?
- Did you park for free or pay for parking (if using a car to visit)
- How easy was it to get to the town centre using public transport (if not using your car)
- What was your overall feel of the area – clean, well kept and welcoming or grubby, in need of repair/repaint and offputting?
- Did you notice a lot of charity shops?
- Did you notice a lot of independent shops?
- How many vacant premises did you see?
- Was it a market day on your visit?
- Was it quiet, ticking over, or very busy with people on the high street?
- Did you find the level of traffic a distraction?
- Did you buy anything?
- Did the town centre appear disabled access friendly?
- Did you talk to any shop staff/owners on your visit about their views on the high street?
- Was there any particular point or area that you felt was the jewel of the high street – that could be its selling point?

Findings

Health of Towns in the District

The Forum was keen to establish, through discussions with the Town Councils and others, the general economic health of each town. Clearly many businesses were remaining open but often not clearing profit; but some towns appeared to be suffering more than others in the current economic climate. Visits by Forum Members also revealed how busy each location was in terms of footfall and the views of local traders and shoppers.

Axminster

The impression left on the Forum, through visits and in discussion in meetings, was a positive one overall. The town benefits from a good selection of independent shops and the added attraction of the “celebrity” factor of River Cottage restaurant. This adds many visitors to the town. Continued positive efforts of the local Tourist Information Centre also help to promote the town as a destination.

The town benefits from good transport links – the train station, bus routes links to both the east and west – and coach parking issues have been resolved locally to provide drop off in town with parking and driver facilities at Millwey Rise. Talking with local traders during visits had confirmed that, despite the current economic climate, traders were positive about the town and how it was being promoted.

The town has clearly suffered from the impact of the Websters site and is anxious to see it developed, to enhance the centre and provide additional attractions and shops, in preparation of the growth of housing. The central car park in that area, offering only a relatively small number of spaces, could be better utilised as development and locate parking on the edge of the main shopping areas instead.

The Forum was impressed with the Town Council’s commitment to continue to work to promote the town, not relying on the River Cottage factor alone to bring in visitors and trade to the town.

Budleigh Salterton

Another town that left a positive impression over all, Budleigh Salterton has a good selection of independent high quality shops and provides a comprehensive range of goods for residents. The traders clearly pride themselves on the quality of service provided and the range and presentation of goods offered that attract both locals and visitors to the town. It perhaps should be noted that the town has quite a high percentage of residents who are both elderly and affluent and who like to patronise the local shops rather than travel further afield.

Parking facilities locally work well and coach parking is adequate and well used. In contrast to other towns, footfall continues to be consistent after midday, with the high street just as busy

in the afternoons. The town does suffer from a fall in trade in the winter months but this appears to be sustained by good trade in the summer and consistent local resident use throughout the year.

The town clearly benefitted from the literary and arts festivals held throughout the year that had increased in reputation and continued to draw in large numbers of visitors year on year. A new Sunday French Market trial has been successful in bringing more footfall to those shops open on that day. The Forum noted the positive work of the local Chamber of Commerce in facilitating events and improvements for the town.

Exmouth

Exmouth is a large town with a population of about 38,000. For a town of that size, the range and size of shops is disappointing. For example, there is only one small shop that can be considered a men's outfitter, there is no shop that can be considered to be even a small department store, and for women's clothes the shops tend to concentrate on the low cost end of the market. A Tesco supermarket, on the edge of the town has over 70% of the retail food market.

Exmouth has taken the step of creating a Town Team, one of the recommendations made by Mary Portas in her review of December 2011. The team consists of representatives from the Town Council, representatives from the Chamber of Commerce and the Exmouth Traders association, and others. Whilst their bid for a Portas Pilot was unsuccessful, the Town Team has started to review the signage around the town, working with the District Council's Streetscene service. They are also working towards the relocation and updating of maps in the area better to direct visitors between seafront and town centre facilities.

The Town Team has a number of creative ideas and impressed the Forum with the enthusiasm and determination to pursue improvements to the town, including marketing the town as a destination for families.

Parking is a key issue for Exmouth and, during the course of their investigation, the Forum considered that more parking close to the shopping centre was required. Pay on exit parking was favoured by the Town Team and indeed this had formed part of the bid for the Portas Pilot.

Visits by the Forum had given the impression of a fairly bustling town and less empty shops than previous years – the redevelopment of the Strand giving the town a fresh look. Exeter Road shopping area appeared considerably quieter. This gave rise to discussion of pulling back the town centre shops to the nucleus of the town, to improve the viability. The Forum is aware of the Exmouth Vision and its goals for preparing for significant investment in the town.

Honiton

Visits by the Forum and a number of recent press articles gave a positive impression of Honiton as a thriving market town. Traders asked gave a positive response to how they felt the level of trade was in light of the current economic climate. The town clearly benefits from the market days with increased footfall drawing visitors into both the market and the town centre shops, but suffers from a significant drop in footfall in the afternoons. The Forum was made aware of possible issues between market stall goods in conflict with retailer products, but the Town Council gave assurances that this was being tackled. Increased footfall on market days may not, however, balance out the drop in footfall on non-market days. There appeared to be some negative impact on some high street shop sales due to two supermarkets on the outskirts of the town – Tesco and Lidl.

Local shoppers reported that there was an issue concerned with the cost of parking and the length of time needed to shop in the town – again raising the issue of the benefit of pay on exit parking to try to retain shoppers for longer in the town.

Themes and festivals are being developed by the Town Council to help further promote the town as a destination. In light of the location on a main route through the District, the lack of accommodation in the town is adversely impacting on the promotion of the town as a destination. The Forum was pleased to learn of the town's Marketing Group, consisting of members from the Chamber of Commerce, the local schools, the Thelma Hulbert Gallery, the Tourist Information Centre and the local library. A town identity had been developed – “the town in the country” – which was used across a number of groups and proving very successful.

Ottery St Mary

Ottery St Mary town centre has been significantly affected by the arrival of Sainsburys in the town. Mixed responses to this were received when Forum members visited the town – some in favour, with increased footfall to financial and other services; some attributing falling trade to the fact that the supermarket offered similar products.

The Town Council has worked closely with the local Chamber of Commerce to improve signage and links between the supermarket site and the town centre, to encourage visitors to patronise both. Such a linkage would be greatly strengthened if there were more shops between the supermarket and the town centre. The Tourist Information Centre was also commended by the Town Council in the excellent promotion work of the town. The Ottery St Mary Heritage Society had also begun work to promote the town to visitors.

The town is severely impacted by the local Garden Centre, effectively operating as an out of town shopping centre, selling, amongst other things, dining room furniture, kitchen hardware, clothes and shoes as well as providing a substantial restaurant/cafe. The Forum also heard how a local farmers' market could be moved from the current car park location to the main

street to encourage footfall into the town centre shops, but this needed consultation with Devon County Council to gain agreement.

A number of traffic related issues were also raised. The coach parking spaces within the town are not used, reportedly due to cost, and so coach operators were stopping at the Garden Centre instead. These spaces could be available as free parking to encourage coaches to stop in the town. The town council felt that there was a need for a second pedestrian crossing to access the Town Hall offices, but this is currently rejected by the County. Another local issue related to the abuse of loading bays by shoppers and the suggestion that awareness is raised of their purpose.

Seaton

The arrival of Tesco, and the scale of the store, has brought shoppers from surrounding areas to the town. However it was apparent to the Forum members visiting the town that those shoppers are not heading into the town shopping centre itself. There were many pleasing aspects to the newly redeveloped part of the town, including the floral displays in the public areas and the new public realm next to the tram station – but more was needed to be done to assist the town. In the shopping centre there are some empty shops, and some premises are in need of maintenance. During visits to the town centre, it was apparent that footfall is very low. The Town Council felt that relaxed street trading laws would permit street trading in more locations and allow retail premises to spill out onto the streets, attracting more footfall.

The Town Council along with the Chamber of Commerce have done considerable work in trying to improve the town – including a new Welcome Team to direct visitors and those that alight from the tram; and new branding of “Natural Seaton”, with a recent festival linking in with the Wetlands attraction and the Jurassic Coast. It perhaps should be noted that these activities are likely to boost the eastern end of the town centre where Tesco is placed rather than the existing shopping centre.

Improved signage is needed to link up the seafront, the town centre and the attractions of the Tramway and the Wetlands. At present it is far from obvious where the shopping centre is to the visitor to the tramway, Tesco or the Wetlands. Seaton Tramway and the Wetlands attract considerable visitors, some via coach operators, who could provide needed footfall in the town centre if directed correctly.

More accommodation is also needed in the town – local bed and breakfasts have consistent bookings, but limited accommodation restricts the town as a place to stay either overnight or for a longer stay. Requests for more accommodation had also been received directly from coach tour operators.

The Forum concluded that, of all the town health checks, Seaton was a priority to help improve viability, needing to increase the offer of personal service and specialist shops to attract visitors into the town centre.

Sidmouth

The town benefits from having a medium sized independent department store (Fields) and this attracts shoppers from a wide area. It also has a number of specialist retailers such as Goviers that have a national following. Shops in the town also benefit from the custom of a substantial number of reasonably affluent visitors who stay at one of the several three and four star hotels in the town.

The Forum concluded that Sidmouth, although to an extent impacted by the recession, was still a busy town. Shoppers enjoyed a range of independent shops (and indeed coffee shops) in an attractive location, but a shortage of parking is a key issue for the town. A summer bus hopper service from the Manor Road car park had proved successful, but better signage was required to get people to that car park initially. The Forum felt a park and ride facility would help ease parking difficulties, but could not offer a solution to a suitable location.

The Chamber of Commerce has a good working relationship with the Tourist Information Centre, undertaking excellent promotion of the town. The town centre has retracted slightly as peripheral retail outlets have closed; however the Town Council did think that a review of the classification of primary and secondary retail units for the town would be helpful to improve the centre. A winter attraction would also help boost footfall in the quieter winter months. The night time economy was vibrant due to the quality of restaurants and public houses in the town.

Business Rates

The level and proportion of outgoings that business rates occupied was raised as an issue for every town – direct from traders, and through the Town Councils and Chamber of Commerce and other trade associations.

In the current economic climate, the Forum was surprised to learn that applications for rate relief remained at a constant level. The Forum did not expect this to continue and felt that clear promotion of relief available would be useful. The rateable value was set by the 2010 Rating List – based on value as at 1 April 2008. With this level being set at a more prosperous economic time, it did not reflect the present reduced value and would not be changed until the 2015 Rating List – based on value as at 1 April 2013.

Discussion with the Valuation Office revealed that they were sympathetic to appeals on rateable value for those areas that had recently been affected by a supermarket built on the edge of town. This will be worth promoting to businesses in the Ottery St Mary and Seaton town centres.

One of the issues discussed at some length was whether the rating system fairly treated town centre shops compared with out of town supermarkets, garden centres, and large warehouse shops. The Valuation Office suggested the valuations were fair and did reflect the level of trade in the various forms of outlet. The Forum, supported by some landlords, shopkeepers and others, doubted that this was true but it was difficult to deduce the cause of the unfairness.

An obvious discrepancy relates to parking. Out of town stores provide parking free to customers and as this parking therefore does not generate income, it does not affect rateable value. However, in town parking in this area costs shoppers significant amounts of money. It could be argued that much of it acts as a tax on shoppers and is a valuable source of income to local authorities such as the East Devon District Council. It is an implicit surcharge on in-town shopping that is not experienced by out of town shoppers. In many parts of this district, it may well add a cost of 5% to the average shopping trip.

With such discrepancies in shopping costs it is scarcely surprising that town centres suffer. A possible remedy would be place a charge on out of town shopping spaces either through the rating system or a direct local authority charge. If this were done one would expect in-town parking charges to be reduced so that local authorities were not accused of exploiting shoppers generally (and thus further benefitting internet shopping). We recommend that the Council pursue with Government the case for either introducing a rateable value increase on the basis of private parking spaces or allowing councils to make an annual charge for such spaces.

Parking

Parking has been identified as a key issue for many of the towns, with Exmouth and Sidmouth in particular requiring additional spaces. Whilst greener methods of transport are desired, the current practice of the majority of visitors to the District's towns by car cannot be ignored. Town Centre reviews elsewhere in the country by Scrutiny committees revealed that the issue of parking availability and price was a common theme, resulting in a number of parking schemes to help improve town centre footfall. These included pay on exit, pricing zones with those closer to the town centres being cheaper, and promotions combined with parking tickets.

The Forum appreciates that car parking charges set by the District Council realises a valuable income that helps towards the services it provides. Finding a balance between a reasonable income, whilst being at an acceptable fee level to the public, is a difficult one. Many traders cited examples to the Forum members of shoppers suddenly fleeing shops to return to their cars, as their parking ticket was due to expire. Shoppers would not pay additional money at that point and walk back to the town centre to continue shopping. A pay on exit option as a way for retaining shoppers for longer was raised by almost all of the towns. This option was

not identified in the scope at the start of this Forum but the Forum recommends that further work is carried out to explore the economic viability and benefits of pay on exit schemes. The Forum was pleased to learn that progress is being made towards a pay by phone facility so that shoppers may top up their parking ticket without having to return to their vehicle.

The parking costs issue was raised to such a degree in relation to the advantage of out of town shopping then, as indicated under the heading of rating, the Forum believes that a charge should be introduced related to the number of parking spaces available at such centres. The Forum would welcome a review of the charges that would include consideration of providing the first half hour in some car parks for free.

A number of towns, in particular Exmouth and Sidmouth, raised the issue of the convenient availability of sufficient parking spaces. Several people commented that shortages of parking spaces in convenient locations were a major deterrent to many shoppers. It was also felt there needed to be more spaces for perhaps 30 minutes limit for those who just wished to make a visit to a bank, or a very limited visit to a shop. This reinforced the concern that parking issues were a very major cause of the difficulties facing town centres.

Signage

Whilst the Forum would not like to see the District covered in signs, it is clear that some towns are in need of improved signage and maps to aid visitors to the town.

Axminster has a good example of a town map, on display in several accessible areas of the town that sets out the town's key features and retailers. Some towns have already embarked on improving signage, such as Exmouth working with the Streetscene service. A review of all towns' signage would help assist work already in place. Key locations in each town need to be signposted, but a review should also assess how the towns are signed from main access routes. Economies of scale could be achieved by purchasing signs, (including brown tourism signs), in quantity for all of the towns in the District.

Town Centre reviews elsewhere in the country by Scrutiny Committees revealed that signage was a common issue that needed a consistent and logical approach, both for signs within the town and to direct traffic approaching towns.

The Maintenance or Creation of Major Attractions to Bring People to a Town

It was quite clear from the evidence that the River Cottage restaurant in Axminster brought many people to the town and that this benefitted the shops there greatly. It was also apparent that the attractiveness of the seafront, together with the Fields department store and the presence of major hotels boosted the numbers who visited Sidmouth shops. For a small town, Budleigh Salterton has several Literary, Music and Art festivals and displays that encourage visitors to the town.

Ottery St Mary, Seaton and Exmouth are perhaps rather less fortunate or successful in these regards. Seaton has the benefits of the Axe valley and the Axe tram ride but there is no linkage between those attractions on the east of the town and the shopping area. Exmouth has a superb sea and estuary front but there is no satisfactory linkage between that and the shopping area and furthermore most of the visitors to the town are day visitors from Exeter who have substantial shopping facilities in the city.

Exmouth is a sufficiently large town for it to have to have a significant store that would attract shoppers to it in town. It is also sufficiently large and with an excellent sea front that should be attractive to a major restaurant name to take advantage of the sea front. It is hoped that the regeneration of the town succeeds in bringing a “magnet” activity that brings real life to the shopping area.

For Ottery St Mary and Seaton the task may be harder. However, Otter Nurseries is clearly a major magnet near Ottery St Mary and perhaps some form of trading linkage could be developed to the benefit of the town and the nursery. For Seaton the leisure activities involving the Wetlands and the tramway need to be exploited by the town in a way that does not significantly occur at present.

Each town needs a clear vision on how they are going to improve and continue to grow visitor numbers, and some towns have started to form their view of how their town will progress in the future. The Council needs to support the towns in helping define that vision.

Local Plan policy on Town Centre Areas and Primary Shopping Frontage

Some peripheral retail units have ceased trading on the outskirts of some town centres. In the current economic climate, the Forum felt that constraining the established boundaries of the town centre areas, including the designated primary shopping frontage areas, would benefit the town centres. Such constraints would help distil retail and other premises for visiting (such as leisure and community facilities) into refined town centre areas that appear fully occupied and keep visitors interested. It would also permit those premises that clearly cannot economically function as a retail unit on the edges of the town centre to change use.

Fair Competition

The Forum debated the unfair advantages that certain shops and out of town retail outlets had over town centre premises. Examples were given of establishments competing with goods whilst enjoying the benefit of a lower or nil level of business rates. These included charity shops holding a larger percentage of new goods for sale than the level permitted; and out of town farm shops providing a large product range from outside the local area in direct competition with shops in town centres. Charity shops are checked twice a year to assess the proportion of new goods sold. The Forum are keen to ensure that excessive proportions of new goods in charity shops are not permitted, as that impacts on retail units that have higher overheads selling similar products. There is also concern that some farm shops are sometimes

not selling the proportion of locally produced food that they have contracted to do, and that such matters should also be monitored.

Whilst there are clearly resource issues in monitoring such premises, and difficulties in identifying where some products have been sourced, the Forum felt it was important to enforce policies designed to give fair protection to existing retail premises.

Mary Portas Review

The report by Mary Portas includes many recommendations that are yet to be fully agreed by Government. The concept of the “Town Team” is already being developed in Exmouth, and in other less formal forms in the other towns.

A number of her recommendations, relating to business rates and quality of service in particular, are supported by the Forum; however the concept of a new “National Market Day” or deregulating to enable market traders anywhere on the high street was felt to be counterproductive to already struggling businesses.

Online sales

The proportion of retail sales made via the Internet is estimated to have been 10.7 per cent of all retail sales excluding fuel in February 2012. Reports have reached the Forum of the practice of visitors in shops who are purely noting prices, to then proceed to purchase an identical product online at a cheaper price. Clearly retailers cannot compete on price for many products.

Large retail organisations are now selling large quantities of their goods on-line and, for some, this is offsetting reductions in sales at their shops. On a much smaller scale, the Goviers shop in Sidmouth sells a very large quantity of items either on-line or through telephone sales. It is something that a number of specialist shops in our towns might develop to their advantage and use such distance selling to complement their shop sales.

Customer Service and Aesthetics

Budleigh Salterton, among other individual units in other towns, demonstrates that good customer service and quality presentation is of value to shoppers. Exmouth Town Team is aiming to undertake some training for retailers in customer service and actively campaign with retailers to improve the customer experience. Excellent examples like these should be built upon and shared as good practice across of the towns in the District.

Streetscene do an excellent job to keep the town centres clean and tidy. If additional litter bins are required, sponsorship of them could be encouraged to cover costs. Landlords should be encouraged to keep up maintenance of premises in town centres, including upper floors, to complete the attractive picture of a welcoming town centre.

Joint Action and Advice

Action for Market Towns (AMT) is a national membership group that provides small towns, local authorities and others with information and advice, examples of best practice, and gives national representation. Action for Market Towns is a not-for-profit company and a registered charity. Membership benefits should be explored to decide if membership should be recommended to the towns in the District.

Acknowledgements

The Panel: Councillors Tim Wood (Chairman); Graham Brown; Roger Giles; Pat Graham; Steve Hall; Sheila Kerridge; John O'Leary

The Panel would like to thank:

The seven Towns of the District – their Town Councils and Clerks, Chambers of Commerce, and residents and shop owners who answered the many questions of the Forum both at meetings and during visits to the towns;

Mr Ade Brayley, Chairman of the Exmouth Town Team

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