

WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
THURSDAY 20 NOVEMBER 2014

MARRIOTTS WALK REVIEW
REPORT OF THE STRATEGIC DIRECTOR

(Contact: Andrew Tucker, Tel: (01993) 861721)

(Decisions on this matter will be resolutions)

1. PURPOSE

To update members on the work of the Marriotts Walk Review Group and seek the views of the committee in respect of future reports on the issue.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- (a) That, the report be noted; and
- (b) That, the committee continues to monitor performance by way of an annual report in the future.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1. At the meeting of this Committee held on 30 May 2013 it was agreed to establish a review group to consider the impact of the Marriotts Walk development from an economic development perspective both in Witney and the surrounding area.
- 3.2. Having considered the report the Committee resolved:
 - (a) That the draft scoping document appended to the report be approved; and
 - (b) That a Review Group comprised of Mrs Chapman, Mr Coles, Mr Handley, Mr Kelland and Ms Leffman be established to undertake the review.
- 3.3. The Review Group met on a couple of occasions and agreed a scope for the review and received confidential information relating to footfall at the centre and more widely in Witney.
- 3.4. Consideration was also given to surveys that had been undertaken with shoppers using the centre in 2010 and 2011. The responses highlighted the following:
 - 80% of people use Witney because it has a good selection of high street and independent retailers
 - 88% of people rate the shopping facilities as good / very good / excellent
 - 70% of people use Witney Town Centre because it has free parking
 - 82% of people rate the parking facilities as very good or excellent (26% rate them as good)
 - Over 90% of people said the car parks were easy to find
- 3.5. The Review Group also received confidential information regarding usage of the centre and footfall figures and more recent data that has been received indicate that footfall is similar to a year ago.

- 3.6. During their consideration of the issue the Review Group was cognisant of other factors that could impact such as car parking and received details of the revised parking strategy that was introduced to try and increase the availability of parking for shoppers in the town.
- 3.7. The Review Group also received a presentation from an independent retail consultant during which he identified national trends in retailing; provided information regarding the strengths and weaknesses of retail in Witney and outlined the future challenges facing the sector.

4. CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1. The Review Group having received the information highlighted a number of issues that needed to be borne in mind for the future.

Challenges for Traders in Witney

- 4.2. The Review Group noted the rapid growth of internet retailing and the variation in rent and business rates between prime town centre property and edge and out of town developments. However, with regard to internet sales, it was noted that both traditional stores and some companies that had been established as on-line retailers were becoming multi-channel operations.
- 4.3. The threat to independent retailers of the underlying viability of their business when faced with rising costs. It was acknowledged that business rates were often perceived as a key factor in this respect but this only represented a relatively small proportion of operational overheads when compared to rent and staff costs.
- 4.4. It was recognised that future retail development proposed in the County, and in particular the redevelopment of the Westgate Centre in Oxford, could have a detrimental impact upon retailing in the town and Members were keen to ensure that the Council exercised its influence to strengthen and support the retail sector as far as possible.
- 4.5. The committee should also note the separate initiative approved by Cabinet to support independent retailers in their business planning. This demonstrates that measures are being taken which are of relevance to issues raised during the review.

Car Parking

- 4.6. The importance of free parking, together with the revised parking strategy, in supporting the viability of town centres was noted.
- 4.7. A proposed parking review is currently under consideration and the council is continuing to monitor utilisation.

Economic Climate

- 4.8. The Review Group noted that the reduction in disposable income and fall in consumer confidence occasioned by the financial climate at the time had suppressed retail demand. However both the Marriotts Walk development, Woolgate Centre and other retailers continued to trade well and remained relatively content.

Overall Conclusions

- 4.9. The Review Group considered that in a difficult economic climate the performance of the Marriotts Walk centre had remained strong as had retail generally in Witney.

4.10. It was acknowledged that there were still a lot of challenges and was an issue that the committee could monitor in coming years by way of update reports taking in to account the issues raised during discussions and any other factors that may arise in respect of the centre.

5. ALTERNATIVES/OPTIONS

None applicable.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no direct financial implications. The work of the Review Group was within existing budgets.

7. RISKS

None.

8. REASONS

The work of the Review Group is considered to accord with the Council's objective to work in partnership to sustain vibrant, healthy and economically prosperous towns and villages with full employment.

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Strategic Director

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Background Papers:
Agendas and minutes of Marriotts Walk Review Group