

COMMERCIAL OVERVIEW OF BIGGLESWADE TOWN CENTRE

The following are notes from a conversation with a nationally well-known commercial Property developer who accepted an invitation to visit Biggleswade.

The town has an attractive Market Square which could be very successful but its commercial potential does need to be maximised. This would go a long way to help mitigate the High Street's demise.

Commercial activity in the town has been allowed to 'happen' without any strategy. This is no different to the majority of towns of this size but it leads to shop closures and a fall in rental values, culminating in a lack of retail confidence and a fall in property values. This is exacerbated by the change in the retail shopping pattern.

In the case of Biggleswade, there are obvious planning mistakes which need immediate short term rectification. This needs to be followed by a medium term investment strategy to stop the decline in retail confidence and more empty shops.

The town is on the cusp of commercially going downhill. Up to now, possibly because of its location, coupled with customer loyalty and buying habits, it has survived but the tell-tale signs of empty shops and a failing market are there. The impact on the town centre due to the closure of the main access into town for seven months has made the trading problem more apparent. It will also have broken shoppers' buying habits and it will be an uphill battle to draw them back.

Whilst shop retailers in most cases keep up with buying and selling trends, they are vulnerable to elements beyond their control: poor planning of the town's infrastructure and commercial direction. These inevitably result in the closing down of shops and loss of local employment.

A progressive local authority in charge of infrastructure can help stop the downward trend by carefully fine tuning policy, recognizing what is required now and in the future. In a lot of cases, this also saves them money through not going up blind alleys. The local authority must work with the retail sector to formulate the right strategy to create confidence in order to encourage new retailers into the town and give the banks confidence to lend. Success breeds success but the strategy also needs constant review.

Investment in infrastructure projects may not always have an immediate financial return but as the town becomes more successful, a positive return becomes recognisable.

Most local authorities have not explored the potential of their towns or produced a strategy. They should look at and understand the success models that are apparent elsewhere. The layout of some towns can make the task difficult but in Biggleswade's case, it is reasonably simple.

The first thing to do is to compare the town centre with the new out of town retail park, which is already a success story. The developers knew that they had a large catchment area so had to find the ideal location. Then they talked to the major stores that attract shoppers and sold the concept of success. As a development like that is normally built from a blank canvass, it is relatively easy. In the case of town centre, less so.

What the new retail park offers is the shopping footfall that it creates. If this can be tapped into, the town can benefit. How do you tap into that footfall?

Look at why the retail park trading model is successful in attracting the right stores and the customers — location; choice of shops; and free parking. Now look at the town centre and compare. This shows immediately what is needed.

A staged strategy then needs to be produced: short term easy fixes to stop the immediate decline and longer term plans to create success. You can then sell the town as a location in which to invest. Without such a strategy you have nothing to sell, there will gradually be more deterioration.

Looking at the town centre in comparison with the retail park, the first issue you can easily recognise as a major problem is the issue of car parking. Car parks adjacent to the town centre are almost full early in the day with resident, town employee or commuter parking. There is nowhere for visitors/shoppers to park. This means that the only parking available for shoppers is on-street parking.

The new retail park has some 800 parking spaces, with up to 4 hours stay. The stores on the park would not put up with anything less.

The town centre parking is all restricted. One small area has 2 hours stay, the rest 30 minutes or 1 hour. This when the town centre has more shops.

In the allocated parking time, shoppers cannot easily:

- Visit more than one or two shops
- Use a service such as opticians or dentists
- Enjoy a meal
- Visit the hairdressers
- Meet professionals such as solicitors or accountants

This leads to shoppers spending less and businesses such as restaurants not being attracted to the town.

Restricting on-street parking to 30 minutes or an hour when there is no reasonable car park for shoppers has curtailed commercial success of the town and led to a reduction in the type of tenants willing to take premises in the town. Even with a large car park available for shoppers, controlled parking on-street may not be an option for Biggleswade.

In the short term, on-street parking needs to be increased to 2/3 hours to stop the obvious decline. What really needs to happen is to match as closely as possible the offer at the retail park in terms of available spaces and length of stay.

Biggleswade urgently needs a car park close to the town centre to give an extra 100 spaces and probably, over the next five years, a further 100 spaces.

The food stores car parks cannot be relied upon. They will control them for their own use and are doing so more rigorously nationally. Food shopping tends to be separate to other shopping and done on separate visits. Many smaller independent food retailers have disappeared putting more

pressure on parking in the big stores. Also, with food retailers extending the range of goods they sell, the time spent in their stores has increased.

Restrictive car parking, as Biggleswade has in the town centre, also has the effect of discouraging prospective retail businesses or services from setting up in the town. It also has a direct effect on market traders.

The Saturday market which takes up available parking has the effect of reducing the parking available so both retailers and market traders suffer, where Saturday is normally one of the best days for trading.

If shoppers do not have the time to spend money, retailers cannot sustain their operating costs. They will look at reducing costs and often the first effect is on jobs. In the end, though, the business may have to close.. This is evidenced already in Biggleswade by the empty premises and a general lack of investment. This can lead to falling rental and property values and, in desperation to rent premises, to businesses opening which do not present the image of the town which you would want.

The retail high street is already adapting to online retailing but it does need councils to encourage small retailers to do so. With some of the major stores that have left the High Street or disappeared altogether, then one has to look at what will replace them.

If the basic infrastructure is in place in the town, there will be no impediment to new businesses, many of which will be start-ups and small traders. This will make the town individual, which is exactly what is needed and can be the basis of success. You could say that the wheel has gone full circle to what it was years ago. The town will still need to be marketed but this will be much easier with a firm basis on which to go out.

Success will create a demand for retail space. Bigger empty shops will perhaps have to be split into smaller units. It is highly unlikely that there is currently anyone out there who would want to come to Biggleswade and take on a big unit.

So create a distinctive image as a shopping town. Be different. When this is achieved, it should be possible to tap into the catchment of the new retail park, encouraging them to visit the town centre as well.

The current problem is that, if you bring people from the retail park into town, where would you put them as most will want to come by car? Since the retail park is now fully operational, the town's parking issues need to be addressed now. Otherwise, customers who do want to come into the town to extend their shopping may do so once and most likely will never try again.

If nothing is done for the town, it will lead to plans for more residential conversion of commercial premises, never to return. Conversion of commercial premises to residential has less planning restrictions and building costs.

In conclusion, if Biggleswade is to become successful and continue to be successful, the basic need for parking has to be met. Until this is done, it will not matter how many other schemes are put in place or how much money is spent, the town will still deteriorate.

Martin Thomas, November 2016

Notes on Current Situation in Biggleswade

The car park in the railway station yard has been rented under licence by the Town Council, who have now been given notice that the licence will be withdrawn at the end of April 2017. This will result in the loss of some 60 spaces to the town.

The building known as Baystrait House in Station Road has recently been sold and planning for change of use to residential is being sought. This should be challenged as the building is purpose built for multi rented office space and is the only one of its type in the town. Once lost, you will lose workers and visitors, all of whom spend money in the town.

The Town Council operates Rose Lane Car park on a lease from the present Lord of the Manor. The lease has less than four years to run. It will be a real blow to the town if the Landlord will not renew.

The premises on the corner of Bonds Lane and Station Road (previously occupied by Fairfield Products and a shop) which is now going for residential in spite of being identified in the Town Centre Master plan as Commercial with Residential Above.

There are too many retail premises empty. This does not encourage shoppers or businesses into the town.

The Saturday and Tuesday markets are struggling as are the speciality Farmers', Italian and French markets.

Landlords have a dilemma when they lose tenants and cannot re-let. After three months, they have to pay business rates if the rateable value is above £12,000. Some premises may be able to be split into smaller units which are easier to let. The alternative — and easier option - is to seek change of use from commercial to residential and this is already happening, with several such planning applications over the last few months.

There has been a huge increase in housing in Biggleswade but this has not resulted in the Section 106 monies needed for the basic infrastructure in the town centre.

The shuttle bus between the new retail park and the town centre is not in place. However, at busy times, there is insufficient parking at the retail park (even when not all units are occupied) and the parking is limited to four hours, insufficient to shop at the park and then visit the town centre.



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