

## **Comments on Braintree Town Centre**

**A memo addressing various issues that have arisen concerning the Town Centre including the High Street, and the desire to have an input into the Local Development Framework, based on the comments and suggestions made by Braintree Chamber of Trade & Commerce members including an Open Meeting in October 2007**

### **Summary**

#### **A list of physical changes which are suggested for consideration**

- An Arts and Community centre
- Upgrade St Michaels Lane to enable one way rear servicing/deliveries
- Upgrade of George Yard Shopping Centre to enable better rear servicing/deliveries
- Planning Guidelines to encourage development of properties on south side of High Street which would include retention of facades but provision of modern retail units behind
- Increased associated parking provision in support of the development
- Pedestrianisation of High Street
- Improvements in town centre – to maximise “charm”

#### **The issues facing the Town Centre**

Town centre businesses have the desire to form a vital and viable lively town centre which serves the community to the most positive extent, whilst remaining profitable.

- Vitality and viability are based on an active and extensive economy which serves an extensive part of the local population.
- Liveliness depends on people who visit the town not because it is the only place they can reach but because they want to buy goods, receive services and participate in what the centre offers.
- Without profitability there is no incentive to take risk, which is what all businesses involve.

There is concern that Braintree town centre is struggling and that there is a need to “do something”.

The High Street is perceived as less active than it could be, with low levels of footfall and a high proportion of traders which are not the most appropriate for a flourishing High Street (ie they attract visitors for a very specific purpose on a small number of ‘appointments’ such as estate agents, opticians and hair dressers).

The night time economy is based solely on alcohol related entertainment.

There appear to be inappropriately high levels of charity shops and service outlets in the town.

The question is what to do? This commentary looks at some of the physical changes that have been suggested for incorporation in the local development plans in the mid to long term. The suggestions are not set in stone but designed to be looked at for viability if the community thinks them attractive.

## **Town Centre Development**

The suggestions and ideas in this commentary are linked to the concept of the Local Development Framework and a timescale of 20 years – not that it will take 20 years to start any project or even perhaps to finish them, but that long term solutions have been considered rather than the short term options that can also be of immediate value.

There is awareness that the recent Cambridge report suggested that there are three potential routes to follow – do nothing, aim for Heritage/Arts/tourist attraction style activities or aim for a technological-ideas-rich community.

“Do Nothing” – “failing to plan is planning to fail” is an old adage and is not a route which is contemplated as ideal at this stage.

“Heritage/Arts/tourist attraction” – whilst considerable achievements have been made in this area in recent years, this would be a risky route on its own as it is highly dependent on external visitors and factors. Braintree is attractive but probably does not have enough “attractions” to generate jobs and income on the necessary scale. (Which scale sees Braintree as a lively prosperous and attractive community with higher than current numbers of workers working in the immediate district.)

“Technological-ideas-rich” – the most appealing route which could also include elements of the arts heritage route – leading to a well rounded community in which creativity is valued and the arts are appreciated, valued and used by the locally-resident population.

The latter two concepts have also led to the suggestion of an Arts and Community centre in the middle of town which has various positive elements. Such a centre could additionally include safe parking, green transport nodule (i.e. bus station, car share point) and an income generation element such as retail or residential options.

The Sainsbury car park could become multi storey to assist the daytime economy and enable safe parking to be provided a short distance from such a centre. Such a facility would encourage evening and daytime visits both for the local population and indeed for tourists.

There appears to be a town centre space behind the Old Town Hall which is currently being considered for a bus station only. Whilst it would be likely that more than one story would be required, an element of partially buried transport access could help mitigate this. Such a building could become a landmark in it's own right to complement the old style Town Hall and award winning modernity of the immediately adjacent Library. It would also be a comfortable fit with the Museum and Learning for Life Centre which would be immediately adjacent.

There is already a strong arts community (fine arts, modern arts, dramatic arts etc) in the Braintree area and a suitable centre would help foster and be supported by this.

The project could initially be council led, supported by a private partner, and eventuate into a complex building which is at least self-funding or even the basis of a Community Trust.

## **High Street**

The thorny issue of the pedestrianisation of the High Street has been entangled in town centre issues for some long time.

There are cogent arguments on both sides but the sad fact is that there has been a decline in the vitality of the High Street for over 20 years. The addition of George Yard Shopping Centre has been blamed and may well have encouraged a movement in the footfall pattern in the town centre. However, the decline is also associated with premises which are ill suited to modern retail in that they are smaller than many high street name retailers have sought, are less than optimally laid out and some which have suffered from poor maintenance programmes over their very long lives. Additionally, many retailers prefer areas which already have active footfall levels – they prefer to follow, not lead.

Against a background of recent history when Braintree suffered the loss of much of its industrial economic strength which was (in common with much of the rest of the UK) slow to return, it is not surprising that such a footfall slowdown occurred at that time and was replaced by a different flow pattern which took into account the stores in George Yard. Whilst economic strength has returned to the District, many premises on the High Street remain as not the most attractive for modern retailers.

Pedestrianisation is often seen either as the only way to regenerate the High Street or as the final death knell.

It could be argued that pedestrianisation would regenerate but like so many things it is not an answer by itself. It could work if it were carried out in conjunction with other projects.

The regeneration depends on persuading modern retailers (whether small or large) that a number of elements would change in the town.

- Access for shoppers

- well signposted safe parking, with particular attention for disabled, lazy or very time pressured shoppers
- flat access
- clear layouts (also known as “readability” or sight lines)
- Access for deliveries – with minimal restrictions of time or space
- Internal layouts which enable fast turnaround for shop fitting, high standard of services (electricity, water etc) in well maintained buildings
- Attractive surroundings

A series of physical projects have been suggested to this end:

- Upgrade St Michaels Lane to enable one way rear servicing/deliveries to properties on south side of High Street
- Upgrade of George Yard Shopping Centre to enable better rear servicing/deliveries to properties on north side of High Street
- Planning Guidelines to encourage development of properties on south side which would include retention of historically – worthy facades but with provision of modern retail units behind (similar to the sympathetic way that the Woolworth building on Bank Street was treated)
- Increased associated parking provision - perhaps by way of some first floor level parking made as part of the façade-only retention building project
- Pedestrianisation of High Street
- Improvements in town centre – to maximise “charm”
  - CCTV for added security to include parking
  - Cleaning standard improvements
  - Street furniture improvements
  - Improved signage for vehicles and pedestrians

This has to be seen against the background of the recent GVA Grimley report that suggested that there is a little room for increased growth for convenience retail and only some for comparison retail in Braintree. Since these units on the High Street should be aimed at comparison retailers, this, together with the population growth still to be attained, should allow for a low number of main units and a handful of small units aimed at encouraging new or smaller retailers.

It is also noted that the recent Tesco planning applications for expansion claim that the “global” figures used in the GVA Grimley report are inaccurate at the level of the town centre analysis, in that they mis-estimated available square footage and did not include Tesco data concerning overtrading. If these statements are accepted at any point they indicate that in fact there is rather more available spend which could be soaked up in Braintree and would allow for further growth without difficulty.

## **Parking**

There is a level of dissatisfaction with car parking in Braintree. (see note at end)

- It is seen as expensive, although this is a presentation issue, as it does not seem to be actually. By comparison with Freeport of course, it is expensive and a way to produce a level playing field is to encourage Freeport to impose charges. It is possible that the government will be introducing such a measure as a part of their drive to reduce miles and force the producer of pollution to pay (Freeport collect, the government tax Freeport!).
- More importantly it is seen as inappropriately provided. That is, the parking is not always where it is wanted, it is not always provided in a way that suits need eg day workers do not want to pay high costs – they are relatively poorly paid in retail and see parking costs as a “tax”; and people wanting a quick “pop” want parking close to their destination (& at minimal cost). There are also issues about the layout of the main multi storey parking

Further growth on the outskirts of the town in office developments and light industrial units should also encourage the development of easy access daytime parking (quick entrance/egress/ pay on exit) which in itself should prove an encouragement to businesses to enter those new properties. (A green transport, “free at the point of delivery” quick bus at lunchtimes is an alternative)

Whilst it is understood that the government is indicating that parking provision should be minimised, there clearly still has to be parking as a facet of modern day living and in support of the people living in more rural parts of the area which Braintree serves.

### **Night Time Economy**

This is an issue for Braintree because the night-time economy in the town centre depends almost exclusively on alcohol based entertainments – pubs and clubs with a restricted entertainment offer. This contrasts markedly with the Freeport/Braintree Retail Park site where the cinema, bowling club and (shortly) swimming pool are to be found with a strong food offer covering Prezzo, Aroma, Pizza House etc. Immediately adjacent (and again away from the town centre) are McDonalds, KFC, Frankie & Bennys etc.

It is difficult to see how this situation can be remedied in terms of improving the offer in the face of entrenched businesses at the Freeport site but certain improvements would have to be made in order for any business to consider starting in the town centre in the evening. These improvements include

- safe parking – the very limited parking on offer in the evening is largely unsupervised and concentrated in the Manor Street area, closely adjacent to Market Place with its concentration of pubs.
- reduction in the perception of “yobbish or drunken groups” – an appearance difficult to dilute when there are few other people using the town centre
- reduction in the “fear of crime” element – which causes people to be unwilling to visit the Town centre in the evening unless they can be sure of a large group of others (i.e. visiting the same event or venue)

- suitable premises, which potentially includes adjacent low risk/safe parking, larger premises than is generally available
- town centre marketing to publicise such improvements

### **BID (Business Improvement District)**

It is noted that some of these elements could be delivered as easily by a BID (Business Improvement District) as by the local authority on it's own.

A **Business Improvement District** is a partnership between a local authority and the local business community to develop projects and services that will benefit the trading environment within the boundary of a clearly defined commercial area. Over 42 Business Improvement Districts have now been established across England and Wales

See [www.ukbids.org](http://www.ukbids.org)

### **NOTE :**

George Yard Shopping Centre is currently carrying out a customer survey which is not yet complete. Some comment was requested in this survey about parking and early results have been included in the background for this commentary.