

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

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 question is what ?

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 or low budget 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 a grand scale.

“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 a locally-resident population.

The latter concept also leads to the suggestion of an Arts and Community centre in the middle of town and has various positive elements. Such a centre could 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.

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 be council led, supported by a private partner, and eventuate into a building which is at least self-funding or the progenitor 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 have suffered from poor maintenance programmes over their very long lives.

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, the premises on the High Street remain as not the most attractive for modern retailers.

Pedestrianisation is 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 – from well signposted safe parking, with particular attention for disabled, lazy or very time pressured shoppers to flat access and clear layouts.
- 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) well maintained buildings
- Attractive surroundings

One of the suggestions for enabling much of this would be a series of interlocked projects –

- 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 facades but provision of modern retail units behind (similar to the Woolworth building on Bank street)
- Increased associated parking provision perhaps by way of some first floor level parking made as part of the façade-only retention building
- Pedestrianisation of High Street
- Improvements in town centre – to maximise “charm”
 - CCTV for added security to include parking
 - Cleaning standard improvements
 - Street furniture improvements

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

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)

Some of these elements could be delivered more easily by a BID than by a local authority of course.

Parking

There is a level of dissatisfaction with car parking in Braintree.

- 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 as 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

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

