

CITY OF PLYMOUTH

Subject: Plymouth City Centre Company Response to Mary Portas Review
Committee: Growth & Prosperity Overview & Scrutiny Panel
Date: 20th July 2012
Cabinet Member:
CMT Member: Director for Place
Author: Clint Jones, City Centre Manager
Contact: Tel:
e-mail: clint.jones@plymouth.gov.uk
Ref:
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In December 2011, Mary Portas outlined her vision of how the High Street can be saved. The High Street is not dead – but as Mary rightly points out in the report *'the public sector alone cannot create vibrant High Streets'*. The community needs to have a sense of belonging and public respect and this will only happen if *'we roll up our sleeves and just make things happen'*.

This report highlights our response to the ten most relevant of the key recommendations

1. Put in place a "Town Team": a visionary, strategic and strong operational management team for high streets.

Plymouth City Centre Company exists for this very purpose, we work to deliver a 5 year business plan on behalf of the retail community. We deliver operational management of the High Street along with a strong and strategic marketing focus. Our structure already means that the Council and landlords are involved and that retailers are part of all decision making and delivery. We are also working closely with the planning team and have recently established a City Centre officers working group. Plymouth has applied for both rounds of the 'Portas Pilot' funding – we were unsuccessful in the first wave (No BID was successful) and we are awaiting the result of the second wave.

2. Empower successful Business Improvement Districts to take on more responsibilities and powers and become "Super-BIDs".

We already have more delegated responsibilities than many BIDs across the country because of our strong working relationship with Plymouth City Council.

3. Establish a new "National Market Day" where budding shopkeepers can try their hand at operating a low-cost retail business.

Plymouth has a thriving City Market, which is currently approximately 91% let; it also offers day benches for hire. We also operate markets such as Flavourfest and our Christmas Market which allow local traders to access the City Centre for a reasonable fee. In the future we are already looking at bringing back 'Market Day' to Plymouth as part of our ongoing 'Shop Local, ShopPlymouth' campaign.

4. Local authorities should use their new discretionary powers to give business rate concessions to new local businesses.

Plymouth City Council already offers hardship relief, administered through rates, for existing local businesses. We have raised awareness of this by offering support in application to any business that needs it. However, any other discretionary powers would need to be balanced against the financial problems currently facing local authorities.

5. Local areas should implement free controlled parking schemes that work for their town centres and we should have a new parking league table.

Parking is an eternal bugbear for City Centre retailers. The reality is that we are unlikely to ever be able to convince the Council to offer completely free parking in Plymouth. However, it is clear that parking is important to consumers and therefore we will continue to lobby on behalf of retailers to ensure that the cost is kept down.

Many towns and cities are already offering 'Free After...' campaigns or specific days when parking is free. We are speaking directly to the Parking department about these, possibly BID subsidised, schemes with a view to implementing something similar in Plymouth. In the meantime, we currently have some of the best value car parking in the South West of England – not least of all with Western Approach Car Park offering all day for £5.

6. Make explicit a presumption in favour of town centre development in the wording of the National Planning Policy Framework.

The 'Town Centre's First' approach to development is wholeheartedly supported by PCCC. With plans for development in Derriford already being drafted it is vitally important that the City Centre remains central to the sustainable planning for the City. This is reflected by the local authority in the Area Action Plan for the City Centre Area.

7. Encourage a contract of care between landlords and their commercial tenants by promoting the leasing code and supporting the use of lease structures other than upward only rent reviews, especially for small businesses.

We have long believed that 'Upwards Only' rent reviews do not meet the needs of either landlord or tenant in today's market. We would encourage any move towards 'turnover based' reviews as essential to encouraging new and exciting businesses onto our High Street. We are already empowered through the BID to support both tenant and landlord and will often assist in the amicable resolution of issues between parties. This is part of our remit which we are keen to develop over future years.

8. Explore further disincentives to prevent landlords from leaving units vacant.

This is an especially important point for Plymouth – whilst our vacancy rate is below the National Average, many of the properties are in the middle of otherwise well let areas. This definitely has an impact on the overall perception of the area and therefore impacts upon our ability to encourage new retailers, and indeed shoppers, into the City. It is vital that landlords continue to maintain property and actively seek to redevelop or rent the premises.

Negligent landlords who allow buildings to fall into a state of disrepair should be challenged. CPOs could form a part of this challenge – but it is important to think about the impact this could have on the local economy in

a wider sense. It seems better to bring the buildings back into use and up to code than simply transfer ownership unless a developer is waiting in the wings with a sympathetic redevelopment plan for the area.

9. Empower local authorities to step in when landlords are negligent with new "Empty Shop Management Orders".

This idea strikes a chord with us as we are currently developing a scheme to do exactly that! We want to address the problem of empty units and have come up with a package response. Our initial plans involve asking landlords to give us permission to utilise the window space for a collaborative project with the Plymouth College of Art to promote local artists and courses. Alongside this we would like to encourage landlords to spend a small amount improving the overall look and feel of their empty units and potentially providing a contribution towards window / fascia cleaning etc. If there were powers that could be enacted to assist us in the implementation of this type of project then that would be great – however, in the meantime we will continue to try and do these ourselves.

10. Support imaginative community use of empty properties through Community Right to Buy, Meanwhile Use and a new "Community Right to Try".

We already support this – in the last two years we have used several shops in the West End of the City for arts projects. Any additional support that becomes available through potential new 'Empty Shop Management Orders' or the localism agenda would be welcomed, as long as the proposal for meanwhile use was in keeping with the locality and complimented the existing retail offer. Most recently we have undertaken a project with Plymouth College of Art to develop 109 Cornwall Street into a learning hub and retail shop which aims to reduce the number of NEETs in the City. Whilst also giving local art students and artists a space to sell their work. We are keen to investigate other such partnerships.

Empowering Super BIDs

One of the major issues that has been discussed on a national level has been the possibility of a super BID. Plymouth City Centre Company was asked to contribute directly to the discussions with DCLG and have taken part in several national discussions with both the Association of Town Centre Management and British BIDs. The key points of these discussions are summarised below:

1. Evolution and advancement of BIDs is taking place and should be welcomed but will not benefit from a new 'label' of Super BIDs which is misleading and in danger of being 'self-appointed'.
2. There is a need to ensure that the quality of BID activity is well measured through the Industry standards managed by British Bids which provides all relevant industry criteria & guidance as well as two levels of accreditation:
 - Standard Accreditation
 - Advanced Accreditation (Plymouth City Centre Company was the first BID to gain this status)
3. Mature BIDs would benefit from a stronger relationship with their local authorities and felt that guidance notes supported by DCLG would assist in achieving this.
4. Showcasing best practice should continue through the Nationwide BID Survey amongst other activities and publications.

City Centre KPI Overview

Footfall for June 2011: 1753886 this figure is –0.38% on the previous year. (LFL)

Footfall for June 2012: 1569860 this figure is –6.43% on the previous year.

Vacant Units July 2011: 52 or 11%

Vacant Units July 2012: 48 or 10.2%

Current National Average: 14%

Key findings from retailer survey (150 retailers surveyed):

- 63% of retailers are trading level with or above last year.
- 57% of retailers have seen an increase in customer numbers compared to last year.
- 56% of transactions are below £25.
- 64% of retailers have the same or higher levels of staffing than last year.

The future of the City Centre

We live in an age where it is so easy to consume, to purchase online, to ‘socially network’ using the internet instead of taking the time to visit the heart of our community. It is our job and our challenge to encourage people back to their roots – but in order to do this we need to offer them something compelling and convenient, something different and ultimately something which will meet their needs and expectations.

In order to do this there needs to be a solid commitment from the authority to maintain the ‘City Centre First’ approach to development in the City. Any out of town developments need to be sympathetic to the fact that the city centre should always remain the primary retail hub for Plymouth. There needs to be a method established for measuring the level of development across district centres and its impact on the sustainability of the City Centre.