



# **Discussion Paper on District Centres**

## **Introduction**

The 'District Centres' Community Committee topic will investigate how to support sustainable district centres in the inner West area. This discussion paper sets out the challenges and opportunities facing district centres in the years ahead, and asks the Committee to identify a small number of specific themes or issues that warrant further investigation and consultation with local residents.

The Community Engagement Plan at Appendix 1 outlines how the local authority and its partners will consult with local residents to find out their views on this topic.

## **Background**

The inner West area has three main district centres; Armley Town Street, Bramley shopping centre and Kirkstall Road. There are other, smaller centres including Stanningley Bottom, New Wortley, Rodley and Hawksworth Wood, but for the purpose of this report, the focus will be on the three largest.

The three district centres are very different; Bramley is dominated by a shopping centre with relatively small units, Kirkstall has two retail parks with large stores and a busy high street full of independent shops and a strong night time economy, and Armley's Town Street has been transformed with heritage lottery funding and has a multi-cultural retail mix of retailers serving the local community.

There are many stakeholders that contribute towards the sustainability of a district centre. Retailers and businesses are an obvious one, but the council plays a key role in terms of determining planning policy, cleaning the streets, managing traffic and keeping people safe from crime and anti-social behaviour.

## **The Inner West District Centres**

### **1) Armley**

Armley Town Street has the One Stop Centre and Library at one end and a modern medical centre and Armley Moor at the other. A few years ago, the Council was awarded a heritage lottery grant to install York stone paving, artwork and street furniture and fund heritage shop fronts to a number of retail units in the town.

Armley is one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the city, and although the main district centre has only a small number of empty shops. Town Street is a Designated Public Place prohibiting the consumption of alcohol on the street, the police make regular patrols and take positive action when necessary.

### Drivers:

- Excellent public facilities within the district centre including the library / one stop, leisure centre, medical centre and Armley Moor.
- Several banks and chain stores on Town Street including Boots, Co-op, Jack Fulton and Savers.
- A good mix of independent stores including clothing, hardwares and butchers
- Several stores serving the increasing population of new migrants from Eastern Europe

### Challenges:

- No large supermarket, with parking, to bring customers from surrounding areas into the town
- Wilkinsons / Tesco Metro face away from the town centre onto Stanningley Road
- Groups of males gathering by off licenses and betting shops blocking pavements. This is not a crime, but residents report feeling nervous and intimidated.
- Dog mess and litter are an issue on Town Street
- A reduction in the number of factories and businesses near the centre has affected footfall

### Opportunities

- Planning permission has been granted for a supermarket on Carr Crofts, however there are currently no firm plans to develop the site.
- Planned redevelopment of eyesore sites including former Theaker Lane medical centre.
- One Stop Centre to become a multi-agency Hub with an increased range of customer facing services.
- Successful community events such as Armley Fun Day and the Christmas light switch on could be used to further promote the town.
- Armley is home to two fantastic arts organisations, Interplay Theatre and Assembly House Studios, as well as several freelance artists. There could be an opportunity to tap into this creative talent and bring it into the public realm.

## **2) Bramley**

Bramley district centre is dominated by Bramley shopping centre with some independent retailers further up Town Street. There is a medium sized Tesco store in the centre along with Farm Foods and a number of smaller retail units. In recent years, the number of pawn brokers and high interest money lenders and domestic goods stores has increased. At a recent Bramley forum, residents reported that this is detrimental to the overall offer at the centre.

New River, the owners of Bramley shopping centre have ambitions to improve the centre. The office block attached to the centre is currently unoccupied and a number of proposals are being explored around the future of this space.

The Bramley housing office is adjacent to the shopping centre, however it is the only municipal building within the district centre, with the library and community run Bramley Baths around a quarter and half a mile away respectively.

#### Drivers:

- Shopping centre with Tesco and parking brings customers in from the surrounding area
- Plans are at an early stage to redevelop and potentially expand the centre
- Bus terminus at the centre increases footfall.
- District centre is clean and safe

#### Challenges:

- The number of high cost lenders / pawn brokers limits the mix of retailers at the centre
- Small unit sizes are not suitable for the larger retail chains
- There are some cafes within the centre, but no restaurant which limits the evening economy, some pub closures over recent years
- The centre is set back from the main road, and shops are not visible to passing trade

#### Opportunities:

- New River are looking to redevelop the office block at the centre if a suitable tenant can be found. The new car park may feature a market and performance space which will create a buzz around the centre and opportunities for local entrepreneurs
- A new Community Shop is opening at the centre run by Bramley Elderly Action offering a range of services including a credit union and financial inclusion advice sessions
- Leeds City Council is looking to rationalise its assets across the city and there is an opportunity to review the council owned buildings around the centre to co-locate services and drive footfall.

### **Kirkstall**

Kirkstall has three distinct retail centres, the large Cardigan Fields complex with a cinema, restaurants and new Aldi supermarket, Kirkstall Road with a range of independent shops, restaurants and cafes, and the retail park just before the Abbey with a Morrisons supermarket and other chain stores.

There are several large developments proposed for this area including a new Tesco store close to the leisure centre, the Kirkstall Forge railway station and the redevelopment of the BHS site opposite Morrisons. Whilst these developments will certainly bring jobs and economic benefit, consideration will be given to how they will impact transport and trade in other parts of the community.

Kirkstall benefits from a well used leisure centre opposite the district centre close to the housing office and historic Kirkstall Abbey and Abbey House attractions. A household waste sorting site is located just off Kirkstall Road. The area around the Kirkstall district centre is due to benefit from the council's Town and District Centre capital scheme.

### Drivers

- Kirkstall Road is a main route into Leeds with the independent shops located close to carriageway.
- The Morrisons retail park is on a key junction that also serves Armley and parts of Horsforth, Hyde Park and Headingley.
- The streets adjacent to Kirkstall Road are densely populated with many shared houses for young professionals and students.
- There is a strong community spirit in Kirkstall with the popular Kirkstall festival, farmers market and new Kirkstall in Bloom group.

### Challenges

- Traffic is often heavy and there is limited parking around the shops on Kirkstall Road.
- There are some 'eyesore' sites close to the district centre including two former pubs and former waste transfer station.

### Opportunities

- The new Kirkstall Forge station will increase footfall in the area.
- Proposed developments including Tesco and the BHS site could bring funding through the new Community Infrastructure Levy to improve the wider area
- The new Town and District Centre scheme will provide a platform for community engagement.
- The Kirkstall Festival and farmers market already play a key role in promoting the area and could be further exploited as a marketing tool.

## **Question 1: What influence does the Local Authority have over the sustainability of district centres?**

Leeds City Council services have some affect on the success of district centres but there are also some limitations in terms of influencing private sector businesses which can present a challenge when looking at a vision for the area.

This section outlines the role of key public sector services on local district centres:

### Leeds Policy Background

Over the next 15 years the service is planning for growth in retail and leisure spend overall in Leeds. The Core Strategy has a "Centres First" approach. This means directing new shopping proposals to sites within centres or to the edge of centres. The designated Town Centres within the Inner West Area are Armley, Bramley and Kirkstall. New facilities opening within these centres will help boost their health and vitality, but there is constant pressure from developers to open out-of-centre

facilities. The Site Allocations Plan seeks to identify extensions to the centres of Armley, Bramley and Kirkstall in order to secure improved retail provision in these areas. The Local Authority seeks to resist inappropriate retail developments outside of these centres, whilst being sensitive to the needs of the area in general. As such, the regeneration benefits of certain schemes (e.g. the Aldi proposal on Tong Road) must be balanced against their impact on the nearby town centres. When appropriate, the Local Authority has refused permission for out-of-centre stores, such as the enlarged Tesco proposals at Stonebridge Mills, as result of their likely negative impacts on nearby town centres.

Within town centres we define shopping frontages that contain high concentrations of shops. There is policy to maintain minimum concentrations of shops in these frontages. Within Primary Shopping Frontages we seek to resist any applications which would result in the proportion of A1 shop units falling below 70% of the overall frontage. Within Secondary Shopping Frontages 50% of the frontage should remain in A1 shopping use. Other town centre uses – banks, estate agents, letting agencies, cafes, restaurants, pubs, hotels, offices – should play a supporting secondary role in the defined frontages, or locate elsewhere in the town centre. Shopping frontages are currently being reviewed in the Site Allocations Plan.

A number of issues are regularly highlighted by residents and Ward Members in relation to planning policy:

#### *Betting Shops*

The Government has recently signalled their intention to alter the planning status of Betting Shops. They currently fall within the A2 Use Class, which means that changes of use from other services in that class (eg banks, estate agents, employment agencies) to betting shops do not need planning permission. However, in the future, changes to betting shops from all other uses will need planning permission.

Planning application decisions should be taken with regard to planning issues. This cannot include moral standpoints on gambling. Instead we have to consider what tangible impacts might arise. Planning policy seeks to maintain minimum concentrations of shops in shopping parades. So if a betting shop proposal would reduce the concentration of shops unacceptably, this would be a valid reason for refusal. There may also be amenity issues (such as noise and antisocial behaviour) from people coming and going, but these may be addressed through applying conditions to the planning permission. Amenity issues will be a greater concern if there are dwellings nearby.

#### *High Cost Lenders*

There is concern that high cost lenders are opening in certain town centres and having damaging effects on vulnerable communities. Whilst sympathetic to the issue, town planning may have a limited role. Further research is being undertaken by the Financial Inclusion Team to explore the effectiveness of other local authorities in trying to use planning control to address this issue. The use of Article 4 Directions has been proposed for discussion, which would mean that any units converting to a High Cost Lender would be required to seek Planning Permission. There are,

however, significant issues that need to be solved before an Article 4 Direction can be implemented, and the Financial Inclusion team are investigating this.

### *Food and Drink*

Planning has greater ability to control hot food takeaways, drinking establishments and restaurants. The uses are separately defined in the Use Class Order. There are often physical nuisances in terms of noise and disturbance from visitors coming and going, noise from inside the premises, parking issues, music, outside seating, cooking smells etc. There can be cumulative impacts where such uses cluster together. Planning control often has good grounds to resist proposals altogether or permit with conditions that lessen the impact on amenity. These considerations are set out in Core Strategy policy which seeks to protect local amenity.

### *Car Parking*

Many town centres do not have enough free or cheap car parking for visitors. The Portas Review highlighted the need for car parking to help town centres to compete with out-of-town, but noted that it is important for spaces to be available for town centre visitors, rather than being taken by commuters and shop workers. The Core Strategy is supportive of provision of car parking for shoppers and visitors to town centres, but there may be limited land opportunities and the Council has limited funding for such provision.

### Planning – Development Management

Development Management Planning Officers consider and determine planning applications and provide pre-application advice on schemes taking into account national and local policy.

The key material planning considerations that applications are assessed on are include among others:

- Principle of the development
- Highways Safety
- Visual amenity - design, layout (taking into account character of the area)
- Amenity of neighbouring properties/uses
- Landscaping including trees, esp. if they are protected.
- Conservation Area impact if applicable
- Listed Building impact if applicable

Some developments trigger the requirement for S106 planning contributions for example, towards greenspace within the locality, provision of affordable housing, education contributions, highways improvements and travel plans to encourage different modes of travelling.

The majority of applications are advertised, which can take differing forms, for example site notices, neighbour letters, adverts in the press. Any comments received from the public must be noted and responded to as part of the determination of the application. The submission of an objection does not necessarily mean an application will be refused.

## Assets

The Council owns a number of properties in the district centres, and services like a library or leisure centre attract large number visitors. The Strategic Asset Management service is seeking to use council assets in the localities to focus on the following:

- To assist in the delivery of front facing locality based customer service provision through community hubs, pop up arrangements within individual buildings or clusters
- To work with Services to ensure that buildings are fit for purpose for both staff and visitors
- To use the council's assets to stimulate/assist regeneration, which may be through housing/commercial development
- To rationalise the number of council buildings, through making better use of the retained estate, via new ways of working, maximising space usage and sharing space with the third sector and other government departments via the One Public Estate pilot
- To increase the quality of the Council's investment portfolio

## Community Safety

Reported crime around the three district centres is low, with the exception of a slight peak in shoplifting based around the larger stores in the Bramley shopping centre & Kirkstall, and vehicle crime around the Savis Mill retail park.

Despite the low level of reported crimes, members of the public regularly complain about perceived anti-social behaviour related to groups of youths (Bramley shopping centre and Cardigan Fields, Kirkstall) and non English speaking adults (Armley) congregating around the district centres. Whilst no crime is being committed, the police and community safety officers are aware of how issues this can affect community cohesion, and work underway to prevent tensions and improve the perception of crime and community safety in the town centres.

The police and local authority have worked together to introduce a 'Cumulative Impact Policy' in other areas of the city to limit the number of licenced premises in a specific location. There are no current plans introduce a Cumulative Impact Policy in the Inner West, but it could be argued that with seven off licences and three public houses on Town Street, Armley could be considered for this in the future.

## Environment Locality Team

The Environment Locality Team has a range of responsibilities in relation to district centres:

### *Street Cleansing, litter bins and graffiti*

All district centres receive a daily litter picking service – and a mechanical clean 4 times a week. Whilst the overall cleanliness of the district centres has improved over recent years, cigarette butts, chewing gum and food cartons remain an issue for the team. The Locality Team is also responsible for litter bins, and each district centre is assessed for litter bin provision and ensuring an appropriate timetable is in place for emptying. Street cleansing operatives and Environmental Enforcement Officers also regularly check district centres for graffiti and make referrals through to the graffiti removal team or work with the building owner to ensure the graffiti is cleared. In recognition of the above challenges - the locality team has recently reviewed its

cleansing regime and has asked all de-litters to enhance the environmental quality of destination district centres by doing more detailed manual cleansing to remove detritus and weeds etc. as part of the service level agreement commitments.

#### *Environmental Enforcement and Business Waste*

The Environmental Enforcement Officers work to educate the public around litter and issue fixed penalty notices where appropriate. The officers speak to local businesses to ensure trade waste is disposed of legally and issue Street Litter Cleansing Notices to specific retailers such as takeaways where excess litter is an issue.

#### *A Board and Street Advertising*

Council policy attempts to strike a balance between allowing businesses to promote themselves whilst minimising obstructions, litter and clutter on the streets. There are policies around A Boards, advertising on street furniture and flyering. Officers attempt to be supportive by providing advice and guidance in the first instance with enforcement powers used as a later option.

#### Employment & Skills

The service supports individuals into work placements and training opportunities. It is beneficial to have work placements close to home and creating closer links with local businesses in the Inner West district centres would facilitate this.

Local businesses can be supported to up-skill their existing workforce, for example around customer service, IT or basic skills. The service also works with employers to promote apprenticeships and placement opportunities for young people.

The new Employment, Skills and Welfare Board will review local employability and advice services with a view to improving provision across the priority neighbourhoods and within district centres.

Leeds Rhinos are keen to expand their work in communities and Employment & Skills are currently in discussions about possible options and funding, and there are other specialist providers in Kirkstall who support people with mental health difficulties in up-skilling and securing employment.

Employment Leeds works closely with Economic Development to link to the recruitment processes of new developments as demonstrated with the new Aldi stores Kirkstall and Bramley and Asda in Middleton. Sessions were held in local communities to help job seekers become more competitive for the posts.

### **Question 2: What are the themes or issues to take forward for further analysis?**

The Community Committee is asked to consider the opportunities and challenges in this paper and identify a small number of themes or issues to take forward for further analysis and community consultation.

In 2011, the government carried out research into town and district centres led by the retail specialist Mary Portas. A number of recommendations were made which are listed in appendix 2.



There are examples of successful district centre work in other parts of Leeds. The White Rose Centre agreed to promote Morley town centre through advertising on its internal TV screens, allowing the town council to set up a prominent display and providing a £10,000 grant to fund a specialist adviser to develop the night time economy. The redevelopment of Morrisons in Rothwell was used as a catalyst for improving Commercial Street by improving customer flow and re-designing parking, the shop frontage and pathways.

From the experience of the Portas Pilots and work carried out around Leeds, the following questions may benefit further discussion:

- How to market the offer at the district centres?
- What opportunities exist for long term improvements?
- Does the district centre have a unique selling point, or can one be created?
- How can the not for profit sector influence innovation in district centres?
- What role do businesses and landlords play, how do we engage with them around the improvement agenda?
- How to support start-up businesses?

# The Portas Review

## An independent review into the future of our high streets

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### Summary of recommendations

1. Put in place a "Town Team ": a visionary, strategic and strong operational management team for high streets
2. Empower successful Business Improvement Districts to take on more responsibilities and powers and become "Super-BIDs"
3. Legislate to allow landlords to become high street investors by contributing to their Business Improvement District
4. Establish a new "National Market Day" where budding shopkeepers can try their hand at operating a low-cost retail business
5. Make it easier for people to become market traders by removing unnecessary regulations so that anyone can trade on the high street unless there is a valid reason why not
6. Government should consider whether business rates can better support small businesses and independent retailers
7. Local authorities should use their new discretionary powers to give business rate concessions to new local businesses
8. Make business rates work for business by reviewing the use of the RPI with a view to changing the calculation to CPI
9. Local areas should implement free controlled parking schemes that work for their town centres and we should have a new parking league table
10. Town Teams should focus on making high streets accessible, attractive and safe
11. Government should include high street deregulation as part of their ongoing work on freeing up red tape
12. Address the restrictive aspects of the 'Use Class' system to make it easier to change the uses of key properties on the high street
13. Put betting shops into a separate 'Use Class' of their own

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

15. Introduce Secretary of State "exceptional sign off" for all new out-of-town developments and require all large new developments to have an "affordable shops" quota

16. Large retailers should support and mentor local businesses and independent retailers 17. Retailers should report on their support of local high streets in their annual report

18. 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

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

20. Banks who own empty property on the high street should either administer these assets well or be required to sell them

21. Local authorities should make more proactive use of Compulsory Purchase Order powers to encourage the redevelopment of key high street retail space

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

23. Introduce a public register of high street landlords

24. Run a high profile campaign to get people involved in Neighbourhood Plans

25. Promote the inclusion of the High Street in Neighbourhood Plans

26. Developers should make a financial contribution to ensure that the local community has a strong voice in the planning system

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

28. Run a number of High Street Pilots to test proof of concept