

Review of Highcliffe Shopping Centre

A Summary

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INTRODUCTION

Concern for the health of high streets is common theme across the country. High streets have been affected by out of centre supermarkets, retail parks, on-line shopping and the economic downturn. Studies have been conducted nationally and the topic has featured in a series of TV programmes.

Locally Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners were commissioned to conduct a retail study of Christchurch; they reported their detailed views of the Highcliffe Shopping Centre in 2008 and some aspects were updated in 2012. They concluded that:

“Overall Highcliffe town centre is functional and is clean and tidy. However it appears to be a bit tired when it comes to good quality streetscapes including the architecture of the buildings, street furniture, planting and public art. The centre seems well used and there are few vacant units although vehicle congestion and poor access for pedestrians cause conflict.”

Their view informed the Christchurch and East Dorset Core Strategy; it is expected that following revision the Core Strategy will be adopted formally.

It is now more than five years on since NLP reported so it is timely to review what has changed and what still has to be done to improve the Highcliffe Shopping Centre and how best that can be achieved. The content of the full review is outlined in the Appendix. The main conclusions of the review and the recommendations are set out below.

CONCLUSIONS

Over five years on from publishing the NLP study [1] and few things have changed:

- The Highcliffe Shopping Centre performs quite well but could do better.
- It has a good number of services which maintain the footfall
- it provides for everyday convenience shopping, but there is little competition.
- It has a small number of interesting specialist shops and there should be more comparison shops
- It has charity shops for those who wish to browse but probably too many.
- The percentage of non-retail properties is too high and this reduces the interest raised by the frontages.
- Residential development in the core has broken up the continuity of shop frontages
- The number of vacant shops has increased
- The width of the pavements is actually relatively narrow which limits the Council's ability to plant trees, erect street furniture and locate objects of art. These actions would require the cooperation of the owners of the forecourts.
- There are active community facilities within the centre and close by.

The centre lacks a vibrant evening economy but with the local demography the level of support locally would be unlikely to be high. However it would be worthwhile to pilot late evening opening to assess the response. Al Fresco dining is not encouraged by the congestion along the A337.

The Core Strategy vision “To minimise congestion and air pollution, sustainable transport infrastructure and services will be encouraged.” is somewhat vague. This then highlights the main problem of the Highcliffe Centre which is the volume of traffic passing through – even when some is syphoned off along the rat runs, which are unsuitable for heavy commercial vehicles. Control of the timing of deliveries would help. With the bypass plan deleted, the long term prospects for improving pedestrian/traffic conflict in the centre are not good.

In the short term the case for upgrading the Ringwood Road to “A Road” status should be considered and controlling the junction with the A35 to improve traffic flows. The Lymington Road would then be downgraded to “B status” and there could be a restriction placed to prohibit HGVs apart from deliveries. The use of the Cliff Top car park as a lorry park would have to cease.

In the long term radical more expensive concepts could be to:

- “move” the shopping area to a new development on the land previously identified for the bypass which would be more central within Highcliffe.
- develop the Recreation Ground as a shopping area with integral parking and formalise the leisure use of the South part of Chewton Common.
- Develop the Wortley Road Car Park by adding one or two more levels to form a shopping mall with a roof terrace garden.

The A337 would become the “bypass”

In the short term there are a number of ways which have been identified which could improve the image of the centre and make it more pleasant. The starting action for this would be the formation of a partnership to identify and progress the appropriate actions. Detailed recommendations are set out below

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Create a Partnership to include as the core members:

- the Highcliffe-on-Sea Traders’ Association
- Highcliffe Residents Association
- Highcliffe Community Association
- Christchurch Borough Council
- Dorset County Council

The core membership would be expanded when appropriate to involve the Police and other representatives to fulfil the Partners and Communities Together (PACT) functions

2. Provide information at the two bus stop Gateways, Wortley Road, Cliff Top and Highcliffe Castle Car Parks

3. Improve vehicle signage and repair the cast iron finger posts.

4. In the summer if a parking ticket for Highcliffe Castle or Cliff Top has not expired it would be valid for the remaining time at Wortley Road Car Park.

5. When the shuttle bus runs between Cliff Top and the Castle travellers will have the option to be dropped in the shopping centre.

6. Produce a master-plan and design guide for the shopping centre (this should be part of a wider neighbourhood plan).

7. Create coherent facias to cover the design of shop frontages, shop signs and their illumination.

8. Review and improve pedestrian signage.

9. Carry out regular street care audits.

10. Repair the block paving.

11. Request Tesco to repair metal seats

12. Maintain the seat at Sea Corner.
13. Enforce CBC's "A" board policy and seek to reduce the clutter on private forecourts.
14. Promote window dressing of empty shops.
15. Initiate window display competitions.
16. Carry out first impressions exercise.
17. Improve floral displays in public realm and encourage traders to do the same.
18. Review and enhance Town Trail leaflet and distribute at Gateway sites.
19. Consider the possibility of reviving the market on the Hoburne car park.
20. Make greater use of the Highcliffe Community website or develop a new one.
21. Consider adopting an Empty Property Scheme
22. See if HRACIC would be interested in a community run shop.
23. Incorporate the PACT functions in the responsibilities of the Highcliffe Centre Partnership.
24. Identify a CBC Officer to be a Highcliffe Centre Manager.
25. Improve Highcliffe Recreation Ground.
26. Review the "Meeting the Need Analysis" with more recent census data.
27. Consider whether a trader specialising in craft and hobby supplies should be encouraged to open a shop in Highcliffe.
28. Consider whether a quality restaurant with outside dining should be encouraged in the secondary core.
29. Consider the long-term future for the Christchurch Day Centre.
30. Develop positive plans to deal with the increasing volume of traffic and congestion on the A337 through Highcliffe. This will require discussions between DCC and HCC regarding the option of upgrading the Ringwood Road and improving the junction with the A35.
31. Additionally there are the following Mary Portas recommendations which are supported.
 - 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.
 - Local authorities should use their new discretionary powers to give business rate concessions to new local businesses
 - Explore further disincentives to prevent landlords from leaving units vacant
 - Local authorities should make more proactive use of Compulsory Purchase Order powers to encourage the redevelopment of key high street retail space
 - Run a high profile campaign to get people involved in Neighbourhood Plans
 - Promote the inclusion of the High Street in Neighbourhood Plans
 - Developers should make a financial contribution to ensure that the local community has a strong voice in the planning system

- Support imaginative community use of empty properties through Community Right to Buy and a “Community Right to Try”

APPENDIX

STRUCTURE OF THE FULL REPORT

- A description of the shopping centre is given in Section 3 of the main text. and Annex A is an extract of the CBC Planning Policy which applies currently to the centre. The shopping centre has two community facilities within the primary core but there are others close by and in the wider area; these facilities are summarised in Annex B.
- In section 4 the changes to the shopping centre over the past 10 years are discussed
- Section 5 provides an analysis of the of the shopping centre with a detailed listing of the currents shops and business in Annex C
- Section 6 deals with the perceived needs of the customer concentrating on the local residents in Annex D and goes on to discuss those of the wider community and tourists,
- The Core Strategy vision for the future is discussed in Section 7.
- Ways in which the shopping centre could be improved are given in Section 8 supported by Annexes E which contains Mary Portas’s recommendations and a response to “100 Ways to Improve the High Street” in Annex F.
- The conclusions drawn from the review are presented in Section 9 and the recommendations in Section 10.

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REFERENCES

1. "Joint Retail Assessment Christchurch Borough Council East Dorset District Council North Dorset District Council Purbeck District Council" - Volume 1: Capacity Analysis, Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners, March 2008
2. "Joint Retail Assessment Christchurch Borough Council East Dorset District Council North Dorset District Council Purbeck District Council" - Volume 2: Christchurch, Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners, May 2008.
3. "Retail Update 2012, Retail and Town Centre Uses Study. Christchurch East Dorset Councils" Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners, 24th September 2012
4. "Planning for Town Centres", Communities and Local Government, December 2009
5. "Christchurch and District Consolidated Local Plan", 2007
"Christchurch and East Dorset Core Strategy Pre-Submission", March 2012
6. "The Portas Review", Mary Portas, December 2011
7. "High Streets at the Heart of our Communities: the Government's Response to the Mary Portas Review", Department for Communities and Local Government, March 2012
8. "100 Ways to Help the High Street" http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/economy/-/journal_content/56/10180/3511217/ARTICLE