

**Gravesend Town Centre Review:  
Urban Gravesham Submission to Gravesham Borough Council Overview and  
Scrutiny Committee, February 2015.**

Quotations:

*'The phenomenal growth of online retailing, the rise of mobile retailing, the speed and sophistication of the major national and international retailers, the epic and immersive experiences offered by today's new breed of shopping mall, combined with a crippling recession, have all conspired to change today's retail landscape.*

*New benchmarks have been forged against which our high streets are now being judged. New expectations have been created in terms of value, service, entertainment and experience against which the average high street has in many cases simply failed to deliver...*

*The only hope our high streets have of surviving in the future is to recognise what's happened and deliver something new.*

Introduction :The Portas Review: An independent review into the future of our high streets, 2011

*"Wanting to go into town is different from wanting or needing to shop. It is about an experience. It is about sociability and relaxation, creativity and being part of something you cannot get at home or work."*

Jan Gehl (2010) Cities for People

*"High streets and town centres that are fit for the 21st century need to be multifunctional social centres, not simply competitors for stretched consumers. They must offer irresistible opportunities and experiences that do not exist elsewhere, are rooted in the interests and needs of local people, and will meet the demands of a rapidly changing world."*

Action for Market Towns (2011): Twenty-First Century Town Centres

**Urban Gravesham Submission:**

**People have choices:**

Its essential that the Council recognises that people have choices- they can come to Gravesend town centre, or go to Bluewater, Rochester, Canterbury. Many people choose not to visit town centres at all- they go to supermarkets which stock an increasing range of electrical and household goods and clothing, or they do their shopping online.

Not even the vast majority of people in Gravesend actually have to come to the town centre- many don't. So why should people come to the town centre at all?

It's not just about shopping. It's also about sociability, leisure and culture- enjoying the place. People will only come to the town centre and the riverside if it is pleasant place to spend time in.

For this to be the case:

The town centre has to be managed well. The Council has had a Town Centre Initiative in place for years- this has done a good job organising additional cleaning, organising farmers markets, and events, a modicum of marketing in order to provide a coordinated overall management of the town centre . However, maybe it is time to revitalise and relaunch the TCI. Why not call it the Town Team- as suggested for such organisations in the Portas report?

The town centre has to be safe. Again the Council, along with the police, makes reasonable job of this- aided by street pastors at night. But more can be done.

Its also important to deal with perceptions- its amazing how many people will not set foot in the town centre after 8:00pm – a campaign really is needed to overcome this unjustified fear. Talking about campaigning- how about more marketing to put Gravesend on the map as a great place to visit and enjoy? This is not just for day trippers from elsewhere, but persuade everyone that 'Gravesend is Great'. Well done for starting this off with the promotional film - but keep going.

The town centre has to diversify.- Gravesend already has a lot of restaurants, pubs. It has the rejuvenated Library and the Woodville Halls. But the leisure and cultural offer has to be better. A virtual museum is not a museum. UG strongly supports the Paul Greengrass cinema- but it is not a substitute for a full time cinema. And how about a proper Community Arts Centre?

Mainly however, Gravesend town centre has to be great place. So lets start with Gravesend's unique selling point- **it is a historic town in a stunning riverside setting**. Its also an every day workaday sort of town. In our opinion this is and will remain a key part of its character and its charm.

So you, the Council, must be rigorous in protecting the USP–take derelict building owners to task, make sure you have effective planning enforcement teams, find money to carry out necessary environmental schemes, and make sure that design is sympathetic and in keeping with the historic character of the town.

And chuck out any so-called regeneration schemes that would threaten its uniqueness. The damage caused by not doing so will be not just be cultural or social- it will be economic as well.

## Some more UG suggestions:

UG asked its membership about on how to improve the town centre and make it a place that people want to go to. After discussion and debate we have come up with the following suggestions which we hope you will find useful. They are not set out in order of priority.

- 1) Keep up the work that has been undertaken by Town Centre Initiative and Towncentric - keep up the farmers markets, food markets, events, marketing. Work through the Incentive to persuade shops to have longer opening hours. Consider setting up a Business Improvement District (BID) to fund some of its activities- talk to the Chair of the Canterbury BID to find out more.
- 2) Set up a Business Incentive Scheme like at Sidcup and Canterbury. There, new businesses are being offered free retail space for a set period. Special courses are run to train small retailers about marketing, merchandising and running their businesses. Grants are available to smarten up shop fronts and improve business premises.
- 3) Use the above incentives and your position as landowner to encourage speciality shopping in Gravesend High Street. It's the only way smaller retailers will survive against the biggies. The range of specialisms can be huge- bread, farm shops, vintage clothes, collectables, beauty boutiques, optical specialists, or just plain experts who can given an outstanding level of service.

A key principle is 'Additionality'- one specialist shop (i.e vintage or antiques) at bottom of High Street will fail. However, establish eight and you establish a quarter - which people will seek out.

And lest anyone thinks that specialist shops are too posh and upmarket – we are not talking the exclusion of everyday shops- but establishing additional and different offer that will attract people from all over the surrounding area as well as the many existing Gravesham residents that never bother going anywhere near the town centre. Bluewater has 8 million people within an hour's drive time- this means that Gravesend does too. So- lets get in on the action!

- 4) Move 'Towncentric' out of the St Georges Centre and into the former Railway Tavern building. This could provide tourist information, offices for Town Centre Management plus a small arts centre in a prominent location in an attractive building.
- 5) Good luck with the Market project- it could be a really important part in the revival of the town centre. However, the traders who will move in, and the activities that will take place there, will be more important for the success of the project than just the refurbishment of the building. Select traders with care (and with free initial rents if required) and make sure that the market is well managed. It has got to be a destination- not a down market version of Wilkinson's.

- 6) Encourage 'meanwhile' uses of derelict buildings to remove the sense of dereliction from the town centre and to encourage new businesses to set up in Gravesend. Specialist 'meanwhile' companies will negotiate with building owners to take on temporary leases of buildings for free. In return they pay the liabilities- business rates, insurance etc. and may carry out minor decorating works. They will sublet the premises at cheap rents to start up businesses and will provide business and marketing advice to those businesses.
- 7) Get the present charlatans out of the Town Pier and lease the premises to a responsible company. It does not have to be 'haut cuisine'- even a Pizza Express in such a stunning location would really put Gravesend on the map.
- 8) Apply for a Purple Flag Award- in the same way that the best beaches get a 'Blue Flag', this is an accreditation scheme for a well managed night time economy. Gaining this will require joined up thinking across the Police, Council, night clubs and pubs. This will result in safer streets, its good for marketing and its good for business.
- 9) Establish a purpose-built and modern Arts Centre and Venue for all the community. It could be a vibrant meeting, performing, and learning space. Or at the very least modernise St Andrews Arts Centre and the Victoria Centre to make them fit for purpose.

*... What this community would benefit from is somewhere to come together...Somewhere that is for our community, where children and adults can gather and classes can be held under one roof for all the arts.*

*A venue that is big enough and purpose-built, allowing anything from the small local bands to the largest of local orchestras, from the amateur drama class to the local artist, where the community has control and young and old can showcase their talents and be encouraged and have fun together in a safe environment.*

*MRS JO WATTS, Gravesend - recent letter to Newshopper*

- 10) Establish a new museum. This would not just house Gravesham's artefacts, but also the Roman and pre-Roman artefacts found at Ebbsfleet- a collection that is rich in variety and quality, and of international significance. Opening all of this in an iconic new building could attract hundreds of 1000s of visitors to Gravesend and instil a new sense of civic pride. A Council study from a few years ago and which seems to be gathering dust showed that funding would be available many sources- this is a project which is entirely do-able.
- 11) Copy Medway Council by building and operating an 'Innovation Centre'. Such a building would provide cheap, high quality business space, fast internet connections, meeting rooms and other facilities. It could capture the entrepreneurial spirit of Gravesenders and encourage new businesses to set up and grow.

- 12) Make sure that building, planning and other regulations are applied sensibly Provide good customer service and make it easy for people to set up businesses. Inspire an 'open for business' ethos amongst all your staff.
- 13) And- we will not be alone amongst your constituents in urging this - get the basics right; Additional cleaning for the town centre, effective planning enforcement. Good work is being done-don't let it slip.
- 14) We don't want to be political- but free Saturday parking really does put Gravesend on the map as a place that wants to attract shoppers. You can minimise lost parking income by dumping the daft Transport Quarter project and thereby retaining the parking income that comes from the present Rathmore Road car park.

### **And finally:**

The sort of regeneration promoted by the suggestions above will be slow and incremental, and at times uncertain. But the alternative – the kind of sudden 'big bang' change promised by the Heritage Quarter scheme will probably never happen. If it does it will be to the detriment of the rest of the town centre, and will destroy that all important USP.

The incremental method, rooted in place and community, really is the best way forward. It should be placed within the context of shiny and new Ebbsfleet Garden City and a massive Paramount Resort bringing jobs people and prosperity to the area. In our first ever letter of objection to the Edinburgh House Proposals back in 2008 we said

*'Amidst the mass of new development envisaged as a part of the wider Thames Gateway project, Gravesend can still maintain its identity as a special place. Within this wider context its historic character will bring its own economic and social benefits and is the best basis for a healthy and vital long term future. The town centre still faces challenges and there is more to be done- but change needs to be managed carefully and with the agreement of the whole community'*

The above is as true today as it was seven years ago.

Its obvious that regeneration is not free- it requires funding. This can come from lots of sources- both public and private. But it will not come unless there is a strong leadership and a sensible coordinated action plan for the town centre- one that has the widespread support of businesses, central government, and the wider community.

You, our Councillors, are best placed to provide that leadership. Your report is not an end point, other than perhaps representing the end of the Edinburgh House false start. Lets hope that it provides the start of a new way forward- one that we can all support.

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