

Discussion paper: The Future of Prudhoe Front Street :

MORE THAN HANGING BASKETS

Summary

This paper written for the Town Centre Working Party set up by Prudhoe Community Partnership and Prudhoe Town Council. It asks what a thriving Front Street might look like in 2030 and what strategies are needed to ensure its success. Drawing on national trends, it envisages a town centre with a distinctive retail offer, but in which retail has given way to entertainment and community use which brings people into the town centre.

The national problem

All the talk is of the “death of the high street”, as evidenced by chain stores closing branches and going into administration. Ironically, because Front Street has never attracted the big national multiples, it is relatively immune and still has a high occupancy rate. In March 2019, only three empty shops.

The main culprit is on line trading which took up 20% of retail sales in December 2019 and seems set to increase further. “Be absolutely clear” says Mike Ashley “the web has killed the high street”.

High street retailers face a cocktail of issues:

- Too much retail space
- Fragmented property ownership
- High rents and rates
- Inequitable business rates which favour the online trader

The way forward

The Select Committee report ‘High streets and town centres in 2030’ (1) published in February 2019 believes that:

“ high streets and town centres can survive, and thrive, by 2030 if they adapt. Our vision is for activity-based community gathering places where retail is a smaller part of a wider range of uses and activities and where green space, leisure, arts and culture and health and social care services combine with housing to create a space based on social and community interactions.”

(1)<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomloc/1010/1010.pdf>

The Select Committee recommends:

- High streets develop a strong local identity - a 'place brand' - that draws on their heritage and local characteristics and provides a distinctive offer
- Retailers must give 'experience' – the personal service that distinguishes them from online retailers and 'convenience' – the flexibility to alter opening hours for customer lifestyle and to offer 'click and collect' services.
- Cultural anchors- like cinemas and theatres – to increase footfall and keep the high street alive at night
- Public services and health services on the high street to fill the gaps and bring in more people.
- Community projects and facilities – such as a buggy centre or a dementia centre – to increase the livelihood of the high street
- Town centres should be community gathering places where people meet and interact.

The expert engaged by the select committee recommended that town centres should be

"providing public space that is inclusive of people of all backgrounds and ages, and is accessible to people of all levels of mobility. They can provide a centre for people to gather, to feel relaxed and to connect with others socially. They are therefore important both for physical and mental wellbeing." (p 18)

Stockton on Tees is repeatedly cited as an example of a town centre that has turned itself around and might be worth a visit.

To implement these recommendations requires:

- A community partnership of all stakeholders with an agreed long term vision
- One to one consultation with shop keepers to gather their views
- Support from landlords to adapt and improve their property for future use
- Involvement of the local authority in buying up property for community use
- Further funding from central government – following the Future High Streets Fund – and a more sympathetic treatment of business rates.

And, above all, the willingness to adapt to a different kind of high street that is multi purpose and will draw all kinds of people into the town centre at all hours of the day and night.

What does this mean for Prudhoe?

A series of strategies for discussion follow which, if adopted, would need turning into objectives and actions over the next ten years:

- 1) **We need to develop a stronger sense of place and brand for Prudhoe** that can be promoted to the world at large. It must move on from being a "former mining town" and even "an historic castle town" and find a brand that reflects its friendliness, its convenience and so on. It must be realistic and forward looking. We might need outside help to do this. Some early wins would be strap lines and stickers to encourage local shopping "Prudhoe can.."
- 2) **We need to support shop keepers and help them move with the times** to ensure we maintain a thriving, varied and attractive retail offer. Ideas could include more flexible opening hours, greater customer care, better promotion of the Front St business community and incentives to be community facing. Would need careful consultation with shop keepers so that they move together.
- 3) **We need a partnership with landlords and developers** to improve the building stock, make the frontages more attractive and use the premises in more imaginative ways which could include more flats above the shops. We need a register of who owns what.
- 4) **We need to offer more social and cultural attractions.** These could include a refurbished East Centre, a new cultural hub and space for community projects as well as one off events like the Art Trail that reposition Front St in a more contemporary way. It would be worth planning for some ambitious projects to have them 'spade ready' when opportunities arise.
- 5) **We need to improve the public space** so that the town centre becomes a more attractive place to gather. This would involve managing the traffic, ensuring adequate parking and making sure everywhere is accessible. Although it has been tried before, we need to be more imaginative in our urban design and again we may need to look at other town centres and bring in consultants. Early wins could be 20 mph zone and parking discs to free up spaces for shoppers.

- 6) **We need a more outward looking mind set** that reaches out to the outlying estates, brings in newcomers and is prepared to try new and even whacky ideas rather than say " we 've tried it before or "it would never work here". New residents at Cottier Grange need to identify as Prudhonians.
- 7) **We need to strengthen the working party into a 'town hub'** as being rolled out by the County Council elsewhere and which would include a wider range of stakeholders and experts. This may need resourcing, for example, by a town manager.

In conclusion: We must be realistic

Prudhoe can be insufficiently ambitious and ridiculously unrealistic, often at the same time. In my view, we ought to accept that:

- We are not Hexham - which may have a similar population but has three times as many shops and twice the footfall. Prudhoe is ranked in the second tier as a 'smaller centre' by the County Council
- We are not Corbridge - which is a picture book village with upmarket shops that makes it an attractive visitor destination with which Prudhoe cannot compete.

But we are a successful high street with every reason to expect we can thrive in changing times for town centres if we find and project the right identity and work together in adapting to the likely town centre of the future.

Next steps:

- Agree these or other strategies.
- Flesh out each strategy with objectives and actions and completion dates
- Consult more widely
- Identify some quick wins to show progress
- Agree a delivery mechanism (s)
- Manage expectations as some of these objectives will take years to achieve.
- Visit Stockton? Invite other town centres to share their experience?

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(This paper is for initial discussion with the working party and others. It has not been adopted by either the Partnership and Town Council. Hopefully, it will provide a basis for discussion with a range of relevant parties both in Prudhoe and further afield before the final strategies and objectives are agreed)