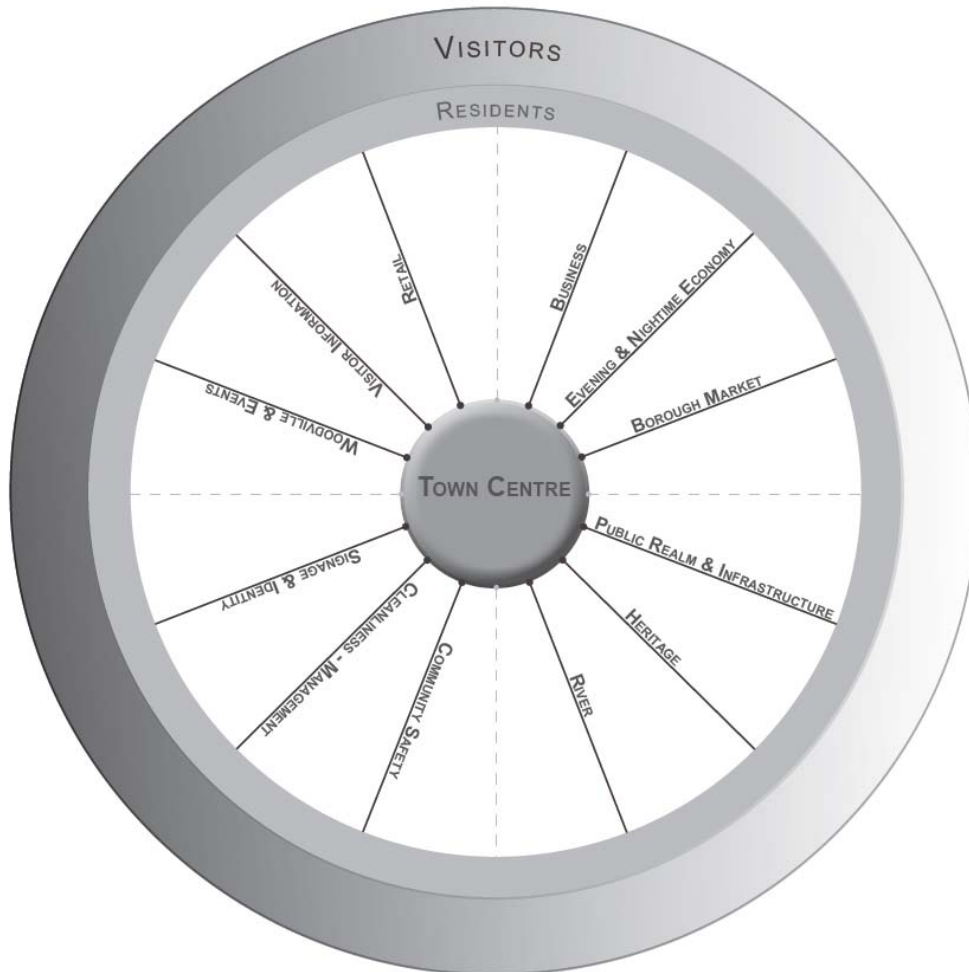


# Revitalisation of Gravesend Town Centre Scrutiny Review



March 2015

## 1. Background

- 1.1 On 14 July 2014, Members of the Overview Scrutiny Committee agreed to conduct a review on the Revitalisation of Gravesend Town Centre, led by Cllr John Cubitt, Cllr Brian Sangha and Cllr Shane Mochrie-Cox
- 1.2 The Committee agreed a finalised version of the Term of Reference (see Appendix 1) for the Revitalisation of Gravesend Town Centre Review on 16 October 2014, summarised here:

### **Revitalisation of Gravesend Town Centre**

#### **Reason for Review**

To carry out a review of Gravesend Town Centre with a view to revitalise and make recommendations on how to ensure local businesses are adequately supported and well positioned to take advantage of current and future proposed developments in the area, including making optimum use of the town's heritage assets to build a sustainable future.

\* Revitalisation means building on and utilising the successes that have already been achieved and stimulating further progress.

#### **Links to the Corporate Plan and Priorities**

This review supports achievement of one of five 'key' objectives in the Councils' Corporate Plan for 2011 – 2015 viz:

**Corporate Plan Objective:** *"Economic Development and Regeneration"*

**Priority:** *Working with partners to ensure that Gravesend remains a thriving borough, attracting development opportunities and improving the economic well-being of the borough as a whole.*

#### **Terms of Reference**

- Consider the role of strong civic leadership to bring together and strengthen local partnership working to take advantage of future opportunities for revitalisation of Gravesend Town Centre.
- To identify and examine the local and regional factors that have caused a decline in retail outlets in Gravesend Town Centre.
- Look at the cultural identity and heritage of Gravesend as a riverside town and how its appeal can be promoted in order to attract local people and visitors to the Town Centre.
- Identify examples of innovation and 'best practice' in Town Centre revitalisation in England.
- Consider what steps Gravesend Council and its partners should take on wider issues such as planning policy, investment and external funding to improve and sustain the future economic vibrancy and health of Gravesend Town Centre.
- To take evidence from a wide range of stakeholders, such as businesses, residents, shoppers and visitors, to seek their views on the future role and functions of Gravesend Town Centre and how these aspirations might be realised.

- 1.3 On 12 November 2014 a Focus Group was convened to glean the opinion of local businesses, residents, groups etc – 10 representatives attended the Focus Group and contributed to the discussions around the Revitalisation of Gravesend Town Centre (see Appendix 2). The key points are summarised here:

- Identity of Town Centre – Use historic links and heritage;
- Make use of empty units – pop up shops/allow for use of exhibition of artwork – schools;
- Allow subsidised rent/business rates for start-up businesses and/or business incentive scheme;
- Better road/tourism signage and directions;
- View and visit town from perspective of out of town visitors;
- Cleanliness of Town centre/street scene/attractive street furniture;
- Website – unhelpful, uninformative, hard to navigate;
- Lack of joined up thinking in general;
- Improve and make attractive Town Pier access;
- Sound business advice from GBC for start-up businesses & business plan;
- Offer Gravesend as a day out package – Prom, Cyclopark, town centre etc.;
- Activities/event half term for kids.

1.4 On 15 January 2015, the Overview Scrutiny agreed the following

- (1) Cllr Cubitt, Cllr Sangha and Cllr Mochrie-Cox to meet, before the end of January 2015, with Sue Lord, Service Manager (Regeneration & Policy) and Simon Hookway, Service Manager (Economic Development) to discuss the review and draw together key information and ideas before considering further evidence gathering sessions;
- (2) an Interim Review report be submitted to the Overview Scrutiny Committee on 12 February 2015;
- (3) a Final Review report be submitted to the Overview Scrutiny Committee on 12 March 2015 before being presented to Cabinet on 30 March 2015;
- (4) the feasibility of an online survey that covers key questions around the Revitalisation of Gravesend Town Centre be investigated.

## 2. Scrutiny Review Meeting 29 January 2015

2.1 On 29 January 2015 Councillors Cubitt, Sangha and Mochrie-Cox met with Sue Lord, Service Manager (Regeneration & Policy) and Simon Hookway, Service Manager (Economic Development) to discuss the review and draw together key information and ideas before considering further evidence gathering sessions;

2.2 Following discussions with Sue & Simon, Cllrs Cubitt, Sangha and Mochrie-Cox decided the following:

- Adopt a 'Hub and Spoke' approach to the review which outlines the key areas (spokes) in the Town Centre (Hub) that currently provide an 'offer' to Gravesend residents and visitors and identify opportunities for future development (see Appendix 3)
- In view of time constraints the group agreed to focus, by way of example, on one key area/'spoke' – Heritage and explore in detail the current offer and how it can be improved.

- Hold an evidence gathering session on the Heritage aspect of the review at the next Overview Scrutiny Committee (12 February 2015) and invite the following people to take part in the session:
  - Christoph Bull – Local Historian
  - Tony Larkin – Local Historian
  - Simon Hookway – Service Manager (Economic Development)
  - Sue Lord – Service Manager (Regeneration & Policy)

### 3. Heritage Evidence Gathering Session 12 February 2015

3.1 The Overview Scrutiny Committee held an evidence gathering session on the Heritage aspect of the review with the above mentioned experts on 12 February 2015 (see Appendix 4) and gleaned the following information:

- The hearts and minds of residents and businesses in Gravesend need to change in order to generate a sense of Civic Pride.
- Tourism is a fantastic way to promote the town - Gravesend is a Riverside Town like no other with a rich history e.g. The Riverside, The Pier, Watling Street, Fort Gardens, Dickens connection, Gurdwara, Pocahontas, Canal, St Georges Church etc.
- The Riverside and Watling Street are the key historic areas in Gravesend.
- One of Gravesend's strongest historic themes is the Victorian era / architecture.
- A Museum in Gravesend would be very beneficial for the Town.
- Towncentric should be relocated to a more central position e.g. Windmill Street or New Road
- Improved signage is required in Gravesend for the Pier and the Ferry area.
- Advertising is essential to promote the Town's Heritage sites and generate Civic Pride.
- Improve the Gravesend Tourism website and use of social media to promote the Town.
- There is too much neglect in Gravesend e.g. shabby buildings. Businesses / owners should be encouraged to properly maintain buildings.
- Gravesend already attracts many visitors, we need to build on this and improve the guided tours/personal contact provision in the Town e.g. more volunteers.
- Overall message: Need to **promote Riverside Heritage** and **generate Civic Pride**.

## 4. Recommendations

- 4.1 Cabinet are invited to note and further develop the areas identified in the Heritage evidence gathering session (see Appendix 4) summarised below
- The hearts and minds of residents and businesses in Gravesend need to change in order to generate a sense of Civic Pride.
  - Tourism is a fantastic way to promote the town - Gravesend is a Riverside Town like no other with a rich history e.g. The Riverside, The Pier, Watling Street, Fort Gardens, Dickens connection, Gurdwara, Pocahontas, Canal, St Georges Church etc.
  - The Riverside and Watling Street are the key historic areas in Gravesend.
  - One of Gravesend's strongest historic themes is the Victorian era / architecture.
  - A Museum in Gravesend would be very beneficial for the Town.
  - Towncentric should be relocated to a more central position e.g. Windmill Street or New Road
  - Improved signage is required in Gravesend for the Pier and the Ferry area.
  - Advertising is essential to promote the Town's Heritage sites and generate Civic Pride.
  - Improve the Gravesend Tourism website and use of social media to promote the Town.
  - There is too much neglect in Gravesend e.g. shabby buildings. Businesses / owners should be encouraged to properly maintain buildings.
  - Gravesend already attracts many visitors, we need to build on this and improve the guided tours/personal contact provision in the Town e.g. more volunteers.
  - Overall message: Need to **promote Riverside Heritage** and **generate Civic Pride**.
- 4.2 Cabinet are invited to note the remaining themes identified in the 'Hub & Spoke' diagram and accompanying notes (see Appendix 3) summarised below; and consider developing a programme aimed at their development both individually and collectively to form a comprehensive strategy directed to the revitalisation of the town centre.

Business

Evening & Night Time Economy

Gravesend Borough Market

Public Realm & Infrastructure

River

Cleanliness

Community Safety

Woodville/Town Centre Events

Signage/Identity

Visitor Information

Retail

**Gravesham Borough Council  
Overview Scrutiny Committee  
*Topic for Thematic Review in 2014/15***

**Revitalisation of Gravesend Town Centre**

**Reason for Review**

To carry out a review of Gravesend Town Centre with a view to revitalise and make recommendations on how to ensure local businesses are adequately supported and well positioned to take advantage of current and future proposed developments in the area, including making optimum use of the town's heritage assets to build a sustainable future.

\* Revitalisation means building on and utilising the successes that have already been achieved and stimulating further progress.

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**Terms of Reference**

- Consider the role of strong civic leadership to bring together and strengthen local partnership working to take advantage of future opportunities for revitalisation of Gravesend Town Centre.
- To identify and examine the local and regional factors that have caused a decline in retail outlets in Gravesend Town Centre.
- Look at the cultural identity and heritage of Gravesend as a riverside town and how its appeal can be promoted in order to attract local people and visitors to the Town Centre.
- Identify examples of innovation and 'best practice' in Town Centre revitalisation in England.
- Consider what steps Gravesham Council and its partners should take on wider issues such as planning policy, investment and external funding to improve and sustain the future economic vibrancy and health of Gravesend Town Centre.
- To take evidence from a wide range of stakeholders, such as businesses, residents, shoppers and visitors, to seek their views on the future role and functions of Gravesend Town Centre and how these aspirations might be realised.

### **Guiding Principles for the Scrutiny Review.**

1. Whilst this scrutiny review will focus on Gravesend Town centre this is not to underestimate the importance of secondary 'local' shopping centres in Gravesham which are vital to local people.
2. The Scrutiny Review should collect evidence from a wide range of stakeholders, including voluntary groups.
3. Recommendations to Cabinet should be PRACTICAL and DELIVERABLE and take into account available resources.
4. The final report should include a section on Risk Assessment and control measures.
5. The review should include the following:
  - a. Background research on town centre revitalisation and lessons learnt
  - b. Consultation using the most appropriate method
  - c. Evidence gathering through meetings and Member visits
  - d. Use of Focus Groups to explore specific views in depth
  - e. Consideration of the diversity of interests and communities in the Town
6. The review should be completed by February 2015 with a report to Cabinet in March 2015.
7. A work programme and timetable to be jointly agreed between the Chair, Vice Chair and relevant officers from Democratic Services to assist resource allocation and manage workloads within available resources.

Updated October 2014

Scrutiny Review – Town Centre Revitalisation

Focus Group - Wednesday 12 November 2014

Present:

Councillor Brian Sangha (Facilitator)

Councillor John Cubitt - Observer

Focus Group Representatives:

Store Manager

Joint Proprietor - Hairdresser

Joint Proprietor - Ale House

Local Historian

Chair 50+ Forum

Urban Gravesham Representative

Gravesham Youth Council Member

Parish Chair

Proprietor – Public House

<p>Q1. Your top 4 challenges faced by Gravesend Town Centre in the last 10 years?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internet shopping</li> <li>• Shopping Centres             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Bluewater</li> <li>○ Westfield</li> <li>○ Lakeside</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Closure of Marks &amp; Spencer</li> <li>• Recession and Economic climate             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Empty units</li> <li>○ High rent</li> <li>○ High Business Rates</li> <li>○ Employment/Unemployment</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Traffic flow – East to west &amp; North to South             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Congestion</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Parking in the Town Centre in the evening</li> <li>• Opening times of multi storey car parks St Georges Centre, Thameside Centre</li> <li>• Attracting wider demography of shoppers             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Lack of reason to come to Town Centre</li> <li>○ Apathy</li> <li>○ Outside influences</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Night time safety</li> <li>• Too many Pound shops</li> <li>• Litter</li> <li>• Attracting new businesses</li> <li>• Long redevelopment processes e.g. Canal Basin, Heritage Quarter, Transport Quarter</li> <li>• Securing future for Gravesham Town Hall and Borough Market.</li> </ul>
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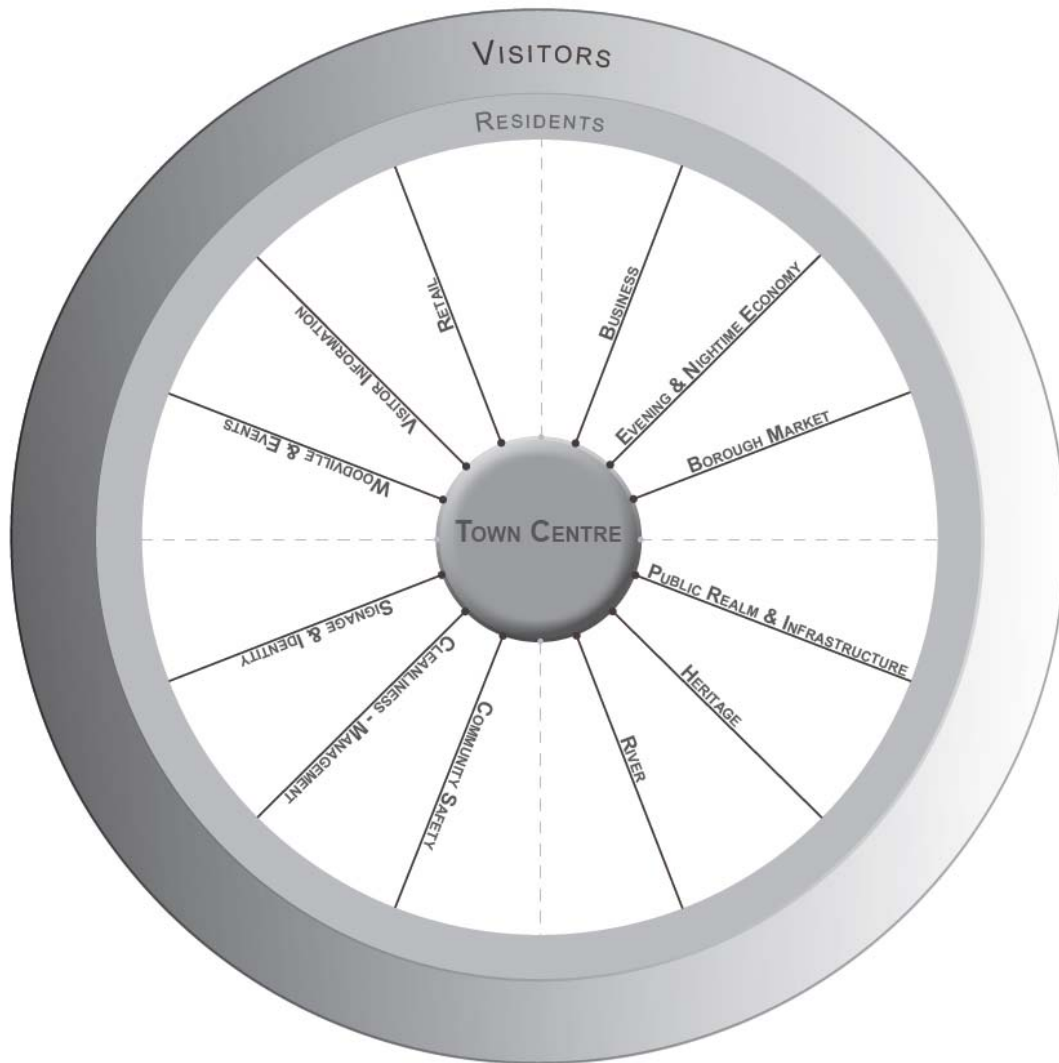
<p>Q2. Top 4 reasons for decline in retail in Gravesend Town Centre?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of a good Market</li> <li>• Bluewater</li> <li>• Lack/Loss of high end retailers</li> <li>• Influx of Charity shops/£ shops</li> <li>• Parking <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Cost</li> </ul> </li> <li>• High Business rates/rent</li> <li>• Economy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Lack of start-up businesses</li> <li>○ People not buying</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Lack of specialist/boutique/independent retail</li> <li>• Low employment within the town centre</li> <li>• Interest points for youths and younger people</li> <li>• Lack of appreciation of historical assets</li> <li>• Dramatic change of demographic of residents within Gravesend</li> <li>• Internet</li> </ul>
<p>Q3. What are Gravesend Town Centre's Assets?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Town Hall/Court House</li> <li>• River Thames (highest rating in Focus Group)</li> <li>• Character and Architecture/buildings History/historic links/heritage</li> <li>• Anchor Retailers – Debenhams/BHS</li> <li>• Library</li> <li>• Diverse community</li> <li>• Transport links – HS1, ferry, road, train</li> <li>• Size of town centre</li> <li>• Points of interest – Windmill Hill, Gurdwara, Prom</li> <li>• High Street</li> </ul>
<p>Q4. What would attract people to visit Gravesend Town Centre?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Independent/specialist shops</li> <li>• Flexible/free parking</li> <li>• Guided tours</li> <li>• Historic interests/links</li> <li>• Events – food/entertainment/history</li> <li>• Museum to showcase local history, artefacts etc.</li> <li>• 'Innovation Centre'</li> <li>• Late night shopping with facilities to support</li> <li>• Policing presence at busy times</li> <li>• Internet facility</li> <li>• Publicity/website/information – what is on in Gravesend, places to visit, when and where <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Facebook, twitter</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

- |  |   |
|--|---|
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• River front attractions e.g. Town Pier</li> <li>• Purpose built Arts Centre venue</li> <li>• Central venue for youths – open at evenings and weekends</li> <li>• Market &amp; farmers market – good mix of quality stalls</li> <li>• Evening entertainment/events</li> <li>• Attractive town – clean/lighting</li> <li>• Café culture/alfresco</li> <li>• Street food/markets</li> <li>• Cinema</li> </ul> |
|--|---|

**From discussions the following was noted:**

- Identity of Town Centre – Use historic links and heritage;
- Make use of empty units – pop up shops/allow for use of exhibition of artwork – schools;
- Allow subsidised rent/business rates for start-up businesses and/or business incentive scheme;
- Better road/tourism signage and directions;
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- Sound business advice from GBC for start-up businesses & business plan;
- Offer Gravesend as a day out package – Prom, Cyclopark, town centre etc.;
- Activities/event half term for kids.

**Revitalisation of Gravesend Town Centre 'Hub & Spoke' Diagram**



## **Briefing Note to Accompany Town Centre Hub & Spoke Diagram**

### **Business**

- The council gives advice and support to new business start-ups in the Town Centre, e.g. in respect of available commercial properties, planning and regulatory services and business rates advice.
- Quarterly business network meetings run by the council help inform and strengthen collaboration within the local business community. In excess of 200 people attended the January 2014 meeting. Participation of town centre retail community is a challenge and alternative models for this have been explored.
- Town Centre Initiative continues to provide a constructive forum to discuss and address issues in the Town.

### **Evening & Night Time Economy**

- *Local Alcohol Action Area* Project, supported by the Home Office, oversees a multi-agency approach in co-ordinating actions in respect of reducing alcohol-related crime and disorder and promoting growth by establishing a diverse and vibrant night-time economy.
- Promotional film about Gravesend Town Centre has been produced to be shown on websites and before screenings at the Woodville Cinema.
- *Good Evening Gravesend* promotional map is being prepared showing restaurants, entertainment venues, etc. to be supplemented by itineraries/food trails and recognition of food hygiene ratings.
- *Reducing the Strength Campaign* to encourage participation of alcohol premises.

### **Gravesend Borough Market**

- £1.8 million Coastal Communities Funding awarded for the refurbishment of the Market building, comprising 22 permanent market stalls, 22 'pop-up' stalls, reopening of the roof-lights and improved circulation within the building. A new A1 retail/B1 office unit to draw additional footfall to the Queen Street end of the Market building.
- Development programme and pattern of occasional markets to create a mix of traders and new character for the Market.

### **Public Realm & Infrastructure**

- Heritage Quarter application approved for mixed uses and public realm enhancements, awaiting outcome of judicial review
- Transport Quarter, Rathmore Road application approved, detailed design in progress
- Heritage Lottery Fund grant application submitted for restoration of Clock Tower, decision due July 2015
- Milton Road between Clock Tower and Ordnance Road junction – various enhancements including replacing old or damaged and painting street furniture, repairs to footway paving funded by KCC Members' Highways budget

## **Heritage**

- *Discover Gravesham* visitor guide to promote local events and activity.
- Winter Talks programme, hosted at Towncentric, with emphasis local heritage.
- Self-guided audio guides available for Riverside Heritage Trail and New Tavern Fort and Chantry Heritage Centre – child friendly versions available.
- Annual Gravesham Calendar supported by community photographic competition.

## **River**

- Town Pier Pontoon used six days a week as landing and departure point for Gravesend to Tilbury ferry
- Town Pier pontoon receiving visiting vessels, including the Waverley and the historic Thames barge *Cambria*.
- River trips co-ordinated via the council's tourism team at Towncentric, e.g. Topsail and Jet Stream Tours.
- KCC to put the Gravesend to Tilbury ferry contract to tender in 2015

## **Cleanliness**

- Regular programme of street cleansing and management of public conveniences supplemented by the Team G maintenance team to address damage, graffiti, littering, etc.
- Council has employed an outside contractor, Kingdom Security, on a 12 month trial to undertake litter and dog fouling enforcement within the borough.
- Provision of solar-powered compaction bins within the Town Centre.

## **Community Safety**

- Dedicated Town Centre Police Officer and PCSO support, G-Safe radio scheme and Street Pastors; training of licensed bar staff, etc.
- *Local Alcohol Action Area* activity focused on a range of initiatives including the participation of businesses in the Reducing the Strength Campaign, multi-agency approaches to street drinking, use of new dispersal powers by Kent Police in respect of alcohol related ASB.

## **Woodville/Town Centre Events**

- Regular events held in the Town Centre with a monthly Farmers' Market, annual Pancake Day race, St George's Day, Vaisakhi Parade, etc. and Half Term events.
- Christmas Programme 2014 focused on 7 main events and complimentary Advent Calendar of events in venues across the town.
- Decorating the town with flags for St George's Day Flags, Splash of Colour flower scheme/Gravesham In Bloom and Christmas Lights.
- Woodville programme of entertainment and first release digital cinema.

### **Signage/Identity**

- Town Centre blue and white cast iron finger posts and signs updated and renewed as necessary to facilitate navigation around town by pedestrians
- Artist illustrated 3-D map of Riverside Leisure Area being installed at Ordnance Road junction to encourage pedestrians to visit the area, funded by the KCC Members' Highways budget.

### **Visitor Information**

- Towncentric Visitor Information Centre – Gold Award 2014 for Visitor Information Provider of the Year from Tourism South East and entrant in the national awards (May 2015). 33,000 visitors in 2014.
- Gravesham's visitor attractions, accommodation promoted to visitors through [www.gogravesham.co.uk](http://www.gogravesham.co.uk) and social media.

### **Retail**

- Vacancy rate within the Town Centre is 11.7% (February 2015). Council proactive in seeking action and positive use of vacant units, especially where there are clusters of vacancies within the town.
- Awaiting confirmation of the future of the Marks & Spencer unit following closure in September 2014. Monitoring national retail announcements, e.g. in respect of national sale of BHS, take-over of 99p Stores by Poundland and re-branding of Discount UK as Bargain Buys.
- Footfall being maintained within the Town Centre.
- Heritage Quarter application approved for mixed uses including retail and public realm enhancements, awaiting outcome of judicial review.

## Revitalisation of Gravesend Town Centre Scrutiny Review

### Heritage Evidence Gathering Session – Overview Scrutiny Committee 13 February 2015.

The Committee held an evidence gathering session on the Heritage aspect of the Revitalisation of Gravesend Town Centre Scrutiny Review with the following key expert witnesses:

- Christoph Bull – Local Historian
- Tony Larkin – Local Historian
- Simon Hookway – Service Manager (Economic Development)
- Sue Lord – Service Manager (Regeneration & Policy)

Overview Scrutiny Committee Members:

Cllr John Cubitt (Chair)

Cllr Brian Sangha (Vice-Chair)

Cllrs: Brian Francis, Rob Halpin, Leslie Hills, Les Howes, Shane Mochrie-Cox, Alex Moore  
Makhan Singh

Note: Cllr Michael Wenban was also in attendance

The Committee listened to the expert witnesses and gleaned the following ideas for the Revitalisation of Gravesend Town Centre:

- The hearts and minds of residents and businesses in Gravesend need to change in order to generate a sense of Civic Pride.
- Tourism is a fantastic way to promote the town - Gravesend is a Riverside Town like no other with a rich history e.g. The Riverside, The Pier, Watling Street, Fort Gardens, Dickens connection, Gurdwara, Pocahontas, Canal, St Georges Church etc.
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- A Museum in Gravesend would be very beneficial for the Town.
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- Advertising is essential to promote the Town's Heritage sites and generate Civic Pride.
- Improve the Gravesend Tourism website and use of social media to promote the Town.
- There is too much neglect in Gravesend e.g. shabby buildings. Businesses / owners should be encouraged to properly maintain buildings.
- Gravesend already attracts many visitors, we need to build on this and improve the guided tours/personal contact provision in the Town e.g. more volunteers.
- Overall message: Need to **promote Riverside Heritage** and **generate Civic Pride**.

Phil Hales  
True Hairdressing

19 Nov 2014

Town Centre Regeneration focus group

I have more thoughts about the suggestions concerning the small; creative and interesting shops that the group spoke of wanting in the town.

Small businesses like those, you will notice, survive only on the back of a busy high footfall street or centre.

These shops are often based around tourism or adjacent to busy "Global Brand" shops.

For anyone to risk opening a shop of that type, based on sound business marketing and planning, would be extremely high in Gravesend at the moment.

Those very desirable shops are a reflection of a very successful town but are not the making of a very successful town.

I am sure you are aware of my views on the Heritage Quarter and I firmly believe that it is the most direct way of stimulating the town and therefore attracting the type of shops and indeed customer that we all seem to want.

Global brands of shops and restaurants are run to strict and successful plans of marketing and operation; quite simply they succeed.

But they need to display themselves in a smart, clean modern town to succeed and at present Gravesend will not attract them.

The development would bring shops and restaurants to the town and with it they bring people who want the level of quality and service that we all desire.

Also it will bring more people to live in the town and therefore more people using the shops and restaurants.

Towns are changing. Retailing is changing. We are probably on the cusp of the revival of towns where people live, meet, dine; and afterwards ...shop.

The big out of town centres will have their place but the more people that live in a town the more a town is used. It is a fact.

If the development does not go ahead, what would we do to make it survive?

The shops we talked of will only come when footfall rises significantly.

Tourism is clearly one of Gravesend's best assets, history, River Thames, etc.

A very concerted effort would be required to increase Gravesend's status as a tourist destination. I have no doubt that we have much to offer but it will need selling on a large scale to keep lots of people coming on a regular basis.

Perhaps then businesses will be able to risk opening.

It would be less of a risk if many businesses opened in unison.

If only it were possible to communicate with each business that wanted to come to Gravesend and co-ordinate them opening together on a grand scale with lots of publicity, it may therefore become less risky for them.

Maybe it is possible; maybe the Borough Market could be co-ordinated that way. It would mean running the market as a dictatorship, with the final say so on the type of business, its business plan and the knowledge of its market being run by management of the Market itself. (Much the same way that Bluewater operates)

I have rushed through this a bit but hope that it puts a little something else in the pot, and gives you thought.

Best regards

Phil Hales

P.S. Please feel free to share these thoughts with the rest of the focus group.



Urban Gravesham  
The Civic Society for Gravesend & Northfleet



4 Belvedere Close  
Gravesend  
DA12 1QB

14<sup>th</sup> February 2015.

GBC Overview and Scrutiny Committee  
Gravesham Borough Council, Overview and Scrutiny Committee  
Civic Centre,  
Windmill Street,  
Gravesend  
Kent DA12 1AU

Dear Councillors,

**Gravesend Town Centre Review.**

Thank you for involving Urban Gravesham in the present review of Gravesend Town Centre.

Having attended the workshop organised by the Council, and having consulted our members, we have compiled a note on what we think should happen to the town centre. We attach hereto the note, entitled Gravesend Town Centre Briefing Note, which we hope you find useful and informative.

We look forward to the outcome of the Town Centre Review and would welcome any further discussions with yourselves.

Yours sincerely ,

S. COUVES  
Secretary to Urban Gravesham

**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 Gravesend'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, routed 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.

END