

Economic Growth Scrutiny Panel

Meeting Date: 29th July 2021
Portfolio: Economic Development
Key Decision: No
Policy and Budget Framework: Yes/No
Public / Private: Public

Title: Events - planned events and how they can support city centre vitality
Report of: Corporate Director of Economic Development
Report Number: ED 24/21

Purpose / Summary:

This Report outlines key work streams that will contribute towards Carlisle's recovery from the challenges presented as we move out of the COVID-19 lockdown as we move towards economic recovery and renewal.

Recommendations:

To consider the contents of the report and contribute to emerging thinking regarding economic recovery and renewal of Carlisle District.

Tracking

Executive:	
Scrutiny:	ED.26/20: Carlisle's Economic Recovery and Renewal Post COVID-19 - 9 th July 2020
Council:	

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1. Amongst the challenges presented by COVID-19, the pandemic has had a huge impact on our city centres. While some changes and challenges brought about by the pandemic are new, others are merely a continuation or acceleration of pre-existing trends. Lockdowns have driven a significant increase in online shopping, which has in turn hastened the decline of high street retail. The demise of several well-known high street retailers over the last year has also seen a renewed policy focus on what we should do about our high streets.
- 1.2. The changes in the economic geography of the city during lockdown have reinforced the importance of our local places. The adoption of working from home, closures of retail and hospitality, and the temporary end of commuting en masse have all changed how and where we spend our time and money. City centres have seen both footfall and spending decline dramatically: yet in some high streets that serve more local catchment areas, spending has increased
- 1.3. This report will outline the challenges and opportunities that Carlisle city centre faces if mass retail continues to decline and what other activities should take place on Carlisle's high street.

2. City Centre Overview

- 2.1. Carlisle lies at the heart of both the county of Cumbria and the wider Borderlands region. It serves a wide geographical hinterland and is the economic, administrative, and cultural centre for Cumbria, as well as a substantial portion of north west England and southern Scotland. Over 500,000 people live within one hour of the city and the city's retail catchment, with few alternatives, totals over 180,000 people.
- 2.2. However, only 4,220 people live in Carlisle city centre, a decline of 7.2% since 2011. The working age resident population in the city centre has fallen by 11%, whilst the over-65s population has increased by 21% over the same period.
- 2.3. Furthermore, the city centre's employment is focused primarily in wholesale and retail trade (27%), the public sector (20%) and professional services (19%). Of these sectors, only wholesale and retail trade is proportionally larger than the district, Cumbria and England, due to the high street presence of major retailers, such as at the Lanes Shopping Centre, which accommodates over 70 stores including major retailers such as Primark, NEXT and New Look. This employment is likely to fall following the closure of Debenhams and is likely to shrink further still from the lockdown impacts of 2020 and early 2021.

- 2.4. In 2019, retail, professional services, and the public sector combined representing 66% of employment in the city centre and highlighting Carlisle's reliance on a service-led economy. The recent restrictions, during which most of these establishments were closed, demonstrates the precariousness of the city centre economy and the issues with over-reliance on one or two sectors.
- 2.5. Carlisle's visitor economy suffered significantly during the pandemic where the sectors impact fell by £404m (72%) from 2019, to £156m in 2020, although the prospects for a strong rebound in 2021 are promising.
- 2.6. Carlisle's city centre is dominated by retail land use. The city centre had a vacancy rate of 12% in 2019, which has been relatively stable since 2012. Weekend footfall fell all over the city centre including in the Historic Quarter from 2012 to 2019. The weekend decline may be exacerbated by the lack of city centre residential properties, implying that working individuals often do not visit in the city at weekends.

3. City Centre Economic Recovery Action Plan

- 3.1. As part of the package of actions funded by the Re-opening the High Street Safely Fund, an 'Economic Action Plan - Responding to Covid -19 in Carlisle City Centre' was commissioned (the full report can be found here www.carlisle.gov.uk/regeneration). This provided an economic baseline on which to monitor change. The action plan covered:
- Key economic trends affecting Carlisle
 - Stakeholder engagement and feedback
 - Policy review
 - Development of themes and sub-themes to form an Investment Framework and Economic Action Plan.
- 3.2. Carlisle has been ranked 27th out of 110 town and cities to be most vulnerable post pandemic¹. This considered the impact of home working and loss of retail outlets with the strength of current cultural assets. This analysis emphasises the need for more appropriate and sustainable measures to be implemented in Carlisle city centre to ensure the economy thrives post-pandemic. The key messages nationally that also apply to Carlisle include:

¹ KPMG (2020) 'The future of towns and cities post COVID-19' Available at: <https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/uk/pdf/2021/01/the-future-of-towns-and-cities-post-covid-19-how-will-covid-19-transform-england-s-town-and-city-centres.pdf> [accessed on 22/02/2021]



Workers will continue to work from home for at least some of their time post-COVID-19.



Rural homes may become more desirable due to their size and closeness to natural assets, both of which have increased in importance during the pandemic.



Flexible office space is expected to continue to increase in demand, in both big cities and smaller towns.



Retail land use will continue to fall post-COVID-19 in town and city centres presenting opportunities for alternative land uses to draw people into city centres.



Sustainable growth will be a key part of recovery from the pandemic, with the net-zero goal and active travel being important aspects of this.



Securing a UK/EU trade agreement has reduced the concern of the impacts of Brexit many sectors, however there are opportunities in promoting local business opportunities.

Source Mott MacDonald

3.3. Through the baselining exercise, trends analysis, stakeholder engagement process and policy review, the main findings were identified and the opportunities and challenges they present for Carlisle city centre considered. There were then developed into three key themes for investment:

- Theme 1 – Harnessing changing working patterns to diversify and grow the city centre.
- Theme 2 – Creating a thriving centre for residents and visitors.
- Theme 3 – Ensuring a supporting and innovative public sector.

3.4. Of relevance to this report is Theme 2 with sub-themes 1 to 3 being of particular relevance to the discussion around city centre vitality and the impact of events.



Source: Mott MacDonald

1. A sense of place - repurposing and revitalising the city centre

- 3.5. The city centre has been hugely impacted by COVID-19. Visitor numbers have fallen due retail outlets and heritage assets being closed and no events taking place. Creating a sense of place will help draw people back into the city centre improving vitality and viability.

Key opportunities:

- There is a need for further support for the change in use of city centre vacant units, with the City Council highlighted as a body who should support such action. However, it has been noted that due to the historical nature of the city and it being home to many listed buildings the cost of conversion for some units will be high.
- Prior to COVID-19, Carlisle's limited leisure and evening economy (especially during the week) had led to a perception of a lack of vibrancy. *Reinvention* and *rebranding* are required to increase visitor number and improve perception of the city centre

2. The visitor economy –expanding and marketing Carlisle's visitor offer

- 3.6. Carlisle's visitor offer is a key strength for the city. Carlisle should capitalise on the growing trend of the staycation market, positioning itself as an attractive location for weekend breaks and as part of longer journeys in the North West of England.

Key opportunities

- Carlisle has strong historic assets in the city centre, such as Carlisle Castle, Cathedral and Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery.
- It is likely that the tourism industry will rebound after lockdown measures are lifted in 2021 with an expected strong demand for domestic tourism.
- Event such as the Cultural Bazaar and monthly Farmers' markets are very popular in Carlisle. Those stakeholders who are involved in running events cited the need for appropriate infrastructure for these to function at the best of their ability e.g. water and drainage for outdoor stalls or suitable indoor space during the colder months.
- Carlisle is currently not a popular option for UK holidays (at least in terms of searches for holidays), even with an increasing interest in the nearby Lake District and Hadrian's Wall. There is an opportunity for Carlisle to reposition itself to take advantage of this trend in staycations.

3. The leisure economy – bringing vibrancy to the city centre, in particular the evening economy

- 3.7. Carlisle's reliance on the retail sector (both for visitors and as a source of employment) will be severely impacted by changing trends in this sector. The city centre needs to bolster its leisure offer in order to be more resilient and attract larger number of visitors.

Key opportunities

- Extend the 'after five' offer in Carlisle into the centre of the city with a wider variety of entertainment and leisure facilities for all age ranges.
- Food stalls were highlighted as potentially offering a wide range of benefits, being a leisure service to residents and visitors, creating an entrepreneurial culture as well as celebrating different food cultures from across Carlisle and Cumbria's residents.
- Suggested ideas for vacant units include exhibition space, a community hub, a cooking school, a community cinema and a food hall. With many large vacant units in the centre this may be an opportunity for a multi-use space operating as both a cinema and community hub for example.
- Carlisle city centre has the opportunity to rebrand its leisure economy to be attractive to a wider demographic.

4. Grimsey Review

- 4.1. Building on the Grimsey 1 and Grimsey 2 reviews, the 'Build Back Better'² Covid-19 supplement report, produced by Bill Grimsey and team, provides a comprehensive exploration of how town centres and high streets can transform in order to thrive in a post-Covid19 environment. It also includes a series of insightful best practice case study examples throughout to bring the 27 key recommendations to life. The ideas contained focus on boosting local authority capacity; building place making skills; enhancing coordination; and delivering intelligence and data directly to high streets and town centres.
- 4.2. The report suggests COVID-19 has accelerated a cultural shift around what people want to see from their high streets and town centres, which was underway before the pandemic, such as the desire for experiences over 'stuff', and concerns over societal issues like sustainability. As the report observes, the pandemic has therefore "paved the way for a post retail landscape to emerge", whereby "we've spent an enormous amount of energy over the last decade trying to work out how to keep an outdated model on life-support. It's time we expended that same energy and commitment on looking to the future". To build back better in the future, the authors subsequently urge us to see our high streets and town centres as being about more than just retail; instead offering 'community hubs' which provide "health, education, culture, housing, leisure, art and crafts, along with some shops"

5. CITY CENTRE EVENTS

5.1 Why event will be important in city centre vitality

- 5.1.1 According to a recent report on eating out in town centres, by Springboard and the NPD Group, improved performance of high streets is being driven by a booming and inventive food and drink sector, such as street food or markets.
- 5.1.2 The report Re-imagining urban spaces to help revitalise our high streets by DCLG states that there is no point in simply chasing the traditional model of the high street - a place where people come together to shop. Retail is an important element of a thriving town centre, but it's not sufficient. Instead, you need to re-imagine your high street and town centre, and drive towards a new future where people come together for many different reasons. Events are a compelling reason for people to visit our City Centre.

² <https://www.highstreettaskforce.org.uk/resources/details/?id=5f61c69f-8fbe-43bf-9cdb-03a0517bfe64>

5.1.3 Markets in particular can be an important asset to the area economically – for example supplementing the variety of goods and services available, providing enterprise opportunities, and attracting visitors – and socially – encouraging different communities to intermingle, and including social groups who might otherwise not be attracted to the town centre.

5.1.4 The potential for urban spaces to support growth in the evening and night-time economy should not be ignored – not just in terms of outside seating areas for pubs, bars and restaurants, but also nighttime and performances. Clever lighting can highlight attractive or historical features and architectural details and unlock heritage for both the community and visitors alike, deter anti-social behaviour, and increase safety.

5.2 **Past successes – impact**

5.2.1 Following the easing of restrictions, the Council was awarded funding from the Governments 'Welcome Back Fund'. Some of this was used to support the introduction of a new event in the City Centre, the Carlisle Hawker Festival. This event provided a street food market, open air seating and live music.

5.2.2 It is estimated that around 20,000 attended the event, many of whom would not have been in the City Centre had the event not been put on. The event also provided a platform for local businesses to trade (free of charge) and was an opportunity for local musicians to perform to an audience once again. The event generated some positive feedback from those who attended and took part.

5.2.3 The International Market held twice per year in the City Centre has the same effect drawing residents and visitors into the City Centre with spin off benefits into other retail and hospitality outlets.

5.2.4 In February 2020, the Council's Discover Carlisle Team introduced a new event, Carlisle City of Lights. The event was organised in partnership with Cumbria County Council's Street Light Team and Carlisle Local Committee. The event featured new architectural lighting of some of Carlisle's key historic buildings and the headline sound and light experience 'SPACE – God, The Universe and Everything' at Carlisle Cathedral. The event completely sold out and an economic impact assessment has shown that over the duration of the event an additional £166,000 was generated for the local economy. One restaurant owner reported that bookings during the February event were higher than the Christmas period.

5.3 **Future events**

5.3.1 The Summer International Market is planned for August Bank Holiday Weekend and will incorporate the Proclamation. The Proclamation is a declaration of the City Council's rights to hold an annual fair in August, originally granted to the citizens of Carlisle in 1352 by Edward III.

- 5.3.2 Restrictions in February 2021 meant that the 'City of Lights' event could not go ahead. It was decided that the event should be postponed until Autumn. The proposed dates for City of Lights 2021 are 14,15 and 16 October (pending government restrictions). The event will be based over 3 venues and will be held outdoors.
- 5.3.3 Next year, 2022, marks the 1900th Anniversary of Hadrian's Wall. City of Lights 2022 will be themed on Roman Occupation with a bespoke digital immersive sound and light experience.

6. CONCLUSION AND REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.1 Events will play an important part in enhancing the vitality of the city centre driving footfall to existing businesses and encouraging new business start-ups.
- 6.2 Research conducted in partnership has shown that Carlisle receives 7% of the total visitor market in Cumbria. Events are one way to increase Carlisle's share of this market.
- 6.3 Events have a key cultural and social value, but also an economic impact with City of Lights 2020 generating £166,000 for the local economy over 3 days, with 91% of those attending visiting specifically because of the event.
- 6.4 Events are an instrument for the development of the visitor economy and to extend the visitor season.

7. CONTRIBUTION TO THE CARLISLE PLAN PRIORITIES

Contribution to the new Carlisle Plan priorities of economic growth and health and wellbeing.

Contact Officer: Paul Walker and Zoe Sutton **Ext:** 7312

Appendices
attached to report:

Note: in compliance with section 100d of the Local Government Act 1972 the report has been prepared in part from the following papers:

- None

Equality – None

Property – No Property comments

Finance - Funding was awarded to the Council as a response to COVID-19 from the ERDF for Reopening High Streets Safely and the Welcome Back Fund, both of which were intended on attracting visitors back to the Town Centre. Further funding has been granted for the Town Deal and Future High Street Fund which will see nearly £30m invested in the City Centre area to help improve vitality and increase usage of the City Centre. The Council also has base budgets for use in and around the City Centre to provide events and improve footfall.

Legal - It is vitally important as a public authority that all events are run in accordance with relevant rules, regulations and guidance both generally and particularly in relation to covid-19.

Information Governance - There are no information governance implications with this report.