

REPORT OF 2ND SUMMIT MEETING - 27.03.09

Lynda Waltho MP welcomed everyone and opened the meeting. The Agenda set for 28.02.09 would be continued:

SWOT Analysis - David Cox:

Strengths of the town include its history, its traditions, a good many long-established businesses;

Weaknesses are that Stourbridge always comes second to Dudley, e.g. Dudley is being given a new town centre (**see press release**), Stourbridge is struggling to survive (**see article**).

Opportunities are available: to use empty shops for display etc. purposes. Woolworth buildings are being considered from a national perspective for community use – opportunities for indoor markets, craft markets etc.

Threats are the subways (literally threatening for some people, especially at night) and the feeling of decline expressed by the empty properties. We need to contact landlords to see about alternative uses for empty shops.

Opened for public discussion:

Mr Webster asked how those present had come to the Elton Centre?

5 had walked; 2 came on public transport; everyone else came by car. His point was that if we look after (1) the car, this will help (2) the customer, which will benefit (3) the traders. Birmingham St car park is seriously under-used. We need transport from it into town. When the High Street was closed for Harvest Festival the shops did not benefit, only the street traders.

Lady: she walks whenever possible but the High Street is dangerous for pedestrians and for the disabled. The traders seem to be the only people to oppose pedestrianisation, most of the consumers seem very much to favour it. Ground level in the High Street is awful, the tops of the buildings are much better. Future planning consent should prohibit plate glass windows and concentrate on appearance.

Gentleman: we should pedestrianise the High Street and give free parking. The subways should be filled in and pelican crossings should be monitored to prevent motorists jumping red lights. **Kate Weston** agreed that the subways are a disgrace. She wanted to know why they were never properly drained? Why there was always stagnant water?

Chris Armfield: the car parks are disgusting; he regularly sees drug paraphernalia; the ticket machines are being blown up and Bell Street is at the mercy of boy racers. Were the car parks better maintained, cleaner, more secure then they would be used more. Dropped kerbs are still being blocked. Parking controls need to be enforced.

Via written submission, Kate Weston asked how many traders were active members of the Stourbridge Chamber? How representative was the Chamber of the wishes of the majority of traders?

David Cox : pedestrianisation is more than just taking the cars off the High Street. We need to look after everyone, however they come to town.

Lynda Waltho reminded the meeting of Cllr Adams' undertaking to order a thorough survey of traders and town-users on the subject of pedestrianisation. She welcomed the fact that Dudley Council / officers had organised a meeting with the traders – (see [press release](#))

John Parry (Parry People Movers)

Successful town centres need either (a) a large open car park or (b) space to make one, not necessarily in the town centre. Nottingham has spacious parking facilities on the outskirts of the city; people take the tram into the city centre, which is designated as a Clear Zone – block paving creates a different feel, different attitude for and from those motorists who do go in.

We have the large car park on Birmingham Street; we should aim for a circular tram/light rail service that can go from the Junction to the Town station, from there down the Ring Road to Birmingham Street car park, into town and then back again. The only issue would be how to get the tram/train across the ring road. John's solution would be to put in a by-pass and re-grade the ring road.

Multi-storey car parks can be used if people have bulky shopping to do but the beauty of the rail system is that you know the 'train' will come. Light rail is environmentally friendly, conserves energy and is reliable.

A new (High Speed 2) system is being developed on the back of the success of the Channel Tunnel link. It will involve the creation of 'stopping points' from which a light-weight feeder rail system will ferry passengers to the main line HS2 network. Prof Andrew McNaughton, Chief Executive of HS2, has been asked by the Dept for Transport to prove the economic viability of light-weight rail technology = the Stourbridge Town link line is to be the exemplar / study / demonstration of light-weight feeder rail systems. The aim is to provide a park and ride facility plus actual transport from A to B.

The Certificate authorising the use of the PPM on the Stourbridge Town Branch line arrived on 27.03.09. The service will begin on 28.03.09, initially in combination with heavy rail until the second tram/train is ready for service.

Joe Green: Merry Hill began with mini and courtesy bus services from the estates etc. to get people to the shops. It worked. Until such time as we can extend the PPM service around town, we should make Birmingham Street free parking and provide a courtesy service into the shops.

Debbie Digger: parking charges will be introduced at Merry Hill fairly soon. Contracts are being renegotiated, 75% are complete. We should grasp with both hands the opportunities that gives to Stourbridge. We need to attract blue chip, specialist traders etc.

Lady: at 80.000sq.ft. Tesco will be a 'Threat.' We should bear in mind what has happened to Cradley since Tesco opened there. Who will the car park be for? Mark Rogers confirmed that it will be free parking for use by the town.

Chris Armfield: we should promote the town's historical connection with rail: the shortest railway line/journey in the UK, the Stourbridge Lion, links to America etc. **June**

Collins thought we should have a Tourist Information centre. **A gentleman** also thought we should have signposts for local amenities – library, bus and rail stations, toilets etc.

Mr Webster: internet shopping means that town centres must change to provide specialised shops and service centres e.g you can buy your computer online but to get it repaired you have to shop locally; buy your suit online, get it altered locally.

Les Jones was invited to give a council 'Regeneration brief' perspective of issues raised:

we cannot reverse planning and building decisions – e.g. can't order a shopkeeper to remove plate glass; the council owns a lot of property and land in Dudley town centre, virtually none in Stourbridge; the Master Plan for Stourbridge became the Unitary Development Plan in 2005; it should be effective for 10 years but won't actually come into play until later this year; the area around the canal side should be for industrial development, this makes development for housing, the new GP centre etc. difficult to plan for etc.; partners are being prepared for co-operation with future development. Plans for developing the bottom of town are reverting back to houses instead of flats; pocket park funding failed to materialise because the money was to come from the development at the canal side.

Permission for that was refused = no money for pocket park; Modus have alternatives other than Stourbridge. We need to promote ourselves, make Modus want to come here; removal of Merry Hill parking charges is linked to funding for the Midland Metro; he tried to get a bus link from Birmingham St. to the town centre but no contractor would take it on and the council couldn't afford to do so; there won't be money available from Advantage West Midlands – urban towns are funded differently from market ones – what is available to Ludlow isn't available to Stourbridge.

Liz Walker: thought section 106 funding from Transco (previous owners of the gas holder site) ought to be enough to fund the pocket park development.

Les Jones: we will never get consensus on pedestrianisation but it must not happen without the agreement of the traders – we could lose businesses simply by planning to pedestrianise. Agreeing with John Parry about the psychology of paving v. tarmac, he wondered if any money was left from the budget intended to create a High Street and Market Street standardised and clear walk zone? With an estimated cost in excess of £2.5 million any improvement scheme would be dependent on private development.

Mark Rogers: we should invite the Chief Planning Officer to come to the next meeting to explain just what is or is not possible.

Re Rent reductions: **Lynda** had made enquiries re the possibility of lower rents being charged to encourage occupation of empty premises but, at this point, property owners are still refusing to consider that possibility – they are fearful of setting a precedent.

Credit Unions: (previously raised by Kate Weston) cannot lend money to businesses, only to individuals. **Sue Solly** asked if the government could be persuaded to legislate to allow this to happen? Also to allow lending to charities? **Liz Walker** reported that Castle and Crystal CU is planning to open a branch on Lye High Street; there are also plans to set up a 'station' based at Amblecote church.

Lynda Waltho reported that the government was making £24 million available to support the voluntary sector. The Black Country re-Investment Society is working to advise and support new businesses and those experiencing difficulties (see attached leaflets).

NEXT STEPS –

- it was felt that these needed to be a pre-consultation exercise with council officers
- Cllr Jones offered to ask for them to come to the next meeting
- Lynda Waltho offered to make direct contact with the town centre traders to ask them come to the next meeting
- Only himself and 2 others traders having attended this meeting, Geoff Downing offered to take information from it back to his business colleagues.