

Newton Abbot Town Development Manager Report
Newton Abbot Town Council Annual Meeting 2019

Every single day brings with it headlines referring to ‘dying’ or ‘struggling’ high streets, with so called ‘experts’ giving advice on what should be done. However, much of what needs to be done, is in the hands of central government alone. I add my weight to the arguments of place managers nationwide and we do everything we can to lobby our local MPs and the government regarding the taxation imbalance which exists between those who trade from bricks and mortar properties in the heart of town centres and those who trade online and from much cheaper warehouses and industrial spaces. We live in a digital age now whether we like it or not and the taxation system has not kept pace with technology or our way of life. For me, it’s disappointing, after a decade of lobbying alongside colleagues and working with other organisations such as Chambers of Trade, BID boards and the ATCM (Association of Town and City Management), that our voices appear to have been put on ‘mute’. Instead of the root and branch reform of business rates, which for a decade, we have repeatedly advised is essential, the government instead continues to offer an assortment of ‘funds’ for which bids must be submitted by local authorities. At the end of the day, no matter how smart the town or innovative the event, a business will only open if the numbers stack up. Rents are not so much the problem, but business rates are. High street retailers are paying more than their fair share of tax and online retailers are simply not contributing enough. Amazon’s rates contribution is less than 1% of turnover and yet look at shops in the high street and their contribution is more like 6.5%. Despite this, our government continues to shy away from addressing the anomaly and ignores the strenuous lobbying from all representative national and local organisations. It also ignores the findings from the very industry specialists, who government has specially commissioned to report on high street decline! We are all concerned about the potential decline of the high street, but without government intervention on this basic issue, it will ultimately be the consumer who will decide if we cherish our high streets enough to halt the decline which is seen in many towns. Fortunately, there is still plenty of shopping taking place in Newton Abbot.



Thinking about Newton Abbot’s location, it lies a short distance between 2 major cities and sits next to acclaimed seaside resorts. Newton Abbot also has out of town retail parks and destinations on all sides and so it could be safe to say that we should be ‘up against it’. However, Newton Abbot continues to support with pride, a vibrant array of independent shops and businesses. Whilst big names such as House of Fraser and Debenhams are disappearing from high streets nationwide, Newton Abbot has its own

independent department store, which has grown from year to year and received huge investment and is a massive attractor to the town. Just last year saw major refurbishment works to the main Austins ladies store, which resulted amongst other joys, in a superb new fragrance hall. Visiting fragrance bosses were bowled over by the department and one I spoke to, told me how some of the London stores would have been delighted to experience the level of footfall which our town enjoys! Newton Abbot is also still home to a wide range of national retailers such as Waterstones, Wilko and Bodyshop. There have been several shop closures over the last 12 months, but the vacancy rate remains on a par with the last decade and a cycle of openings and closures are normal and what has always lain at the heart of a vibrant town centre. Amongst other new businesses to the town centre, we welcomed over the last 12 months: Orsino Lounge, Meat 59, Greggs and The Pharmacy café

(under new ownership). We also saw Kays Carers, Relocate Homes, the Accountancy and Tax Centre, Lolly stick Media, Malcolm Barrett Fine Art and Kelly Glover hair and beauty.



The range of shops in Newton Abbot reflects the needs of those who use it.

Mobile phones are a massive feature of our day to day life and therefore it's no surprise that we have a good range of mobile phone shops. Meeting for coffee and eating and drinking generally are popular activities and an experience which cannot be replicated online and so its brilliant that our town boasts such a fantastic choice of places to go. Having an array of outlets in the same field is a positive thing as consumers visit towns with choice and not those with a 'Hobson's

choice'! The shop vacancy rate at January 2019 was 4.7% in Newton Abbot, maintaining a like for like with 2018 and still below the South West figure of 9.4% and the UK figure of 10.4%. (source Springboard). There are those who continue to mourn the departure of M&S from our town centre, but big bosses at major national chains don't get paid for the easy stuff. Numbers are crunched, and myriad meetings take place before difficult decisions like these are made. Much larger towns than Newton Abbot have lost their M&S, leaving much larger holes in the high street, but life goes on and at the time of writing this, I'm aware that this is one building which is not likely to remain empty for too long!

Few have missed the controversial rent-to-own retailer, Brighthouse, since it closed its doors last year and since the superb refurbishment of Market Walk Shopping centre, the landlord, Teignbridge District Council, has received a healthy interest in the 4 x vacant spaces within Market Walk from national and independent retailers. It is likely that by the summer new occupiers will be on site, which will drive greater footfall and enhance the overall offer both in the Centre and in the town.



It was brilliant to see Bank Street business and award-winning local gallery 'Frames and Boxes' open a pop-up shop in the Centre for the Christmas period and I'm grateful to Teignbridge District Council for providing space for pop-ups over the last couple of years.

Stephan and Molly Robinson in their Christmas 'Pop-Up' in Market Walk



We sympathise with nearby Teignmouth which is set to lose its Waitrose and the fact that the John Lewis Partnership is feeling the strain tells a very clear story about retailing challenges nationwide.

Newton Abbot however looks forward to the opening of a brand-new Aldi, which will be built to a bespoke design on a once derelict site at the entrance to our town. We are also delighted that Aldi has committed not only to a bespoke store design but also to a complete refurbishment of our historic railway signals at the location. Recruitment is under way at present and there has been a massive response to the vacancies advertised.

We look forward to the completion of the former Queens hotel as a residential development. Now that planning has been granted we also await the imminent commencement of work on the former Seymour Horwell site in Wolborough Street.



These are just three examples of investment which can be seen at every corner of Newton Abbot, a fact which we continue to celebrate as a sign of continued growth and confidence. With a new hotel coming soon, we will also be able to welcome more visitors to the town. Newton's Place is another fantastic project and the museum and community space is a place we will all be proud of and another 'attractor' to the town.

To ensure the vitality of town centres after the shops have closed, local authorities are hoping to encourage owners and landlords to convert disused upper floors into residential accommodation. This is something I'm working on with TDC as there are grants available. Newton does in fact have a good degree of vibrancy in this regard already. Residential can be found above shops in most of the main shopping streets, but there are more opportunities. Communication between local authorities, landlords and tenants is a key part of my role as town centre property ownership is complex

I've been working alongside colleagues in the Town, District and County Councils and with private partners. Alongside the lobbying I've been focussing on identifying other ways in which we can support our town centre.

Newton Abbot has 5 town noticeboards located in car parks which are embarrassingly out of date and one of my projects is to get these updated and refurbished. I hope to have identified funds and get this done to coincide with the opening of our new community space 'Newton's Place'.



We now have two town centre classic vehicle shows and I am much indebted to the West Country Classic Vehicle Club members who I work alongside to put these events on for shoppers. This year we will also have a children's competition in partnership with the MDA and more vintage live music to add to the atmosphere.



Our second year of Summer nights street food events went down well with the community, seeing whole families and people of all ages enjoying an early supper with some live music before going on to enjoy the rest of what Newton Abbot has to offer at night. We plan 3 more events this year.



Working on behalf of the Community Trust, which owns Golden Lion Square in Bank Street, I have been pleased to organise several musical events last summer, culminating in a jazz concert. Kindly sponsored by the Passage House Hotel, Swervy world will be playing again on Easter Saturday – a lovely addition to our popular children's Easter activities.



I work with many schools colleges and organisations within the town and quite closely with South Devon College. Everyone seems to be thrilled with the Olive trees in the amazing planters designed and constructed by South Devon College learners. We will see more of their handiwork this summer as a special hexagonal bench is to be designed and made. This will fit around the tree by Costa in Courtenay Street, where the roots are lifting the paving and causing a hazard. The rather unattractive orange fencing will be replaced by a hand-crafted bench designed by our own youngsters. Newton Abbot streets have also become much safer over the last 12 months as work continues to replace 'wonky' paving slabs with tarmac. I understand that the rate of accidents has drastically reduced and shoppers and residents can go about their business without fear of a drenching in bad weather or without the need to constantly be on the lookout for trip hazards.

'Iroko' planters made by SDC learners



A new bench in this location in the summer!

It's no secret that Newton Abbot will double in size, as new homes are built over the next few years. It's therefore vital that the investment which we have been fortunate enough to have seen over the last decade, continues into the next. There are three Councils at work in the town and a host of enthusiastic and passionate organisations, groups and businesses and I'm honoured to work alongside most of them. It's great to see everyone working very hard to keep the momentum going and there is much about which to be positive.

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