

## **Retail in the City Centre Meeting Note**

A workshop focussing on retail in the City Centre was held in Marischal College on 15 January 2014 with Councillors, members of the City Centre business community and City Centre community groups invited. Please find an attendee list below.

Richard Noble – FG Burnett	Jean Morrison – Councillor
Stephen Booth – Aberdeen City Council	Neil MacGregor – Councillor
Jenny Laing – Councillor	Robert Collier – Aberdeen and Grampian Chamber of Commerce
Ian Yuill – Councillor	Craig Stevenson – Bon Accord Centre
Ryan Manson – Union Square	Gareth Evans – NHS Grampian
Joanne Wilkes – F&C Reit	Dominic Fairlie – Aberdeen Civic Society
Muriel Jaffrey – Councillor	Graham Dickson – Councillor
Barney Crockett – Councillor	Susan Bree – Aberdeen Inspired
Steve Harris – Visit Scotland	Callum McCaig - Councillor
Robert Holder – John Lewis	
Christine Boylan – Craigiebuckler and Seafield Community Council	

Apologies were given from Councillor Marie Boulton and John MacFarlane of Aparention for The Academy.

The session consisted of a presentation outlining the Aberdeen Local Development Plan – Main Issues Report by a member of the Local Development Plan team and then a presentation by Keith Hargest on the Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Retail Study (2013) and its implications for Aberdeen City Centre. The slides from the presentation can be found on [\[http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/planning\\_environment/planning/local\\_development\\_plan/pla\\_2016\\_main\\_issues\\_report.asp\]](http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/planning_environment/planning/local_development_plan/pla_2016_main_issues_report.asp) and the Retail Study can be found on [\[http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/planning\\_environment/planning/local\\_development\\_plan/pla\\_2016\\_mir\\_sd.asp\]](http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/planning_environment/planning/local_development_plan/pla_2016_mir_sd.asp). The presentations were then followed by facilitated workshops in which groups were asked to discuss the following questions.

It should be noted that this is not a minute of the workshop but a summary of points raised by each group. If you have any queries on the points summarised below please do not hesitate to contact me on the details below.

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## **1. What do you want your City Centre to be like by 2035 and how should it be used?**

### **Diverse City Centre**

There was a general consensus that the City Centre should be more diverse by encouraging other uses because people want to do more than just shop. One group stated they want to see a more diverse range of uses such as offices in the City Centre, particularly the west end of Union Street which should also have more cafes and residential units. Another group furthered this by saying they wish to see more people of working age in the City Centre during working hours and are looking forward to the development of the Silver Fin on Union Street.

Another group wish to see more high end shops to attract people into the centre. However, it was questioned 'what is an ideal mix of uses?' as a mix of uses is important but what is the ideal proportions? It was suggested we need to look at other successful cities and analyse what is there and what makes them attractive which could provide examples of what we could do here. Perth was mentioned by another group as a quality city that Aberdeen could aspire to. It was also mentioned that a mixture of uses could be in one building with retail on the ground floor and other uses in the upper storeys. However, it is recognised that there are lots of pressures on the city centre and it will be difficult to accommodate all uses. It may be right that multiples focus in the core of the city centre but this may mean that independent shops and offices have to locate elsewhere. It was also noted that Belmont Street's is a good example of different uses.

It was said in one group that they wish to see Aberdeen as Scotland's Private Sector Capital. They would also like to see population growth in the City and a City Centre that is growing to support the increase in population – there was caution regarding over-development though but sites need to be made available for development. Others wish to see a City that reflects the wealth of the region – where people want to come to rather than where people need to be.

It was also noted that some thought that the universities should move back into the City Centre as this is a huge loss.

### **Linkages and Wayfinding**

Many think the City Centre needs to be more cohesive and negotiable as it is not very joined up at the moment. It also needs better linkages so places are easier to get to. There should also be better linkages within the City Centre such as transport links and pedestrian links. The drop in levels between Union Street and the Green must be addressed through more effective linkages and wayfinding. It was noted in one group that they would like to see the Wayfinding Project run by Aberdeen Inspired to be accelerated as this will help with the current issue.

## **Accessibility, Transport and Parking**

It was agreed that access and connectivity is important for a successful City Centre. It was thought that public transport in and out of Aberdeenshire is particularly bad, which may be why so many people feel the need to bring their cars. There also needs to be a better commitment from National Railway Service to provide a more frequent service – for example on Boxing Day (a big shopping day) there were no trains and it is thought a local train service would help people get into the City Centre. It was agreed that public transport is essential for the City Centre, however it was said by one group that it is expensive. There also needs to be better integration between the different modes of transport. It was also stated that there are a lack of cycle racks and this should be addressed.

It was suggested that Castlegate should be opened up as a bus turning circle and there are Victorian toilets underground. However, some thought bus hubs are tacky, unpleasant places.

It was also noted that some think there needs to be a balance between pedestrians and cars because the city still needs to be 'car friendly' for shoppers. However, at the moment the City Centre is dominated by vehicular movement and the importance of pedestrian movement should be recognised. A balance between commuter parking and shoppers parking is also needed because the rise of commuter parking has led to an increase in parking charges in Council car parks. Therefore, there needs to be a comprehensive review of shoppers' car parking and maybe a more clear distinction between short term and long term parking. However, it is thought that it is still important to attract offices into the City Centre. It was noted that the small businesses in the West End are worried about the impact of parking charges on their business. Some said that we can't fight against the high car use here because it is a unique issue in Aberdeen.

It was also suggested that car parks should be ringed around a pedestrianised core, between the shops and the business zone and it was noted there is a lack of room for new car parks but the existing ones do ring the City Centre.

## **Public Perception**

There is currently a poor perception of the City Centre, which may be related to traffic. It was also stated by one group that people need to let go of Union Street and realise it is not the shopping street it once was and focus on protecting the middle section for retail.

## **Public Realm**

Many agree there needs to be more and better quality pedestrian friendly public realm where people can sit and relax such as, shared surfaces, wider pavements and two lanes for cars etc. on Union Street. Currently the public realm is overcrowded and doesn't encourage people to linger and the unpleasant environment on Union Street is retailers' biggest problem. One group wish to see Union Street pedestrianised between Market Street and Bridge Street and another would like to see the Castlegate opened up as an event space.

Another group mentioned that events need to take place in Aberdeen to give people a reason to come to the City Centre.

Another group noted that they think the experience of walking along Union Street is unpleasant. Some ideas that could make it better include pedestrianisation – it does not necessarily have to be full pedestrianisation. Pavements could be widened, a central reservation provided for pedestrians or get rid of planters and other street clutter. Some want to allow parking on Union Street or allow traffic through at night only, however there were mixed views on this.

It was noted that one group wish to see the cleaning of the buildings and public realm in the City Centre enforced.

### **Architecture**

Aberdeen has great and unique architecture which should be celebrated and should be complemented with new iconic architecture. There was also some who wish to see the retention of traditional granite frontages as this makes Aberdeen distinctive. However, others would prefer to see modern materials and design. There was also a view expressed that buildings in the city centre should generally be no higher than five storeys.

It was suggested that we keep the frontages of the buildings on Union Street and extend out and up to rear. Another group wish to see the repairing of shopfronts. This comment was furthered by another group who think Aberdeen does not manage the quality and design of its physical shop fronts as some other towns do. They also suggest that we look at Regent Street's dedicated policy on shop frontages.

### **Shopping**

It was suggested that trade hours of the shopping centres should be extended. One group would like to see the City Centre weatherproofed where it should be covered and join up the shopping centres. It was said that covered shopping areas are a better option and they don't have to be enclosed. Another group said they wish to see the City Centre as a major centre for retail and leisure providing what people want.

One group said that we need to accept that the trend is shifting in favour of 'destinations' that can offer retail, food/drink and leisure all under one roof – which is the appeal of Union Square. Also, traditional shops (for example outside on Union Street) are not attractive to retailers any more because they are small and often require significant investment to bring them up to code in terms of fire, waste and disability regulations.

### **Night-time Economy**

It was suggested that there needs to be improvements to the evening economy and it was noted that police will want the night time economy to be focused in certain areas. However night time economy doesn't have to mean alcohol, it can focus on family dining, entertainment etc.

## **2. What do you think it is important to include in the City Centre boundary and why?**

### **Existing Boundaries**

It was noted that one group would like to change the terminology of the existing map. They suggested the City Centre Business Zone should be called 'Retail Zone' and the City Centre boundary should be the 'Business Zone'.

### **Important Features in the City Centre**

One group think it is important to keep the library and Union Terrace Gardens in the City Centre.

### **Proposed Changes to Boundaries**

Most groups agreed that the four areas proposed to be taken out of the City Centre were logical and fair and were in support of a more focused and compact city centre that only really included the truly mixed use areas, i.e. not those which are mainly residential. One group thought the Holburn area should be a town centre as it contains destination shops. However another group think that the King Street / Morrisons area should be retained.

Another group completely disagreed with the shrinking of the City Centre and think that it needs to grow and asked why we want to reduce it. They thought adding the link to the beach to the City Centre boundary would be good to promote tourism. Another area they thought should be included is the North Dee area as it would bring suits into the City Centre. However, another group disagree and think North Dee should be business district, not retail. It was also thought that the area north of the Harbour has development opportunities similar to the Merchant Quarter / Green and therefore should remain in the City Centre but it was agreed that the north area of Ferryhill should be removed from the boundary as this is predominantly residential.

It was also said that if we were to promote the Denburn / Woolmanhill site for retail then it would not be sensible to remove the Skene Street area from the City Centre boundary.

## **3. Do you agree Aberdeen City Centre needs the new retail space? If so where should it go?**

### **New Retail Development**

It was noted that some had initial scepticism about the proposed retail development, given that demand does not seem to be high enough. However they came round to the idea, based on acknowledgement of the fact that there is still untapped spending in Aberdeen. Others thought the figure was no shock because of Aberdeen's economy and location. This group saw most value in designating new retail sites as it would give planners the ability to resist out of town retail development on the Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route, thus helping to protect existing retail in the City Centre. A large out of town shopping centre is a

big worry for existing retailers. However, some say they don't want more retail to take away from the existing centres.

It was stated that 30-35,000 sq. m. of retail development is the equivalent of 6-8 John Lewis stores and John Lewis predict that by 2020, half of their turnover will be online. Therefore, one group was not convinced we need this amount of new retail floorspace with the current population and predictions. However, they also appreciate that we need to be ready for growth due to the allocated sites in the adopted Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Local Development Plans.

It was questioned that if there was more retail development would retailers just move between centres and if so would this be a problem? Would a new Union Square just entice existing retailers from Union Street? However, it was stated that if House of Fraser wanted to come and build a large department store, there is no where for them to go. Demand is high in Aberdeen for floor space but there just isn't the space to give retailers - supply is lacking.

Another point was raised regarding the 'first footing' of new shoppers to Aberdeen is rare. Most people who are visiting Scotland would go to Edinburgh or Glasgow in the first instance rather than Aberdeen. It is also the case that 'new' retailers to Scotland will also focus their attention on Edinburgh or Glasgow. i.e. Harvey Nicholas. It was also stated that creating a shopping mecca in Aberdeen's City Centre can add on benefits such as tourism.

### **Expand Existing Shopping Centres**

It was suggested that we should look at the option of expanding what we have, for example, a second floor on St Nicholas Centre or expanding Union Square. The redevelopment of linkages between St. Nicholas Centre and other centres was also suggested.

### **Denburn / Woolmanhill Site**

It was also noted that the Denburn / Woolmanhill site was not an attractive option for some. It was felt it was too far out of the city and may even draw people away from the existing retail centres, damaging the city centre. It was also said to be cut off for pedestrians and not promote a linked up City Centre. However, one group think it is possible (and will be important) to create good access into the Denburn/Woolmanhill site. Another group suggested that a railway or shuttle could be used between Union Square and the proposed new development.

### **Aberdeen Market**

Improving the market building and using the upper and basement floors of Union Street would be welcomed as some think the market is not a pleasant shopping experience at present.

### **Crooked Lane / George Street Site**

Crooked Lane would seem like a good area to be improved and should be included within the retail strategy. It was also noted that there are a number of residential properties on this site that would need to go through a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO).

### **Former St Nicholas House Site**

The aesthetic linkages from the rear of Marischal Square over to St Nicholas Centre would have to be carefully explored. The view at present is not pleasant. It was also suggested that E&M's linked into St. Nicholas Centre/St Nicholas House would be great and it would help rejuvenate the Castlegate. This was furthered by the suggestion to add to the Muse/St Nicholas House re-development, the empty E&M building, the redundant first floor above St Nicholas shopping centre, the adjacent buildings to the south of Union St, Aberdeen Market. The roads could be absorbed into buildings and adjacent smaller spaces which would create a significant space at the heart of the city which could provide a multi-floor transformation of the retail and city-centre offer, if joined up in a clever way.

It was stated by one group that the retail offer in Marischal Square should be high-end.

### **Other Suggested Sites**

We should have a look at some of the ideas that the Scott Sutherland School have for the Castlegate area as it is under used at the moment. Other areas that appear to be under used include the offices and multi storey car park along Gallowgate and the Mounthooly area.

Lumsden's Locksmiths site along John Street, Schoolhill and Marischal Hall and John Knox church were also suggested as potential sites for retail development.

It was also suggested that there is great potential to develop above the railway station – as per the John Halliday vision that was released in the press late 2013.

## **5. Should there be a minimum level of retail frontage on Union Street or are other uses acceptable**

There was a general consensus that the current Union Street Frontages policy should be made more flexible because retail is changing. It was questioned which is better – a non-retail use or a vacant unit? However, it was noted that betting and pawn shops actively detract from the vitality of the street. It was then questioned whether there are any ways planning can stop the proliferation of betting shops? It was also said that a balance must be struck with retail and non-retail uses in the right places. It was also noted on another table that vacancies are a big complaint from the people of Aberdeen - thus we should be actively trying to reduce them.

It was said it is important to remember that the new mix of uses should be complementary, for example hot food takeaways may not be appropriate in all parts of Union Street.

A retail core should be maintained between St Nicholas and Union Terrace. However, one group wish to see more boutiques in the West End.

Residential, offices and cafes in the West End of Union Street would be ok. It was also suggested that vacant units should be modified to allow access to the upper floors.

#### **6. Should the west end shops be protected? Do you agree with the proposed area?**

Some think the area should be protected from change of use as well as loss of independent retailers in favour of chains. Protection should be about the whole character and 'feel' of the area, rather than any specific types of use. However, it was questioned whether it was too late now as the area has already changed dramatically for the worse over the past few years. It was agreed by one group that the boundary proposed was the correct area that should be protected. It was also said that the area needs more unique and independent stores and that vacant shops should be taxed to encourage landlords to get users in. It was also noted that there are existing and proposed new offices in the area which may help to sustain independent units.

Another group said that we shouldn't fight against the market, a policy may not be required and may in fact be risky as it may prevent a larger but appropriate site from opening in the area. Also if there is a policy, it should maintain the West End's distinctiveness but keep options open - don't be too prescriptive.

Another group are against the policy as they wish to see the area remain in the City Centre and City Centre Business Zone. They would also like to see more support for the Merchant Quarter / Green area.

On a related note, it was said that addressing decline in places like Torry may be difficult. Retail Rocks got some businesses started but some have moved elsewhere – this isn't necessarily a bad thing as it did help to get a business established.

#### **Other points made during the workshop:**

Click + Collect growing in importance, but is also having a negative impact on some stores; returns to a shop of goods bought online affect the bottom line, and perceived profitability, of that individual store. The impact of online retail returns on the physical shop can be that a unit is starting with a deficit in its figures at the start of the day.

Click and collect services can encourage people to linger longer in retail areas.

Dundee are strict with what retail parks are allowed to sell, not allowed to sell clothing. This is to protect the City Centre.

There is a need to ensure that new growth areas have proper town centres with a high street and a proper mix of uses. This is something that many suburban areas (such as Bridge of Don) lack. Rosemount is a good example with a decent range of uses including specialist shops.

The town centre first policy does not encourage a good mix of uses in other parts of the city.