



## **Minutes of meeting of joint working party with Prudhoe Town Council on future of town centre held at Spetchells Centre on Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> April at 7pm**

**Present:** Cty Cllr Anne Dale, Doreen Elwell (chair) Cllr Tracy Gilmour, George Hepburn, Jill Keeler, Cllr Jennifer McGee, Mark O'Connor, Cty Cllr Gordon Stewart, William Thompson, Iain Watt,

**Guest:** Colin Barnes, Director, Northumberland Estates

**Apologies:** Elizabeth Evans, David McGee, Cty Cllr Ken Stow

**1** Doreen welcomed Colin to the meeting.

**2 Minutes** of meeting held on 5<sup>th</sup> March were agreed with the addition of 'Lawson' after 'Anne' in minute 5 to avoid confusion with Anne Dale.

### **4 Matters arising :**

- (i) **Hanging baskets:** The Town Council will write to retailers offering them a hanging basket outside their shop at a cost of £55 each. William suggested it might be cheaper for them to buy and install their own and the Town Council will suggest this option as well.
- (ii) **20mph speed limit:** Gordon reported that he had received positive and negative responses from the public to the idea. The Town Council has supported it. Gordon has asked County Council officers to undertake a feasibility study.
- (iii) **Meeting with Mr Dhillon:** Doreen, Tracy and George had held a productive meeting with Mr Dhillon, who owns property on Front Street and who was willing to collaborate with any future plans.

### **5 Presentation about Northumberland Estates developments in Prudhoe**

Colin explained plans to increase the retail offer in Prudhoe through developments at Low Prudhoe and in the town centre.

He explained that the Low Prudhoe development was now a joint venture with Advance Northumberland. Exploratory work was in progress and, subject to detailed planning approval in May, work should start this year. He said the scheme had been well received by the public.

Phase 1 of the Low Prudhoe scheme, to the east of the roundabout from Castlefields, comprised an Aldi store, B&M, and a drive through restaurant. Discussions are ongoing with a travel lodge and family pub restaurant operator. Phase 2 will be mixed use retail and leisure yet to be defined. Colin confirmed that the possible contamination and flooding had been taken into account.

In the town centre, a smaller scheme was now proposed to the north of the United Service Club with access from Front St. This would be about 15,000 sq ft and could comprise two larger 'bookend' stores with smaller units in between. One of the larger stores could be a convenience supermarket. There would be further parking provided and 27 houses accessed from Station Bank.

The previous planning permission had lapsed so the scheme would be subject to renewed planning approval and also to attracting retailers at the right rent in what Colin said were difficult market conditions. This meant that the timescale was still uncertain.

Colin considered that the town centre development would provide a different offer to the retail park and that experience elsewhere suggested that there was potential for both to trade successfully.

There was discussion about whether the bus service could be extended to the retail park and whether the footpath from West Wylam to the retail park could be upgraded and made safe at night. There would be some disruption from contractors lorries entering the site from Front St.

Anne Dale asked for copies of the planning application. Jennifer McGee suggested a presentation to the Town Council. Doreen thanked Colin for his presentation.

## **6 Discussion about the future of Front St.**

George presented his paper which is attached to these minutes. The ideas had been developed from the points made at the last meeting. They were also informed by national trends which suggest that high street retail will shrink over the next ten years and that thriving high streets will need to diversify and offer cultural activities, entertainment, public services and a welcoming public space.

George said there were some immediate actions like hanging baskets to be taken but that a longer term strategy was needed to help Front St adapt to changing times over the next ten years. He hoped the working party would adopt a strategy and then develop objectives and actions.

It was generally agreed that we first needed to agree a vision for Front St and George agreed to facilitate a discussion about the vision for the next meeting. Opinions were divided about whether Prudhoe could be an attractive 'destination' and whether we had to accept that retail would decline. These and other issues would need further debate.

## **7 Any other business**

- (i) Visits:** George suggested visiting other towns which were successful examples of regeneration. Stockton, Amble and Haltwhistle were suggested.
- (ii) Paul Murray:** Paul is the business development manager at Fab hair and beauty saloon. He is a newcomer to Prudhoe and brings experience as a manager in the Arcadia group. It was agreed to ask him to speak at the meeting.

## **8 Date of next meeting**

It was noted that David McGee finds Tuesday's difficult and agreed to rotate the meeting days in future. Unfortunately, this was not possible in May so the next meeting will be held on **Tues 7<sup>th</sup> May at 7pm** and meetings will then be set further in advance.

## **Discussion paper: The Future of Prudhoe Front Street :**

### **MORE THAN HANGING BASKETS**

#### **Summary**

This paper written for the Town Centre Working Party set up by Prudhoe Community Partnership and Prudhoe Town Council. It asks what a thriving Front Street might look like in 2030 and what strategies are needed to ensure its success. Drawing on national trends, it envisages a town centre with a distinctive retail offer, but in which retail has given way to entertainment and community use which brings people into the town centre.

#### **The national problem**

All the talk is of the "death of the high street", as evidenced by chain stores closing branches and going into administration. Ironically, because Front Street has never attracted the big national multiples, it is relatively immune and still has a high occupancy rate. In March 2019, only three empty shops.

The main culprit is on line trading which took up 20% of retail sales in December 2019 and seems set to increase further. "Be absolutely clear" says Mike Ashley "the web has killed the high street".

High street retailers face a cocktail of issues:

- Too much retail space
- Fragmented property ownership
- High rents and rates
- Inequitable business rates which favour the online trader

#### **The way forward**

The Select Committee report 'High streets and town centres in 2030' (1) published in February 2019 believes that:

" high streets and town centres can survive, and thrive, by 2030 if they adapt. Our vision is for activity-based community gathering places where retail is a smaller part of a wider range of uses and activities and where green space, leisure, arts and culture and health and social care services combine with housing to create a space based on social and community interactions."

(1)<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomloc/1010/1010.pdf>

The Select Committee recommends:

- High streets develop a strong local identity - a 'place brand' - that draws on their heritage and local characteristics and provides a distinctive offer

- Retailers must give 'experience' – the personal service that distinguishes them from online retailers and 'convenience' – the flexibility to alter opening hours for customer lifestyle and to offer 'click and collect' services.
- Cultural anchors- like cinemas and theatres – to increase footfall and keep the high street alive at night
- Public services and health services on the high street to fill the gaps and bring in more people.
- Community projects and facilities – such as a buggy centre or a dementia centre – to increase the livelihood of the high street
- Town centres should be community gathering places where people meet and interact.

The expert engaged by the select committee recommended that town centres should be

“providing public space that is inclusive of people of all backgrounds and ages, and is accessible to people of all levels of mobility. They can provide a centre for people to gather, to feel relaxed and to connect with others socially. They are therefore important both for physical and mental wellbeing.”  
(p 18)

Stockton on Tees is repeatedly cited as an example of a town centre that has turned itself around and might be worth a visit.

To implement these recommendations requires:

- A community partnership of all stakeholders with an agreed long term vision
- One to one consultation with shop keepers to gather their views
- Support from landlords to adapt and improve their property for future use
- Involvement of the local authority in buying up property for community use
- Further funding from central government – following the Future High Streets Fund – and a more sympathetic treatment of business rates.

And, above all, the willingness to adapt to a different kind of high street that is multi purpose and will draw all kinds of people into the town centre at all hours of the day and night.

### **What does this mean for Prudhoe?**

A series of strategies for discussion follow which, if adopted, would need turning into objectives and actions over the next ten years:

- 1) We need to develop a stronger sense of place and brand for Prudhoe that can be promoted to the world at large. It must move on from being a “former mining town” and even “an historic castle town” and find a brand that reflects its friendliness, its convenience and so on. It must be realistic and forward looking. We might need outside help to do this. Some early wins would be strap lines and stickers to encourage local shopping “ Prudhoe can..”
- 2) We need to support shop keepers and help them move with the times to ensure we maintain a thriving, varied and attractive retail offer. Ideas could include more flexible opening hours, greater

customer care, better promotion of the Front St business community and incentives to be community facing. Would need careful consultation with shop keepers so that they move together.

3) We need a partnership with landlords and developers to improve the building stock, make the frontages more attractive and use the premises in more imaginative ways which could include more flats above the shops. We need a register of who owns what.

4) We need to offer more social and cultural attractions. These could include a refurbished East Centre, a new cultural hub and space for community projects as well as one off events like the Art Trail that reposition Front St in a more contemporary way. It would be worth planning for some ambitious projects to have them 'spade ready' when opportunities arise.

5) We need to improve the public space so that the town centre becomes a more attractive place to gather. This would involve managing the traffic, ensuring adequate parking and making sure everywhere is accessible. Although it has been tried before, we need to be more imaginative in our urban design and again we may need to look at other town centres and bring in consultants. Early wins could be 20 mph zone and parking discs to free up spaces for shoppers.

6) We need a more outward looking mind set that reaches out to the outlying estates, brings in newcomers and is prepared to try new and even whacky ideas rather than say "we've tried it before" or "it would never work here". New residents at Cottier Grange need to identify as Prudhonians.

7) We need to strengthen the working party into a 'town hub' as being rolled out by the County Council elsewhere and which would include a wider range of stakeholders and experts. This may need resourcing, for example, by a town manager.

### **In conclusion: We must be realistic**

Prudhoe can be insufficiently ambitious and ridiculously unrealistic, often at the same time. In my view, we ought to accept that:

- We are not Hexham - which may have a similar population but has three times as many shops and twice the footfall. Prudhoe is ranked in the second tier as a 'smaller centre' by the County Council
- We are not Corbridge - which is a picture book village with upmarket shops that makes it an attractive visitor destination with which Prudhoe cannot compete.

But we are a successful high street with every reason to expect we can thrive in changing times for town centres if we find and project the right identity and work together in adapting to the likely town centre of the future.

### **Next steps:**

- Agree these or other strategies.
- Flesh out each strategy with objectives and actions and completion dates
- Consult more widely
- Identify some quick wins to show progress

- Agree a delivery mechanism(s)
- Manage expectations as some of these objectives will take years to achieve.
- Visit Stockton? Invite other town centres to share their experience?

**George Hepburn**

**March 2019**

(This paper is for initial discussion with the working party and others. It has not been adopted by either the Partnership and Town Council. Hopefully, it will provide a basis for discussion with a range of relevant parties both in Prudhoe and further afield before the final strategies and objectives are agreed)