

Economic and Commercial Development Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Twilight Economy Review

December 2014

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Chairman's Foreword

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Introduction

In 2002/2003, the Strategic Leadership Overview and Scrutiny Committee carried out a review of the night time economy in Maidstone. Within this review, there was a section titled 'Interplay between the Night Time Economy and Day-Time Economy'. In this section, it was stated that there was unmet potential for delivering what became known as the 'twilight economy'. One of the main recommendations from this report was that 'the Economic Development Section should conduct analysis of whether there is potential to develop the 'twilight economy' and, if so, how this might be achieved and what action, if any, might be required'.

Following this Scrutiny Review, in 2007 the Economic Development Team commissioned a piece of research (produced by Bone Wells Associates in association with the University of Westminster) on the Night Time Economy called 'Maidstone by Night'. This report contained a section on the Twilight Economy. The report's findings were that:

- Late night shopping on a Thursday was a non-event;
- Maidstone lacks a town centre market which could add to the evening economy; and
- Cafes tended to close in the early evening.

During the committee's future work programme workshop, held in July 2014, a suggestion was put forward for the committee to look into the Night Time Economy. Members of the committee were conscious that this review topic could overlap with the terms of reference of other Overview and Scrutiny Committees, namely Community Environment and Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and therefore wished to narrow the scope of the review. After revisiting previous work that had been carried out on this subject, the committee decided to carry out a further investigation into the 'twilight economy'.

Terms of Reference

Once the committee had decided to carry out a review into the twilight economy, a working party was set up to agree terms of reference for the review.

The committee agreed that the twilight economy would be defined as:

'Economic activity that occurs in the town centre after ordinary shop and workplace closing times (around 5.30pm) but before the usual pub closing times (around 11.30pm).'

The stated objectives of the review were:

- To assess whether there is a need for a more vibrant twilight economy;
- To investigate whether there is a will for town centre stakeholders to provide for a more vibrant twilight economy; and
- If the answer to both of the above is yes, what can be done to improve the twilight economy in Maidstone.

Methodology

Evidence was gathered for the review in the following ways:

- Two committee meetings in which evidence was taken from witnesses;
- A walk around Maidstone Town centre in order to see the current twilight economy in Maidstone; and
- A visit to Canterbury, to see their approach to the twilight economy and to see whether there was any best practice that could be applied in Maidstone.

During the committee meetings, the following witnesses were interviewed:

- Dawn Hudd, Head of Commercial and Economic Development at Maidstone Borough Council;
- Laura Case, Cultural Services Manager at Maidstone Borough Council;
- Bill Moss, Maidstone Town Centre Manager; and
- John Barnes, Manager of Wonderland Nightclub.

Evidence Gathered from Witnesses

October

Dawn Hudd, Head of Commercial and Economic Development, and Laura Case, Cultural Services Manager, gave evidence at the meeting in October. These witnesses explained that the problem of the town centre being quiet in the early part of the twilight economy period was common to many towns. It was suggested to the committee that what was needed was a 'champion' for the twilight economy, who was independent of the council.

Two key pieces of work were underway at the time that would be relevant to the Twilight Economy, and that this report could contribute to. The first was the Town Centre Vision, which would set out the future of the Town Centre including where various activities would take place. The second was the Destination Management Plan, which would develop how Maidstone should look as a destination. These witnesses also explained that cross promoting different events that were happening in the early evening could go some way to improving the twilight economy.

Finally, Mrs Hudd gave the committee an example of where efforts had been made to improve the twilight economy. Mrs Hudd had previously worked at Canterbury City Council, and they had seen some success in their efforts on this subject.

Prior to the October meeting, members of the committee had attended the Night Time Economy Forum to request members of this forum give evidence for this review. John Barnes, manager of the Wonderland Night Club, attended the October committee meeting to give evidence. Mr Barnes made several useful suggestions of how assets in the town could be used differently, including Lockmeadow car park and Jubilee Square, as well as capitalising on seasonal events such as Bonfire Night. Mr Barnes also suggested that street lighting was a real issue for the twilight, as well as night time, economies- especially during the winter. Mr Barnes noticed that the town could be very dark, with patchy light coverage due to streetlights being out of order. Mr Barnes also stated that the river could be better lit to make it more inviting.

During this meeting, the committee identified that Maidstone had a strong music offer. The committee felt that this could be capitalised on to improve the twilight economy. Mr Barnes agreed with this assertion, as he knew that night club customers in Maidstone demanded a high standard when it came to music in his clubs.

November

At the November meeting Bill Moss, Town Centre Manager, gave evidence on this topic.

Mr Moss highlighted that Maidstone had an excellent offer in terms of restaurants and places to eat. He considered this was a sector that had gone from strength to strength in the time he had been Town Centre Manager. He stated this was very positive when it came to the twilight economy, as it was a vibrant sector that was active during the twilight hours.

Mr Moss also informed the committee that despite several initiatives, other than at Christmas time, late night shopping had never been a success in Maidstone. It was therefore reasonable to conclude that there was little demand for late night shopping in Maidstone.

Mr Moss also stated that the lighting situation had improved since he had become Town Centre Manager, and particularly since the regeneration of the Town Centre. However both Kent County Council and Maidstone Borough Council could be slow to replace blown bulbs. Kent County Council's service standard for replacing blown bulbs was 28 days, which Mr Moss felt was too long, particularly in the town centre.

Mr Moss thought that the music offer in the town centre was strong. However more live music could be staged in Jubilee Square.

During the October meeting, sketches of the proposed regeneration of other areas of the town centre (including Earl Street, Week Street and Gabriel's Hill) had been circulated to the committee. Mr Moss was asked whether these proposed regeneration projects would be welcome to the twilight economy. Mr Moss confirmed that they would be very welcome, and the regeneration of the upper and lower high street (now complete) had been very positive for the town.

When asked what the council could do to improve the twilight economy, Mr Moss responded that greater marketing of the twilight economy should be a priority. Mr Moss suggested that cross promotion could really help businesses in this sector, for example combined cinema and meal offers.

The committee were informed, prior to the meeting, that Mr Moss would be retiring in the near future. The committee thanked Mr Moss for his years of service to the town, and wished him well for his retirement. Mr Moss confirmed that there would be a new Town Centre Manager appointed, following his retirement.

Evidence Gathered from Field Trips

During the course of the review, the committee conducted two field trips. The first was in Maidstone, between 17.30 and 18.15. The purpose of this trip was to observe and assess the current state of the twilight economy.

The second field trip was to Canterbury. The purpose of this was to see what work had been undertaken to improve the twilight economy in this area, and see if there were any lessons that could be transferred to Maidstone.

Maidstone Field Trip

The committee walked around Maidstone Town Centre during the twilight hours. Following this, their observations, comments and thoughts were reported back to the committee during the meeting in November.

The committee noted there were large areas of darkness, possibly due to blown street light bulbs. This was particularly noticeable on Earl Street, which was the focal point for restaurants in the town.

The committee noticed that the town became more run-down as you headed towards Maidstone East Station along Week Street. However despite this there were plenty of eating establishments and restaurants at this end of town. The committee also noticed several new eating venues being fitted out.

The committee also noticed an increase in the street population, particularly beggars and street drinkers, as they approached Maidstone East station. The committee observed that this gave the town an unwelcome feel, particularly if it was the first thing people saw as they left the train station.

It was noted how good the Christmas lights looked, and also how smart the town hall, and other buildings around Jubilee Square, looked when they had been floodlit.

The committee also discussed from their own experiences how dark approaches to car parks were. This was seen as unappealing for those who may be parking in the town centre during the twilight hours.

Canterbury Field Trip

Following on from Dawn Hudd's suggestion during the committee meeting in October, the committee organised a field trip to Canterbury. Bob Jones, who was the Chief Executive Officer of Canterbury Connected Business Improvement District (BID), facilitated this trip.

The trip consisted of a briefing about the Business Improvement District, a tour of Canterbury during the early evening and then a post tour debrief.

During the briefing, the committee learned about Canterbury's Business Improvement District (BID) - including what it was, how it came about and its plans for the future - and the MyCanterbury app.

A Business Improvement District is a defined area within which businesses have to pay an additional levy in order to fund projects within the district's boundaries. In order for a BID to come into being, a ballot of businesses in the area must take place. To win the ballot, over 50% of businesses by rateable value as well as by absolute number must be in favour of the creation of the BID. This ensures support from both independent businesses and national chains.

Canterbury went to ballot in July 2014, and was successful. The BID got underway in October 2014 and had a five year term. The BID had already provided the following:

- Additional Street Cleansing;
- Christmas lights; and
- Hanging floral displays.

Following these initiatives, the BID would be providing three 'Street Ambassadors' who would liaise with levy payers and statutory authorities, help resolve issues and meet and greet visitors. The BID would also be providing energy consultations to help local businesses save money on their energy bills.

The activity of the BID was not designed to replace the responsibilities of the local authority, but to provide additional services above and beyond what would normally be received by businesses within the BID area. For example, Canterbury City Council is still providing street cleansing services in the City Centre, however an additional street cleansing team provided by the BID was carrying out pressure washing on pavements and buildings to improve the image of the area.

One of the most innovative initiatives the BID was taking forward was the MyCanterbury app. This app was the successor to the 'Canterbury Card', which was a card that gave local residents access to special offers and

promotions within Canterbury. This card was formerly run by the City Council, and had a large membership. The administration of the scheme had been passed on to the BID, and the existing database of users had been used to create an app called MyCanterbury. The app allowed local businesses to send promotions to users of the app. The app was able to distinguish between visitors and residents and build up a picture of each user based on their previous purchases. This allowed businesses to tailor their messages to their target audience (e.g. residents, visitors, frequent customers, those who made similar purchases). Businesses within the BID area received a free listing on the directory for this app, and could use the app to generate flexible promotional opportunities on a paid for basis.

The creator of the MyCanterbury app had plans to expand the app. A major component of these plans was to use existing users as 'visitors' for other areas. The app had the capability to recognise when users were in other locations that had an app using the same platform. For example if a MyMaidstone app was created, MyCanterbury users would automatically become visitors to Maidstone. This would allow businesses in these locations to push their promotions to app users from other areas if they were to visit Maidstone.

When it came to public transport, an interesting initiative had been trialled in Canterbury for their Park and Ride services. Previously, Park and Ride buses had been provided by the County Council's operator. However there had been a change of contract and services were now provided by Stagecoach, who also provided the majority of local bus services in Canterbury. A deal had been agreed with Stagecoach for them to accept Park and Ride bus tickets on their local bus services for times after Park and Ride services had ended. Park and Ride car parks were also not locked overnight. This allowed an extension of the Park and Ride service into the evening for little to no additional cost.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Following the evidence gathered by the committee, the committee has drawn several conclusions, resulting in recommendations.

Lighting

The committee noticed the poor lighting within parts of the town centre in the twilight hours. This was not necessarily due to a lack of lighting, but due to lights being out of order. The committee also heard evidence from witnesses that Kent County Council's service standard for replacing street light bulbs that may have blown was 28 days. The committee felt that this was too long, and the areas of darkness created gave the town centre an unappealing feel.

Recommendation 1: That the Cabinet Member for Economic and Commercial Development be recommended to negotiate a deal with Kent County Council to ensure broken streetlights in the town centre are fixed at a faster timescale than 28 days.

The committee also felt that lighting on the approach to car parks was poor. This made it unappealing for visitors, who may feel unsafe returning to their car in the twilight hours.

Recommendation 2: That the Cabinet Member for Planning, Transport and Development should ensure there is appropriate lighting for approaches to council owned town centre car parks.

The committee noticed that those buildings in Maidstone town centre that had been floodlit really improved the look of the area. The committee also noticed this had the same effect in Canterbury.

Recommendation 3: That the Cabinet Member for Economic and Commercial Development invest in, or encourage businesses to invest in, floodlighting of appropriate buildings in the town centre. Floodlighting of buildings could be included into existing regeneration plans and funded through section 106 money.

The committee felt that if the problems with lighting could be improved in the town centre, it would make it a more desirable place to pursue leisure activities in the twilight economy.

Engagement

The committee was impressed with the work already carried out by the Canterbury Connected BID, as well as their proposed future projects.

The committee had identified that with a new town centre manager there may be a new opportunity to engage with local businesses; particularly those whose trading hours may fall within the twilight hours. If it is something that is desired by the business community in the town centre, the council should support the creation of a BID for Maidstone.

Recommendation 4: That the Cabinet Member of Economic and Commercial Development, as well as the Head of Commercial and Economic Development, be recommended to support the new Town Centre Manager, help them to engage with local businesses and if required support the BID process.

Marketing

The committee heard evidence that businesses within the twilight economy would benefit from an increased level of marketing, and a more sophisticated way of reaching their customers. When the committee visited Canterbury, the committee were particularly impressed with the MyCanterbury app. This platform appeared to be an appropriate solution to the problem that had been identified.

Recommendation 5: That the Head of Commercial and Economic Development be recommended to investigate the possibility of bringing the MyCanterbury app to Maidstone, with a particular focus on twilight economy businesses.

It was felt by the committee that having this tool, and engaging with local businesses on how to use it for the promotion of events (for example music, seasonal events and festivals) and the cross promotion of different businesses could help to solve many of the problems that had been identified in this review.

Regeneration

The committee noted that there was a positive response regarding the proposed regeneration plans of Earl Street, Week Street and Gabriel's Hill.

The committee felt that these regeneration plans would make the town a more inviting place to spend an evening. The committee particularly welcomed the proposed regeneration of Week Street. This was because the end of Week Street that was closest to Maidstone East Railway Station had a particularly run down feel, with a large number of the street population (beggars, street drinkers and rough sleepers) congregating in this area. There were several independent food businesses at this end of town, and the unwelcoming feel from the street scene was probably a detriment to their business. If this area was regenerated, and the lighting situation improved, it was felt that this would improve this end of town.

Recommendation 6: That the Cabinet Member for Economic and Commercial Development make the proposed regeneration work in Week Street, Earl Street and Gabriel's Hill a priority.

Park and Ride

The committee was concerned that a lot of people depend on the Park and Ride service to get to their place of employment in the town centre. This service finishes at around 6pm and the car parks are locked at 6.30pm. The committee felt that this was a barrier for people wishing to stay in the town centre to pursue leisure activities after work.

Although not minuted, during one of their committee meetings a former Cabinet Member for Planning, Transport and Development noted that he had tried introducing a later park and ride service for late night shopping at Christmas time. This had not been a success, and had been relatively costly for the council as they had to spend money on extra bus services.

However the committee had heard about a relatively simple solution to this problem when they visited Canterbury- negotiating that Park and Ride tickets be valid on local bus services and not locking car parks at night.

Recommendation 7: That the Cabinet Member for Planning, Transport and Development be recommended to negotiate that park and ride tickets be valid on local bus routes after park and ride services finish, and to keep the park and ride car parks unlocked in the evenings. This could be trialled in one car park with the best local bus services, and the passenger numbers be monitored. If successful, this could be expanded to all Park and Ride sites.