



Briefing Note

Cirencester Futures – a discussion on the future of the high street.

Summary

A conference on the future of Cirencester town centre is to be held on 29th January with the working title "Cirencester Futures". Some key points to note are:

- it is *not* a public meeting;
- it is *not* a discussion about general issues affecting Cirencester – such as parking – but is squarely focussed on gaining an appreciation of how changes in the nature of the high street brought about by modern forms of consumerism may affect Cirencester town centre in future. Related issues may unavoidably be raised in discussion, but they are not the prime focus;
- it *is* about ensuring that the Framework Masterplan takes proper account of the wider commercial and retail context and that it is not, in colloquial terms, barking up the wrong tree; and
- it *is* about achieving a degree of consensus amongst key stakeholders in the town as to what the issues are regarding the future of the high street and how these issues may be tackled through the Framework Masterplan and/or via other delivery mechanisms.

Briefing

The impetus behind the conference derives from professional and popular media articles highlighting the effect that new forms of retailing are having on the traditional high street. A key aspect is the increasing use of the internet by shoppers.

Mary Portas and Bill Grimsey are salient amongst those calling for a new concept for the high street. The issue is acknowledged by central government and major media such as the BBC. The main message is that to ensure longevity and future high street health there needs to be less reliance on traditional retailing and a more mixed-use approach that encompasses residential, leisure, services and business alongside a more internet-savvy retail sector.

The recently-adopted Cotswold District Local Plan sets out a strategy for the town centre and commits the council to preparation of a masterplan in the form of a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD). The district council has partnered with Cirencester Town Council to incorporate the SPD into a Neighbourhood Development Plan that the Town Council will shortly begin preparing.

It is critically important that the masterplan is based on solid evidence-based understanding of the issues facing the town centre – including "macro" issues relating to the impact of the internet on



retailing. If we disregard that context we risk the masterplan either being rendered obsolete by events or promoting types of development that will not be optimised for the future. Obviously, none of us is clairvoyant but we need to use our best professional endeavours to ensure that we are cognisant of what is looming on the horizon.

The sole purpose of the conference therefore is for key stakeholders, planners, politicians and others to obtain a firm grasp of the issues that may affect Cirencester town centre in future and to achieve a degree of consensus as to how these issues may be tackled through the masterplan SPD and the Neighbourhood Plan. We may only end up with a set of questions – but so long as they are the right questions, we will be on the right track.

A “health check” on Cirencester town centre, undertaken by Forward Planning, provides a robust account of the state of the town centre. This formed part of the initial wave of information and early engagement with local retailers and businesses during November. This resource provides the foundations for early and ongoing engagement. The domain cirencesterfutures.org and the branding logo have been obtained by Cirencester Town Council. These were launched in October and are intended to provide an immediately recognisable identity for the work of the partnership between CDC and CTC.

The Health Check indicates that the town centre is in comparatively good health. But this begs questions around whether the town is in danger complacency and, crucially, whether and how the issues raised by Grimsey *et al* will affect a prosperous market town like Cirencester. Ultimately we need to better understand/agree the key challenges and establish what can be influenced/delivered at a local level to meet them.

It is important that the views of key stakeholder groups in the town – retailers, business people, politicians – are obtained. We have worked with CTC’s Community Manager to identify representatives from local community groups to ensure the general public has a voice at the conference. Furthermore, the public will be able to comment on the outcomes of the discussion when the SPD and Neighbourhood Plan are consulted upon. It is also intended to make the materials presented in the discussion and any papers resulting from it publicly available on the Cirencester Futures website.

It is also not envisaged that the conference will be a one-off. It will act as a catalyst for the formation of stakeholder groups that can participate in the ongoing development of the SPD and Neighbourhood Plan. It is a possibility too that investigation of the possibility of establishing a Town Centre Commission may emerge.

There is no ulterior motive in excluding the general public from the discussion, but there are unavoidable and overriding practical considerations and ultimately the need for a focussed debate.