

Abingdon Town Centre – SWOT Analysis and Action Plan

Draft Report – 2 September 2008

Introduction

'Town markets its shining talents' – this was the headline for a very positive full-page report in *The Herald* on the final of Abingdon's recent talent competition. But in the success of the competition and the words of that headline, there are strong pointers towards a way forward for the town centre itself and for all those involved in ensuring its vitality.

Run a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) discussion with councillors, council officers, businesspeople or those involved in the array of community groups in Abingdon and you quickly come up with a long and varied list of 'Strengths' (see Appendix 3). The list of suggestions under the heading 'Opportunities' is even longer. This demonstrates that the town centre has a huge amount to offer, and that there is great potential to work on. True, there are challenges to face, but that is the case with every one of our market towns. The SWOT work threw up weaknesses and threats, but some of those are more perceived than real. What is more, in the discussions we have had and the proposals set out in this report there are clear strategies to tackle the weaknesses identified and the threats faced.

That said, this report is not the magic wand waved by one of the talented competition winners. Building on the strengths, making the most of the opportunities, overcoming the weaknesses and facing down the threats will take time, commitment and resources.

There is no shortage of people who love the town and groups and organisations who are committed to its success. What was clear from the outset of this project was that we did not have everyone working together, pulling in the same direction. There have been initiatives and good ideas but the benefit was rarely maximised because not everyone who needed to be was behind them. There was no clearly agreed strategy and no way to bring together the resources needed. This report aims to put that right.



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Executive Summary

Our principal proposal is the creation of a new infrastructure to bring together the key players in the town centre. This town centre 'board' would bring together representatives of the three councils and a number of private sector organisations. It would meet quarterly and would be charged with agreeing a strategy to take the town centre forward, and with monitoring delivery. Each partner would make a contribution to a pooled fund which would provide the resources needed to achieve its objectives. While this would be for the most part financial, there would be scope to allow some contributions to be 'in kind'. All would be committed on a rolling three-year basis to allow planning ahead and certainty.

It is expected that delivering the objectives set out in the strategy would require two different sorts of project. The first are those that can be carried out by one or more of the partner organisations under their own existing responsibilities and within existing resources. There will also be projects that require partnership working and may need new sources of funding.

To take this forward it is proposed that the board create and fund a new role of 'partnership officer'. The job would be two-fold, to work with council officers on projects that fall under their remit, and to lead on those that are originated by the partnership. The amount of time this role requires and the 'salary' cost can be matters for negotiation but it is not envisaged that this will need to be full time. What will be required is someone with the skills to work with others, including those at a senior level, and the expertise to drive forward the partnership initiatives. It is also considered important that the 'pooled fund' be sufficient not only to cover the costs of the appointment but also to provide a budget for the partnership projects.

To support the partnership officer it is proposed that two further groupings be considered. One an economy/business 'key players' group along the lines of the one set up as part of this study. The other a 'community voices' group bringing together the leaders of the various community and voluntary organisations who give so much to the town centre. These groups would have a number of benefits.



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The two groups would be a source of support for the partnership officer. The meeting would allow them to keep up to date with progress on work being done on town centre projects and allow them to contribute their resources/expertise where possible. It would also ensure that all involved in ensuring the vitality of the town centre would be meeting regularly, giving a sense of greater cohesion and unity.

Alongside these proposals on infrastructure, this report also sets out two strands of an action plan. They are based on the findings of the SWOT work and the challenges drawn from that. The first lists a series of actions and activities that the various partner organisations could undertake as part of the work towards improving the town centre. These include the setting up of a forum to examine the issue of parking; work to improve the town centre street scene; a study of and improvements to signage, both to and around the town centre; and the commissioning of a study of the current peak and trough trading times of the week/day and a canvassing of trader views on the possibilities for late/evening/Sunday opening. The second strand is a number of actions that rely on the proposed infrastructure being put in place because what is envisaged is only really possible through effective partnership working and will need a pooling of resources. These proposals include further work to agree Abingdon's niche ("what it is that we are to promote") and, once that is done, the development of a PR/Promotions strategy for the town centre and the creation of a dedicated resource to deliver it.

Much of the focus of the discussion about infrastructure and the proposals in the action plan is on creating the right environment in which shops, commercial businesses and the various voluntary and community organisations that work in the town centre can succeed. This is important but it is not the whole story. Individually and collectively town centre traders and businesses have a vital role to play too, both in helping to promote the town centre and to make sure that they are in the best position to benefit from the increase in footfall and the longer stays that the improving environment can help generate. There are also therefore proposals for the business community to help ensure that the town centre continues to have a strongly beating retail, hospitality and commercial heart.

Methodology

Our brief (see Appendix 1) indicated two main areas of work: conducting a SWOT analysis and developing and consulting upon an action plan to take the town centre forward. As I indicated at the outset, I had no wish to take the whole of the allocated time simply to draft a report which would then be put on the table for discussion. I was keen to see a start made on activities, initiatives and, most importantly, on joint working to begin to take the town centre forward. My sense was, and remains, that this approach better accords with the mood in the town. To paraphrase 'we know where we are and what the issues are, it's time for getting things done.' My sense is that there would be widespread sign up to the idea that what is wanted is a vibrant and attractive market town centre with a diverse retail, commercial and leisure offer catering for the needs of its resident and hinterland communities, that is also making the most of what it has to offer as a visitor attraction because that can make a contribution to supporting the town centre economy. It is the details on that and how it can be achieved that are the subject of debate.

As you will see from my activity report (see Appendix 2) I began by making contact and engaging in discussions with a range of individuals and organisations with a role to play in taking the town centre forward. This enabled me to draft and engage in discussion on SWOT analysis headings (see Appendix 3) and begin to draw up the action plan. Additionally we were offered the services of a team at the county council to do some data research work which will help to illuminate some of the discussion we will have moving forward. In the course of the discussions we also touched on the issue of Abingdon's 'niche', on what it is we might promote about the town centre and on whether there was scope for further development in terms of the evening economy, late opening and Sunday Trading (see Appendix 4).

Issues to emerge

From the above discussions began to emerge a digest of what I have called the key issues facing the town centre. These are (in no particular order):

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- Traffic congestion (and the perception of it)
- The Parking Regime (and promotion of it)
- The street scene
- Signage
- The potential of the Market Place and its events programme
- Town centre promotion and public relations
- Planning – on major developments notably the proposed Tesco expansion and the Old Gaol and Museum developments
- Linkages with the Tesco and Waitrose stores and the retail park, and the town's education sector
- Future infrastructure – the structure and role of JEF, the partnership/town centre manager model and/or the Business Improvement District model
- Funding – what is/might be available from TC, DC, County, private sector
- The variety and attractiveness of the town centre retail offer
- The precinct refurbishment, attracting new tenants, activities to link in with Market Place events
- Agreeing the Abingdon Town Centre 'niche'
- Possibilities around the 'leisure offer', the evening economy, late opening, Sunday Trading
- Availability of toilets (and the option of a 'community toilets' scheme)

The Action Plan

The next step was to divide the above 'issues' into groups according to the possibilities for action. This we have done in three ways. Firstly there are a group of issues which are to a greater or lesser extent in the control of others. There may in some cases be a lobbying role for a 'town centre forum' and what emerges may need to be factored into decisions about the town centre but we would be in the hands of others. Issues in this category include:

- Traffic - on which the county is the lead authority, there is the AbITS working group, a number of consultant's reports and work being done behind the scenes to make adjustments to the current set up. The scope for action by the 'town centre forum' on this may be in the PR/Promotions area.

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- Planning – both regarding the Tesco and Old Gaol developments
- The precinct refurbishment, attracting new tenants, activities to link in with Market Place events – which are in the hands of Threadneedle/Workman although again there is scope for lobbying on the basis that the developments at the precinct have a major influence on town centre vitality. One example has been to encourage all parties to work together so that the refurbishment can start and be completed at what is the best time for the town as a whole and to ask that the position over developments there is regularly and positively communicated so that morale does not suffer and that others in the town centre can make their decisions on the basis of a proper understanding rather than on speculation.

The second category of issues are those on which action might be taken short term. These are actions that can be delivered by one or more authority under their present powers/responsibility and/or using current funding. For the purposes of this report we have grouped those together as 'Action now'.

Action now (again in no particular order):

The following are suggestions that might be tackled swiftly under existing responsibilities/using current budgets

- Street scene, for example, to improve the location and availability of litter bins, placement/usage of trade waste bins, look of key buildings e.g. The Guildhall, the multi-storey; grass cutting/planting work e.g. in front of the multi-storey. It is a shared view that the 'look' of the town centre can be improved. ***It is proposed that a street scene tour be instigated to detail what improvements are needed which can then be passed to the responsible authority for action and to determine a timescale.***
- Community Voices. As part of this project I arranged and chaired a meeting for community groups/individuals interested in supporting the town centre vitality initiative. This was a very valuable meeting which threw up different perspectives on the issues and a number of interesting ideas and suggestions.

It also showed that there are significant 'people' resources that could be engaged as part of the partnership model. Ideas included the potential benefits in terms of footfall, and especially to the evening economy, of there being a single town centre 'home' for voluntary and community groups to base their performance/art/theatre/music groups and organisations. ***It is proposed that a regular, quarterly forum for 'community voices' be set up. It is further proposed that work to explore the possibility of there being a town centre performance venue be speeded up.***

- The Parking Regime. This is a complex issue. There is a strong view in some quarters that it is having a negative influence on town centre vitality. There are those that doubt that. There is no shortage of suggestions but there appears to be a lack of consensus about what needs to be done. There are questions about the messages the car park data is giving us: to what extent is the fall away in usage influenced by the dramatic increase in home working? How much has the pressure on schools to introduce green travel plans and divert people away from car travel had an influence? Why are there months when the drop off in multi-storey usage is exceeded by the extra people using ground car parks? Is the fall-off in car park usage compensated in some way by an increase in bus usage or in cycling or walking? How much is the decline in multi-storey usage influenced by the switch to 'people-carrier'-type vehicles which would be difficult to get in there and/or a view being taken about its attractiveness and safety concerns? Usage of the multi-storey is an important issue because its location and the fact that people who start their visit to Abingdon there are then drawn through the precinct, is a significant benefit to traders there. There is also the question of the district council's policy of balancing the budget on its parking service and the influence on that of income from the fines regime. ***It is proposed that a working group with members drawn from the 'key players' Forum be set up to examine the parking issue and to make a case to the district council, and that, where necessary, further study work is commissioned to answer the questions that may guide any views being taken.***

- Signage – there is a sense that there is scope to review signage both to the town centre and around it is as a step towards making improvements that would help boost town centre vitality. ***It is proposed that a signage tour be conducted by members drawn from the 'key players' Forum to examine the issues and make a case to the relevant council(s).***
- The variety and attractiveness of the town centre retail offer. It has been said during discussions that the retail mix within the town centre is not yet quite right. This is in truth largely a matter for the market, although the various proposals for improving the town centre environment can only help make Abingdon a more attractive proposition for incoming shops, stores and commercial businesses. It has also been suggested that there is scope for action by traders, the hospitality sector and businesses, both individually and working together, to help increase the attractiveness of the offer. There are a number of ideas and opportunities that have been suggested including: a focus on the condition of shop fronts, windows and the immediate area outside; developments in customer service including taking up training opportunities; reviewing PR/promotions strategies and exploring the potential of joint working; making the most of the opportunities of email, text and web promotion; tapping into the resources available to look at waste and recycling issues and the potential benefits to 'the bottom line', to reputation and the street scene. The town features excellent examples of all of these, but it is argued that there is scope for raising standards generally to the level of the best. The Chamber could play a lead role in this; there is scope for some grant funding to support improvement work, for example on shop fronts; expertise is available to help that is free or offered at discounted rates on things like waste audits and skills training. ***It is proposed that traders work individually and collectively on a major 'business improvement' drive to play their part in making the town centre retail and hospitality offer more attractive and to make sure that they are best placed to benefit from the additional footfall that the wider town centre vitality project can be expected to bring.***

- Linkages with the Tesco and Waitrose stores and the retail park. In the course of the meetings we have had through this project it has become clear that there is a willingness on the part of the stores and in the schools sector to offer support for town centre vitality initiatives. Indeed some ad hoc linkages are underway as a result of the contact made during the project. ***It is proposed that a plan be developed to identify what linkages are possible with the Tesco and Waitrose stores, the retail park and schools sector and how they might be achieved.***
- The potential of the Market Place and its events programme. The 2008 programme has been well received and made a major contribution to improving the town's press profile. There is agreement that this needs to be built on going forward and that every effort be made to obtain best value from the programme by linking it to other events/activities in the town centre and especially in the retail sector. ***It is proposed that the Market Place events programme be continued and indeed enhanced with strong linkages developed with other elements of the town centre Action Plan.***
- Traffic. While the discussions over the traffic scheme take their course there is one area on which there is scope for action by the partners to the Forum. That is on PR and perception. This is because of a number of factors. There is a view that perceptions of the traffic situation are worse than the current reality, that some of the media traffic reporting does not help and, worst of all, that the main congestion is in the morning and evening (and sometimes lunchtime) rush and therefore unlikely to adversely affect the majority of those coming in to shop. One idea currently being explored countywide is the creation of a network of businesspeople who make themselves available to the media's traffic report operators either proactively or reactively to alert them to traffic issues. This is something the Chamber might feel able to encourage its members to play a lead role in. ***It is proposed that tackling inaccurate perceptions on the traffic issue be among the priorities for the proposed PR/Promotions resource and that the Chamber investigate, either locally or as part of a wider initiative, the idea of creating a 'traffic reporting network'.***

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- Chamber recruitment campaign. As with every chamber in the Oxfordshire Town Chambers Network, Abingdon's counts as members a proportion of the total businesses in the town. This will always be the case. It is also important to remember that the Chamber is led on a volunteer basis. This has implications for its capacity which should not be underestimated. That said the development of the partnership model in the town centre and the wide range of activities and developments taking place as a result suggest that this would be a good time for the Chamber to extend its reach. ***It is proposed that, with the support of the partnership as necessary, the Chamber launches a recruitment drive to give every town centre business a new opportunity to join.***

The third category of issues can only really be tackled through some kind of partnership working, so we have called them 'Action later' as they might only happen after the creation of some kind of partnership infrastructure.

Infrastructure

A key priority now is to create and embed an infrastructure which will help take the town centre forward. The context for this debate is one in which there are three levels of local government and a number of private sector organisations each of which has different responsibilities, priorities, structures and funding issues. It is vital that these different partners work together for the good of the town centre, and do so in a sustainable way as part of a long-term strategy. It is only by creating such an infrastructure that the town centre can successfully tackle the issues listed under 'Action later'. What follows is a potential infrastructure model.

A role for JEF

The current JEF is widely considered to have been a valuable arrangement to promote and make possible joint working between three partner organisations. There is a sense now that to build on that success it needs to look to widen that partnership and to strengthen its capacity to get things done. ***It is proposed that the JEF be re-constituted as a 'town centre partnership' with a 'board' to direct its affairs.***

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There are a number of models to be explored ranging from becoming an actual company (as in Wallingford) to more simply becoming a partnership (as with the Bicester Vision entity). As with any decision of this nature there are pros and cons. The choice of entity ought to be something for a discussion among the partners once the process is underway. ***It is further proposed that the partnership be expanded to include the county council and a number of private sector organisations – those that might be considered stakeholders in the town centre and prepared to play an active part in taking it forward.***

The detail of the constitution can be developed later but could feature the following:

- Each of the three Councils, the Chamber, and the private sector organisations to have a 'seat on the board'
- Each partner organisation to have one vote
- For the Councils one councillor and one officer to be board members but with only one vote per council which would rest with the councillor. While the choice of representatives will be a matter for each council it is worth noting that experience suggests that engaging representatives at the highest possible level delivers clear benefits in terms of the impact on that organisation's response.
- Each partner to commit to make a 'fund' contribution on a rolling three-year basis i.e. an amount per year for three years with an additional year's sum agreed as each year passes (to make for ease of financial planning and certainty for those whose work is funded by the partnership). The size of contributions would be a matter for the partners, but models such as Bicester Vision and OX1 illustrate the level of contribution that could be made, including 'in kind'. This would, for the first time, create an infrastructure which could support development of a business plan that is the key to attracting private sector funding to add to the commitments already being made to the JEF. There is extensive experience on which Abingdon can draw of businesses that are prepared to make contributions to 'town centre management' partnerships. Who the private sector partners for Abingdon might be and the level of their contributions is a matter for discussion.
- This board to develop and agree on the future strategy for the town centre.

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In addition to the 'board' it is proposed that the existing 'key players' forum becomes a 'management group' to support delivery of the strategy.

Depending on available funding, it is further recommended that a 'partnership officer' be engaged to be responsible to the 'board' for delivery.

The rationale for this recommendation is as follows. Experience suggests that setting up one or two layers of infrastructure as described is beneficial but does not deliver maximum value. There is a tendency for issues to be discussed at, say monthly, meetings, without action always being taken between times. A partnership officer would be entrusted with the task of making sure things do happen. There is discussion in this county and others about the seniority of this role, how it is administered and how long it is needed. Some towns opt for a town centre manager but this also raises questions about funding, the role, the skills required, the length of time needed and the hours worked, and where the post should be sited. More importantly I think for Abingdon now is a sense that we may not yet be at the right stage for a town centre manager role. It may be better to engage a partnership officer as a first step with a town centre manager to follow when partnership working is embedded. One thing to stress is the widespread agreement that sufficient funding needs to be drawn together to give the partnership officer a budget beyond the amount needed to cover salary costs/office etc. There will be significant scope for benefit from the role working behind the scenes and encouraging partners and others to deliver projects, activities and initiatives using their existing budgets but experience shows that there are also projects which the partnership itself will need to initiate for which a dedicated budget would be needed. ***It is further proposed that the funding agreement should be sufficient to allow the 'partnership officer' role to have a project budget.***

One possible infrastructure choice down the line would be to examine the option of making Abingdon Town Centre a Business Improvement District (BID). This is a model now in place in more than 70 towns and cities around the country and would be one answer to the question of funding/hosting the town centre manager. Stage one would be to run a BID feasibility project in the town centre; something JEF/the 'board' could examine if it wished.

Action later

- Agreeing the Abingdon Town Centre 'niche'. No PR/Promotions campaign can be effective without clear guidance on what it is that is to be promoted. There are a great many ideas about what it is that we should be promoting in Abingdon (this was the subject for one of the 'key players' meetings and was also raised at the 'community voices' meeting, see Appendix 4). ***It is proposed that further discussion should take place among the partners on the issue of Abingdon's niche and that the conclusions should form stage one of a marketing strategy for the town centre.***
- Improving the town's retail and hospitality offer, encouraging joint working between its different elements, working on improving the range and quality, and better promoting what we already have. There is widespread support for the view that these should be one significant focus going forward. This is in part an issue of PR/Promotions (see below) but also has indications for issues like improving signage and the street scene (including shop fronts via promotion/take-up of the shop-fronts-grant-scheme) and developing the café culture. As improvements are made, then footfall can be expected to increase and that, along with improvements to the trading environment will help attract new retail business into the town. Similarly there are strongly expressed views that there is scope to extend the leisure offer in the town centre "something to DO apart from shop, eat and drink". Time has not allowed further exploration of this issue so the following recommendation comes with the rider that it is made without knowledge of whether such an audit exists. ***It is proposed that a full audit be undertaken of the leisure activities available in the town centre and that this should be matched against (a) the needs/wish list surveys of town centre users so that gaps can be identified and (b) a timeline to ensure that we have an accurate picture across the year/seasons. At the same time it is proposed that the way the available activities are promoted be audited to ensure that any perceived gaps are real rather than based on a lack of knowledge.***

- Possibilities around the evening economy, late opening, Sunday trading. We have also held discussions on these issues as potential routes forward, but it is clear that there is no real data on which to work. ***It is proposed that a study be commissioned to look at what days/times are peak trading hours and whether this changes for different business sectors and also to canvas opinion within the town centre retail and hospitality business communities on the scope/enthusiasm for late opening and Sunday trading.***
- Availability of toilets. This is an issue for all towns where the need to make facilities available needs to be balanced with the costs of upkeep and the potential negative impact of having badly run/unattractive facilities. ***It is proposed that a study be done on the community toilets scheme pilots being run elsewhere in the country and that town centre hospitality businesses are canvassed for their views on bringing something similar here.***
- Town centre promotion and public relations. A number of the partner organisations have PR resources, but there is no dedicated PR/Promotions function for the town centre, no cohesion in terms of what is published when or how, and no strategy to ensure best use is made of the resources and the potential storylines available. There are also a number of ‘volunteer’ organisations producing PR who would benefit from having some professional input. ***It is proposed that some of the resources identified under Infrastructure be devoted to developing a town centre PR/Promotions strategy and then to the creation of a dedicated town centre PR/Promotions resource. This will depend on the funding available and can be the subject of further advice, if needed, at that time.*** There are a number of issues that could be picked up this way, including traffic perceptions (as noted above), the parking offer, Market Place and other events. One good example of the potential of such a resource has been the recent take-up of empty retail premises. The town centre had very high profile (“ghost town”) coverage for its empty shops; what has been the coverage of the newcomers?

One of the identified weaknesses in the SWOT was the difficulty of communicating with residents who do not read *The Herald*, the *Town Crier* or council websites and this is another issue a PR/Promotions resource could address. In preparing the PR/Promotions strategy it would be valuable to examine potential communications tools. Another objective would be to draw together all those who are running events/activities/promotions in or affecting the town centre so as to maximise the value of each of their efforts. One current example is the shoppers guide. Joint working on how to distribute the guide, PR to highlight its existence and a jointly developed programme of events/activities to mark its publication would all add to the impact. In Witney, publication of a similar guide (and its interactive online version) has greatly improved morale in the town and helped win some very good positive publicity.

Conclusions and timescales

One correspondent wrote recently to me "it's not good here, and it's getting worse". I think that is at the gloomier end of the perspectives but we can agree that there is nothing to be gained from delay. ***It is proposed that the parties to JEF begin the process that is needed within their organisation to take a decision on the 'infrastructure issues' as soon as possible.*** If approval is won then discussions can begin with the county council and potential private sector partners. At the same time the partners would need to agree their contribution on funding and the partnership model they wish to adopt. Only then could the partnership officer be recruited and work started on the 'Action later' projects. It is worth saying that in Bicester the partners agreed an interim 'partnership officer' arrangement (a) so that there was a dedicated resource to support work towards setting up the partnership model (b) that an early start could be made on a number of agreed initiatives. In Abingdon's case, a role could be to keep the monthly 'key players' meetings running and encourage work to begin on some of the 'Action now' projects.

Iain Nicholson
August 2008

Appendix 1

Project Outline

1. Discuss proposals for steering the project
2. Agree the area to be analysed
3. Profile the area – create an evidence base
4. Carry out a social, economic and environmental SWOT analysis of the area in consultation with the Joint Economic Forum (JEF)
5. Agree a long term common vision for Abingdon town centre with JEF (what sort of town do we want Abingdon to be in 20 years time?)
6. Use the vision to identify overall aims that link to local, regional and national priorities (e.g. indicate that Abingdon town centre projects will contribute to the Vale Community Strategy, Oxfordshire Local Area Agreement and Regional Economic Strategy)
7. Identify and consult on project ideas and opportunities (including fund raising, information gathering and town centre management) that will move the town centre towards the vision (building on strengths and opportunities; minimizing weaknesses and threats)
8. Prepare a SMART¹ action plan for a minimum period of four years. The plan should include an indicative budget and allocate responsibility for the achievement of each project. Performance management should include regular reporting to JEF
9. Agree the plan with JEF

Appendix 2

Activity Report

- Studying a wealth of documentation relating to the town centre economy
- Holding a number of face-to-face meetings with 'key players' in the business/economy sectors of the town centre and then arranging, contacting invitees and hosting a monthly series of 'key players' meetings to include officer representatives of the town, district and county councils, plus representatives of the Chamber, Oxford Bus, a local secondary school, two of the major stores (Tesco and Waitrose), a local action group and agents for the company running the precinct.

1

1. Specific – Objectives should specify what they want to achieve.
2. Measurable – You should be able to measure whether you are meeting the objectives or not.
3. Achievable - Are the objectives you set, achievable and attainable?
4. Realistic – Can you realistically achieve the objectives with the resources you have?
5. Time – When do you want to achieve the set objectives?

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- Attending a 'Town Council meets Business' event'
- Arranging and hosting a 'community voices' meeting to bring together lead representatives of community and voluntary groups in the town
- Based on discussions at the above two, drafting and consulting on SWOT analysis headings
- Creating text for a public feedback item for *The Town Crier*
- Arranging, contacting invitees and hosting a 'community voices' meeting to engage members of leading community groups in the process and testing the SWOT analysis headings on them.
- Examining other 'town partnership' models at work in Oxfordshire and beginning investigations into the process for a Business Improvement District feasibility study
- Preparing an Interim Note and presentation for JEF and drafting this report.

Appendix 3

Draft SWOT Headings

Strengths

- Historic buildings
- The River
- Attractive areas
- Good location
- Good road links
- Independent retailers
- Town centre stores
- A number of groups willing to support the town
- Free Internet access in town centre
- Regular markets
- Market Place (and events co-ordinator)
- No shortage of car parks
- Town centre 'key players' group

Weaknesses

- Lack of a 'theme'/'brand' – i.e. what's the attraction? Why would you come?
- Lots of charity shops
- Empty shops (and clustered)
- Cost of parking, threat of fines and lack of awareness of '£1 for 3 hours' scheme
- Traffic congestion
- Poor perception (of the traffic) in press and on radio
- Empty car parks
- The multi-storey is 'intimidating'
- Poor signage to the town centre off the A34 and on approaches
- State/lack of communication on progress re the Precinct
- The 'look' of the street scene in some places litter bins, building frontages
- Layout of the town with large residential communities in the South
- No grocer or butcher
- Junction to the A34
- Lack of toilets
- Shortage of 'name' stores
- Not attracting 'higher-spend' shoppers in sufficient numbers
- Communication with residents if they don't read The Herald/Town Crier/TC website
- Absence of anything to DO in the town centre (apart from shop, eat and drink)

Opportunities

- A growing population/resident town centre population
- Congestion is am and post-school/drive-time – so weekday shopping times are clearer if we could get that message out
- Traffic situation improving
- The Museum
- The Market Place and supporting the events there
- Oxford bus service could bring people in to 'destination' Abingdon

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- Old Gaol
- 2nd Bridge
- Evening economy
- Café culture
- Display boards for shoppers guide in car parks and at Waitrose/Tesco
- Strengthen recreation offer
- New Precinct 'name' tenants
- Independent traders working together
- A BID
- A town or partnership manager
- Evening/Sunday opening for smaller traders to tap into visitor market
- Scope to make more of tourist/visitor traffic on the river
- Tourism/visitor programme
- Working with the army base/police HQ
- Welcome pack

Threats

- Didcot
- Free parking in Witney
- Quality bus service to Oxford
- Growing Tesco
- Loss of pubs in town centre
- Damage to pub/hotel trade by perceptions/experience of traffic congestion
- Beehive effect (i.e. residents commuting away from Abingdon to work)
- Out of date traffic reports
- Negative press
- Rents/rates impact on smaller traders/lack of local control of business rate

Appendix 4

Discussion notes on Abingdon's 'niche', the evening economy, late opening and Sunday Trading.

Comments/suggestions/questions on Abingdon town centre's 'selling points/niche':

- Do we make enough of the attractions of river travel to the town? Can we attract river trippers into town with a programme of events in the town/the markets? Could river trips be part of school outings possibly linked to a visit to the Museum?
- Are we making enough of the opportunities for walking tours of central Abingdon? What are the possibilities for a heritage trail?
- Are there more possibilities to promote Abingdon nationally as a destination for tourist coaches?
- Or should we focus on people who live within, say, five miles and getting them into town more often and for longer?
- What do we need to do to improve the town's retail offer? Do we have the right retail mix?
- We could focus more on people's leisure time so on evenings/weekends/lunchtimes. We also need to look at the town's accessibility and the welcome on issues like signage, toilets, cafe culture.

On the evening economy/Sunday trading?

- With standard trading hours, we may be missing two types of customer: those who work away from the town and leave before the shops are open, returning after they close, and those who work in town but finish after the shops close.
- Against that there is an issue of staffing, especially for the smaller independent traders (the same issue which occurs with Sunday opening).
- Could we consider a half-day closing to create staff time for an evening opening? If so, what day? It would need to be co-ordinated? Can we commission a study of footfall/takings to identify quiet(er) days? Could we switch opening hours to 10-7 everyday (seen to be 'more modern' than a half day closure)? Could parking fees be altered to encourage shoppers to work with trading hours changes?