

The Ripon City Plan - Our Changing City Centre

Nationally, high streets, town and city centres have changed and are continuing to change. Superstores and retail parks, often based out of town, have changed shopping habits, nevermind the impact of on-line shopping. So, centres like Ripon are having to find new ways to attract shoppers.

Of course, Ripon's city centre never was solely retail: there always have been banks, pubs, the Town Hall, tea shops. It's just that we cherish what we're familiar with. We might not like to see the end of a particular trader; we may well not want to use another bank, takeaway or charity shop, but our personal preferences are not strong enough in themselves to stem a tide.

How does City Plan help? Well, you told us that your vision is for the City Centre to be the "meeting place of choice", the heart of the community, serving a much broader purpose than just a place in which to shop. Today it's a place in which to do business, socialise, spend leisure time and much more and with our rural hinterland Ripon is well placed to do just that.

Remember the debates over whether to let Prezzo take over Burton's, Yorkshire Building Society use the vacant Stead and Simpson shop and Costa replace Bon Marche. In practice, these changes haven't turned out for the worse. Prezzo, for example, is helping the Market Place become more animated in the evening; and a stronger evening economy is something you told us is important.

Ripon's vacant shops were a concern five years ago but there's no reason why they should be now. The evidence of recent years has been that very few shops do not get taken up and today only a small proportion of our shops that are vacant. It's what's happening overall in the city centre that creates its vitality.

So how do we ensure that the city centre remains a place to shop? It's about being flexible and encouraging overall activity. That's why the City Plan will be proposing a different approach: a three fold strategy.

Firstly, we want to protect shops from changing to other uses where it makes sense to do so. Some streets are better placed to have a range of uses where once there were exclusively shops and tea rooms. We think it's still a good idea to ensure some premises remain as shops, but not with an unrelenting approach that leaves key buildings vacant and a blot on the streetscape. This can be restricted to the Market Place Quarter (a concept we showed in the Preliminary Draft Plan.) As long as over half of the premises remain as shops, Ripon will still be a shopping centre of note (and the proportion is currently well above this). Protection will be strong to ensure shops in The Arcade and at Marshall Way are not used for something different.

Secondly, high street names are generally looking for modern and regular sized shop units to rent. Ripon hasn't any of these available at the moment. The city centre needs to provide new modern retail units. This has been supported by independent research for Harrogate Borough Council. So, in the Preliminary Draft Plan we suggested development of new shops at Victoria Grove / Moss's Arcade to attract new 'high street' operators. We still believe this is the way forward.

The Marshall Way shops, car park and the rear of shops on Fishergate could make another "market place". To encourage this we think the yards and vacant buildings to the rear of North Street should

be developed as a small scheme attractive to independent shop keepers, perhaps similar to the development which has recently opened in Helmsley, for example.

Thirdly, there are too many blind frontages in the city centre. The Yorkshire Trading Company has shown what can be achieved with its new frontage onto the bus station arrival point. We understand that display space and shop security are important for retailers but drab, soulless, blind walls and obscured windows can just give the impression that the shops have finished when in reality there's another group just around the corner. It's important to encourage new display windows and shop entrances, especially on the premises on the eastern and southern edges of the Marshall Way car park and the western and southern edges of the Arcades short-stay car park.

Shops are an essential part of the big picture for Ripon city centre. This approach is part of how we can all make it our "meeting place of choice".