

Ripon City Plan – City Centre Retail

Last month we outlined the approach of the city plan in relation to tourism, the exciting developments currently being planned at the Cathedral and the Workhouse Museum, the need to look holistically at these, the opportunities they would create and the city centre infrastructure improvements which would be needed to maximise them for the city's economy

This is of course only one aspect of the city centre and heading into the Christmas trading period, recent events have again lead to a rumbling national debate about the future of shops on the High Street and the performance of some of the country's biggest brands.

Much of what is suggested as the best ways in which to support towns and city centres to attract customers is about the visitor experience and is therefore much more about management and collaboration and as such beyond the remit of the City Plan. However, there are things that can be done as part of a long-term development strategy.

The approach in the city plan recognises that the growth in on-line shopping and changes in customer expectations means that the city centre is a changing place. Recent research suggested that across the country 14 shops closed every day in the first half of this year, but that was actually the lowest level of closures for 7 years. In that context Ripon is holding up quite well but that doesn't mean that we should be complacent. Instead we need to recognise and be able to manage change that is likely to happen over coming years.

In particular, we have used the phrase in the vision for the city that it will be "a meeting place of choice for culture, leisure and tourism for residents and visitors." This is recognising that town and city centres are increasingly place where people come to learn, to access public services, to live and spend time with friends. Therefore, vibrant and successful places will be those that have a whole mix and are flexible to keep evolving and changing.

There are a few policies which we have included in the city plan to support this approach. There is interest in providing new shops and leisure development and therefore our approach is to seek to encourage any development of this type to be within the existing city centre, rather than on the periphery. Additionally, we are seeking to provide some additional flexibility in "change of use" to try to ensure that empty shops don't remain vacant unnecessarily when there are businesses wanting to open but are blocked from doing so because they aren't shop.

We could fill a whole month's column explaining the planning use system and "change of use" but in essence premises are categorised by the type of business they are used by (e.g. shops and retail, professional services, food and drink, hot food takeaway, etc). Generally, planning permission is required for changing from one type of use to another, although there are some exemptions.

It is important to note that it is the type of business and not the actual business / brand for which planning permission is granted. This also applies when planning permission is granted for a new development, so, for example, the recently approved planning application for development on Rotary Way is for premises to be used as a shop and is not in planning terms tied to a retailer or brand.

With last week's announcement of a change of strategy for Marks and Spencers and a reduced number of shop openings planned it is not yet clear on the impact on the Rotary Way proposal. Like many we are watching with interest.