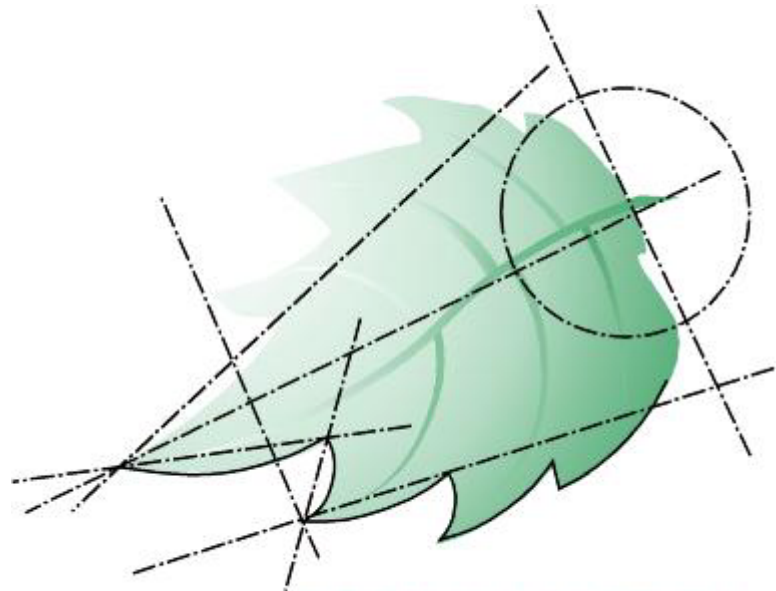


Harrow Town Centre Development Strategy

Phase 1 Report Conclusions

Client: London Borough of Harrow



DMS CONSULTING
September, 2002

Harrow Town Centre Development Strategy

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Introduction

- 1.1 DMS Consulting and Lesley Punter were appointed to assist the London Borough of Harrow in the development of a long-term strategy to guide decisions about the future of Harrow Town Centre (HTC). The aim of this work is to assist with the production of a strategy which has credibility in the community and commercial world and which provides foundation for a programme of action that is ambitious whilst being realistic.
- 1.2 This handout only presents the Conclusions and one Appendix from a report that has been produced on the basis of some analytical work we have already carried out for the Council. A full copy of the report will be placed in the group rooms for members to refer to. Additionally, if any member would like to have an electronic version of the full report, please do not hesitate to request one via DMSbiz@aol.com.

Conclusions

- 2.1 From the work we have carried out in this first phase, we have arrived at some conclusions about Harrow Town Centre. Our general impression, that Harrow appears less important, vital and interesting than it should be, has been validated by the analysis of the available data.
- 2.2 In our view, Harrow Town Centre is at a crossroads; one which is facing many urban centres in the UK. It has been found in a number of studies that some town centres are growing and others failing at a faster rate, with the result that the gap between successful and declining towns is widening. In some cases, the decline can be explained by their context in a failing region but in other cases it has been difficult to show statistically why some progress while others drop behind.

- 2.3 Nevertheless, we believe, from the research that we have already undertaken, that people should be optimistic about the future of Harrow. Whilst there are challenges that need to be addressed, we believe the town centre can be improved in a way that will make it attractive for residents, businesses, visitors and investment. If a clear sense of direction can be set out and widely endorsed, there is considerable potential for the Council to work in partnership with others to secure Harrow's position as one of the more important centres in London.
- 2.4 We believe that some of the weaknesses we have observed can be tackled successfully. For this to happen, the Council must provide strong and sustained leadership with the aim of ensuring that Harrow fulfils its role as a London Metropolitan Centre. The Council must also be prepared to mobilise its own resources to improve the centre and encourage others to do the same.
- 2.5 Our work so far has reinforced our initial view that the Council needs to develop a long term vision and strategy to guide its own and the actions of others who should have an interest in seeing a viable, vibrant and successful town centre. This can be described as a Town Centre Development Strategy (TCDS). By declaring this vision publicly, backed by some form of marketing initiative, the Council would be taking a significant step towards creating an atmosphere in which investment would be encouraged. A clear framework contributes to a climate of confidence conducive to development, improvement and successful businesses.
- 2.6 The strategy must be based on a realistic view of the long term potential of HTC and be developed with stakeholders. It also needs to integrate with other core documents such as the UDP, the Cultural Strategy and Community Plan.
- 2.7 The Council will also need to illustrate the change in direction and its vision by some "signpost" actions designed to try and alter existing perceptions of the centre and create new ones for those who do not know Harrow. This will require some hard thinking about the need for change and the options that are realistic for the future of Harrow Town Centre (HTC).
- 2.8 We have some observations about what might be included in the strategy but first we summarise our concerns and where we believe there are significant opportunities.

Strengths and weaknesses

- 2.9 What is immediately clear from the review is that despite improvements in recent years (St. Ann's/St George's shopping centre) Harrow is not fulfilling its retail potential. The range of shops, particularly in the critical areas of fashion, clothing and shoes, is not as wide as one might expect in a centre serving a potential catchment in excess of 200,000 people. It is recognised that there are other centres that, because of their proximity, will always draw trade away from HTC. Nevertheless, HTC does need to find ways of (at the very least) sustaining its position as a Metropolitan Centre. If it does nothing to secure its position, there is a risk that it could experience a relative decline.
- 2.10 The town centre environment is not of the standard one sees in some other locations of similar size and function. It appears outdated, lacks quality and does not present a particularly distinctive or strong identity.
- 2.11 The town centre feels relatively compact and this could be a major advantage in the competition with other centres. Unfortunately, this virtue is undermined because several important and heavily used pedestrian routes are at odds with some moderate to high flows of traffic. In spite of pedestrian priority measures, through traffic is still using parts of the town centre which are from a business, retailing and pedestrian point of view, highly sensitive. Additionally, some people appear to be using designated disabled spaces to drop off/pick up passengers and not for the purpose for which they are intended. These factors mean that the presence of cars detracts from what should be a relaxed atmosphere. This also prevents Harrow from offering the sort of experience that people generally look for in a modern centre.
- 2.12 Harrow is fortunate to have rail, tube and bus stations so close to the centre and very close to each other. Unfortunately, this powerful public transport focus is undermined by poor and unattractive pedestrian links. The route between the bus station and the tube/rail station is not attractive visually and there is a significant pedestrian/bus conflict at the exit to the bus station. Access to the bus station for buses is very tortuous, and within the station, the space is tight. The pedestrian route between the stations and the shopping core on the other side of College Road gives priority to vehicles rather than the very high numbers of people wanting to cross at this point.

- 2.13 Time has shown that HTC is not going to attract major large office employers. Its employment strengths in future would seem to derive from small indigenous and new businesses and perhaps public sector or institutional type services. We consider that more work needs to be done to underpin a realistic strategy in relation to the office sector.
- 2.14 On the other hand, some of the strengths that the centre does have, such as Harrow's history and importance, provide opportunities for changing the way people regard the town centre. For example, it is important to acknowledge the contribution that the wide and interesting range of small and independent retailers and business already make to the vitality and economy of the centre. These could provide a strong base from which to grow.
- 2.15 We consider that Harrow could provide a more interesting shopping experience. It is recognised that other centres (notably the West End) already provide an offer that is significantly up market and as such beyond what Harrow could reasonably aspire to. It is not realistic to expect Harrow to compete in the same terms as centres with the very highest quality retail tone. There are, however, grounds for believing that the existing offer in HTC could be improved so that the centre could be more successful in attracting business.
- 2.16 In the medium to long term, Harrow Town Centre has an asset in the area around the rail/tube station and bus station that offers huge potential. If the Council can, in partnership with other stakeholders bring forward the development of the site identified in the U.D.P., there is the chance to deal with some of the structural weaknesses in the town centre facilities and significantly improve the way in which it functions.
- 2.17 Finally, HTC could be come a more vibrant centre, especially in the evenings and on weekends, if the growing number of people living in the centre are catered for. A larger resident population would also start to positively influence perceptions about the centre in the minds of investors and businesses.
- 2.18 Taken together the strengths and possibilities that the centre possesses override the weaknesses and threats to the centre. We believe that HTC could become much more attractive to a wider range of activities and uses than at present and become a dynamic and interesting centre deserving of the status of a Metropolitan Centre.

Possible content and process

- 2.19 On the basis of our work to date, we do not believe that HTC should be physically expanded beyond that already identified in the UDP, or that new sites could or should be found for major office employment in HTC. There is much scope however for any strategy to identify incremental and signposted change over time, within the context of an understood role for the centre in the long term.
- 2.20 This does not in any way undermine the great potential of the Harrow-on-the Hill station site. Given the crucial strategic importance of this site the Council should treat its delivery and implementation as one of its highest priorities and single-mindedly pursue its achievement. This site offers Harrow the chance to significantly improve its town centre and profile by creating a new urban quarter. However, for this strategy to succeed it is vital that the new quarter is integrated into the existing town centre with safe and attractive pedestrian routes, convenient and accessible bus facilities and appropriate levels of car access.
- 2.21 College Road as it is now will not be able to fulfil all these objectives. The layout of the new urban quarter would however provide a golden opportunity to take some traffic off College Road by offering cars or buses an alternative route through to the bus station (perhaps expanded/rationalised) or to a shopper's car park.
- 2.22 The main questions that remain in our analysis are to do with the proposed changes in London's transport policy and its impact on HTC, and the implications of the current economic situation on the health and prospects for development and employment in HTC. More work needs to be done to understand how, for example, congestion charging and Cross Rail might change perceptions about the relative attractiveness of various centres. The overall impact of a new stadium at Wembley also needs to be considered.
- 2.23 We think that Council owned sites could play a pivotal role, signalling at an early stage, the way ahead for the centre. They could give the Council a chance to increasingly diversify town centre activity and to add to the footfall with employment in public sector activity such as a library/tourist information/one stop shop base.
- 2.24 Similarly, changes to public spaces, car parks and traffic management are directly within the Council's control and need to be signalled early to take advantage of TfL funding.

- 2.25 In Appendix 1, we have set out a range of immediate short-term actions that could be taken to improve the environment of the centre. Some are straightforward, relatively low in cost, but would nevertheless have a high impact on people's perception. These need to be implemented as part of a comprehensive and integrated programme of traffic management, environmental improvement and town centre management initiatives.
- 2.26 We do not see the TCDS as being a comprehensive document covering all town centre topics in detail. Rather it needs to be easily understood, visually attractive and interesting to read. It will need to "break the mould" and present Harrow town centre as a place with good opportunities for investment, that is interesting, attractive, vital and where things happen.
- 2.27 In order for a realistic Town Centre Development Strategy to be developed, it will need to be undertaken with input from both existing and potential businesses and residents. We have outlined one possible way in which that might be accomplished.
- 2.28 Once the Council's aspirations for the town have been clarified through the process of drafting the T.C.D.S., the list of businesses wanting to be in Harrow could be examined with a view to selectively targeting some of them with a marketing initiative. Provided there is a realistic chance of appropriate accommodation becoming available, a proactive marketing campaign combined with a programme of physical improvements and a clear vision of the future could start to help influence the quality of the town centre for the better. This marketing initiative could include an event to which carefully selected businesses, developers and investment institutions would be invited to receive a presentation about the TCDS and the opportunities, which exist in Harrow.

Lesley Punter, David Scott

Action points for immediate improvement and change

General improvements

Renew street furniture. The design of the furniture looks very dated and is of a standard type that has been used elsewhere. Consider a “bespoke, custom designed” approach to street furniture. Instead of using standard seats/litter bins/cycle racks/safety rails etc. from catalogues, commission original furniture which interprets some theme or aspect of Harrow’s history or association with famous people. This will help to create a unique sense of place in the centre

The positioning of furniture, particularly seating and cycle racks, should be reviewed. In some places, the original reason for the siting of furniture no longer apply with the result that it is not well used. So, for example the relocation of the Post Office counter services from one side of College Road to the other will alter where seating will be most needed.

Such a review could also bring benefits for the ambulant disabled, wheelchair users and blind or partially sighted people. “Mobility corridors” clear of street furniture with wheel chair friendly surfaces could be designed to make movement for the disabled much easier. Seating areas could be provided at intervals specifically calculated to help ambulant disabled people.

Actively encourage attractive A-Boards to be sited outside the mobility corridors to increase visual interest. A simple licensing system would give control over siting. Such a system can also make for more enforcement against inappropriate street furniture placed in positions that are inconvenient, dangerous for pedestrians or of poor quality.

The re-positioning of furniture should also be seen as a way of reinforcing street life and the commercial viability of frontages that could benefit from an injection of vitality. So, for example, space could be provided outside cafés and restaurants specifically as sitting out areas.

Consider setting up a marketing consortium for the HTC involving key stakeholders such as the St. George’s and St. Anne’s centres, major retailers e.g. M&S, Debenhams, and the Chamber of Trade and the Council. The consortium could co-ordinate publicity and marketing and pool some financial resources to achieve greater impact.

Examine the potential to allow free parking in some visitor/short stay car parks at times when they are underused. For example, a concession where, for example, the first hour of parking is free could increase visitation to the centre and overall increase car park income. Such a concession would also send a powerful message about Harrow's determination to offer choice in gaining access to the centre and show that the Council is not "anti-car".

Consider disposal of some, smaller "non-strategic" sites in council ownership subject to completion clauses in order to get some site developed and engender a sense that things are happening in Harrow. Subject to political decision, receipts from these disposals could be used to "pump-prime" town centre related improvements.

Station Road

Station Road functions as a very important public transport route and drop off/pick up route for cars. It also provides front servicing for businesses. It has the virtue of being within the central area and therefore strongly fulfils the requirements of national planning and transport policy in terms of public transport.

As well as giving the town centre a very high accessibility profile, the bus stops in Station Road ensure high pedestrian flows in an area where smaller businesses might otherwise struggle being so close to the two covered shopping centres. In fact, some retailers that one might expect to see in more prime pitches seem happy to trade from Station Road (e.g. Specsavers, Littlewoods, Debenhams). This also probably reflects a shortage of suitable premises in the prime pitches.

Whilst Station Road is not blessed with outstanding architecture, the buildings are pleasant on the whole with some interesting variety in the shopfronts and a good range of shops and services occupying different unit sizes. It is quite a wide street in relation to the relatively modest height of the buildings.

Despite these virtues, the overall atmosphere and appearance of Station Road could be very much improved. This would in turn lead to greater vitality and viability and help to reinforce the road's role as a vital pedestrian link between College Road, the prime pitch at the western end of St Ann's Road, Debenhams and potentially any development that will take place on the council owned land next to Debenhams. Unfortunately, Station Road does not currently fulfil this potential to act as a critical part of the town centre for a variety of reasons.

These are:

- Poorly sited and old fashioned street furniture.
- A complicated carriageway arrangement that takes up a lot of space.
- A lack of clarity in what traffic orders apply in different parts of the road.
- Difficulty in enforcing the regulations with high levels of abuse, particularly private vehicles using Station Road as a short cut and parking in it or dropping off/picking up.
- Poor quality/insufficient waiting facilities for bus passengers.
- The east and west sides of the road do not have a strong visual link and are in places separated from each other from a shopper's perspective.

Action points

Review position of bus stops with a view to reducing the amount of carriageway whilst maximising pedestrian space. Site bus stops with a view to directing pedestrian flows past retail frontages that need the benefit of higher footfall or anchoring.

Consider varying the Traffic Orders by time to explicitly encourage the evening economy. For example, after 6.30pm allow private vehicles to access Station Road and park in it. Variable message signing would be needed to aid enforcement.

If the Council decides to encourage more food and drink uses in the centre consider how much of Station Road should remain protected by the prime frontage designation and relate this judgement to any changes in the traffic management regime.

Remove the shrub planters, particularly along the east side. They create a sense of separation and make the commercial offer along that side far less visible. Consider providing restaurant sitting out areas as part of the design. These areas could be taken out of the public highway designation licensed and provide a source of revenue for the Council.

Review the location and siting of the taxi rank in dialogue with the operators. Ideally, a new site could be found which avoids the need for the taxis to access the rank by travelling down Station Road. A new rank in St. John's or Lyon Road could perhaps be considered.

As with the buses and car drivers, some improvements elsewhere for the taxi/private hire community could help avoid confrontation with them about changes to Station Road.

Find out who owns the Zoom Loom building and how long the lease has to go! It is a real let down for Station Road and is a generous sized unit that might attract a High Street retailer, if they were convinced of Council commitment to improve the area.

If the Traffic Regulations are changed in Station Road and the physical layout changed to deter illegal parking, revisit the specification for traffic enforcement in these areas. However, wardens cannot take action against moving traffic offences so cannot enforce against vehicles taking a short cut. The police are unlikely to have the resources so the design of the Station Road area must be as self-policing as possible.

College Road

College Road currently functions as an important part of the bus network as well as part of the circulation system for cars. It provides access to the car parks serving the core of the shopping centre. Some “conflicts” between bus and car movements were noted. College Road has not been observed at peak times, but at mid morning/mid afternoon and evening, there was not serious congestion. Pedestrian flows along either side of the eastern end of College Road are not heavy but there is a steady flow encouraged by the presence of the bus station, railway station, post office, and (at lunchtime) some large offices. The pedestrian flows at the western end of College Road are light although they could increase as a result of the large housing scheme currently underway.

The footway on either side of the road at the eastern end is very generous even in spite of there being a lay-by on both frontages.

The obvious problem in College Road is the poor quality pedestrian route from the station to the shopping core. It is visually unattractive and its layout creates a strong sense that if pedestrians try to cross they do so on sufferance. This crossing point and the associated station approach is the first experience of HTC for a large number of people, and unfortunately it gives a very poor impression indeed.

The route between the bus station and the Rail/Underground station is not attractive and there is a significant pedestrian/bus conflict at the exit to the bus station. Access to the bus station for buses is very tortuous, and within the station the space is tight. In the long term, development over the adjacent railway sidings could allow for improvements to the bus station and provide for high quality pedestrian routes (including escalators) between the bus station and the station.

Action points

The buses have to make a tight manoeuvre into and out of College Road from Station Road. Improvements to Station Road should look at scope to make turning movements easier for the buses at this junction.

It is vital that any proposals for the former Post Office site (Consignia) contain active uses (retail/food and drink/professional services) at ground floor. The dead frontage of the existing offices at ground floor already makes this part of College Road dull and uninteresting. The relocation of the Post Office Counter Services to the other side of College Road will remove a significant footfall that will be difficult to replace, but certainly things should not be made worse by more dead frontage being introduced.

Consider moving the taxi rank from immediately in front of the station exit. It adds to the vehicle movements at a point where we should be trying to get pedestrians to the town centre or bus station. Given the comments above, consider moving the rank eastwards to the existing lay-by in front of the Post Office.

Provide dedicated shoppers' pick up/drop off facility in the lay-by on the south side of College Road at eastern end. If the number of such spaces is reduced in Station Road this could be compensated for by formalizing a pick up/drop off. In this location, footfall will be generated for a frontage that could suffer when the Post Office relocates.

To encourage the taxi operators to agree to relocate, consider providing a small driver's "den". The presence of such facilities can significantly help natural policing of areas that might otherwise be unwelcoming.

Consider pulling the stop lines at the station crossing back and install flush surface in a distinctive (but robust) material carried across into footways. This will mark the pedestrian corridor visually and without going as far as speed humps give a slight vertical deflection in the carriageway to send a message to car drivers that this is a sensitive area. Install safety barriers at this point that have been specially designed for Harrow. This will help announce the fact that visitors have come to a place that has its own distinct character and identity.

The route into the bus station for the buses is tortuous. Buses coming from Kimberley Road have to make a tight right turn into College Road and then what is almost a U turn across College Road to access the bus bays. The feasibility of providing a bus lane contra flow east from the junction of Headstone Road to the Kimberley Road should be examined. A phase on the lights allowing buses to go straight into the station could be triggered via detector strip(s) in the bus lane. (Such an improvement could form part of a package offered to the bus companies to offset any concerns they have about reorganising Station Road)

Although there are seating facilities under cover at the bus station, for reasons we did not have time to discover, a large number of people stand outside. Consider extending the canopy to provide some shelter, and make the bus facility more visible and attractive?

Consider moving cycle rack from inside station concourse? Create a facility in the large footways on either side of College Road, so it is still convenient for rail users.

Open up bigger skylights in the roof over the station course?