

Kidderminster Empty Shops: An update Report, November 2006

1. Introduction

This report presents information relating to the current state of Kidderminster's vacant retail stock of town centre properties. It follows the publication of the White Young Green Retail and Commercial Leisure Study 2006 and consideration of related issues at Wyre Forest District Council's Prosperity Policy Panel. On November 17th officers undertook a survey of town centre empty shops to update the last in-depth study conducted in April 2006. A Map of findings is presented as 'Appendix A' to the 6th December Prosperity Policy Panel report on 'Kidderminster Empty Shops'.

2. Background

The District Council currently undertakes studies into vacancy rates within Kidderminster town centre and this information is published on the Council's website and held in a database. This type of research into socio-economic data is an essential part of the plan, monitor and manage approach towards planning policy and is consistent with the requirements of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004. The team uses a range of techniques to provide the most accurate assessment of floorspace and the latest version was published in April 2006. This showed that vacancy rates (by floorspace) increased from 4.76% in April 2005 to 10.76% in April 06. This can largely be explained by the closure of the Littlewoods and Waitrose premises (Waitrose subsequently let to B&M Bargains). In terms of the number of units the increase has been less dramatic from 7.9% to 8.86%.

Number of Vacant Units	Percentage of Total Units	Gross Area vacant (m2)	Percentage of Total Gross Floorspace
24 (of 271)	8.86%	7,522 (of 69,894)	10.76%

Wyre Forest District Retail Update – April 2006

The annual retail monitor involves primary fieldwork which was updated in April and this identified vacant units in Blackwell Street (x2), Coventry Street (x4), Swan Centre (x6), Worcester Street (x4), Rowland Hill (x3), New Road (x4) and Oxford Street (x1). In addition to the current vacancies a number of stores have been subject to temporary retail interest including the former Marks & Spencer store in High Street.

The annual April update was subject to a mid-year check by the Economic Development team in September with a study of 14 available retail premises comprising approximately 5,200m² of floor space. At the time, five other properties, of about 372m², were "Under Offer". The largest property available remains the former Littlewoods store (approximately 3,265m²) for which there are no known plans. Since that time, the prominent 'Haven' store at the junction of New Road and Market Street was in the process of closing following a long period where the company was in Administration and the store is being advertised 'To Let'.

3. Changing circumstances

Ongoing commercial transactions are often commercially sensitive and difficult to ascertain. It is a reflection of the dynamic nature of retailing in Kidderminster that there are at least four premises undergoing refurbishment as part of new occupiers. These include the former 'all sport' in High Street which is being converted to a Vodafone store, the arrival of Cooltrader (see Appendix 1) in the Swan Centre and Fopp (see Appendix 1) in the Rowland Hill Shopping Centre. The former Thai restaurant in Bridge Street is being converted to a chip shop.

By way of example, Appendix 2 to this report outlines the number of formal planning applications submitted in the Blackwell Street and Coventry Street area. This shows that between 2001 and 2006 seven proposals requiring planning permission were subject of planning applications of which three have been implemented. However, for a number of reasons, including commercial viability, many proposals may not be realised.

The White Young Green (WYG) study indicates that Kidderminster is now retaining a much greater level of expenditure generated by the residents of town's core catchment area (which includes Stourport and Bewdley). For comparison goods this has increased from 44% in 2001 to between 60 and 70% in 2006. Outside of the core catchment area Kidderminster has also seen its share of the market grow. In zone 8 (Tenbury and rural areas south of Stourport) it has increased from 10% to 35%. Similarly in zone 5 (Norton [Stourbridge] and Kinver) it has increased to 15%. Meanwhile, there has been a reduction in the amount of expenditure lost to competing centres such as Merry Hill. The White Young Green study also identifies a number of high profile operators seeking premises in Kidderminster.

4. A process of Review

At the time of the Local Plan review, with the construction of KTC.1 well underway, the Council predicted the likely shift in focus. In preparing the Local Plan, the Primary Shopping Area designation of 1996 was retracted up Worcester Street and Oxford Street to provide greater flexibility in the use of units in lower Worcester Street. It was also a factor in preparing the framework for KTC.3 as a leisure hub and gateway to the area. So the Council has a track record of planning, monitoring and managing development in the centre.

At the time of the Local Plan Review there were already a considerable number of vacant premises in Oxford Street and Worcester Street. It is interesting to note that in November there was only one empty shop in the whole of Oxford Street. It would seem that the flexible approach to other uses outside A1 retail including restaurants and salons has had the desired effect. There are now a number of design boutiques in the area. The estate agents 'quarter' has also continued to expand in recent years with a number of new agents locating in the vicinity of Oxford Street, Marlborough Street and Worcester Street.

The higher end of Worcester Street benefits from having top retail names including Woolworths, Officers Club, H Samuels, Dorothy Perkins, Burtons & Evans, Boots, Birthdays, Thomas Cook etc. Collectively the critical mass presented by these stores has the potential to function as an anchor to draw people into the area. With other

nodes including Weavers Wharf, Rowland Hill and the Swan Centre, it is connected to routes that form a figure '8' (see diagram below). Therefore, a convenient circuit potentially exists for shoppers. There may be scope through signposting, accessibility improvements and marketing to highlight this characteristic. This type of approach can be explored through the preparation of an 'Action Programme' and a review of the Town Centre Strategy.

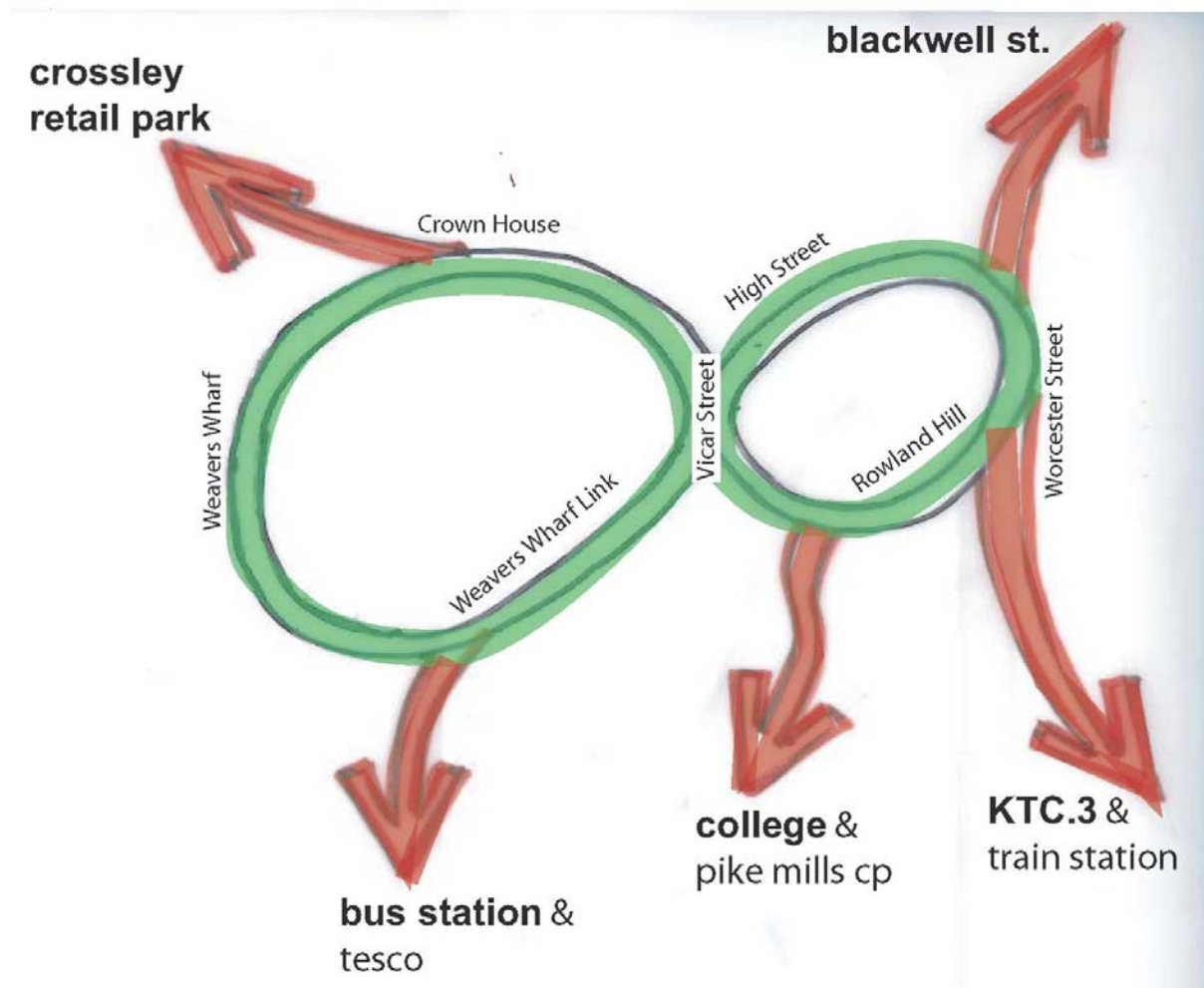


Fig.1: key links... defining a circuit for the main shops

The appointment of a Town Centre Manager will undoubtedly provide additional capacity to improve, increase and maintain the town centre's vitality and viability. The aim is to allow resources to be specifically allocated to market and promote the town centre, develop and co ordinate events and bring together town centre businesses.

Subject to the necessary ingredients being in place, it is envisaged that the above package of measures may ultimately lead towards a town centre "Business Improvement District". In the meantime initiatives such as the Blackwell Street Revival programme are proving to be a catalyst for change and are helping to deliver real improvements on the ground. Within existing resources there may also be scope for the Council's 'regeneration team' to work towards making the necessary connections between retailer interest and the availability of suitable sites and opportunities.

Whilst there is no strategic funding for towns like Kidderminster from the major funding bodies such as Advantage West Midlands and the National Lottery, the

relevant stakeholders continue to seek resources to move the town centre forward. Meanwhile, Officers continue to monitor the situation on the ground. White Young Green make a number of detailed recommendations to the Council about how the existing annual retail update can be improved. These include a regular review of the 'Management Horizons Europe' (MHE) UK retail rankings, annual monitoring of the Focus database of current operator demand in Kidderminster and commissioning of pedestrian footfall surveys on an annual basis.

5. Conclusion

Kidderminster does not contrive to be “a Merry Hill” or “a Birmingham Bull Ring” - but the town centre is acknowledged, by the sector, to offer first class shopping opportunities for a town of its type and size. The WYG study concludes that “given the important regional shopping role assumed by Merry Hill and Worcester, there is unlikely to be scope to further claw-back locally generated expenditure on clothing and footwear by improving the range and choice of facilities in Kidderminster”. However, perhaps the challenge to Kidderminster is to explore how the town can continue to retain the same levels of interest.

APPENDIX 1

Shops due to locate in Kidderminster

FOPP

Fopp is Britain's largest independent chain of music stores that sells CDs, DVDs and books. There are numerous outlets across the country, including stores at:

- Bath
- Brighton
- Cambridge
- Cardiff
- London
- Manchester
- Nottingham
- Oxford
- Sheffield

Source: www.fopp.co.uk

COOLTRADER

Cooltrader is a small but fast growing specialist frozen food retailer. Stores are located throughout the UK, including outlets at:

- Chester
- Newcastle Under Lyne
- Northampton
- Shrewsbury
- Stourbridge
- Walsall
- Wrexham

Source: www.cooltrader.co.uk

Blackwell Street/ Coventry Street, KIDDERMINSTER
Development Proposals requiring planning permission: 2001-2006

Application Number	Location	Date Submitted Date Decided	Who owns it	Proposed Development	Decision	Implemented?
WF/0719/03	The Tower Buildings, Blackwell Street	17/7/2003 8/09/2003	Domino's Pizza Group Ltd	COU A1 to A3	Approved	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
WF/0665/02	The Tower Buildings, Blackwell Street	04/07/2002 26/09/2002	River Oak Associates Ltd	Resubmission of 0060/01. COU and conversion of second floor to nine flats with new lift tower and fire escape. No affordable 2x3bed, 3x2bed, 4x1bed	Approved	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
WF/0062/04	The Telephone Building, Blackwell Street	05/04/2004 24/06/2004	Malvern Estates Plc	35 apartments, new retail unit, ground floor offices car-parking, raised amenity area 30% affordable	Approved	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
06/0575/FULL	The Swan Centre	24/05/2006 17/07/2006	Blackthorn Enterprises	Retrospective application for a car wash facility, including a temporary building	Approved	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
WF/0955/03	The Swan Centre	23/09/2003 11/11/2003	Worcestershire County Council	COU from A1 to Disability Centre	Approved	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
05/1200/FULL	Russell's Electrical Store, Coventry Street	12/12/2005 17/02/2006	Spurville Ltd	Demolition and erection of 2 storey building, 3 units for A1/A2/A3/A5 use	Approved	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
WF/1277/04	Russell's Electrical Store, Coventry Street	01/12/2004 17/01/2005	Spurville Ltd	COU to A3, new shop front and shutter, 2 self-contained flats on first floor	Approved	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

The above is a summary of the main proposals involving planning applications submitted between January 2001 & November 2006.

N.B.

USE CLASS DESCRIPTION

- A1 Shops
- A2 Financial & Professional Services
- A3 Restaurants & Cafes
- A4 Drinking Establishments
- A5 Hot Food Takeaways