

Design South East

A shared vision for Braintree Town Centre

A report on workshop 5, held on 25.07.17

Facilitated by Chris Lamb and David Tittle

Workshop 5 - about the day

Design South East were asked to facilitate a workshop to help elected members and officers of Braintree District and Essex County Councils, local business and other town centre stakeholders collaborate on the development of a shared vision for Braintree town centre. This was the fifth and final workshop in a series of workshops with specific stakeholder groups. The purpose of the workshop was to reflect on the outcomes of the workshops to date and to develop a shared vision for the town centre and agreement on the next steps. Participants were sent a copy of the summary of the 4 workshops titled 'Braintree Town Centre: Building Blocks for the Vision'. The workshop started with a brief overview of this, and then moved into small group working to consolidate the vision. Following feedback and discussion, each group then identified next steps which they then shared with the room.

The elements of the vision

There was general agreement to the building blocks of the vision developed in earlier workshops. Participants drew on these in their group working to distil the pivotal elements of the vision.

The critical elements of the vision for the town centre are:

- It is a modern market town; legible, connected and walkable
- It is a place of quality; reflected in its townscape, its parks, its shops, its facilities and its produce
- It is inclusive and diverse; a place that develops its younger generation of makers and producers, but that welcomes people of all ages
- It is superbly located; set in a rich productive landscape, this is a place to come for great local produce and products; products made in Braintree, grown in Braintree and sold in Braintree
- It is a place that is historic, but this is no museum; it is living history, brought to life as the independent retail centre and cultural heart of Essex, with a thriving specialist food market for local produce and independent retailers in the traffic controlled High Street, combined with a rich townscape formed through centuries of industry and trade, history brought to life and at its heart, on a new cultural quarter around the beautiful Town Hall
- It is a vibrant place; but one that knows how to help you slow down and relax in its squares and streets, cafes, bars and restaurants, and enjoy spending time with friends and family
- Once a weaving town, it has always been and always will be a home of industry, invention and innovation; now home to a new generation of makers and producers

A suggested, consolidated vision

Braintree is a modern market town; superbly located; set in a rich productive landscape, this is a place to come for great local produce and products; made in Braintree, grown in Braintree and sold in Braintree. The independent retail and cultural heart of Essex, this is an historic place, with a townscape formed through centuries of industry and trade. Braintree is living history, brought to life by a thriving specialist food market for local produce and independent retailers in the people centred High Street, a short walk to the new cultural quarter around the beautiful Town Hall. An inclusive place, Braintree welcomes people of all ages but this historic weaving town has always been and always will be a place for industry, invention and innovation, now home to a new generation of twenty first century makers and producers.

Key actions required in order to implement this vision

To help make this vision a reality we agreed that we needed to address one of the key issues of delivery; how we collaborate.

It was accepted that Braintree District Council could not and should not be responsible for delivery. This is the responsibility of everyone in the room. But if that is the case; how do we make sure that the commitment to change is actually turned into action?

We agreed that the town centre needed a vehicle for working together; a new Town Team, supported by a new Town Centre Manager.

It was unclear at this stage how the new Town Centre Manager would be funded and who he or she would be employed by. This brought into focus the need for further discussion and it was agreed that a new action focussed Town Centre Steering Group, comprised of a relatively small number of stakeholders should be formed to build on the vision.

The purpose of Town Centre Steering Group would be to:

- Decide on priorities and actions
- Engage other stakeholders as required
- Lobby other key stakeholders like the County Council; essential if the traffic is to be controlled in the town centre

It was agreed that the council should lead the coordination of this group; interested stakeholders being asked to contact Stephen Wenlock.

Finally, the group identified two actions to take as first steps:

- Develop a town centre website and social media presence
- Organise a 'game-changing' town centre event

Summary of Workshops 1,2,3 and 4

The following vision statements and key objectives were established in the previous four workshops with planning officers, local business owners, local stakeholders and elected member of the council. There are many reoccurring themes, indicating that there is a high degree of consensus on how the local community would like to see Braintree town centre develop. The objective of the fifth and final workshop should be to combine the following statements into a single unified vision, and further consider how the implementation of key objectives could help achieve this vision.

12/12/16 Workshop 1 – Planning officers

1. A town centre that does not major on chain stores and that is walkable.

“Braintree is Essex’s top independent shopping destination, based on a compact town centre, an abundance of smaller retail units ready to be adapted and home to a vibrant community of entrepreneurial people.”

The essence of this statement is for Braintree to use its retail offer to differentiate its self from other towns in the area and to foster a community of independent retailers within the town centre.

2. A town centre with rich heritage, including its historic textile industries and existing built heritage assets in terms of its layout, public spaces and key buildings.

“With its history of silk and textiles, there is more to Braintree that you might realise. It is the cultural heart of Essex, open to everyone to visit, explore and live through the day and night through its beautiful countryside, heritage, architecture and events.”

This seeks to ensure that the image of Braintree is recast, that its rich heritage, countryside setting and accessibility are all projected to a wider audience, and that it is a place you can spend a whole day visiting its range of attractions and activities.

Key actions:

- A ‘textile trail’ around the town centre, using public realm and public art to link together heritage assets within the town, referencing Braintree’s historic industries.
- Better links between the town centre and Freeport, so that more spend is captured in town through linked trips.
- Set up a creative hub within the town, so that the town attracts the right kind of business people and allows them space to network and innovate.
- Rethink the traffic management in the town, with pedestrian-only areas studies to assess the effect on retail.
- Develop a key nodes and gateways plan, to announce the town centre more prominently to visitors and make the area work together as a whole.
- Better relationships with local retailers to better understand their needs and pressures.
- A town centre team to promote the town through marketing initiatives, events and coordinated working.

12/06/17 Workshop 2 – Local business owners

1. A town centre that acts as a destination for a wide area, making the most of its independent retail and market offer.

“Braintree serves as a destination market town for the Essex community every day. We do this by having something to offer that nobody else has got.”

2. A town centre with the look and feel of a high quality market town, where people can access goods and social activities that they cannot get online or elsewhere locally.

“Braintree has unique, quality products, high levels of services and a thriving cultural centre, and makes the most of high tech solutions”. The essence of this statement is for Braintree to use its retail offer to differentiate its self from other towns in the area and to foster a community of independent retailers within the town centre. It is also to ensure that spend from a wide area is captured, upping the image and attractiveness of the town as a destination.

Key actions:

- The appointment of a town centre manager to coordinate initiatives from local businesses, to help market the town in the wider area, and to take ownership of the ‘big picture’ of the town.
- A review of rents and rates, with the aim to ensure that the kinds of retailers we want to attract to the town find Braintree viable and welcoming.
- An overall improvement in communication, as it is felt that whilst lots of good things happen, not everyone knows about what is going on. This could be a role for the town centre manager.
- A data-gathering initiative, as at present high-quality information on how the town is performing is missing. An audit of plans and strategies already in place, information on footfall and activities ‘heat mapped’, and a review of who is using the town centre today would all help inform future management.
- A strategy for improving the market, regularising the look and feel of it, offering specialist days and making it more frequent. This could include attracting locally produced food and other goods, and should include reviewing the market charter.
- Overall, a trust building exercise is needed, so that businesses feel confident in investing in the town’s future knowing that all stakeholders are engaged and pulling in the same direction.

17/07/17 (afternoon) Workshop 3 – Local stakeholders

1. A modern medieval town - intensifying the town centre through a rich mix of shopping, living and leisure.

Many of the concerns raised through the workshop process regard the lack of footfall and the shrinking economy of the town centre. This ambition rejects outdated principles of zoning the town into separate uses (as seen with Freeport shopping centre and monocultural housing developments) and seeks to create a more vibrant mixed use town centre. Through sensitive development and the integration of more retail, leisure and residential accommodation, increased activity can be brought to the area in the evening as well as the day time. Intensifying the way the town centre is used in this way could help make it a more attractive place for businesses to operate, and a safer, more inviting place to spend their time.

2. An inclusive place that embraces its rich history of trade manufacture and art.

Braintree should aim to serve a broader demographic, from the young, to the elderly and all those in between. Encouraging manufacture and trade, based on the traditional function of the town could open up opportunities in training and volunteering and could help re-establish its role as a hub in the wider community.

Key actions:

- Ease business rates to encourage more local retail and services to re-establish themselves in Braintree town centre. Independent businesses and small traders should be prioritised, with local farm shops that relate to the historic market town function.
- Improvements to the A120 outside Braintree could reduce congestion in the town centre. This could open up further opportunity to explore more multi-modal transport and increase the priority for pedestrians. The creation of a 'spine' link connecting key areas of the town centre could improve walking/cycling routes and help make more pleasant conditions. The route from the church, down the High Street, towards the station was highlighted as a key connection worthy of improvement.
- Capturing some of the footfall from Freeport with improved connections and signage/wayfinding could help increase economic activity in the town centre.
- More affordable parking and removing charges for disabled users could help increase the amount of people choosing to shop in the centre. The introduction of a park and ride scheme should also be considered.
- The creation of more public seating and green spaces to encourage people to pause and spend more time within the town centre.
- Occupying the upper levels of retail units with residential accommodation could create more activity throughout the day and week.
- Provide public lavatories in the town centre.
- The town currently lacks a purpose built arts venue, and the introduction of this could provide a space for groups currently using less suitable venues.

17/07/17 (evening) Workshop 4 – Elected members of the council

1. A place where history and heritage are brought to life

The heritage of Braintree is impressive, not only in the prominent historic architecture, but also in the less immediately visible industrial heritage of invention and manufacture. Improving links between heritage assets and providing more information for visitors and residents could help highlight this story, while strategies to rekindle artisan skills could build upon this history and reach out to younger generations.

2. Reviving the heart of the market town

Building upon the existing pavement culture of the town centre and exploring alternative models to reintroduce a market to the town centre could help return the traditional role of the town centre.

3. Working as one to be number one

Increased coordination between local businesses and introducing more opportunities to harness the goodwill of the wider community through collaborative projects could help benefit the wider area.

Key actions:

- The establishment of a 'young enterprise zone' could match the issue of vacant shops on the High Street with the provision of premises to train young people in craft and manufacture techniques inspired by Braintree's Heritage.
- The promotion of a 'Made in Braintree' brand could emphasise a unique retail offer to help compete with neighbouring retail centres.
- Greater interpretation of Braintree's manufacturing history, highlighting it as the birthplace of Kellogg's and Coca Cola should be provided, as well as its role in the textile industry. This could be tackled through signage, apps, and improving links between key locations. This could be viewed as a more modern interpretation of a heritage trail.
- Encourage more active business associations to work together on joint projects such as improving the Christmas lights.
- Build on the existing pavement culture by encouraging more activity on the street, with markets, food, drink and street theatre.
- Explore alternative ways to re-integrate the market back into Braintree, with a focus on temporary speciality markets to help tempt people back in to the centre. Marketing strategies to promote this should be included.

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