

Bury But Better 2009

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BURY COUNCIL



Stakeholder workshop

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A stakeholder workshop was held on the 1st of July 2008 in the Elizabethan Suite at the Town Hall in Bury. It was run in two sessions: Using the Strengths, Weaknesses, Threats and Opportunities (SWOT) identified in the 2002 workshop, the first workshop session asked to reassess these for Bury in 2008 and how Bury compared to its competitors Bolton, Rochdale and Oldham six years on.

The Good

In the previous study the good things about Bury were summarised under the following headings: authenticity, compact character, accessibility, a good place to shop, a good place for leisure, well managed and quality services and we will deal with each of them in turn:

Authenticity

People continue to take pride in Bury. This goes along with good education levels (one of the highest in the country) and the highest safety in Greater Manchester.

They value their town for the numerous heritage attractions, such as the East Lancs. Railway, and the improvements that took place in the Historic Core and elsewhere in the town centre over the past few years. Here the extension to the Arts and Crafts Centre to accommodate the Fusiliers Museum was one mentioned amongst others. The market, now officially announced the best in the UK, continues to attract visitors and remains one of the key drivers for the town.

Compact character

People value the compact nature of the town centre although there was the fear that with a number of facilities potentially moving to the edge of the town centre, such as the college, Council offices, the Athletics Track and possibly the leisure centre, the compact nature of the town could be lost. At the workshop there was unanimous agreement that the leisure centre should be retained either on site or elsewhere within the Phoenix Quarter if the possibility arose to create new facilities.

Accessibility

Accessibility continues to be one of Bury's strengths and people appreciated the easy access from the south by bus, Metro and road. The town centre was rated as a good place to walk and very accessible for disabled people.

A good place to shop

The expansion of Bury's retail provision at The Rock and the continuing developer interest in the town centre were seen as positive. However,



it was noted that the Mill Gate Shopping Centre seemed to be doing less well than five years ago. Participants made the point that there were empty units and there was general concern about the Mill Gate's future once The Rock development opens in 2010. It was discussed that the Mill Gate Shopping Centre should be well linked with The Rock development and that uses should complement each other.

Marks and Spencer's decision to move into The Rock was seen as a loss for the Mill Gate Shopping Centre and participants felt that it would need another 'anchor' store if it was to remain successful.

The market continues to be Bury's No. 1 attraction but people felt it should be reorganised and re-branded so that it attracted a wider range of people with more spending power. Suggestions were made to better promote certain elements, such as a farmers market and the specialist shops.

A good place for leisure

There were mixed views about leisure activities in Bury, especially within the town centre itself. While it continues to be a good place to walk



due to its proximity to the open countryside, and people value the offers of the leisure centre and the numerous heritage attractions, the evening economy was now seen as a threat. The criticism was made that the mix of evening leisure uses had not been met and that the drinking culture caused violence and vandalism. This has changed dramatically since the last workshop where people agreed that it was a good place to go out for a drink and the updated masterplan/strategy will need to take this into account. The new leisure facilities that will be provided as part of The Rock development (cinema, bowling etc.) were welcomed as they are more family-orientated and will meet Bury's needs.

Well managed

In comparison to five years ago Bury was rated safer, greener and cleaner. People appreciated the 'Bury in Bloom' campaign though some thought it was too focused on the town centre.

The point was made that Bury was in a transitional phase at the moment and that parts of it suffered from the construction taking place in various parts in and adjacent to the town centre. Especially the appearance of the pedestrianised areas of The Rock which was seen as appalling, though people appreciated that this will be resolved within a couple of years.

Quality services

High education levels continue to be one of Bury's strengths and people take pride in Bury.

The Bad

Weaknesses identified at the workshop held in 2002 were categorised as: weak identity, rough edges, difficult to access, poor facilities, insecurity and failing places.

Weak identity

When asked what made Bury special participants said it has the market, many heritage attractions

and the River Irwell, which draw in visitors and make it special. They went on to say that no comparison to Bolton, Rochdale or Oldham was possible, as its spirit makes Bury stand out. With all the recent development Bury's identity as purely a market town was thought to be outdated.

Rough edges

At the workshop six years ago people generally viewed Bury's environment as positive but criticised its 'rough edges' particularly around the ring road.

This is still an issue today and people felt that the major gateways and routes into the town (such as Rochdale Road and Wash/Bell Lane) have not seen any improvement since. There was agreement that Angouleme Way should be downgraded by making it pedestrian and cyclist friendly, introduce tree planting and only allow development that fronts directly onto the ring road. The junctions at the college and the Peel/Angouleme Way junction need redesigning, which could also unlock land for much needed gateway development.

The lack of green squares and hard spaces for activities across the town centre was picked up again, too.

Difficult to access

The ring road continues to be a barrier between the residential neighbourhoods and the town centre and people find it difficult to get to the town centre. This particularly affects pedestrians, cyclists and disabled people. Workshop participants welcomed the idea of making Angouleme Way more cyclist and pedestrian friendly.

Poor facilities

While last time people at the workshop came up with a long list of things missing from the centre, which was seen as little more than a shopping centre, this will change with the current



developments at Townside and The Rock.

This list included town centre housing, leisure uses, local employment, exhibition space, high quality shops, decent restaurants / bars, a department store, cinema and hotel. While Townside will provide a hotel, some town centre housing, a new NHS centre and new office facilities The Rock will include more shops along with a new Marks and Spencer and a Debenhams, apartments and some leisure uses including a 10 screen cinema.

Insecurity

The main concern people had was that the mixture of the night-time activity had not been met and was mainly based around drinking. This leads to violence, especially after dark and in the early mornings, and vandalism has increased. It attracts gangs from outside Bury and people felt that any expansion of the evening economy must be managed very carefully and should be based around family-orientated leisure.

Failing places

The quality of the public realm along the pedestrianised area of The Rock is very poor although it is a very important route. However, it was recognised that with the development at The Rock it would be resolved in a couple of years.

Some criticised the state of the Mill Gate Shopping Centre saying that there were always empty units these days and that they feared that this could get worse once The Rock was open for trade.

Despite these negative comments participants were aware that Bury is going through a phase of change that has some unpleasant side-effects such as traffic diversion, building noise, the poor state of The Rock etc. Still, they are very fond of their town centre and appreciated that the projects underway would contribute to its enhancement.

However, there are also some threats that must be addressed and tackled if Bury is to continue its role as a thriving town centre.



Threats and opportunities

Six years ago one of the main threats facing Bury was whether the town was able to retain the centre's high ranking in the retail hierarchy without endangering its market and the independent retailers. Since then, Bury Market has been named the Number One market in the UK. It needs to keep up with its competitors and some people at the workshop felt that the market needed substantial investment and a face-lift also to attract a wider demographic profile of market users than at present.

The new retail provision at The Rock was seen as a much needed expansion of the retail offer, which will help Bury to compete with other centres nearby, such as Bolton or Rochdale, but it was also seen as a threat to the existing town/shopping centre. A strong shift eastwards might leave areas like Bolton Street, which has seen

footfall numbers decline for a few years in a row already, become more peripheral. This may pose a threat to the independent retailers.

The new development at Townside and The Rock will also see the completion of around 600 apartments and with presently relatively few town centre residents this will be a big change and also a challenge for Bury. As it will bring more life into the centre it will impact on footfall numbers, traffic volume, the evening economy and potentially create a demand for longer shop opening hours.

In the short-term Bury's success will partly depend on how quickly these new apartments will be sold/let and there was a fear amongst the workshop participants that the majority of these would be buy to let only rather than owner-occupied, which was seen as a threat to creating sustainable communities, which integrate with existing ones.

There are, however, many other projects that have progressed since the previous study that will support Bury's strengths such as the Fusiliers Museum move to the Arts & Crafts Centre, the go ahead for the refurbishment of the transport museum with a heritage visitor centre in the pipeline at Buckley Wells and the progress that has been made with the town centre development and the culture quarter strategies. This will ensure that the Bury offer will continue to improve and demands still unmet will be identified and addressed in the masterplanning section of this document.

The four 'A's

The 4 'A's analysis of a town centre, based on the idea that the success of any centre is rooted in 1) the **attractions** that bring people into the town, 2) the ease with which they are able to **access** the centre, 3) the **amenity** of the centre when they arrive and 4) the effectiveness of local people and agencies at taking **action** to address these issues, was undertaken as part of the original study and we will look at each of these in turn and discuss how the town centre's performance has changed since.

Attractions: In terms of attractions Bury is in the process of extending its offer to attract more people to the town centre from both the local and wider catchment. In 2002 on the attractions wish list were a bingo hall, a town centre cinema, certain national retailers, a department store and town centre housing. By 2010 most of these things will be available mainly through the two schemes at The Rock and Townside. The full impact these added 'ingredients' will have on the town centre will have to be monitored and managed carefully.

At present there are still no proposals for affordable, high standard and attractive family housing in/near the town centre. This update study will consider opportunities to provide it.

The ELR currently attracts over 100,000 visitors annually and these are set to increase with the extension and enhancement programme currently underway. As mentioned earlier, Bury Market and numerous cultural events keep drawing in people from a wider catchment.

Access: The second 'A' dealt with the ease with which people can get to the centre.

The re-assessment of Bury's transport situation in section 8 shows that Bury is very accessible



although it is easier to reach the town centre by different modes of transport from the south (Metrolink, rail, bus, car, foot and cycle) rather than the north (mainly car based). Passenger numbers on the Metrolink have declined in the past years but with eight more trams on the line from 2009 the more frequent services will hopefully see user numbers rise again.

At the workshop there was some complaint about the loss of quite a number of long stay parking spaces due to the development of Townside and The Rock. The ring road still creates a barrier and there was wide support for it to be downgraded/'softened' by adding separate foot and cycle paths, introducing tree planting and only allowing new development that fronts directly onto Angouleme Way.

People feel that it is still difficult to get around the town centre and cycling is prohibited on The Rock and in the Mill Gate. The current state of The Rock is feared to put visitors off Bury and it should be a priority to redesign its public realm as soon as development/building activities permit because it is a very important route through the town centre as the Mill Gate Shopping Centre is not accessible 24/7. The new design should include public art and live up to the high standards Bury has set itself through the Bury in Bloom campaign. Again, this could be achieved through the involvement of local/international artists and make it a visitors destination not only for its retail offer.

Amenity: The third 'A' is the amenity of the centre or how attractive it is when people arrive. This is the point where Bury struggles at the moment due to its building activities. As much as workshop participants appreciated the implementation of the 2003 masterplan they feared that during this transitional phase Bury was not very welcoming. However, levels of maintenance and cleansing of public areas are very good. Bury has been awarded the North West in Bloom five years in a row now (2004 - 2008).

Action: The final 'A' relates to the ability of stakeholders in the town to mobilise efforts to address the issues faced by the town. A town centre manager has now been in post since autumn 2007 and she is working towards a 3 year strategy for the town centre. Stakeholders remain very active and passionate about Bury and there are different forums and boards meeting on a regular basis to discuss town centre issues.

Project ranking

In the second session we asked people about the six themes developed for the 2003 masterplan:

- Reinforcing Bury as a market town;
- Making the most of Bury's heritage;
- Creating an accessible town centre;
- Creating an attractive, compact town centre;
- Managing the quality of the town centre; and
- Broadening the role of the centre

Reinforcing Bury as a market town proposed the following:

- Expanding the shopping centre
- Protecting/enhancing the market
- Accommodating and retaining independent traders
- Expanding the convenience offer
- Bulky goods retailing
- Regenerating 'The Rock'

- Signage and interpretation

While the expansion of the shopping centre is underway and Bury's bulky goods retailing sector has been satisfied in the last years people felt very strongly about protecting the market and Bury's independent traders.

The regeneration of 'The Rock' pedestrian street was also seen as a top priority due to it being a major link between the Interchange and The Rock shopping centre, especially when the Mill Gate is closed.

Making the most of Bury's heritage covered the following themes:

- Expanding the East Lancashire Railway
- The transport museum
- A new role for the Castle Armoury
- Culture Quarter
- Canal
- Interpretation

There was wide support for the expansion of the ELR and the reopening of the transport museum, both of which are major assets to Bury's identity and cultural offer. There were mixed views about the reopening of the canal at the Western Waterside. While people thought it a good idea, they were sceptical about the deliverability of the project and accepted that it would be a long-term strategy linked to attracting external funding sources and the overall progress in reopening the canal between Salford and Bury.

Creating an accessible town centre mainly looked at highway issues and included:

- Overcoming the barrier of the ring road
- Creating surface crossings
- Improvements to disabled access
- Reprioritising junctions

- Creating a pedestrian link to the canal
- Reorientating the bus station

While most people thought that the town centre was internally very accessible there were mixed views about the recommendations above. Creating surface crossing and reprioritising junctions came out as the key themes that needed resolving in the near future while a pedestrian link to the canal and reorientating the bus station came last in the ranking. Not everybody felt that the ring road acted as a barrier and this may partly be because of Bury's network of underpasses. However, when it came to parking there was common agreement that this was a very important issue. This is to do with the loss of long stay parking at Townside and The Rock and the plans to convert car parks to pay on exit rather than pay & display.

Creating an attractive, compact town centre

- under this heading we covered the following objectives:

- Defining an urban quality area
- Drawing up urban design guidelines
- Preparing planning briefs
- Concentrating on gateways

Concentrating on gateways came out as a top priority as these were generally seen as tatty and not very welcoming.

Another theme covered the **managing of the quality of the town centre**. This included proposals for:

- The appointment of a town centre manager
- Events and animation
- Improving safety and lighting
- Co-ordinating the town centre wardens
- Commissioning public art

People appreciated that a town centre manager had been employed and her work found wide support as did the idea of events & animation and the commissioning of public art. It was felt that lighting and safety had improved greatly.

The last of our themes dealt with the **broadening of the role of the centre** and included:

- Promoting town centre housing
- Promoting Bury Ground as a business park
- Developing small scale offices and provision for SME's
- Creating new Council offices
- Developing studio space and incubator units
- Arts and Crafts Centre

With most of these proposals being taken forward by the Council and other bodies, which was viewed as positive, none of these topics scored high except for town centre housing. Despite the developments at Townside and The Rock, which together include about 600 apartments, it was felt that there was a need for family-orientated town centre living, preferably in the form of high quality yet affordable town houses with some private green space.

An updated set of themes for the 2009 masterplan are presented in the following chapter.

