
DOWNEND TOWN CENTRE
Health Check
September 2012

INTRODUCTION

The Downend Town Centre Health Check, led by Downend Business Community (with support from local partners) aims to identify the work currently taking place in Downend to *improve the vibrancy and vitality of the town centre* and highlight actions that will help it continue to improve.

DOWNEND & BROMLEY HEATH (D&BH) COMMUNITY PLAN

The Community Plan reflects the priorities expressed by local residents and businesses and looks ahead at what can be done to develop, sustain and improve Downend and Bromley Heath as a healthy, safe and lively place in which to live, work and play over the next decade. It was presented to D&BH Parish Council in spring 2011 and at their AGM in April 2011. It was then launched at various community events during summer 2011.

The plan contains *Key Findings* from many different consultations, including a detailed questionnaire sent to every household in the D&BH Parish. The responses were used to produce an action plan, to be implemented with the support of D&BH Parish Council, partners and the enthusiastic help and support of local volunteers. The plan will evolve to reflect changing circumstances. The D&BH Community Plan makes specific reference to local partners working together to achieve improvements in the town centre:

Sustained, revitalised and developed local shopping provision:

- *Research more thoroughly what the community wants in terms of viability and sustainability,*
- *Work with Downend Business Community to develop a local shopping identity and experience*

D&BH PARISH COUNCIL

Downend Business Community (DBC), the local chamber of commerce, has been generously supported by D&BH Parish Council since its inception in summer 2009. D&BH Parish Council has supported the chamber with various activities including the Christmas Lights Switch-On event in 2010 and 2011, which has grown year on year. In 2012, the D&BH Parish Council is also supporting the DBC to host the first ever Village Fete at Downend Cricket Club. New signs have appeared on the roundabout in the centre of Downend, a project the DBC has worked in partnership with the D&BH Parish Council.

ECONOMIC CLIMATE

Following the recession, the UK has only shown signs of a modest recovery with a global economic downturn continuing. In 2009 Government bodies published reports and guides that highlighted the need for town centre partners to work together to counteract the decline of high streets and town centres. These include: *21st Century High Streets*, British Retail Consortium (2009), *Driving Economic Prosperity: a practical guide for lead members*, I&DeA (2009) and *High Noon for the High Street*, New Local Government Network (2009).

THE PORTAS REVIEW

In spring 2011, Mary Portas was hired by Government to investigate innovative ways in which the high street could fight back against low consumer spending, inflation and increased overheads. The Portas Review was published in December 2011, detailing a 28-point plan that can help the high street become the vibrant hub of the community it once used to be, in so many communities across the UK. Mary Portas' Vision is set out on the following page.

WHY A HEALTH CHECK?

Monitoring the health of a town centre was a common theme in the documents mentioned above and important to determine areas for improvement. As a result, these documents were used as the basis for designing this health check (this text is highlighted in blue at the start of each section). The 'Key Messages' from these documents are summarised on the next page, to provide national context.

In spring 2011, DBC took the initiative and with support from South Gloucestershire Council, started completing the health check. The draft document was then circulated to partners for comment (including South Gloucestershire Council, D&BH Parish Council, Downend Community Plan Group, Downend Safer & Stronger Community Group and Avon & Somerset Police) and made available online for the public to view. This final version reflects feedback received during the partner comment period.

FRAMEWORK

The health check has two primary areas of focus. The first is ***developing the town centre*** and the second is ***chamber of trade activities***. For the purpose of this health check, 'town centre' refers to the shopping parade (Badminton Road & Downend Road) and adjoining economy.

This health check aims to inform South Gloucestershire Council's future plans for Downend town centre and also act as guide for local partners engaged in developing the vitality and vibrancy of Downend town centre.

KEY MESSAGES

↳ Out of town centres have decreased town centre footfall and spend. The average group spend for out of town centres, across the UK, is £55 compared to £34 within in-town centres. Moreover, money spent in a chain is more likely to leave the local economy.

↳ Research shows that money spent with local suppliers is worth more to the local economy and tends to be re-spent locally. Locally owned businesses can generate up to a 70 per cent local premium in enhanced economic impact.

↳ In contrast, only a small amount of the wealth that supermarkets generate actually stays in the communities in which they operate. For example, retail profits of large chain stores or multinationals typically flow direct from stores to the head office and ultimately to shareholders around the world.

↳ It is important however, to emphasise that chain stores can drive regeneration, contribute to the community and improve local economic prosperity. While the growth of the 'cloned' British High Street may have harmed local entrepreneurship, it has also often provided much needed inward investment to a community.

↳ Town centres are central to local environmental policy and street scene improvements. The aesthetic character of high streets and their design can play a crucial role in addressing crime and vandalism.

↳ Town centres can be the catalyst for regeneration; impact on local employment; central to driving footfall increases; provide important opportunities for entrepreneurship and enterprise.

↳ Town centres are a focal point of encouraging local spending, social inclusion and empowerment. Added to this, regions with higher economic performance, often driven by the performance of the town centre, are recognised to have higher levels of social trust and capital.

↳ Promoting the town centre can encourage less travel and reduce carbon footprints. Other benefits could be accrued on the basis that local shops tend to rely on local produce and suppliers more, with possible benefits across food miles – leading to a lower carbon footprint.

↳ Town centre partnerships are forums bringing together key local stakeholders to promote the health and wellbeing of the area. The partnership's board of key local actors provides the direction. These partnerships have proved particularly valuable during the recession. Research shows that areas where town centre/high street partnerships exist seem to have reacted more quickly to recent economic pressures.

THE PORTAS REVIEW

My vision: I want to breathe economic and community life back into our high streets. Let me spell out my vision of the future...

I don't want to live in a Britain that doesn't care about community. And I believe that our high streets are a really important part of building communities and pulling people together in a way that a supermarket or shopping mall, however convenient, however entertaining and however slick, just never can.

With town centre vacancy rates doubling over the last two years and total consumer spend away from our high streets now over 50%, the need to take action has never been clearer. Although some high streets are thriving, most have a fight on their hands. Many are sickly, others are on the critical list and some are now dead. We cannot and should not attempt to save every high street but my findings have led me to believe that unless urgent action is taken, the casualties will only continue to multiply.

Fundamentally I believe that our high streets are uniquely placed to deliver something new. I believe that our high streets can be lively, dynamic, exciting and social places that give a sense of belonging and trust to a community. A sense of belonging which, as the recent riots clearly demonstrated, has been eroded and in some instances eradicated. I also fundamentally believe that once we invest in and create social capital in the heart of our communities, the economic capital will follow.

High streets must be ready to experiment, try new things, take risks and become destinations again. They need to be spaces and places that people want to be in. High streets of the future must be a hub of the community that local people are proud of and want to protect.

*Mary Portas (December 2011)
The Portas Review*

High streets and town centres that are fit for the 21st century need to be multifunctional social centres, not simply competitors for stretched consumers. They must offer irresistible opportunities and experiences that do not exist elsewhere, are rooted in the interests and needs of local people, and will meet the demands of a rapidly changing world.

*Action for Market Towns (2011)
Twenty-First Century Town Centres*

DOWNEND HERITAGE

The first recorded date of a known building in the D&BH Parish is a house in Reform Place, claimed to have been built in 1566 according to a map of Downend from 1575. The whole area was then within the boundary of Kingswood Forest, the Royal Hunting Forest under the jurisdiction of the Constable of Bristol Castle, all standing within the area known as Barton Regis. The Forest gradually succumbed to squatters and coal mines, but the D&BH area remained mainly agricultural with some stone quarries.

A number of small farms worked the area mainly grazing livestock with a small amount of arable land. Only three of these farm houses remain; Baugh Farm, Cleeve Hill Farm and Bromley Farm. There were a few larger houses in the area too. Cleeve Dale was demolished in the late 1960s. Cleeve Hill House was owned by the Players, Braggles and Caves and it was the Cave Family who bought up much of the land within the D&BH Parish. Cleeve Hill House was demolished in the 1930s after the sale of the Estate in the 1920s, which saw the beginning of large scale house building in the area.

The two-acre cricket ground in the centre of Downend was used to play cricket from 1894, with the Downend Cricket Club purchasing the land in 1920 at the sale of the Cave Estate. The W.G. Grace memorial pavilion opened in 1922. William Gilbert Grace, the great cricketer, was born in Downend House in 1848 and died in London in 1915.

Since WWII, D&BH has grown from its rural beginnings to a large and thriving community, now bounded by major roads, the M4 and ring road, but still retains much of its pastoral heritage. Lincombe Barn, one of the old farm buildings in the area, now provides a vital community space and in recognition, received the Gulbenkian Award from HRH Prince Charles. There is also a library in close proximity to the town centre as well as a church, public green space and a woodland area.

Downend History Society

TOWN CENTRE TODAY

Downend is characterised as a smaller traditional town centre with 27 units with an A1 use class. Its town centre comprises a traditional high street with a small, purpose built shopping parade. There is a total of 3,333 square metres of A1 retail floor space with a Co-Op food store which, although set back from the primary frontage area, forms the main anchor to the town centre. Supporting this supermarket is a range of comparison, convenience and service retail functions serving the day to day and 'top-up' needs of the area.

The centre, although facing competition from other larger town centres and out of centre shopping and food stores, has in recent years continued to maintain a range and choice of convenience shopping and local service, including a retail service based offering in the form of banks, building societies and estate agents. This has helped to retain local spend.

The south side of the high street is dominated by these types of businesses whilst the north side consists of a high proportion of food based businesses including cafes, restaurants and grocery stores. This mix of retail uses means the town centre attracts footfall during the evening as well as the day, further helping to sustain the vitality and vibrancy of the town centre.

Today, the centre displays a fairly mixed distribution of retail functions with 37% of A1 retail units selling comparison goods. However, significantly for this size of centre, over 50% of the A1 retail floor space is taken up by convenience functions, although these only account for 26% of all A1 retail units. At the time of the survey, the former Co-Op store on Downend Road was vacant. This has since re-opened (spring 2012) as a carpet and furniture shop.

*Town Centres & Retailing
South Gloucestershire Council (August 2011)*

1. DEVELOPING THE TOWN CENTRE

A] UNIQUE SENSE OF PLACE

Town centres are vital to the local community. Local people and groups should work together to maximise the advantages of the town centre's local heritage and natural surroundings whilst providing facilities for modern retailing. The town centre's local identity should be complemented by an appropriate retail mix that is marketed effectively. This will encourage shoppers to appreciate the retail experience.

CURRENT STATUS

- Activities are currently taking place at Lincombe Barn and Leap Valley relating to local heritage and natural surroundings. There are still vestiges of Downend's pastoral heritage in the area but there is no 'coordinated' approach at present, to provide facilities for modern retailing. The D&BH Community Plan recognises residents' desire to retain the character of Downend and to sustain and develop it with local partners.
- The town centre's local identity has historically been referred to as the 'village'. The current retail mix complements this identity to a degree. The cricket pitch provides a focal point similar to a village green. Responses to the D&BH Community Plan questionnaire emphasise residents' wish for a diverse retail mix.
- The town centre is not marketed effectively but the DBC flyer is a start and is circulated inside the D&BH Parish Council newsletter to 5,500 households, 3-4 times a year. Responses to the D&BH Community Plan questionnaire and other surveys identified the need to raise awareness of facilities, shops and activities that exist in Downend.

FUTURE ACTIONS

- Encourage Downend History Society to help set the historical context of the town centre, to aid joint promotions.

Lead Partner – Downend History Society

- Facilitate the formation of a 'Friends of Group' for King George V playing fields.

Lead Partner – D&BH Parish Council

- Work with local partners to encourage a broader range of retail outlets to move to Downend, to improve the economic viability of the town centre.

Lead Partner – Downend Business Community

- Investigate further innovative ways to promote the town centre (i.e. Town App). D&BH Parish Council to continue to support DBC's marketing activities.

Lead Partner – Downend Business Community

B] ATTRACTIVE PUBLIC REALM

A town centre should have an attractive trading environment with consistent styling, pedestrian signage and where public spaces are maintained to high standards. This should include effective deterrents against pollution. The local authority, public bodies and private interest groups need to work together to achieve such improvements.

CURRENT STATUS

- The town centre has consistent styling because it was predominantly built during the same era but it cannot necessarily be labelled as attractive.
- Public spaces (pavements, access paths to Co-Op car park from the high street, Co-Op car park and the Cleeve Wood rank of shops) are maintained to a relatively acceptable standard but there are few deterrents if any, against litter, graffiti and ASB.
- D&BH Parish Council and the D&BH Community Plan steering group are working together effectively. South Gloucestershire Council is also supportive of relevant local issues, as is the DBC. Since the launch of the D&BH Community Plan, some actions have already been achieved.

FUTURE ACTIONS

- Continue to work with South Gloucestershire Council to maintain and enhance visual aspects of the town centre.

Lead Partner – D&BH Parish Council

- D&BH Parish Council is currently looking at the Cleeve Wood shops with the long term aim of enhancing the visual aspects of the area. Consultation during the D&BH Community Plan suggested a 'Big Spring Clean'.

Lead Partner – D&BH Parish Council

- Encourage active collaboration with local partners to achieve the D&BH Community Plan's goals.

Lead Partner – D&BH Community Plan Group

C] PLANNING FOR SUCCESS

Monitoring the health of the town centre should underpin any effective town centre system. A clear strategy should be established to address the increasing rates of vacancy and the accompanying decline in fortunes of town centres.

CURRENT STATUS

- Collaborative working has started between the DBC and the D&BH Parish Council (for example, Christmas Lights switch-on event and Village Fete).
- There are a small number of retail outlets which have remained un-occupied so a strategy is needed to address this. This Town Centre Health Check will go some way to inform such a strategy.

FUTURE ACTIONS

- Continue to build on the foundations of collaborative working (already established with local partners). D&BH Community Plan provides a useful evidence base that can support aspirations for a thriving, diverse retail centre. This information may also be useful for grant applications.

Lead Partner – Downend Business Community

- This matter should be addressed as a result of the recent publication of the D&BH Community Plan, which identified a need for a better mix of local, independent retailers in the town centre.

Lead Partner – Downend Business Community

D] ACCESSIBILITY

Parking and transport policy should reduce town centre congestion and parking demands without affecting footfall. Car parking and cycle locking facilities need to attract customers to the town centre and adequate public transport links should connect local communities to the town centre. Retail premises should be easily accessible to encourage visits from wheelchair users and buggy users.

CURRENT STATUS

- Current on-street parking is generally good in the high street and there are some disabled parking spaces. The free public car park behind the high street, primarily serving the Co-Op store, provides space for long-term stay. Signage for all parking is very poor.
- Generally, there are good bus links to and from the town centre. The bus stops are well-used and located suitably. There is a single journey bus service connecting Downend with Emersons Green.
- No facilities exist for charging electric vehicles in the high street. There are more cycle lanes in the town centre now, as well as cycle stands, but facilities for cyclist-shoppers are still inadequate.
- Given the age of the buildings in the town centre, there is variable access to shops. This is due to some gently sloping pavements in the high street.

FUTURE ACTIONS

- D&BH Parish Council is currently looking into the provision of disabled parking. Work with D&BH Parish Council and South Gloucestershire Council to ensure public parking facilities in and around the town centre continue to remain free and are adequately signed.

Lead Partner – Downend Business Community

- Collaborate with local community transport schemes and providers to encourage more direct routes to Downend town centre.

Lead Partner – Downend Business Community

- All town centre partners to work with relevant green transport groups (such as Sustrans and Low Carbon South West) to promote Downend as a cycle-friendly town centre.

Lead Partner – Downend Business Community

- Signpost town centre businesses to relevant websites or South Gloucestershire Council for advice and guidance on good practise.

Lead Partner – Downend Business Community

E] SAFETY & SECURITY

Retail crime and anti-social behaviour should be deterred, with damaged property and streetscape restored as quickly as possible. Meaningful deterrence can be achieved through a co-ordinated response by local retailers and businesses. Neighbourhood policing should meet the needs of the local community. The town centre should be a safe, inclusive and accessible place for people to live, work, shop and visit.

CURRENT STATUS

- Streetscape is restored quickly and efficiently. It is not known how much retail crime takes place in the high street.
- No coordinated anti-crime communication exists for high street retailers and local businesses.
- It is not known if neighbourhood policing meets the needs of town centre businesses. Neither is it known if ASB and crime reduction partnerships include business crime as a key priority. D&BH Community Plan identifies the need for support for Neighbourhood Watch Projects. It also identified the local Safer & Stronger Community Group as a relevant partner.

FUTURE ACTIONS

- Maintain the already good relationship with Street Care at South Gloucestershire Council to ensure issues are addressed effectively.

Lead Partner – D&BH Parish Council

- The local neighbourhood policing team (NPT) would welcome a *ShopWatch* type anti-crime scheme within the Downend Area.

Lead Partner – Avon & Somerset Police

- The local PCSOs regularly patrol Downend town centre and have a good rapport with local businesses. This has been boosted recently with the addition of a further PCSO to the Downend policing team. The local NPT prioritise all victims of crime whether individuals or businesses and work closely with, and actively encourage, neighbourhood watches in the area.

Lead Partner – Avon & Somerset Police

F] CORE STRATEGY

The Core Strategy sets the strategic planning policy framework to guide future development across South Gloucestershire. In the Core Strategy, Downend is defined as a town centre that functions as a high street and shopping service centre. This Health Check complements the Core Strategy.

Under Policy CS14 (Town Centres and Retail), South Gloucestershire Council will work with partners and the local community to protect and enhance the vitality and viability of existing centres in South Gloucestershire, in recognition of their retail, service and social functions.

As a result of community engagement, the Core Strategy's draft vision for the future of the East Fringe of Bristol (which includes Downend) aims to:

- Preserve and enhance the distinctive identity and heritage of the physical community
- Strengthen the vibrancy and vitality of the town centre
- Improve employment opportunities (by being in close proximity to the Bristol & Bath Science Park)
- Develop reliable, punctual and frequent public transport services with the North Fringe of Bristol
- Integrate well designed housing developments (which do not isolate the town centre)

Policy CS29 in the Core Strategy aims to deliver this draft vision through managing development and partnership working. The viability and vibrancy of Downend will be improved to enhance its role as a service centre for the urban and surrounding rural area and provide additional comparison floor space as appropriate.

2. CHAMBER OF TRADE ACTIVITIES

Downend Business Community (DBC) was formed in 2009. DBC is a chamber of trade which encourages businesses in the Downend & Bromley Heath area to meet regularly, gain access to business support, trade with each other and promote the local economy. The Key Messages section of this health check identified the need for a strong and active chamber of trade to be in place and work with local partners to undertake activities that will improve the vibrancy and vitality of the town centre. DBC therefore has highlighted a set of ambitions and goals it believes will help contribute towards a prosperous town centre.

	CURRENT STATUS	FUTURE ACTIONS
A] Provide a business environment in which entrepreneurship can flourish	DBC encourages established and fledgling businesses to join and take part in joint promotions that will raise their profile. DBC also encourages and invites speakers to general meetings to address businesses about relevant and topical issues.	Continue inviting speakers to attend future meetings to encourage businesses to implement both tried and tested and innovative ideas.
B] Create and foster a spirit of goodwill, friendship and unity amongst local businesses	DBC has deliberately created social events in addition to the business meetings to encourage informal contact.	Continue to host business events and invite local partners along to meet the DBC and create stronger working relationships.
C] Provide facilities for the exchange of views and interaction between businesses	DBC holds regular meetings, at which businesses can exchange information, improve their knowledge and develop further contacts.	Investigate how social media can be used effectively to promote local businesses and encourage footfall to the town centre.
D] Develop an informative website for the Chamber	DBC has created a website that gives profiles of local businesses and their contact details. The website has links to and from Business West, D&BH Parish Council and South Gloucestershire Council.	Review current website and redevelop as appropriate, to best serve the needs of the local business community.
E] Improve communications between the Chamber, Parish Council and local authority through meetings and circulars	DBC already has extensive formal and informal links with both D&BH Parish Council and South Gloucestershire Council.	Continue to work closely with local partners and keep informed of relevant meetings.
F] Establish and maintain relations with bodies having similar objectives to promote the vibrancy of the Town Centre	DBC already has good relationships with all local partners. DBC has recently established a link with the previously dormant South Gloucestershire Chamber of Commerce, now called the SGBF.	D&BH Parish Council aims to continue supporting the DBC and encourage close working relationships. D&BH Community Plan group to provide an opportunity for the exchange of information and views, plans and contacts.

CURRENT STATUS

G] Support and have presence at relevant events for promoting businesses and the town centre, as appropriate

DBC had a presence at the Page Park Centenary celebration in Staple Hill (2011), Heath Fest Bromley Heath (2011) and the Downend Christmas Lights event in (2010 & 2011).

H] Collect and circulate information affecting businesses and town centre footfall that will assist the DBC to publish relevant documents and bulletins as necessary

DBC is member of the SGBF from which it receives regular circulars. DBC uses an online document management system so businesses can access this information.

I] Establish a rapport with civic, business and all sectors of the community and be recognised as representing and presenting the view of businesses to the community

DBC is recognised informally as representing the views of local businesses in the area. The D&BH Parish Council regularly seeks the views of the DBC on matters affecting the town centre.

FUTURE ACTIONS

Continue attending forthcoming events in the area that can increase town centre footfall and promote local businesses (such as the Village Fete in April 2012).

DBC to continue circulating information it receives from the SGBF in a timely fashion.

Local partners to review and action if appropriate, the D&BH Community Plan's references to collaborative working.

SUMMARY & CONTACTS

This health check provides a guide that will be used by local partners engaged in developing the vitality and vibrancy of Downend Town Centre. Coordinated by Downend Business Community (Chamber of Commerce), the lead partners will enlist the help of relevant delivery partners and review the health check regularly to ensure the future actions identified are being achieved.

For information about the progress being made with each 'future action' or to offer your support to any of the lead partners, please contact:

Downend Business Community	info@downendbusiness.org
Downend & Bromley Heath Community Plan Group	riley.ge@hotmail.co.uk
Avon & Somerset Police	James.Rochford@avonandsomerset.police.uk
Downend Safer & Stronger Community Group	Jacqui.Ward@southglos.gov.uk
Downend & Bromley Heath Parish Council	clerk@dbhparishcouncil.co.uk
South Gloucestershire Council	business@southglos.gov.uk

For a paper version of this health check please email: business@southglos.gov.uk